

'1888' was written to mark the re-inauguration of the historic 1888 Steinway grand piano of the American Church in Paris on January 29, 2012; the titles and musical material of its three movements (which may be played separately and in any order) are taken from Gustav Mahler's Symphony n.1, written in 1888.

*If it is the youthful Mahler of the First Symphony and the Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen who provides the basic motivic material for '1888', it is evident that a number of other 'Mahlers' have also found their way into the piece. The 'liminal' Mahler of the Abschied from Das Lied von der Erde or the finale of the Ninth Symphony, addressing the listener from the threshold of silence. The sardonic, grotesque Mahler of Shostakovich or Schnittke. The softly decaying, slow-motion Mahler of Valentin Silvestrov's Fifth Symphony (1980-82), the 'eschatological' Mahler of Nikolai Korndorf's Hymn III (1990), or Mahler the provocative challenger of fixed boundaries between 'art' and 'popular' music as with Bernstein or more recently the brilliantly creative jazz reinterpretations of Mahler by Uri Caine. '1888' inevitably finds itself stepping into an already existing conversation which not only includes the composer but also the 'history of Mahler's effects' (Wirkungsgeschichte). This dialogue has been ongoing for over a century and will doubtless continue for a long while yet after the present modest contribution to it.*

*The title Mit Parodie - Trauermarsch is a composite of two markings in the third movement of Mahler's symphony, in which the composer famously and provocatively employed the tune 'Bruder Martin' (known to most of us as 'Frère Jacques') as the basis for a half-serious, half-ironic funeral march, a gesture which cultural historian Carl Niekerk describes in a penetrating recent study as 'not much less daring than the exhibition of a urinal in a museum by Marcel Duchamp in 1917'. [1] The direction 'Mit Parodie' accompanies the unexpected invasion of a Bohemian village (klezmer?) band into Mahler's texture, perhaps the first of the composer's many characteristic jolts to our notions of the supposed frontier between art and life. The third movement of Mahler's symphony is marked by typically abrupt contrasts between poetic profundity and apparent banality; the present piece attempts to draw out such juxtapositions by contrasting Mahler's mock Trauermarsch and rustic dance music with the tranquil arpeggiation found at rehearsal number 10 of the composer's score ('Sehr einfach und schlicht wie eine Volksweise'). The harp's gentle rocking at this point with retrospect seems to pre-figure much of Mahler's later music at its most metaphysically contemplative such as the songs 'Urlicht' (Symphony n.2), 'Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen' (Rückert-Lieder), the slow movements of Das Lied von der Erde, or the opening of the Ninth Symphony.*

*Sehr gesangvoll is a short outworking of intervallic material taken from the unashamedly romantic second theme of Mahler's finale (rehearsal n. 16) and a fleeting but especially beautiful harmonic progression in the passage for muted strings and harp (marked 'Sehr zurückhaltend. Sehr langsam u. immer noch mehr zurückhaltend') at rehearsal n. 40-5 in the same movement.*

*Wie ein Naturlaut is a free paraphrase of the Symphony's introduction, taking up the elements of Mahler's remarkable 'spatial' evocation of the sounds of nature (the four notes A-E-F-C over an A pedal, interspersed with bird calls and distant fanfares), from which a gradually ascending scalar sequence emerges (rehearsal n. 3+3) in the lower strings. An extended moto perpetuo based on the theme of Mahler's first-movement Allegro, taken from the second of his Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen, 'Ging heut' morgen übers Feld' (heard very briefly at the end of Mit Parodie-Trauermarsch), brings Wie ein Naturlaut to its conclusion.*

[1] Carl Niekerk Reading Mahler: German Culture and Jewish Identity in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 22.

'1888' is dedicated to Anita Nelson

Cover : Gustav Mahler, caricature by Theo Zasche, 1906