

Chapel Hill Philharmonia Program Notes

December 11, 2011

Jacques Ibert

(1890-1962)

Concertino da Camera pour Saxophone Alto

Matthew McClure, Alto Saxophone

Allegro con moto

Larghetto — Animato molto

Gustav Mahler

(1860-1911)

Symphony No. 1 in D major

Slow. Dragging. Always very easygoing

With powerful movement, but not too fast

Solemn and measured, without dragging — Very simple and modest, like a folk song

With violent movement

The Titanic 20th Century

Named *shraddha* by Hindus, *jìchén* in China, *meinichi* in Japan, or *yahrtzeit* in Judaic culture, the celebration of a death anniversary also has assumed traditional significance in the world of classical music. This evening's program of the Chapel Hill Philharmonia honors the 50th and 100th *shraddhas* of **Jacques Ibert** (1890-1962) and **Gustav Mahler** (1860-1911), respectively, with two works that superficially could not be more disparate. One's composer was French, the other's Bohemian of Jewish descent, drawing from the Austro-Germanic tradition. One is a pithy chamber concerto, the other a massive symphony. One showcases the jazzy urban sound of the alto saxophone, the other evokes rustic hunting horns and village bands. Nevertheless, Ibert's ***Concertino da camera for alto saxophone*** and Mahler's ***Symphony No. 1***, sometimes referred to as the "***Titan***", share a common touchstone – humanity expressed through emotive lyricism. Moreover, their composer's lives contained surprising parallels, some merely coincidental, others more profound. Each began to play piano at age four. Each married the artistic daughter of a successful painter. Each divided time between composing and conducting. Each excelled in writing vocal music and directed major opera companies. Each had his work proscribed by Nazi regimes. Each died of heart failure. Each made music from his heart, eschewing restrictive formal systems, finding inspiration in diverse sounds and sources, reaching for modernity, but retaining ties to the past. The compositions we play tonight come from periods of calm before the storms of the 20th century's two world wars. Both convey life and optimism, but hint at impending doom.

Ibert *Concertino da camera for alto saxophone*

A native of Paris, **Jacques Ibert** first studied music with his mother, a talented pianist whose own dreams for a musical career, thwarted by her financier father, were channeled to her only son. Ibert became proficient on piano and organ and entered the Paris Conservatory of Music in 1910, where he focused on composition. The 'City of Light' offered an ideal environment for artistic growth. Ibert was conceived during the Paris Exposition of 1889, the great World's Fair that commemorated the centennial of the French Revolution with the construction of Gustave Eiffel's wrought iron tower. He was four-years-old when his city first heard the dreamy flute solo that opens Claude Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, a signal event in the evolution of modern music. In the same year the trumped-up treason conviction of Charles Dreyfus, a Jewish artillery officer, exposed festering social tensions that would explode globally in the century to come. Ibert was 23 in 1913 when Parisians rioted over, not politics, but the primal rhythms of *The Rite of Spring*. The following year the drums of Igor Stravinsky's ballet score were drowned out by the guns of August 1914, as the Great War began. Ibert became a naval officer, serving at Dunkirk in 1917-18 in battles against German submarines to protect shipping lanes between Great Britain and the European continent. With the war's end he returned to the Conservatory and won the 1919 *Prix de Rome* for composition, enabling three years of study in Italy. The most obvious fruit of this award was *Escapes... (Ports of Call...*, 1922), a lush musical travelogue of the Mediterranean cities Rome, Tunis, and Valencia, one of the composer's best-known works.



Jacques Ibert

Rome exerted a lifelong pull on Ibert. From 1937 until 1960 he served as Director of the French Academy at the Villa Medici. He stood out as a fine administrator and a mentor to the next generation of French composers who spent formative years in Rome. His term was interrupted by the German occupation of France in 1940, when Ibert's patriotism and past military service caused the pro-Nazi Vichy government to ban his music and exile him, much as the German Third Reich anathematized Mahler posthumously as a Jew. In 1955 Ibert was named director of the French National Lyric Theaters, responsible for administration of the Paris Opera and the *Opéra-Comique*, though his time in that post was curtailed by illness.

Ibert's greatest legacy was his original music. In an era when composers fought their own wars over opposing musical styles, he blended aspects of several – Impressionism, the more modern idiom of his French colleagues 'Les Six' (The Six), and Stravinsky's neo-classicism (the latter's cool reinvention of the past after the burning

heat of *The Rite*). Ibert rejected rigid methods such as Arnold Schoenberg's 12-tone approach: "For me, no [one] system. All systems are valid, provided we use them to make music." Ibert's own distinctive voice emerged in compositions for soloists and orchestra, operettas, ballets, and more than 60 theater and film scores, including that for Orson Welles' *Macbeth* (1948). His work was elegantly crafted, Cartesian in its precise clarity, and often humorous. Its core was emotional integrity: "What matters in art is what moves, rather than what surprises. Emotion cannot be faked; she marks her own time. Shock is limited; it is a mere transitory effect of fashion."

Like many of his contemporaries, Ibert was comfortable to draw from eclectic sources. Jazz, introduced to Europe by American doughboys during World War I, captivated Paris of the Roaring Twenties. Black Americans like singer Josephine Baker found a more hospitable welcome in the French capital than under the Jim Crow laws of their native land. Paris stood alongside New Orleans and New York's Harlem as a jazz capital. The success of the Hot Club of France Quintet, founded in 1934, featuring guitarist Django Reinhardt and violinist Stéphane Grappelli, typified the country's willingness to accept and adapt this American-originated music. (Nevertheless, some nationalists within the French music

establishment continued to promulgate aggressively the anti-Semitic and racist attitudes that had surfaced around the Dreyfus Affair).

Matthew McClure, soloist in the *Concertino da camera for alto saxophone*, is the saxophone teacher and assistant director of bands in the Department of Music at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also coaches numerous saxophone chamber groups in the department, including the innovative “Town and Gown” saxophone quartet, which pairs his saxophone students with life-long performers and lovers of music from the community.



McClure earned his Master of Music in Conducting and undergraduate degree in Music Education from The University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He began teaching in the public schools of Russell County, Kentucky, leading elementary, middle, and high school bands. McClure studied saxophone with Jay Romines, Paul Haar, and Steven Stusek, and conducting with Gary Sousa. He has won numerous concerto competitions and performed at the North American Saxophone Alliance National Conference. In the fall of 2009 McClure helped form the North Carolina Saxophone Ensemble, which combines professional saxophonists from across the state with highly enthusiastic and talented amateur musicians.



Portrait of Sigurd Raschèr

The saxophone came of age as a jazz voice in the 1920s. Adolphe Sax, a Belgian, had invented the instrument in, of all places, Paris in 1842, when he attached a clarinet mouthpiece to a keyed brass horn. The saxophone immediately found a home in marching bands, but not classical orchestras. Sidney Bechet and others claimed the instrument for virtuosic improvisation in jazz bands, paving the way for the genius Charlie “Yardbird” Parker in the late 1930s. Gradually, the instrument snaked its sinuous way into concert halls as well. Musicians ‘crossed over’ in various directions. In France Marcel Mule, who played saxophone in the Republican Guard of the *Gendarmerie*, picked up vibrato technique in jam sessions with American dance bands, and was transformed into his country’s leading classical saxophonist. He attained a professorship at the Paris Conservatory. German-born Sigurd Manfred Raschèr studied classical clarinet in Berlin, but doubled on saxophone for nighttime gigs in the city’s jazz clubs. After a professor encouraged Raschèr to try Bach’s music on the saxophone, he committed to the instrument full-time. In the early 1930s Raschèr obtained posts at conservatories in Denmark and Sweden. Opposed to Adolf Hitler’s regime in Germany, he moved to the United States in 1938 and resided here until his death in 2001.

Composers, too, crossed the border between classical music and jazz. The pioneering Stravinsky was an early adaptor, soon joined by Darius Milhaud (one of *Les Six*), Maurice Ravel, and others. If there was any doubt, the unforgettable opening clarinet riff of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) forever legitimized jazz’s influence on ‘serious’ music.

Ibert thus joined a growing 20th century movement when he composed his *Concertino for alto saxophone* in 1935. Like the post-*Rite* Stravinsky, he used a small-scale chamber orchestra of eleven instruments, resembling a jazz ensemble, to accompany the soloist. (However, tonight the Chapel Hill Philharmonia follows a common performance practice of employing the full string section, along with individual flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, French horn, and trumpet.) Although written in two movements, the work actually emulates the tripartite fast-slow-fast structure of the classical concerto. Abundant syncopation, along with expressive timbres, the technique of flutter tonguing, and the use of a diminished scale suggest the *Concertino*’s jazz roots. The rapidly paced opening movement requires technical wizardry. A short orchestral introduction sets the stage for the saxophone to jump in and climb its way up to a high register. The second movement opens with a lyrical, slow interlude, centering on a

bluesy saxophone ballad, supported by the strings. The small wind choir develops the song, which then is restated by the strings. Ibert returns suddenly to the energetic, spiky mode of the first movement, climaxing in a virtuosic cadenza. The work ends with a collective sprint to the finish. Raschèr, for whom the *Concertino* was written and to whom it was dedicated, gave the premiere performance in December 1935. Marcel Mule followed with a performance one month later, and the *Concertino* became established in the saxophone repertoire.

Mahler Symphony No. 1

Gustav Mahler was born, not in a grand capital, but in Kalischt (the name, says commentator Norman Lebrecht, is aptly translated as “muddy ditch”), a hamlet in a German-speaking pocket within the Bohemian domain of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Mahler’s parents, Bernhard and Maria, moved house when their infant son was only three-months-old, in quick response, Lebrecht surmises, to Emperor Franz-Joseph’s relaxation of anti-minority regulations. The legal change enabled Jews to form a community in Iglau, a garrison town guarding the road between Prague and Brno in what is today the Czech Republic. Bernhard ran a distillery business and tavern, while Maria gave birth almost annually. Only six of their fourteen children survived to adulthood, with Gustav the eldest.

Even in that humble setting Mahler’s musical talents emerged. At age fifteen he auditioned successfully for a place at the renowned Conservatory in Vienna, arguably still the center of the western musical universe. He studied piano and composition, and continued a lifelong habit of devouring books. At age twenty he stepped onto the first rung of a professional ladder, with a summer job in a kitschy spa as conductor of operetta productions. Regular appointments in larger provincial theaters followed. Mahler rapidly emerged as an extraordinarily hardworking, charismatic and gifted conductor. Some consider him the greatest orchestral and operatic leader of an era that included Arthur Nikisch and Arturo Toscanini. The notion of conducting as a full-time profession was still new, dating to the mid-1860s with Hans von Bülow’s orchestral direction for Richard Wagner’s operatic productions. It became Mahler’s career, as he advanced over time to larger cities — Prague, Leipzig, Budapest, Hamburg. In 1897 he reached a pinnacle as Music Director of the Vienna Court Opera, accepting conversion to Catholicism to qualify for that Imperial post.

A contemporary critic described Mahler’s communication with instrumentalists and singers: “His body was racked with movement and in the semi-darkness he looked like some kind of fairy-tale goblin engaged in a flurry of hocus-pocus...Every little shift in the orchestra was reflected in his sensitive features...[with] both devils and angels crossing his visage in turn. Lightning flashed from his spectacle lenses with each sharp movement of his head, and from behind the lenses his eyes shone forth, watchful, assertive and demanding attention — every inch of his frame was simultaneously both an instrument of command and a means of expression.”

Unlike most of his contemporaries on the podium, Mahler also remained committed to composition. His first successes were songs. Love, or more accurately infatuation for a young woman, inspired a vocal ‘after-dinner entertainment’ (Lebrecht’s description) *Das Klagende Lied* (*The Song of Lament*), “the first work in which I really found myself as Mahler.” Several years later Mahler responded to another frustrated passion, this time for singer Johanna Richter, by penning words and music of four songs grouped as *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen* (literally *Songs of a Traveling Apprentice*, often translated as *Wayfarer*). Two of these played central roles in Mahler’s first great orchestral work.

In 1888 Mahler composed a tone poem that later morphed into his *First Symphony*, and he conducted its first performance in Budapest the next year. This was a remarkable, if problematic debut work. Biographer Jens Fischer considers it “without doubt the boldest symphonic visiting card in the whole history of western music.” However, the work was not well received, and Mahler only published the



Symphony ten years later, after several rounds of substantial changes. He revised it again in 1906. The name '*Titan*' was added for a performance in 1893, at which Mahler also provided an explanatory program booklet for a work that he knew had proven difficult for audiences to comprehend. Later he renounced these roadmaps, stating "...as long as I can express an experience in words I should never try to put it into music. The need to express myself...in symphonic terms begins only on the plane of obscure feelings, at the gate that opens into the 'other world'...in which things no longer fall apart in time and space." *Titan* alluded to the title of a novel by the early 19th century romanticist Jean Paul, one of Mahler's favorite writers. The composition's first part bore the heading, "From the Days of Youth: Flower-, Fruit- and Thorn-Pieces", a quotation from the subtitle of another Jean Paul romance. The second part was titled *Commedia humana* (*Human Comedy*), after Dante. There is no indication that Mahler actually sought to evoke images of the Titans of Greek mythology, gigantic elder gods who were overthrown by the Olympians. (By contrast, the White Star Line had this powerful image in mind in naming the 'unsinkable' RMS Titanic, the largest ship of its time, which was destroyed in a collision with an iceberg in the year after Mahler's death.) Rather, Mahler insisted, "he had in mind...a powerfully heroic individual, including his life and sufferings and his struggle in the face of a fate to which he eventually succumbed" (Fischer). Even so, the notions of *hubris* (boundless arrogance) and a violent fate feel embedded in the *First Symphony*.

The symphony's opening movement begins not with a theme, but with sounds of nature. The note A wafts eerily, spanning seven octaves from the lowest to the highest strings. It may capture memories from Mahler's childhood, from the forest near his parent's house in Iglau. There the boy often sat on a log daydreaming and perhaps escaping an unhappy home. "I've been to that wood, and I've sat there," reports Lebrecht. "The [sustained A is the] first sound that I heard — when the wind changes, when it starts blowing in from the east and you know the rain is coming..." More aural fragments build



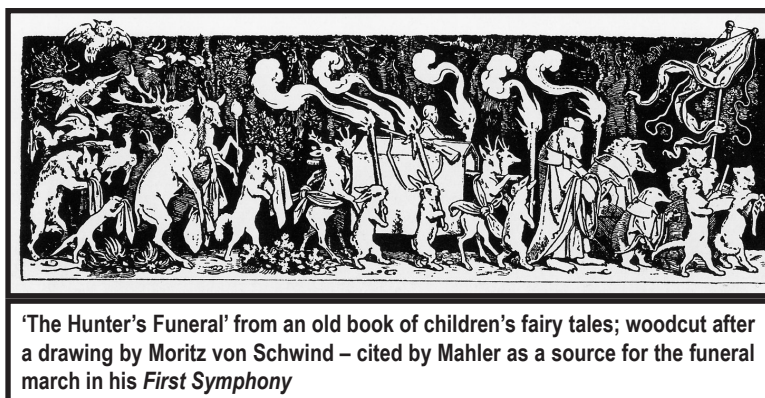
Max Oppenheimer – Gustav Mahler conducting the Vienna Philharmonic

impressions of a scene. The clarinet imitates a cuckoo. A distant fanfare suggests troops in a distant village. A low bass rumble introduces the first sense of foreboding. After more than four minutes the cellos finally break into a tune, the theme of Mahler's second *Wayfarer* song, "I Went This Morning over the Field". Critic Michael Steinberg captures the wayfarer's mood: "rejoicing in the beauty of the world and hoping that this marks the beauty of his own happy times, only to see that no, spring can never, never bloom for him." After a repeat of the long introduction, the music builds to a great crescendo, before capering with increasing wildness to the end.

Already in this first movement we have the germ of Mahler's entire output. He stated his philosophy to Finnish composer Jean Sibelius: "The symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything." That 'everything' includes a wide emotional range and strange juxtapositions: everyday sounds with gorgeous melodies; the profound with the banal; violent conflict with peace. On a walk with a friend through the "incredible musical pandemonium" of a town fair, Mahler exclaimed: "You hear? That's polyphony, and that's where I get it from! Even when I was quite a small child...this sort of thing used to move me strangely...For it's all the same whether heard in a din like this or in the singing of thousands of birds; in the howling of the storm, the lapping of the waves, or the crackling of the fire...The only difference is that the artist orders and unites them all into one concordant and harmonious whole."

The second movement offers an earthy, stomping peasant dance in $\frac{3}{4}$ time — a characteristic Austrian *ländler*. The contrasting *Trio* section becomes a little sexier, with string portamento (sliding) edging towards vulgarity. One can imagine more intimate dancing in a tavern later in the evening. Audiences at the Symphony's initial performances found this the most straightforward movement to absorb and enjoy.

However, the succeeding movement greatly disturbed its first hearers. Like the slow movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Third Symphony*, the *Eroica*, from the beginning of the 19th century, Mahler's 3rd movement is a funeral march. But while Beethoven commemorated a heroic figure — Bonaparte? Prometheus? The artist (the composer himself) struggling against Fate? — Mahler's subject has no such noble overtones. A solo double bass, muted, plays a folk-like rendition of the nursery tune *Frère Jacques* (*Bruder Martin* to German-speakers), transposed to a minor key, while a muffled timpani softly beats out the plodding funereal rhythm. The tune is echoed in the form of a round by odd combinations of instruments. Mahler then introduces a different element. Lebrecht thinks of it as raunchy “Jewish bar music...it's very *klezmer*,” and suggests a specific biographical interpretation of the movement: Mahler is remembering the perfunctory funerals of his many younger siblings, so common in an era when infant mortality exceeded 50 percent. He calls up images of tiny caskets being sent out the back door while heedless customers in his father's tavern never interrupt their “down and dirty” pleasures.



Does this movement really convey a political protest against child mortality? It seems a stretch. Yet the central emotions are not far off. Mahler's program notes of 1893 describe how he conflates the pathetic funeral band's music, with the “coarseness, the mirth and the banality of the world” conveyed in the sound of a second Bohemian village band [outside the cemetery walls], and “the hero's terrible cries of pain.” Together these elements create a deeply disturbing

polyphony. The movement also contains a consolatory interlude. Mahler quotes a serenely beautiful section from the last of his *Wayfarer* songs (“The Two Blue Eyes of My Beloved”), of which the lyrics are: “By the road stood a linden tree, where, for the first time I found rest in sleep! Under the linden tree that snowed its blossoms over me, I did not know how life went on, and all was well again! All! All, love and sorrow and world and dream!” Then the funeral march begins anew.

If not a child's funeral, what else might account for the searing psychic pain endured by Mahler's hero? Does it reflect the sordid ending of the composer's affair with a married woman, Marion von Weber, granddaughter-in-law of the composer Carl Maria von Weber? Or is something deeper at work? Did Mahler somehow intuit from the screeching of a rustic band the coming of what political scientist Hannah Arendt would later term the “banality of evil”, epitomized by the chilling ordinariness of Adolph Eichmann, that would lead the world to war and create living hells?

Whatever the cause, Mahler, in emulation of Zeus throwing thunderbolts at the fearsome Titan Typhon, now hurls “burning accusations...at the Creator.” In his words, “The fourth movement springs suddenly, like a lightning bolt from a dark cloud.” The intensity of this music was unprecedented in symphonic writing. Mahler's hero, having fallen so far from the idyllic morning in the forest, now battles for survival. “Time and again, the hero and, with him, the [symphony's] triumphant motif are struck on the head by Fate.” Finally the music reaches an epic conclusion; a glorious coda, with eight French horn players standing, announces the hero's ultimate victory over his pain. Thus, Mahler seems to follow the models of his predecessors Beethoven and Johannes Brahms in celebrating man's ability to confront and conquer Destiny or Fate. Yet the apotheosis is not a celebration of life, a triumphant “Ode to Joy” as in Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. Rather, Mahler implies that the victory comes only through the hero's

death. The story will continue into the *Symphony No. 2*, with the hero's resurrection. In letters to a friendly music critic in 1896, Mahler "left no doubt that the hero who is borne to his grave" in the opening movement of that '*Resurrection Symphony*' indeed "is the same person as the one who dies at the end of the *First Symphony*, where he is still attended by victory fanfares" (Fischer).

Leonard Bernstein, who idolized Mahler and spurred a revival of interest in his music, took the conclusion further. He expanded beyond the struggle of an 'everyman' coping with individual despair, and heard in Mahler's symphonies a dark warning to an entire civilization. In a passionate Norton Lecture at Harvard University (1973), Bernstein concluded: "...ours [the titanic 20th century] is the century of death, and Mahler is its musical prophet."

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