

Thematic Congruity and Transformation in Mahler's Sixth Symphony

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Mahler's Sixth symphony is held together remarkably well through various forms of thematic repetition and transformation. Mahler, like Sibelius, was known to be concerned with "an inner connection between all the motives." This is very apparent in the Sixth Symphony, which is described by David Matthews as "the most classical of all Mahler's works."¹ Six major analyses have been done of the symphony between 1920 and 1985 by Bekker, Ratz, Adorno, Redlich, Sponheuer, and Floros; all of which agree to at least some extent on slightly altered sonata forms for the Allegro and the Finale.² While each of these analyses make compelling arguments toward the structure of this symphony, they place far too much importance on these structures as the driving element behind the symphony. What truly holds this eighty-minute symphony together is the sheer ingenuity used by Mahler in the subtle manipulation of his thematic material. If one takes a close look at the primary themes of the Allegro, Scherzo, and Finale a very clear thematic unity can be seen. On the surface level, it can be seen that the thematic material within each movement is all closely related with each other, particularly in the Allegro. Thematic connections also exist between movements in three different ways: as pure quotations of earlier material, as similar topical or stylistic references, or as altered thematic material. Through these three forms of thematic development and restatement, Mahler is able to unify this symphony on a very large scale.

The first and most apparent unifying element of this symphony is the use of returning topical and stylistic material. Although there are several topical elements that return throughout this symphony, there are two that are far more prominent than the rest. The Allegro begins as a strong and aggressive March immediately recognizable by the pounding four-quarter-notes-per-bar rhythm in the low strings and timpani, along with the dotted rhythms in the upper voices. This opening material sets up the sound world for the eighty minutes to come. The melodic elements are heavily articulated with great emphasis on the strong beats. Even when there is no percussion present, there is a very strong percussive sense in the low voices. The March topic returns in the Scherzo movement in a slightly altered way. (example 18) This extremely heavy

¹ David Matthews, "The Sixth Symphony" in *The Mahler Companion*, Edited by Donald Mitchell and Andrew Nicholson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 366.

² Robert Samuels, *Mahler's Sixth Symphony: A Study in Musical Semiotics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 72-75.

March topic in two of the symphony's four movements makes this the most prominent stylistic element of the work.

The image displays a page of a musical score for a symphony, specifically focusing on the introduction of a chorale theme in measure 57. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes parts for Flöten 3, Oboen 2, B-Klar 2, Fagott 1, F-Tromp. 2, Pauken 1, Kl. Tr., and Erste Viol. The second system includes parts for Flöten 3, Oboen 2, B-Klar 2, Fagott 1, Violen, and Vcelle. The tempo is marked 'Stets das gleiche Tempo' (Always the same tempo) in a box at the top right of the first system. The score features various dynamics such as *ppp*, *pp*, *p*, *ff*, and *pizz.* (pizzicato). The first system shows the initial entry of the theme, with the Flöten 3 part starting with a *ppp espr.* (pianissimo, *espressivo*) marking. The second system continues the theme, with the Violen and Vcelle parts playing *pizz.* (pizzicato) notes. The score is written in a major-minor key, with a key signature of one sharp (F#).

Example 1: Chorale theme introduced with first statement of the major-minor motto. Allegro measure 57.

The next most regularly seen topic in this symphony is described by Floros as “music from a distance.”³ The defining element in this topic is the use of cowbells. They appear in the Allegro, the Andante, and the Finale and in a discussion given on the seventh symphony (which also makes use of cowbells) Mahler states that the cowbells are meant to portray the loneliness of being outdoors and far away.⁴ The third recurring element is a chorale that does not appear often, but is very important when it does. The first appearance occurs at measure 61 in the Allegro. (example 1) The chromatically descending melodic material, although not always appearing in the form of the chorale, is seen quite often in various forms throughout the symphony. This form of the chorale only appears two other times in the symphony. Once later in the Allegro in diminution (example 15) and as a brief quotation by the horns in the Andante. (example 2)

Example 2: Chorale quotation. Andante measure 165.

Although the material is different, the chorale in measure 49 of the Finale (example 3) is a clear reminder of the forms of the chorale in the Allegro. Del Mar describes the first statement of the chorale as “suggesting a calm faith even under severest adversity.”⁵

³ Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1985), 166.

⁴ *Ibid*, 165.

⁵ Norman Del Mar, *Mahler's Sixth Symphony: A Study* (London: Eulenberg, 1980), 35.

Example 3: Finale chorale. Finale measure 49.

The most often recurring element in this symphony is what Bekker describes as an “unchangeable verdict of fate.”⁶ This is a chord sequence that Bekker named the “Major-Minor motto” which is a strongly attacked major triad whose third is then lowered by half step creating a minor triad. (example 4) This chord sequence occurs seventeen times throughout the symphony. Five times in the Allegro in measures: 59-60, 203-204, 208-209, 314-315, and 334-335. Four times in the Scherzo in measures: 87-90, 261-262, 428-430, and 433-435. And eight times in the Finale in measures: 9-12, 65-66, 96-97, 395-396, 530-532, 668-670, 686-687, and 783-786.

Example 4: Major-Minor motto. Allegro measure 59.

La Grange offers a compelling description of the function of this motto in his analysis of the Sixth. “From the second page of the opening movement the tragic outcome is predicted by the famous leitmotiv (or ‘motto’) of the work, a major chord whose third drops by a semitone to

⁶ Paul Bekker, *Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1969), 209.

become minor, reversing the traditional procedure of the ‘Picardy third’ where the last chord of a minor piece becomes major.”⁷ Often appearing with the major-minor motto, but not always, is a brief pounding timpani rhythm. (example 5) This distinctive rhythm become just as recognizable as the major-minor motto, and since it is first associated with the motto, draws an aural reference to it even when they do not appear together.



Example 5: Accompanying rhythm to major-minor motto. Allegro measure 57.

Beyond these two very distinctive elements, there are two short melodic/rhythmic devices which serve structural purposes in the Scherzo and also appear multiple times throughout the Allegro and the Finale. The first of these is the thirty-second note pickup rhythm seen in example 6.



Example 6: Scherzo pick up rhythm measure 11.

The second very commonly seen rhythm seen throughout the symphony is the quarter note and two sixteenth notes rhythm seen in example 7. This rhythmic/melodic idea is seen first in measure 20 of the Allegro with a slightly altered rhythm, but demonstrating the same character. (Example 7)



Example 7: Recurring melodic/rhythmic element. Scherzo measure 16.

⁷ Henry Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler: Vienna: Triumph and Disillusion (1904-1907)* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), 813.



Example 8: Recurring melodic/rhythmic element altered. Allegro measure 20.

This motive is seen nine times in the Allegro, always with the dotted rhythm, and usually with the same trill seen in the Scherzo. The pickup rhythm from the Scherzo (example 6) becomes increasingly important in the Finale, appearing in multiple textures and serving an important role in nearly every section of the movement.

A-Klar 1.2.3

F-Hörner 1.5

Basstuba

Fl. Flöten 1.2
Engl. Horn

A-Klar 1.2.3

A-Basskl.

Fagotte 1.2.

F-Hörner 1.5

F-Hörner 3.2.4.

Basstuba

Example 9: Finale measure 16.

Observing the use of these four recurring melodic and rhythmic elements is the first step in understanding the thematic unity inherent in this work. These are the motives that remain somewhat unaltered throughout the symphony. The principal themes of each movement are

used in more altered forms in every movement. Sometimes in a very subtle way, and sometimes as nearly exact quotations.

The first example of thematic transformation is appropriately seen in the Allegro from the first theme to the second. (examples 10 and 11) First seen is the fact that the third measure of the first theme is rhythmically identical to the first measure of the second theme. Also distinctly noticeable is the rhythmic similarity between the beginning of the first theme and the material directly following the second theme (last seven measures of example 11). In the first theme, Mahler sets forward four rhythmic/melodic patterns that become some of the most recognizable motives throughout the symphony. The rhythm in the first two measures of each theme is seen again in various forms in this movement as well as the Scherzo and Finale. The third measure, as has already been explained, becomes the first measure of the second theme. The melodic and rhythmic pattern seen in the seventh measure becomes the most distinctive rhythmic element of the Andante, and the motive seen in the ninth measure becomes one of the many elements linking the Allegro to the Scherzo.

Example 10: First theme. Allegro measure 6.

Example 11: Second theme. Allegro measure 77.

Example 12 displays a transformed fragment of the first four measures of the second theme in the solo violin. The first measure of the example is simply an inverted and intervallically condensed form of the previous setting followed by a rhythmically augmented form of the rest of the material. This is also an example of Mahler using similar material in completely new textures, creating a completely new sound world. The sound of the *pianissimo* solo violin is far more delicate and gentle than the sound of this material in its original form.

Example 12: Transformation of second theme. Allegro measure 225.

A fragment of the second theme is shown in the fourth measure of the first trumpet part in example 13. Followed by a horn solo making use of material that is clearly derived from the first theme.

Example 13: Transformation of first theme. Allegro measure 444.

A rhythmically simplified form of the first theme is seen in example 14. The melodic motion and integrity remains similar, but the new rhythm causes the material to take on a sense of triumph.

Similarly to the previous example, the rhythmic augmentation of the fragment from both the first and second themes strengthens the new associations being taken on by this material.

Tempo 1. subito
sehr energisch!

Erste Viol. *ff non legato* *sf*

Erste Viol. *sempre ff* *sf* *p* *ff*

Example 14: Transformation of first theme. Allegro measure 251.

1 2

Flöten 3 *ppp subito espr.*

4 *ppp subito espr.*

B-Klar 3 *ppp subito espr.*

Celesta *pp* *Arpeggiando* *f* *simile*

Erste Viol. *pizz. a3*

Zweite Viol. *pizz. a2*

Violen *pizz. a3*

Veele *pizz.*

1 2

Flöten 3

4

B-Klar 3

Fagott 1

Celesta *pp*

Erste Viol.

Zweite Viol.

Violen

Veele

Example 15: Chorale in diminution. Allegro measure 336.

The chorale discussed earlier (example 1), which becomes a unifying topical element, is seen here in rhythmic diminution. (example 15). This appearance creates a texture not yet heard in the movement. The addition of the celesta within the ensemble and the faster harmonic motion of the chorale allow the music to take on a dream-like sound. This is an early example, with many to follow, of Mahler changing the emotional content of any given section at a moment's notice using very familiar material.

The Andante is the least similar to the other three movements of this symphony. Though it does contain unifying elements, they are far less apparent than the similarities that lie between the Allegro, Scherzo, and Finale. In his *Prague rede* Schoenberg discussed Mahler's Sixth and brought attention to the ambiguity between major and minor tonality of the primary theme from the Andante.⁸ (example 16) Mahler makes extensive use of chromatic half-step relationships in this theme, which gives it the ambiguous sense, especially in the use of the lowered third and sixth scale degrees. In the eighth full measure of the theme is the only thematic element that has any connection to the rest of the symphony. This repeated-note motion appears numerous times throughout the movement making use of every interval between a minor third and an augmented sixth. Though the melodic content is rarely anything similar to this, the rhythmic aspect has already been regularly used in the Allegro, and will be seen in the Scherzo and Finale as well.

Oboe 1

Erste Violinen

Oboe

Erste Viol.

Oboe

Erste Viol.

(second violins)

Example 16: Primary theme. Andante measure 1.

⁸ Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1985), 177.

The Andante makes the least use of thematic transformation within the movement of any of this symphony's four movements. It relies almost entirely on fragmentation and repetition of this theme. Example 17 displays the end of the movement with a fragmented version of the theme in two-voice stretto.

The musical score for Example 17 is presented in three systems. Each system contains staves for Flutes, Oboes, Clarinets, Violins, and Violas. The notation includes various dynamic markings (f, sf, ff, p, mf, pp, morendo ppp) and performance instructions such as '(ob. kl.)', '(fl. Es-Kl.)', '(second violins)', '(first violins)', '(B-Kl. solo)', and '(fl.)'. The score shows overlapping phrases in a two-voice stretto texture, ending with a 'morendo ppp' marking.

Example 17: Thematic material in stretto. Andante measure 173-end of movement.

The return of the pounding March at the beginning of the Scherzo (example 18) is immediately relatable to the Allegro. Though it is in a different meter, no argument can be made against its relationship to the Allegro. The pounding timpani and dotted rhythms draw a very immediate reference back to the sound world of the beginning of the symphony. The March has gone through a clear change, though. The offset timpani accents combined with the changing meters later in the movement give this march a sense of instability described by Alma Mahler as “representing the unrhythmic games of the two children, tottering in zigzags over the

sand.”⁹ This first theme of the Scherzo is not relatable to other thematic material in any way that has already been shown. In this case, it is the surrounding texture and style that ties it to the themes of the Allegro.

Example 18: First theme and restatement of March material. Scherzo measure 1.

The second theme of the Scherzo (example 19), like the first, has little in common with other thematic material in the symphony. This material, like that of the Andante, acts as somewhat of an intermezzo. The surrounding texture here can be related to the moment of chorale diminution from the Allegro (example 15) due to its extremely light nature, but has nothing else in common.

⁹ Egon Gartenberg, *Mahler: The Man and His Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1978), 306.

Example 19: Second Theme. Scherzo measure 98.

Example 20: Exoticism and restatement of recurring “pick-up rhythm.” Scherzo measure 182.

Though it is not a march, the Finale relates in many ways to the Allegro and Scherzo. The first melodic material seen is relatable to the Allegro due to its rhythmic simplicity and heavy accents. (example 21) It will eventually transform itself into something more recognizable.

Example 21: Introductory Theme. Finale measure 3.

The material seen in example 22 can be loosely related to both themes of the Allegro and to the introductory themes seen at the beginning of the Finale. It can be seen as a rhythmic augmentation making use of the intervallic content of the second theme from the Allegro. The rhythmic simplicity ties it to the beginning of the Finale.



Example 22: transformation of first theme from Allegro. Finale measure 164.

Example 23 displays the second structural theme of the Finale. The dotted rhythms and rhythmic contrasts hold great similarity to the thematic material from the Allegro and the Scherzo. At this point in the symphony, so much of the same material has been heard in different ways, that far less is required to draw the ear to a previous moment in the work. A subtle hint of an earlier rhythm can now bring on whatever association it wants. This can be seen in examples 23, 24, and 25. The rhythmic quality draws an association to previous material even though melodically it is now quite different.



Example 23: New theme. Finale measure 114.



Example 24: Finale measure 191.

Erste Viol. *8^{ma}*

Erste Viol. *(8)*

Example 25: Finale measure 407.

Examples 26, 27, and 28 support the relationship of material from the beginning and middle of the Finale with the Andante. Example 26 displays developmental material that is strikingly similar to the introductory theme of the Finale. The melodic content of the first two measures in the example, though of different intervallic content, bears a strong resemblance to the rhythmic material of the Andante seen in example 28. This theme is seen in yet another state in the middle of the Finale (example 27) in inversion with broken rhythms.

Erste Viol.

Example 26: Finale measure 172.

Erste Viol. *Etwas drängend*

Example 27: Finale measure 445.

Flöten 2, 3, 4 *a 4 hervortretend*

Example 28: Andante measure 89.

The opening material from the Finale is seen again at the very end of the movement along with rhythmic and intervallic material similar to the first theme of the Allegro. (example 29) The half-note octave leaps come directly from the beginning of the movement, and the dotted rhythms strongly resemble those of the Allegro and to some extent, the Scherzo. Once again, Mahler has

taken very familiar material, and placed it into a new context creating a completely new emotional state. The slow imitation of the 4 trombones and the tuba implies the character of a requiem.¹⁰ This material offers very fitting end to this gloomy symphony.

Example 29: Finale measure 790.

Formally, this symphony is one of the more conventional of Mahler's works. A rather straightforward approach to the structure of a classical symphony is followed in its four movements. The three movements that are most closely related all center around the key of A minor with an Andante in a contrasting key. The outer movements can both be related to the

¹⁰ Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1985), 161.

classical sonata form, the Andante is a five-part rondo, and the Scherzo can be loosely related to Scherzo and Trio form. It is un-common for these forms to be seen on such a large scale, but Mahler is able to maintain interest throughout the entire work with his incredible sense of cyclic unity through the transformation and repetition of relatively little material. The true quality of the work is shown in Mahler's abilities of free association with the thematic material. Any theme can appear in any way creating any mood desired by Mahler. The aggressive and warlike March theme, which begins the symphony, can be transformed to something delicate and childlike in nature. A lightly rocking rhythmic element of the lyrical Andante can be transformed to fit the March characteristics of the Allegro or the Scherzo. Without this strong sense of thematic congruity and transformation, Mahler's Sixth would not hold the ability to maintain interest for eighty minutes.

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