

## Mahler's Kindertotenlieder #4: "Oft denk' ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen!"

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### 1. Introduction

Mahler began to write the *Kindertotenlieder* when he was a forty years old bachelor without any children — and had not even met his future wife yet. Thus, the nature of Mahler's motivation to work on a song cycle using Rückert's poems about the death of children has been seen as some sort of enigma, subject of numerous scholar investigations. Two plausible theories draw on separate but complementary psychoanalytical studies that are described below.

One of them proposes that Mahler (consciously or not) was motivated by the consequences of his recent confrontation with death (Krawitt, 1978). Mahler went through a serious health crisis in the beginning of 1901, after which he had to stay "away from the world" for several months, in a long period of convalescence. Krawitt develops this argument based on a psychological analysis published by Dr. Stuart Feder (Feder, 2004), summarized as follows:

"(1) Mahler's crisis shocked him into the thought of having children of his own as a 'gateway to immortality'; (2) his whirlwind courtship of Alma Schindler resulted from his wish to have children; (3) he relieved his persistent conflict in his preoccupation about death in thought, art, and life, by embracing the concept of conquering death by birth; and (4) he symbolized his wish to have children in the *Kindertotenlieder* in the form of a mourning parent, a symbol that also reflects the opposite concept of death by birth." (Krawitt, p. 333)

The central idea of this theory is the link between the death of children and the birth of others to replace them, an experience that Mahler had himself during

his childhood. His father had lost eight of fourteen children.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Mahler had seen all the sequence of death and birth in his own family. The loss of Ernst, Mahler's much-loved brother, was an especially traumatic event for the young Gustav. Then, as an adult and after having faced death in 1901, Mahler could be placing himself in the position of his father.<sup>2</sup>

The other psychoanalytical approach, developed by Theodor Reik and summarized in Russel (1991), proposes in a similar way that, by 1901, Mahler would be considering to marry and to become a father. Such thoughts would have awakened memories of his sibling's deaths. Rückert wrote the *Kindertotenlieder* poems after the tragedy of the death of his two children; one of them had the same name as Mahler's dead brother (Ernst), a coincidence Mahler would certainly be aware of. As a consequence, "Mahler (...) identified himself with his father by putting himself into the frame of mind of a man who had lost a son named Ernst." (Russell, p. 5)

## **2. Order of composition**

The exact order of composition of the five *Kindertotenlieder* is subject of controversy. It is known that Mahler wrote some of the songs in 1901 and others in 1904. Apparently there is no single "generally accepted" hypothesis, the plausible ones being 1-2-3/4-5, 1-2-5/3-4 and 1-3-4/2-5 (see Russell, p. 8). The

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<sup>1</sup> According to Feder (2004). As a curiosity, there is some disagreement in different books concerning these numbers. Krawitt says that ten of Mahler's siblings had died before 1901 (p. 337). Russell says: "in fact, of his thirteen brothers and sisters, seven died before reaching the age of two." (p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> One of the most interesting arguments presented by Krawitt to justify his thesis is a potential "Freudian slip" found in one of Mahler's manuscripts. In the fifth song's manuscript, Mahler changed the last word of the poem from "Haus" (house) to "Schoss" (womb), changing completely the meaning of the poem's conclusion. Krawitt argues that the symbology involved in this word replacement (be it conscious or not) is "of the greatest significance", showing that the composer "actually did link the death and birth of children, artistically and philosophically" (p. 337). The fact that the last stanza of *In diesem Wetter* is set to music in a lullaby style becomes even more meaningful in this regard. For the printed edition, however, Mahler corrected the poem and used the original word.

first one is considered to be the least likely; and in any case, we can see that song number four is more likely to have been written in 1904. Krawitt argues that songs 3 and 4 have a qualitatively different treatment (and even choice) of the text, being more literal and less mystical than the other three. He also suggests that the very different situation of Mahler's life in 1904 (now married and with two healthy children) had a significant role in this change of focus for songs 3 and 4 (p. 347).

### **3. The text**

This is Mahler's adaptation of Rucker's poem for song number 4 (translated by Russel, p. 91):

- 1 I often think they have only gone out!
- 2 Soon they will get back home!
- 3 The day is fine! Oh do not be afraid!
- 4 They are just going out for a long walk
  
- 5 Yes indeed, they have only gone out
- 6 And now they will be reaching home!
- 7 Oh do not be afraid, the day is fine!
- 8 They are only taking a walk to those heights!
  
- 9 They have only gone ahead of us
- 10 And will not want to come home again!
- 11 We will catch up with them on those heights
- 12 In the sunshine! The day is fine on those heights!

The structure of this song is rather clear-cut when compared to other compositions by Mahler, and even to other songs in the same cycle. Instead of a musical texture of continuous chromaticism,<sup>3</sup> Mahler adopted more of a juxtaposition strategy. The music is organized in larger formal blocks whose tonality can be clearly identified. However, the juxtaposition of such blocks in the

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<sup>3</sup> By "texture of continuous chromaticism" we mean the type of musical fabric such as Wagner's *Prelude for Tristan und Isolde*, in which tonal centers are never explicitly stated, but rather suggested *en passant*.

actual temporal sequence of the piece makes the tonality of the song a slightly unsettled matter, as we shall see.

Let us now consider the relationship between music and text. The poem is set to music using very balanced proportions:

Mm. 1-23: lines 1-4 (first stanza) = 23 measures

Mm. 24-45: lines 5-8 (second stanza) = 22 measures

Mm. 46-71: lines 9-12 (third stanza) = 26 measures

In fact, the music is pretty much the same for each new stanza. However, they are not mere literal repetitions: changes in orchestration, motivic variations and development of the vocal line have important consequences in the perception of a dynamically progressing musical structure as opposed to a simple repetition of one same music setting. The textual meaning offered by the poem is connected with this musical process.

The entire poem is the representation of a father saying that often he thinks that his children (who are now dead) have just gone for a walk and soon will be coming back home. Roughly, the three stanzas describe the same thing in different ways; what is important, though, is the level of “consciousness of death” that arises from one stanza to another. The first stanza represents the pure illusion of a parent that does not want to believe his children are dead. The second introduces the word “heights” (or “hills”, in some translations), which brings an ambiguous element of a distant place, but possibly still real. It is the third stanza that dissolves the illusion and presents the father’s attempt to comfort himself with the idea that the children are in a better place now, and soon their parents will join them too. Note that the idea of light x darkness, which is so characteristic of all the other songs in this cycle, is here reduced to a

minimum. No reference to darkness actually appears in this poem, and the only explicit appearance of light is in the form of the “sunshine” in line 12. The fact that “the day is fine” is used in all three stanzas also confers a general sense of the predominance of light in this piece. The overall mood of this song is contrastingly bright in relation to the rest of the cycle, but such “light” changes its meaning across the piece. At first, it presents itself as the fragile illusion of a dream or wish (“they have just gone for a walk”). Towards the end the illusion ceases to exist and some kind of “heavenly comfort” is sought: the sunshine “reveals itself (...) to be not the sunshine of the poet’s own world, but a symbol of heaven, seen here (in variation of the symbol of eternal source of light found in the first two songs) as distant sunny heights on which the children now dwell remote and inaccessible to him.” (Russell, p. 92)

#### **4. Tonal construction and form**

As we already suggested, this song can be analyzed as a succession of reasonably well defined tonal moments that, when put together, raise a structural ambiguity as to the tonality of the whole piece.

Let us analyze each one of these blocks for the first stanza, comparing and relating them to their corresponding ones for the second and third stanzas.

Segment “A” (mm. 1-5): consists of the instrumental introduction that precedes the first vocal phrase. The “warmness” of character established by the theme (the parallel sixths in violins and horns) appears to define the key of Eb major as the tonal center of the piece. The fact that the song ends with this very same material in a condensed ‘coda’ version helps enforcing the idea of Eb major as the tonality of the piece. However, it is interesting to note that this theme contains in itself the seed of the major-minor ambiguity that will become the key

to understand the tonal structure of this piece. The melody starts with an expressive leap of a major sixth (Bb-G), thus emphasizing very clearly the major third of Eb. Immediately after, this G is prolonged by the insertion of F# as auxiliary notes. These cannot be heard as simple auxiliary notes, however, since precisely what is happening (enharmonically), is an oscillation between the major and the minor thirds of Eb (mm. 1-2). In measure 3, the lower voice of the parallel sixths reaches a Cb (minor ninth of Bb). A dominant chord with an added minor ninth can certainly be used in a major mode context, but it cannot be denied that it brings its intrinsic “minor” quality into play (the Cb being the minor sixth of Eb minor, as opposed to the major sixth degree characteristic of the major mode). Finally, in m. 5, the descending line that works as part of the resolution to the tonic is made of a chromatic movement 4-3-b3-2: again, the authority of the major third is questioned in very subtle but effective way. It is remarkable to note that all these suggestions of an “intruding” minor mode occur in a so short span of 5 measures, just at the beginning of the piece.

Segment “B” (mm. 6-14): from here on, the evolution of the piece does not agree anymore with a straight definition of Eb major. The very first vocal phrase shifts to Eb minor in its first two notes, leaping a minor sixth up (from Bb to Gb) instead of a major sixth as it would be expected. This segment then builds a clear harmonic progression from Ebm [i] to its dominant Bb [V], back to Ebm and on to its relative major GbM (III), through a simple [vi-ii-V-I] sequence (in m. 10, Ebm is [i] in relation to previous measures, but also [vi] in relation to those to come; see figure below).

mm. 10-14

[i] vi    ii    V7    I  
G<sup>b</sup>

Segment “C” (mm. 15-23): returns to Eb major. Measure 15 suddenly abandons GbM and introduces a pedal on the dominant of Eb (Bb in violas and bassoon). It is not an explicit dominant triad, though: the notes Ab and C above Bb work as appoggiaturas of the dominant triad tones (which appear in the fourth beat of m. 15). The actual underlying chord of these two measures may be considered an embellished version of a V6-4. If the V6-4 chord is already built by suspensions (fourth and sixth above the dominant tone), we could almost say that this case is a suspension of the suspension: the third Ab-C resolves in Bb-G in m. 22 (see figure with harmonic reduction of those bars). Or also we could see it as a IV above the pedal dominant, again serving as some kind of appoggiatura. In any case, it makes much more sense to simply look at the horizontal progression of the individual lines and understand how such chords arise from those relatively simple chromatic melodic movements:

mm. 15-18

V9-7-4    V6-4    vii7    V7  
(or simply    /V  
IV over Bb?)

After reaching Eb major again, the voice follows the violins and horns in a modified presentation of the initial theme from “A”. There is an important break in the vocal line melodic flow in mm. 21: the singer suddenly interrupts the

melody and the orchestra takes over its continuation. In the next two stanzas, this process of interruption will be subject of significant variation: In the second time (mm. 42-43), the singer goes beyond the initial melody breakpoint and sings one extra bar; as a consequence, the orchestra takes over only one bar later, and actually extends the concluding passage for another extra bar (mm. 44-45). Finally, in the corresponding measures of the (mm. 66-68), the singer does not interrupt anymore the melodic flow and sings the complete line up to its climax in the high register, being accompanied by the orchestra with inverted versions of the same melodic shape. Metaphorically, this could be described as a process of “uncovering” the outline of a melody throughout the form; initially this melody had its potential climax “buried” in the orchestra. The deceptive interruption of the singing contributed to a sense of hesitation or uncertainty in the otherwise serene surrounding texture of Eb major. This process of melodic “revelation” may be a compositional strategy to highlight one of the essences of the poem — the transition from *illusion - dream - fake comfort* to a gradual acceptance of the *reality* and an attempt of gaining at least *spiritual comfort* and *certainty*.

Development of vocal line  
at the end of “C” sections  
(small notes = orchestra)

mm. 19-23  
[They are just going out for a long walk!]

mm. 40-45  
[They are only taking a walk to those heights!]

mm. 63-69  
[... in the sunshine!                      The day is fine                      on those heights!]

To summarize the overall form of the piece, these are then the structural building blocks of Kindertotenlieder #4:

	<b>"A"</b>	<b>"B"</b>	<b>"C"</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	1-5 (EbM)	-	-
<b>1<sup>st</sup> stanza</b>	-	6-14 (Ebm->GbM)	mm. 15-23 (->EbM)
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> stanza</b>	-	24-35 (Ebm->GbM)	mm. 36-45 (->EbM)
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> stanza</b>	-	46-58 (Ebm->GbM)	mm. 59-68 (->EbM)
<b>Coda</b>	69-71 (EbM)	-	-

Segments "B and "C" are repeated — with variations — for the second and third stanzas, but their basic structure remains unaltered. At the end of the piece, a shorter version of "A" is presented as an instrumental coda. We can see these two outer segments working as some kind of EbM "frame" for the inner sections of the piece, which is perhaps the main reason for EbM to be the strongest (or at least the first) candidate as "the main key". The body of the song does confirm Eb as the central key area; however, a clear-cut definition of this area as major or minor is obviously ambivalent. As we said earlier, this ambivalence is achieved not by note-to-note chromaticism in an ongoing, tonally undefined texture, but rather by the juxtaposition of blocks "B" and "C", which are reasonably well defined if considered separately ("B" = Ebm, "C" = EbM).

The opposition between these two blocks represent the basic ambiguity between the minor and major versions of Eb, and it is possibly this very musical conflict that actually drives the piece ahead. "B" starts out in Ebm and modulates to its relative major (thus containing in itself another level of representation of the minor-major characters). "C" moves back to EbM, which is reached only in the second half of it (after the dominant pedal discussed above). A variation of the introductory theme from "A" is used in this second half of "C", which also

provokes some uncertainty in terms of form.<sup>4</sup>

## **5. Conclusion**

The idea of major and minor modes as different “flavors” of one same key area, and thus an increased interchangeability of both types within one same piece, can be seen as general tendency throughout the nineteenth century. For example, in most of Brahms’ pieces we can find this kind of major-minor ambiguity woven into small units such as motives or phrases. In this specific piece by Mahler, we could see how this major-minor problem receives a treatment more oriented to larger, separated blocks — even though smaller scale strategies are also present, such as the subtle insinuations of the minor mode “hidden” in the introductory theme “A”. Those blocks are then put together in a way that the piece seems to be constantly fluctuating between one or another version of Eb, major and minor. Mahler takes advantage of this uncertainty in order to achieve a musical structure that parallels, or enhances, the textual meaning offered by Rückert’s poem.

## **References:**

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<sup>4</sup> Because of this reutilization of thematic material, another listening possibility is the slight sense of return to the introduction when “C” finally reaches EbM. The perception of a weak A-B-A’ inside our categories A-B-C may then be suggested. “B”, in this case, would have to accommodate everything that is in the middle of the two “A”-themes, e.g., all measures from 6 to 18 in the first stanza. Note that this alternative division offers a different perspective in terms of musical parsing of the poem: the last line of each stanza becomes the “A” preceding next stanza’s “B”. From this viewpoint, another acceptable formal division could be: A (intro); B (poem lines 1-3); A’ (poem line 4); B’ (5-7); A’’ (8); B’’ (9-11); A’’’ (12); A’’’’ (coda). Even though this does seem a little odd, it highlights an even more cyclic and “oscillating” listening path that is at least insinuated in the piece.

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