Exoticism and Otherness
in Gustav Mahler's Compositions

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Abstract: *German and Austrian fin-de-siècle art was influenced by oriental and exotic arts, as proven by the visual arts of the late 19th and early 20th century, as well as by the philosophical perspectives and literary products of the period. This cultural atmosphere had a significant impact on the compositions of Gustav Mahler, whose exoticist outlook was inspired by this cultural background, as well as his Jewish heritage and philosophical beliefs. Although different in sound from French musical orientalism, where composers strive to create distinct exotic sounds through various compositional practices, the exoticism that reveals itself in the works of Gustav Mahler is often rather subtle, than clearly discernible. Mahler's exoticism is strongly connected to the idea of otherness: the juxtaposition of contrasting styles and themes, from the tragic or sublime to the ironic and grotesque, create a novel and perplexing sound. The present research focuses mainly on Mahler's vocal works, such as the Rückert-Lieder and the Kindertotenlieder, but also refers to the exotic features discernible in his First symphony.*

Keywords: *exoticism; orientalism; otherness; Mahler;*

Introduction – *Fin-de-siècle* in Austria and Germany

Fin-de-siècle art was influenced by the Art Nouveau style, that represented the merging of various European art styles and movements with the exotic influence of oriental or orientalist art, and inspiration from the natural world. Although France was considered the international center of this movement, Art Nouveau assumed various forms, such as the German *Jugendstil* or the Vienna *Secession*. The latter alternative to the style retained its main features, however it gradually departed from the sensual and undulating lines of the French Art Nouveau, towards *"the clarity of geometrical forms and straight lines"*.[2] Inspired by the Münich Secession movement of 1892, a group of Austrian artists that included Gustav Klimt founded in 1897 the *Vienna Secession*.

Similar to other European cultural capitals and influenced by the particular features of the Secession, Vienna also manifested a particular interest in exotic and oriental subjects at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century. This *orientalism* was reflected in visual arts, literature, and music alike. In 1900 a major exhibition of Japanese art was organized by the *Wiener Secession*, while in 1901 people dressed in Japanese costumes attended the *Japanisches Kirschblüthenfest* in the Vienna Prater. The style of Japanese paintings and woodcuts was imitated by visual artists and

Gustav Klimt often employed exotic elements or motifs in his paintings. 1905 witnessed the premiere of Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* in Dresden, which employed an oriental setting[3].

Despite this cultural and artistic background, Adorno believes that Art Nouveau elements are absent from the works of Mahler and states that the composer distanced himself from the leading figures of Viennese modernism, probably sounding rather retrograde compared to the period's standards of modernism[4]. Mahler's music is a combination of various musical styles, rich in contrasting images and emotions that are expressed in juxtaposition. His exoticism is less obvious in sound (despite certain musical pages that have a distinct oriental feel) but rather is related to various philosophical ideas or the concept of otherness. Mahler's otherness can be related to his Jewish roots and Bohemian origin, but also to the inner conflicts that are expressed in his music[5].

1. Gustav Mahler — At the Border between Tradition and Innovation

The first decades of the 20th century were marked by the search for novel musical idioms and compositional processes. Within this changing climate, Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) constantly struggled to find the balance between old and new, between tradition and innovation. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Mahler's romanticism was ill-timed, unsuitable in the context of Viennese modernism, suggesting that the composer was "a cultural conservative"[6]. According to Johnson, Mahler *must have sounded "retrograde"* to his contemporaries[7].

Mahler's compositions may be regarded as a synthesis between past and future, a means for reconciling post Romantic music and the works of the 20th century. However, the composer was often accused of lacking originality and style, due to the reminiscences of other composers and their idioms in his works. Knittel mentions a Viennese cartoon from 1905, entitled *Mahler's Metamorphosen*, which illustrates Gustav Mahler dressed up as Beethoven, Liszt, or Schubert, and eventually in peasant garb — suggesting the various influences discernible in Mahler's music[8]. Further exploring the historical, social, and cultural context, Knittel refers to the prevailing stereotype of the early 1900's, which claimed that eclecticism and imitation were specifically Jewish characteristics[9]. Nonetheless, the influence of his predecessors did not obscure Mahler's originality and his contribution to the evolution of the musical idiom of the early 20th century.

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[3] Niekerk, Carl. 2010. *Reading Mahler. German Culture and Jewish Identity in Fin-de-Siécle Vienna*. Rochester, New York: Camden House, p. 180

[4] Adorno, Theodor. 1992. "Mahler". In *Quasi una Fantasia*, trs. Rodney Livingstone. London: Verso, p. 98.

[5] The Rückert song *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* is evocative in this sense, suggesting the separation between the composer and his environment.

[6] Solvik, Morten. 2005. "Mahler's Untimely Modernism". In *Perspectives on Gustav Mahler*, ed. by Jeremy Barham. Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, pp. 153–71.

[7] Johnson, Julian. 2009. *Mahler's Voices — Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies*. Oxford University Press, p. 228.

[8] Knittel, K.M. 2010. *Seeing Mahler: Music and the Language of Antisemitism in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*. England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, p.1.

[9] Knittel, K.M. 2010, *op. cit*., pp. 1–4.

The words and *the voice* are but two of the elements that are particular to Mahler's compositions, the source for the contradictions that determine the evolution of his musical expression. The voice in this context is more than the human voice, it represents the voice of each emotional state desired to be expressed, the voice of nature, while the words are employed when absolute music is no longer sufficient and unable to give answers to the questions that marked Mahler's creation.

2. Irony and the Other in *Symphony No. 1 in D major* (1887–1888)

Even though Mahler was hesitant to formulate explicit programs for his symphonic works, his *Symphony No. 1 in D Major* (composed between 1887 and 1888) is often referred to as *Titan*. Niekerk discusses the relationship between Mahler's First Symphony and the homonymous novel written by German author Jean Paul (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter), published in four volumes between 1800 and 1803, observing that both works are characterized by contradictions and ambiguities, calling for the participation of the recipient to clarify the meaning of the composition[10].

The symphony exists in two forms: the initial version, in two parts and five movements, and the ultimately published four-part version. The initial version, emphasises the programmatic aspects of the work, through the program notes later removed by the composer:

Part I: *From the Days of Youth*

1. *Spring and No End* (which describes the awakening of nature)

2. *Blumine* (*Andante* – short lyrical piece with trumpet solo, later removed)

3. *Under Full Sail (Scherzo)*

Part II: *Commedia umana*

4. *Funeral March in the Manner of Callot*

5. *Dall' Inferno al Paradiso* (the expression of disillusionment and suffering)

The version most often performed currently is the four-movement, revised version of the symphony – the current analysis will refer to this version of the composition. Here, the composer relinquishes the program notes, offering only indications regarding dynamics and expression. Nonetheless, the original concept of the work is retained through these indications:

I.   *Langsam, schleppend*; *Immer sehr gemächlich* — in the key of D Major.

II. *Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell*; *Recht gemächlich* — a Ländler on the key of A Major.

III. *Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen*; *Sehr einfach und schlicht wie eine Volksweise*; *Wieder etwas bewegter, wie im Anfang* — a funeral march, in the key of D minor.

IV. *Stürmisch bewegt* — *Energisch* — in the key of F minor, transitioning to D major in the conclusion.

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[10] Niekerk, Carl. 2010, *op. cit.,* pp. 29–34.

According to Bruno Walter, Mahler's renunciation of the program can be related to the fact that the composer was rather interested in evoking particular moods and emotions.[11]

The symphony contains numerous musical allusions to the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* song cycle, composed between 1884–1885. In the first movement of the symphony the composer includes fragments of the second song from the cycle*, Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld*, while the third movement, the *Trauermarsch*, comprises a fragment from the fourth song, *Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz* in G Major (Fig. 1):

Fig. 1. Gustav Mahler: *Symphony No. 1 in D Major[12]*,
Third Movement, B section, *Sehr einfach und schlicht wie eine Volksweise*
Fragment from the lied *Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz* ─ bars 85–89

The third movement is constructed according to the A B A structure, with the first section presenting unexpected and contrasting musical material. The A section of the movement opens with the descending fourth motif first presented in the first movement, followed by a double bass

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[11] Niekerk, Carl. 2010, *op. cit.,* p. 40.
[12] The musical examples used the second edition of the *Symphony No. 1*, published in Vienna by Universal Edition in 1906.

solo based on the canon *Frère Jacques*, played in minor — to reinforce the concept of funeral march. The fact that the composer employs a nursery rhyme in minor mode, played by the double bass in an unusual register for this instrument, to evoke a funeral march is deeply ironic, as is the image that supposedly served as inspiration for the movement. According to Floros, in the program for the symphony's premiere in Weimar on 3 June 1894, Mahler wrote that he had been inspired to write the funeral march in the manner of Callot by a picture which *"is known by all children in southern Germany as a parodied image from old children's story books, i.e.: The Hunter's Funeral Procession"*.[13] The woodcut to which Mahler referred to could have been *The Hunter's Funeral*, by Moritz von Schwind. The image that served as inspiration for this movement is ironic, depicting a procession of animals weeping and mourning as they bury the hunter. The subject presented by the solo double bass is then played by the bassoon, cello, tuba, and the entire orchestra.

A counter-melody played by the oboe further emphasizes the irony of the scene. The oboe was often employed by composers in their musical evocations of the Orient (the most eloquent example is Saint-Saëns's use of the oboe in the *Bacchanale* from the opera *Samson et Dalila*, in musical constructions that features the augmented second), due to the sensual timbre of the instrument. In this context, the exotic timbre of the instrument and its intervention over the canon of the funeral march suggest a mocking attitude and the idea of Otherness (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Gustav Mahler: *Symphony No. 1 in D Major*,
Third Movement, A section, bars 17–25

The second subject of this section is truly exotic, due to its melody and the instruments employed by the composer: oboes, clarinets, bassoon, flute, trumpet, cymbals, bass drum. The melody, first played by the oboe (Fig. 3), evokes Klezmer music, often associated with Mahler, yet the origin of it is disputable. Theodor Fischer claimed that the third movement of Mahler's First Symphony recalled him of a traditional local dance from Iglau, called *hatscho*, with a solemn 3/4 first section and a galloping second section in 2/4[14]. Jens Malte Fischer emphasizes that the Jewish music from the regions of Bohemia and Moravia should not be confused with the Klezmer music of the Eastern European Jews, and that the region around Iglau was not a klezmer area[15]. Nonetheless, the Jewish sonorities that are discernible in Mahler's music can be related to the Jewish musicians performing Bohemian or Moravian folk music, thus blending various styles. The

[13] Floros, Constantin. 2014. *Gustav Mahler and the Symphony of the 19th Century*. PL Academic Research, p.36.
[14] Fischer, Malte Jens. 2011. *Gustav Mahler*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 31.
[15] Fischer, Malte Jens. 2011, *op. cit.,* p. 31.

exoticism of the section and the concept of Otherness are emphasized through the melody and timbre of the instruments employed. The replacement of the funeral procession with the image of a Bohemian band of musicians radically alters the mood of the movement, emphasizing the irony of the scene.

Fig. 3. Gustav Mahler: *Symphony No. 1 in D Major*
Third Movement, A section,
Melody of Jewish or Czech inspiration in bars 38-44

The scornful humor and sharp contrasts of the movement are immediately followed by the outburst of the fourth movement, *Stürmisch bewegt*, expressing the deepest wounds of the hero depicted by Mahler. The combination of contrasting elements, synthesized into a unified whole, is a feature that characterizes Mahler's compositions, further pointing to the idea of Otherness.

3. Rückert's Oriental Inspiration

According to Niekerk, German cultural history had long been interested in Orientalism, the key for understanding 19th century German Orientalism lying in the works of Friedrich Schlegel and J. W. Goethe. The European view of the Orient in the 19th century was filled with stereotypes, with the image of the East often used to represent the Other and serve as means for projecting those aspects the West found difficult to express or accept. Even though Goethe strove to counter the stereotypes of European Orientalism, his perspective as well serves as a form of Western self-reflection, according to Niekerk[16]. Goethe's and Schlegel's Orientalism would influence German cultural history in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Another prolific German author of the 19th century interested in the Orient and Orientalism was the poet Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866), also a translator of ancient Oriental texts and professor of Oriental studies in Erlangen and Berlin. Niekerk argues that owing to his Oriental studies and knowledge of Oriental languages, Rückert was able to reproduce Oriental metric and

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[16] Niekerk, Carl. 2010, *op. cit.*, pp.180–182.

stanza forms in his own poetry.[17] Mahler set to music poems by Rückert in the collection of five songs for voice and orchestra (or piano) *Rückert-Lieder*, written between 1901–1902, and in the *Kindertotenlieder* cycle for voice and orchestra (1904).

The **Rückert-Lieder** comprise five songs: *Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder!*, *Ich atmet' einen linden Duft*, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*, *Um Mitternacht* (all composed in 1901), and *Liebst du um Schönheit* (composed in 1902). Composed after the musical setting of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (at times childlike, or satirical), these Rückert songs are more lyrical and contrapuntal. According to Mitchell, the Rückert songs have been composed in an *Orientalist style*, due to the pentatonic scales[18] and heterophony[19] employed by Mahler.[20] In the early 20th century, Western composers could resort to the use of such compositional devices in order to suggest exoticism. The Rückert songs are related to Mahler's 5th and 6th Symphonies, due to these compositional devices also used in the symphonies, but also to the stylistic innovations that anticipate the composer's subsequent works.

Mahler's conservatism is reflected in his choice of setting to music the lyrical poems of Rückert, an interesting alternative given the more modern poetry and music that surrounded him. One of the reasons to explain Mahler's choice could be the semantic complexity of Rückert's poems, reflecting the poet's experience with Oriental poetry. A careful analysis of the poems suggests that the text offers multiple possibilities of interpretation: for example, *Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder!* could refer to the compositional process and the fact that the final result of this artistic toil should be accepted without judgement (an idea that suggests Mahler's experience with criticism); *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* suggests the sentiment of estrangement, the inability of the artist to find his place in this world, but also emphasizes the idea of death as liberation; in the song *Um Mitternacht* darkness and midnight represent pain, the battle between life and death. According to Niekerk, the semantic ambiguity of the poems may be related to Goethe's association of the Orient with a liberated language, unconstrained by representations[21] — which further enforces the Orientalist dimension of the songs. According to Heffling, the spiritual withdrawal suggested by the song *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* may be related to Buddhist philosophy[22].

Phrases from Mahler's songs are based on pentatonic scales, for example in *Ich atmet' einen linden Duft:*

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[17] Niekerk, Carl. 2010, *op. cit.*, pp. 183–184.

[18] It is safe to affirm that the Rückert songs were important in the conception of the work *Das Lied von der Erde* (1908-1909), in which pentatonic scales are also employed by Mahler.

[19] Characteristic for Oriental music and in the devising of the Western Orientalist musical idiom. Musicologist Guido Adler defined "heterophony" as a more irregular and radical form of polyphony (See Adler, Guido "Über Heterophonie" in *Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters* 14 [1908]: 17–27).

[20] Mitchell, Donald. 2002. *Gustav Mahler: Songs and Symphonies of Life and Death.* Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, p. 57 and 111.

[21] Niekerk, Carl. 2010, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

[22] Hefling, Stephen E. 2007. "Song and symphony (II). From Wunderhorn to Rückert and the middle-period symphonies: vocal and instrumental works for a new century". In Barham, Jeremy (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 110.
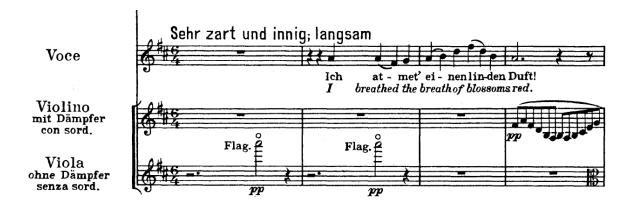
Fig. 4. Gustav Mahler: *Rückert-Lieder*[23]
Ich atmet' einen linden Duft (excerpt), bars 1–4

Between 1833–1834 Friedrich Rückert wrote the *Kindertotenlieder*, a group of 428 poems to express his grief following the death of two of his children. The poems represent the poet's vain attempts to revive his dead children, but also his resignation in the face of loss and search for comfort. The poems were not meant to published, appearing in print after the poet's death. Mahler selected five of these poems, which he set to music between 1901–1904. Three years after the cycle was completed, Mahler would lose his daughter to scarlet fever.

Mahler intended the songs to be performed without any interference to their continuity or order – the chosen songs tell a story, there is a certain evolution of the emotions expressed through the music; hence it is important to respect this indication. The cycle is scored for vocal soloist (mezzo-soprano or baritone) and orchestra. The reduced dimension of the orchestra enabled Mahler to focus on the colour of the instruments, choosing the most appropriate timbres to emphasize the meaning of the poems. The musical idiom corresponds to Mahler's Late-Romantic compositional idiom, expressing the pain and resignation of the poem's narrator. As in his other works, in the *Kindertotenlieder* Mahler juxtaposes such emotions as anguish and resignation but also highlights the contrast between nature and the narrator of the poems (for example, the song *Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n* speaks about the sun that will continue to shine with cruelty, despite the loss experienced by the narrator).

Although in these poems Rückert did not employ the more complex features of Oriental poetry, regarding meter and form, the *Kindertotenlieder* may be regarded as Orientalist, due to their close connection to Schopenhauer's philosophy regarding life, suffering, and happiness — a philosophy of life inspired by the East, namely Brahmanism and Buddhism[24]. Based on this perspective on life and suffering, Mahler's setting of Rückert's poems seeks to support the idea that suffering and death are inherent, thus one should face them with acceptance. This serene resignation and acceptance are expressed in Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* most evidently in the song

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[23] The musical examples used the Wiener Philharmonischer Verlag edition (approx. 1926), reprinted by Vienna Universal Edition.
[24] Schopenhauer in Niekerk Niekerk, Carl. 2010, *op. cit.*, pp. 193–194.

Oft denk' ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen (in which the narrator imagines that the children are not dead, they have just temporarily gone out in the sun, ahead of the adult, who will follow them later — a metaphorical image of death and acceptance), but also in the closure of the cycle, in the transition from minor to Major mode within the last song, *In diesem Wetter*. Through this Schopenhauerian view on life and death, Mahler seeks to create a dialogue between East and West, following Goethe's model, to appropriate certain features of the Oriental thought and way of expressing one's self – at the same time, he also refrains from deepening the differences between *we* and *the Other*, perhaps owing to the fact that he was often perceived as *the Other*.

From a musical perspective, just as the previously presented settings of Rückert's poetry, the *Kindertotenlieder* also contain examples of heterophony, pentatonic scales and polyphonic passages, reflecting Mahler's stylistic choices during this period of his composition — and gently suggesting the Orientalist innovations fashionable during the early 20th century, employed by composers in order to endow their works with novelty.
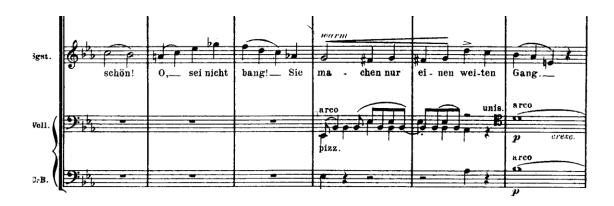

Fig. 4. Gustav Mahler: *Kindertotenlieder*[25]
Oft denk' ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen (Excerpt), bars 17–22
The melody of the soloist is inspired by pentatonic scales in bars 18–19
(A C D E-flat F, with G-flat as upper leading tone)

4. Conclusions

Life, separation, and redemption are themes that would return in Mahler's most Oriental sounding composition, *Das Lied von der Erde*, a symphony for tenor, alto (or baritone), and orchestra, composed between 1908–1909. The work was inspired by Hans Bethge's publication of the volume *Die chinesische Flöte*, containing translations of classical Chinese poems. Among these poems Mahler chose seven, which he set to music. Compared to the Rückert songs, in which toned down Oriental traces are discernible in the structure of the poems, philosophical ideas, and subtle compositional devices (pentatonic scales, heterophony, timbres), the musical idiom of *Das*

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[25] The musical examples used the Leipzig: C.F. Kahnt, 1905 edition.

Lied von der Erde is overtly exotic, rich in pentatonic scales, and timbres suggesting the East, seeming thoroughly saturated with the essence of Eastern philosophy and music. One of the instruments with a pronounced Oriental connotation, most often employed by Mahler in the works presented within this paper, is the oboe.

Mahler's Otherness seems to imbue his entire creation, perceptible in the juxtaposition of contrasting musical images, ideas, timbres. Johnson argues that exoticism and Orientalism were ciphers for his Jewish origin[26]. At the same time, Mahler's musical idiom, pending between modernism and Late-Romanticism, emphasized his Otherness, when compared to the social, artistic, and musical milieu of his era.

Similar to another great figure of his epoch, the painter Gustav Klimt, Mahler often evoked nature in his compositions. Klimt represented nature as beautiful, but distant, suggesting withdrawal. This evocation is echoed in Mahler's music, which lacks action and human figures, rather focusing on the exploration of the inside. Johnson compares Klimt's two-dimensional surface to Mahler's use of a bare, two-part contrapuntal texture,[27] both approaches suggesting the personal interpretation by these great artists of such concepts as *Orientalism, exoticism,* or *Otherness* in early 20th century art.

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[26] Johnson, Julian. 2009, *op. cit.*, p. 256.
[27] *Ibidem*, p. 236.

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