

Eine Alpensinfonie: A Symphony At All?

“The symphony must be like the world. It must contain everything.”

So said Gustav Mahler, in a famous meeting with Jean Sibelius in 1907. With this, he set out his own position on the symphony, deeply entrenched in the Austro-Germanic tradition, which he would go on to explore through his cycle of ten symphonies. Mahler is typically understood as symbolic of turn-of-the-century symphonic practice, and particularly that seemingly innocuous term, the ‘Late Romantic’. The term is problematic for a number of reasons, perhaps most significantly because it immediately encourages us to think of Mahler as fundamentally reactionary, summing up the end of an era, rather than ushering in a new one. Nonetheless, it can certainly be useful to consider as a group the work of Teutonic composers such as Mahler and Strauss who were writing in the decades either side of the turn of the century, and whose music often displays features particular to that place and time.

Perhaps the most immediate of these characteristics is the excess that coursed through every aspect of this music. In every respect, these composers pushed the bounds of their work as far as possible. This is easily apparent in the scale of these works: Mahler’s symphonies expanded the duration of the work and the size of the ensemble involved beyond anything that had been known in the symphonic tradition, for example in the mammoth Third Symphony, the longest symphony in the standard repertoire; or the Eighth Symphony, subtitled ‘Symphony of A Thousand’ on account of the number of performers involved. Just a brief glance at the orchestra involved in *Eine Alpensinfonie* demonstrates the point, with quadruple wind & brass and a huge battery of percussion. It is worth appreciating that with these large ensembles came the potential for extensive experimentation with orchestration: indeed, upon hearing the first rehearsal of *Eine Alpensinfonie*, Strauss remarked, “Finally, I have learnt to orchestrate”. These composers were also able to push the technical demands on the players to whole new heights, with parts of such difficulty as would only have appeared in the hardest of concertos just a few decades before.

In order to match these enormous symphonic undertakings, these composers were stretching their harmonic language as far as was possible within a fundamentally tonal context. Though there are notable examples in which both Strauss and Mahler appear to completely abandon any sense of tonality, these are, on the whole, isolated incidents. Neither composer was prepared to make the final push into atonality, but instead explored the extremes of dense chromatic harmony, and swift and far-moving modulations. Strauss is famous in this regard for having ‘regressed’ in this domain: the greatest extremes in his writing came early in his career, with his operas *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909). Following these masterpieces, he pulled back from the brink, and adopted a somewhat less experimental harmonic vocabulary, most obviously evident in his opera *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), and *Eine Alpensinfonie* (1915) itself. It is in large part for this reason that he is often labelled something of a

conservative, though this has tended to be at the hands of scholars more interested in championing the developments towards atonality achieved by Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, and who have adopted something of a teleological view of music history, celebrating only those who were willing to push the bounds of music as far as was possible.

As early as 1849, Wagner had proclaimed that “the last symphony has already been written”: in his eyes, Beethoven's Ninth had concluded the life of the genre. Indeed, it is worth asking what the position of the symphony was at the turn of the twentieth century, and whether it really was ‘dead’, as Wagner had suggested. It is certainly the case that there was a degree to which the symphony was understood as conservative, traditional, even old-fashioned. However, with this, at least from some perspectives, came a degree of prestige surrounding the genre: a composer's first symphony would have been understood as something of a statement. Nonetheless, there remains a question as to whether composers were doing anything to advance the genre more than just general elements of their music: they were certainly longer and more chromatic, but was anything changing for the symphony itself? To answer this, we need to attempt a definition of the symphony at the turn of the century; or, at least, we need to establish what were considered the essential characteristics of a symphony.

Possibly the most crucial feature was the composer's engagement with particular forms, both on an overall and movement-by-movement level. It was in large part the prestige in which these forms (primarily, of course, the so-called ‘sonata form’) were held that elevated the status of the symphony above all other genres. It is worth acknowledging that by this stage, scholars like Marx and Czerny had codified ‘sonata form’, and there was an understood academic definition of what the form should entail. Likewise, a fairly strict set of expectations surrounded the layout of the symphony: typically, it would be in four movements: a large first movement in sonata form, then a slow movement, a scherzo & trio, and then a finale, often in rondo form. A crucial part of the sonata, and thus the symphonic, process was the coordinated (or intentionally uncoordinated) articulation of harmony, thematic material, and texture. Thus, new melodic material would typically be presented in a new key, and within a new textural setting. Unsurprisingly, given the harmonic freedom of turn-of-the-century composers, these forms were treated in a much more fluid and complex manner than earlier composers had employed, but nonetheless, composers like Brahms and Mahler wrote their symphonies in the knowledge of, and often actively in dialogue with, codified expectations of symphonic practice.

Finally then, we are prepared to consider the title question of this essay: to what extent is *Eine Alpensinfonie* a symphony at all? Superficially, insofar as this work is a large piece for a big orchestra, it would seem similar to the symphonic tradition, which tended to operate at the extremes of available instrumentation and duration, whatever the stylistic period. However, on the face of it, its through-composed form, subdivided into 22 smaller sections, does not appear symphonic at all: even Mahler,

who explored all sorts of formal distortions in his symphonies, had never written a single-movement work like this. Indeed, this is the conclusion reached by most scholars, who simply regard the title as an honorific, and fundamentally understand it as a tone-poem, with its form dictated by the programmatic narrative. Scholarly view of the success of this has varied: not unusually, it is Adorno who is the most critical, writing of the “crass externality of the relationship between program and form”.

Norman del Mar, however, has briefly alluded to the possibility that it follows something of a Listzian fantasia-symphony plan. Though he doesn't extend this analysis very far, it is certainly worth exploring. This formal concept is one typically applied to single-movement works like this, in which we understand there to be an overall form to the work that loosely follows the four-movement shape outlined above.

In relation to this piece, the basic plan is thus: the first movement extends from the opening through to the summit; the summit and vision constitute the slow movement; the storm the scherzo; and the *Sonnenuntergang*, *Ausklang*, and return to *Nacht* the final movement. The first three sections of this work engage aptly with the characteristics of the relevant symphonic movements. The last is slightly more problematic, with no reference to any sort of rondo, or sonata form, and a complete rejection of the conventional jubilation with which symphonies often ended. Nonetheless, this is not completely unprecedented: Tchaikovsky 6; Brahms 3; and Mahler 9 had all concluded in similar manners. It is also worth noting that the piece includes a classic slow symphonic introduction (the opening, up to the dramatic caesura that precedes *Der Anstieg*), and a coda (the return of *Nacht* at the end, with its characteristic descending Bb minor scale, followed by the brass chorale). This thus suggests what Hepokoski & Darcy have termed the Introduction-Coda Frame, in which the introduction and coda set up a bounding frame within which the main activity of the movement or work operates, much as night frames day.

More broadly than this consideration of formal concerns, it is important to acknowledge the significance of the thematic process, so intricately bound up with symphonic practice, in this work. Even aside from the programmatic manipulation of his material, which is not the subject of this essay, the elaborate way in which Strauss reuses the same, often very simple, material in all sorts of guises speaks to his indebtedness to the symphonic tradition. Indeed, though the work appears to be permeated by a large number of different melodies, in reality many of these are derived from each other, thus firmly binding the work together. In 1884, Strauss had shown Brahms his Symphony in F minor: the older composer's response had been, “Your symphony contains too much playing about with themes.” By 1915, Strauss had clearly improved his technique such that his prodigious melodic gift could be allied to a strong technical underpinning, with which he could link together these different themes.

Given this thematic integrity, then, it is tempting to try and understand the piece from a sonata-form perspective, perhaps working in tandem with the symphony-fantasia plan outlined above. A case can be suggested for a quasi-exposition & recapitulation relationship between the 'first movement' and 'last movement' as outlined above, with the 'development' falling between these, largely occupying the storm, but in reality this relationship comes about from the symmetry of the narrative. Ultimately, the music is too harmonically unstable and thematically supple to respond well to this sort of analytical interpretation. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the debt paid by this thematic integrity to the sonata tradition, particularly through composer like Beethoven and Brahms, who had furthered this sort of intensive thematic working.

A symphony, then? That this question is so difficult to answer speaks in large part to the uncertainty that surrounded the genre at the start of the twentieth century, as composers experimented with the symphony in all manner of ways. It is certainly very easy to disregard this work and treat it simply as a tone poem, as most scholars do. Nonetheless, temporarily putting aside the formal narrative suggests strong grounds for a symphonic understanding of the work, which is certainly affirmed by the enormous scale of the piece. Strauss was by no means a symphonist, but this piece is probably as close as his mature works ever got, and what an achievement in doing so.