

OSM
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Karita Mattila sings Strauss

This is the concert of ultimate farewell. Farewell to Beauty, to Music, to the World. Strauss expressed it with a sense of serenity and acceptance; Mahler through torment, sarcasm and meditation. These works are demanding, magnificent, and deeply inspiring.

Richard Strauss Four last Songs

Born June 11, 1864, in Munich; died September 8, 1949, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.
First performed on May 22, 1950, in London, Kirsten Flagstad, soprano, and London Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler.

Anachronism. This is an expression alluding to something antiquated, outdated and old-fashioned. In this sense, Strauss' last work is a perfect anachronism: it invents nothing new, turns five decades backward, and is inspired by the most romantic poetry one could imagine. And yet these lieder disown any usual significance suggested by the world *anachronism*.

While his contemporaries believe only in avant-garde music, exploring new sounds and forms, Strauss, considered as a "has been", composes his swan song. His ultimate opus is a proof that an authentic work of art goes beyond styles, ignores criteria of innovation and modernity, and is independent of its time. Indeed, the musical material is of no importance, but for the spirit which gives it form and life.

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1948 is the twilight of Richard Strauss' long and rich musical life. At the beginning of his career, he shocked audiences with audacious innovations, first with his tone poems, *Don Juan* (1889) and *Till Eulenspiegel* (1895), and later by the operas, *Salomé* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909), both at the peak of modernism. He was expected to follow the path to new music. But it was not to be. Two years later, the *Rosenkavalier* (1911) went against all predictions, moving away from the modernist trend. Afterwards, Strauss was often considered a traitor to the historic progress. Forty years long, he kept his point, remaining faithful to himself, composing operas and celebrating feminine voices with a wonderful production of lieder. Too bad for modernism...

The *Four last Songs* remind us of a Book-of-Hours for the layman, going through the cycle of life, in the poetic images of the seasons, from the spring time to the autumn, and to the fulfillment in the dreams of the starry night. Strauss chose three poems of Hermann Hesse (1877-1962), and the fourth one, composed first, is set on the verses by Joseph von Eichendorff (1788-1857). The songs are linked by the same serenity and grace, in the symbolic imagery in the twilight of life. The soprano soaring melodies and the subtle orchestral accompaniment create a unique emotional atmosphere. The strophic structure

of the poems doesn't impose its recapitulation on music; each lied is through-composed, very similar to a symphonic poem with voice, true to the mood rather than to the words.

This set of songs is of remarkable unity, and yet, it was not Strauss who conceived its title and chose the current order of the lieder. It was Ernst Roth, Strauss' friend and editor, who put them into the order following seasons and emotions. He published them in 1954, six years after the composer's death, under the collective title *Four last Songs*.

Frühling – Spring

In a stormy orchestral swell, the voice is soaring on breathtaking heights, running through the whole register with sensuality and passion. The orchestra comments between the stanzas, extending the long melismas beyond vocal limits. Dark timbres in the beginning slowly lighten till the final cadenza of the postlude.

September

Farewell to nature's beauty, to the fading summer. The shimmering colors of the voice reflect the poetic images suggested by the verses. The subtle modulations and the horn solo of the orchestral postlude create an atmosphere of tender melancholy; autumn is here a symbol announcing the inevitable end of all things...

Am Schlafengehen – Going to sleep

The soaring melody opens the magic sphere of the starry night. The arabesque of the violin solo surrounding the stanzas answers to the limpid beauty of the voice in a dream-like halo. Blissful.

Im Abendrot - At sunset

As a young composer, Strauss wrote the tone poem *Death and Transfiguration* (1891) that made him famous. In his last of the *Four lieder*, the solo horn quotes the *Transfiguration* motif, closing a long journey in music as in life. The vocal line is supported by the late-romantic harmony and the sparkling orchestration. Everything is fulfilled; the light fades out, the voice dissolving in profound calmness: "Is this, perhaps, death?"

The beauty of this chant belongs to another world. Horns and violas answer to the last question quoting the theme from the *Death and Transfiguration*; the piccolos fly away above the orchestra, closing softly this Book-of-hours in music.

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Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No. 9*

Born in Kalischt, Bohemia (now Czech Republic), July 7 1860; died in Vienna, May 18 1911.
First performance in Vienna, on June 26 1912; Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, with Bruno Walter conducting.

Finally, he did dare to defy fate, to ward off the superstition concerning the Ninth symphonies: "It seems that the *Ninth* is the limit." Mahler, aware of the "curse of the

Ninth”, was thinking of Beethoven and Bruckner. Trying to trick fate, he composes the next work, *Das Lied von der Erde – The Song of the Earth* (1911), which is effectively his ninth symphony without the number. The next one, in Mahler’s mind, was the *Tenth*: “Now the danger is past.” But, as any mortal knows, to play with fate, he is always at a loss.

Mahler was convinced that a symphony could create a whole world. In his *Third*, he originally provided titles for each movement, such as: “What Love tells me”, or “What the Angels tell me”. Following the same idea, one could guess the title of his last completed symphony: “What Death tells me”. Nevertheless, at this stage, the music had no need of words anymore.

This powerful work features two conflicting worlds, between life and death. Irony, violence and bitterness mark two shorter, quick pieces, framed with two large slow movements, mournful and exalted, a kind of spiritual pilgrimage, where the music illuminates the road to the last farewell.

1. *Andante comodo*

In a letter to his wife (1912), in a few words, Alban Berg points out the meaning of this music:

Once again I have played through the score...The first movement is the expression of an exceptional love for this earth, the longing to live in peace on it, to enjoy nature to its depths- before death comes. As inevitably it does. The whole movement is permeated by the premonition of death.

The construction of this movement is in a loose sonata form, using interweaving short motifs; fragmented elements are linked without development, apparently lacking any logic. Nevertheless, the unity of the whole is created by the variation and the insistent return of a three-notes motif, in changing timbres, with the characteristic descending second. It is closely related to the opening motif of Beethoven’s piano sonata Op. 81a, *Les Adieux*; Mahler’s sketches bear the mark “Leb’wohl” (Farewell), quoting the title the Master gave to his work. The Finale of the monumental *The Song of the Earth* features the same motif bearing the last words : *Ewig, Ewig*.

2. *Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Ländlers . Etwas täppisch und sehr derb* (*In the tempo of a leisurely Ländler. Somewhat clumsy and very crude*)

Often mentioned as the “dance of death”, this movement is a limping, caricatured *Ländler*, Austrian folk dance. It is a kind of scherzo, with symmetrical tripartite structure, in three different tempi: two *Ländler* framing a Waltz. Following the ethereal sounds at the end of the first movement, it brings us back to earth, mixing folk-like motifs, grotesque parody and polyphonic technique. The orchestral setting emphasizes the clumsiness and sarcasm, through a series of rapid games in bassoons and brass instruments, followed by a *Ländler* phrase played by the piccolo and contrabassoon.

Syncopated rhythms and distorted sounds of the muted brasses are far from the invitation to dance. There reigns the futile agitation of a crumbling world.

3. *Rondo-Burleske. Allegro assai. Sehr trotzig*
(*Very defiant*)

Alluding to the learned critics of his music at the time, Mahler offered in the autograph score an ironic dedication of this ***Rondo-Burleske*** “To my brothers in Apollo”. Fluctuating between virtuosity and vulgarity, and despite its title, the movement contains more violence than humour, dark passages reaching demonic eruptions.

In a form of a rondo, it opens with a dissonant theme treated in a double fugue, followed by three episodes of grotesque counterpoint. As a contrasting central interlude, Mahler transforms the same dissonant motifs into a serene, flowing melodies, played high on violins and flutes. This passage announces the final *Adagio* with a *gruppetto* figure, suddenly interrupted by a blazing dissonance of brass instruments. Again, polyphonic episodes and folk-like refrains alternate in breathtaking race running nowhere, and finally disintegrate in a furious fortissimo.

4. *Adagio. Sehr langsam und noch zurückhaltend*
(*Very slowly and held back*)

“I wander to find my homeland, my home” (*Ich wandle nach der Heimat, meiner Stätte*), could be a leitmotiv of this movement. It is a quote of the last chant of *The Song of the Earth*, among other allusions to Mahler’s own earlier works incorporated in this score. The short *gruppetto* motif, still heard in the *Burleske*, is transformed here in the fugal theme, as a thread going all over the movement. The intensity grows with a hymn-like melody, less in dynamic forces, than as interior expression. Both musical ideas are developed through variations, gradually fragmented, slowing down, until only strings are left playing. Beyond the last sound, in poignant silence, the pilgrim has found the fulfilment of his spiritual journey.

Dujka Smoje