

## THE APOTHEOSIS OF THE SPIRIT - CLIMAXES OF THE MAHLERIAN SYMPHONIC DRAMATURGY

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### ABSTRACT

*Whether we are talking about opera music or symphonic music, each of these genres develops specific dramaturgies and climaxes, closely dependent on the stage action in the first case, or programmatic intentions in the second case. Between these there can, of course, be influences, similarities, contrasts, etc. The present study proposes an analysis of the existing climaxes in the symphonic music of the Viennese composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911), to distinguish a certain taxonomy or typology of them, but also to give a broader perspective on them. Mahler stands out due to the mastery with which he constructs his musical dramaturgies of symphonic essence. The post-romanticism that is attributed to him is characterized by a fragmentation of the musical syntax, which stems from the composer's intentionality subordinated to the transmission of a great diversity of ideational meanings. But here we are not only talking about the diversity of ideational meanings, but also about their breadth and depth, and the claim to express them with the help of musical art. The tragic feeling of life, the fragility of the human being, the obsession with death, the desire for salvation, the vision of paradise, the action to change society, the access to the depth of the self, the involvement in personal becoming are some ideas that Mahler tried to translate into music, debated themes in the writings of Dostoevsky, which Mahler often read. The famous phrase that Mahler addresses to the composers of the dodecaphonic school "reading from Dostoevsky is more important than the counterpoint" (Höweler, 1952, p. 475) further confirms this. In this way, the premises of existentialist philosophy and expressionism in art are created, by experiencing an individual freedom and a subjectivism that reaches, at least in the field of musical art, the highest heights.*

**Keywords:** *climax; musical dramaturgy; symphonism; typology;*

### INTRODUCTION

Any musical dramaturgy, like a literary dramaturgy, presupposes the existence of at least one climax, meaning by this an emotional culmination that is prepared, affirmed and resolved through the processualism of the musical language. The climax is the moment of maximum emotional intensity, which usually corresponds to the exploitation of a maximum of musical resources and usually precedes a denouement. The reception of any work of art cannot be valued without some of these moments, otherwise a lack of interest would intervene. Also, we cannot live continuously anchored in such a state, otherwise we would become euphoric. And the sudden assertion of the climax would cause adverse reactions of surprise, rejection, fear, rather than contagion with the moment.

In their analysis, we can distinguish in a first phase simple climaxes, which accompany the smallest morpho-syntactic units of the musical form, but there are also

climaxes that affect broader formal articulations, without things stopping there. They can expand further, becoming more and more complex, depending in these cases on the macrostructure of a piece of music. The post-romantic aesthetics creates climaxes of such scope that can only be supported by the monumentality of the musical opus. They are those climaxes whose culminations can be prepared during several symphonic sections, their magnitude reaching such heights that they can be translated through the categorical system specific to aesthetics that pertains to the affirmation of the colossal, the sublime, the monumental.

A climax can last from a few seconds to several tens of seconds. Its construction is closely dependent on the sound dramaturgy, there being a direct proportionality between them. An ample climax is prepared by an elaborate musical dramaturgy. In its realization, the musical dramaturgy depends on the musical writing, on the agogic, on the timbral combinations and the effects used, on the harmonic evolutions, without being limited to them. In a diagram of sound intensities, we can note the culminating moments of sound intensities, but the existing sound dramaturgy and climaxes are not limited to this. It would be the simplest way to look at the problem. The same reduction takes place when, through abstraction, the musical form is reduced to its scheme. Indeed, considering its immediate aspects, any sound dramaturgy coincides with this sound dynamic, but surpasses it by the amplitude of the perspective on the musical opus, which implies a visualization in the entirety of the means used, which, moreover, contribute to the stylistic identification of the work. Through its similarities with the literary dramaturgy, it is characterized by "the level of eloquence of temporal units, the degree of theatrical expressiveness of the evolution of musical characters, the more or less explicit nature of affirming the general meaning of the opus" (Vasiliu, 2002, p. 128), musical dramaturgy becoming an important index of stylistic specialization. The 20th century possesses a sense of theatricalization of art that surpasses all the initiatives of previous centuries, found in the programmatic idea, in the emergence of film, film music, and more.

Harmony can build and nuance the feeling of the tragic, a feeling that can only be enhanced by the other components of the musical language. A theme, a rhythm, a combination of timbres, certain technical procedures, a specific tempo or dynamics cannot by themselves achieve the nuance of the tragic but, accompanying the propitious harmony, each can contribute with its specificity to the amplification of this character. Thus, the inner universe of the composer Mahler is transposed into a symbolic form through the musical language of his art. We are witnessing one of the most extensive processes in the history of music that superlatively subjectivizes musical art. Other than this, we only have impressionist, neoclassical and folkloric defensiveness, or the assumption of a meta- beyond which emotion means reconfiguring or giving up a traditional musical language.

## 1. OVERVIEW OF MAHLER'S SYMPHONIES

In the field of the symphonic genre, Mahler stands out among the composers who assume the greatest freedom in his creation, without turning it into a symphonic poem. Thus, at an overview of his nine finished symphonies, the variability in the number of parts is noticeable:

- one of his symphonies has two parts (8th symphony).
- only four symphonies are constituted according to the classical pattern consisting of four parts (symphonies I, IV, VI, IX).

- three of them have five parts each (symphonies II, V and VII).
- and only one has six parts (3rd symphony).

**Tabel no. 1.** Overview of Mahler's nine finished symphonies

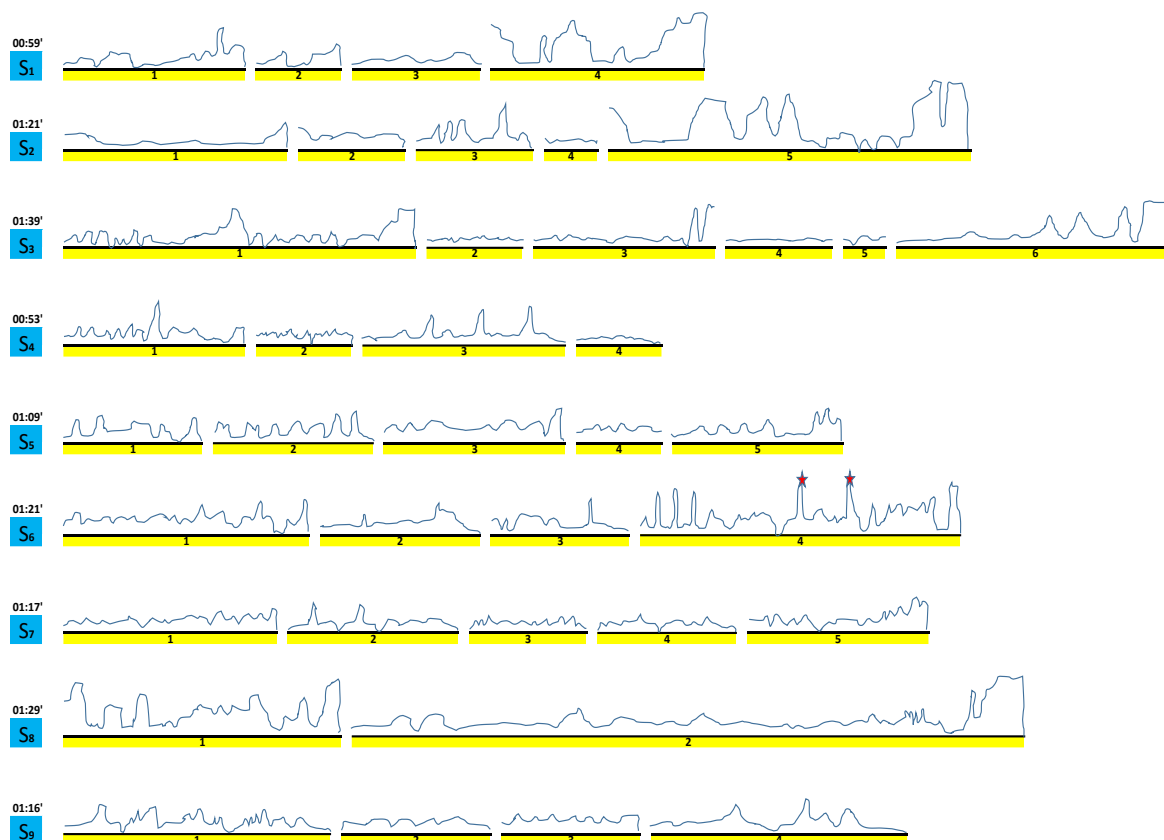
	1	2	3	4	5	6
S <sub>1</sub>	Langsam, schleppend	Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell	Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen	Stürmisch bewegt		
S <sub>2</sub>	Allegro maestoso	Andante moderato	Scherzo - In ruhig fließender Bewegung	Urlicht. Sehr feierlich, aber schlicht	Im Tempo des Scherzo. Wild herausfahrend - "Auferstehn"	
S <sub>3</sub>	Kräftig, Entschieden	Tempi di Menuetto. Sehr mäßig	Comodo. Scherzando. Ohne Hast	Sehr langsam. Misterioso. Durchaus ppp "O Mensch! Gib Acht!"	Lustig im Tempo und keck im Ausdruck "Es sungen drei Engel einen süßen Gesang"	Langsam. Ruhevoll. Empfundene
S <sub>4</sub>	Bedächtig, nicht eilen	In gemächlicher Bewegung, ohne Hast	Ruhevoll, poco adagio	Sehr behaglich		
S <sub>5</sub>	Trauermarsch . In gemessenem Schritt. Streng. Wie ein Kondukt	Stürmisch bewegt. Mit grösster Vehemenz	Scherzo. Kräftig, Nicht zu schnell.	Adagietto. Sehr langsam.	Rondo-Finale. Allegro - Allegro giocoso. Frisch.	
S <sub>6</sub>	Allegro energico, ma non troppo. Heftig, aber markig	Andante moderato	Scherzo. Wuchtig - (Trio) Altväterisch. Grazioso	Finale-Allegro moderato- Allegro energico		
S <sub>7</sub>	Langsam (Adagio) - Allegro risoluto, ma non troppo	Nachtmusik I. Allegro moderato	Scherzo. Schattenhaft. Fließend aber nicht zu schnell	Nachtmusik II. Andante amoroso	Rondo - Finale (Allegro ordinario)	
S <sub>8</sub>	Hymnus - Veni, Creator Spiritus	Slußszene aus "Faust"				
S <sub>9</sub>	Andante comodo	Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Ländlers. Etwas täppisch und sehr derb	Rondo-Burlesque. Allegro assai. Sehr trotzig	Adagio. Sehr langsam und noch zurückhaltend		

Thus, if for the romantic composers the observance of the classical canon still has quite a lot of weight, for Mahler it becomes more and more flexible, varying according to the ideas, programming and musical dramaturgy pursued. More than once it happened that he gave up certain symphonic parts or introduced others from the original intention. For the romantics, it is not so much the change of the canon formed by the number of parts in a symphony that is relevant, but rather the changes that take place at the structural level. Mahler, on the other hand, seeks to affirm a dramaturgy of the monumental, without limiting himself to formal pretenses, aiming for the symphony's macrostructure. It results in a great diversity of symphonic idioms, the number of parts of which varies between two and six (with the absence of those consisting of three parts), which create syntheses with the oratorio genre (symphony-oratorio), which insert the lied as a constitutive part of the symphony (as occurs in symphonies II, III and IV) or approaches instrumental soloist moments, sometimes of a concertante type, even if passing, in several of his symphonies. The flexibility of the Mahlerian symphonic canon is also found in the interludes between the different parts. Where we were used to hearing an allegro part, a slow one appears, and vice versa; if the predictions were somewhere in the area of the dancing character, they were circumvented by slow sections, etc. At the same time, the combination of pre-existing musical structures contributes to the monumentality of the opus and to the revelation of a complex musical dramaturgy. But one of the decisive steps towards change lie in the shading and shaping of the initial characters of the various symphonic parts or sections. Thus, the funeral march is an attempt to recover the feeling of the familiarity of death, the ländler becomes an expression of the joy of life, the brass potentiates its solemn or tragic feeling, and sometimes turns into an image taken from the Apocalypse, some instrumental solos become the echoes of a predicted ideal or of a local lyricism, the scherzo can be enriched or tinged with the feeling of the grotesque, the lied can become a kind of forecast of Paradise, etc. Basically, the freedom to signify meanings of a certain depth specific to post-romantic aesthetics, consists in the capacity of the imaginary faculty of the human mind to establish symbols that "constitute models themselves of the mediation of the Eternal in the temporal." (Durand, 1999, p. 119)

## 2. ABOUT CLIMAX AND MAHLERIAN CLIMAXES

In the context of so many symbolic distillations that can be illustrated by an elaborate symphonic dramaturgy, we will start from a definition of the climax according to which it "appears at the limit peak of accumulations, from where it can no longer evolve into accumulation and, which represents a point of suspension, of tensional temporal freezing, after which, inevitably, there will be a fall, an end to the accumulative tensions..." (Pop, 2000, p. 109) According to this definition, it appears that at the microstructural level, climaxes are constituted by three stages, a stage of accumulation, one of affirmation of the climax followed by the moment of relaxation. At the macrostructural level, things are much more complicated. As I stated earlier, the research framework of this article is the presence of climaxes at the level of an entire part of a symphony and even, but especially, of an entire symphony. If in classical or romantic symphonies, with some exceptions, of course, the existence of such climaxes is almost nil and some are devoid of any monumentality, in the dramaturgy of a post-romantic symphony an organicity is created that overcomes the structural or conventional barriers of the various symphonic sections. Thus, the fragmentation of the syntax brings with it the fragmentation of the sound dramaturgy that develops a fluctuating dynamic, extremely capricious and unpredictable, with dynamic twitches,

sinusoids, contractions and expansion, concentrations and rarefactions of dynamic spaces, amplifications and retentions that sometimes make it extremely difficult to follow their evolution. If we were to make a diagram of Mahler's symphonies, in which we could grasp briefly, in a holistic way, the evolution of the climaxes specifying the number of parts and their extent in relation to each other, then, in a rough form, it would look according to the image captured in figure 1.



**Figure no. 1.** The diagram of Mahler's symphonies containing the evolution of the climaxes, specifying the number of parts and their extent in relation to each other

As can be seen in the diagram above, the symbol *SI* to the left of it specifies the number of the symphony. Above it, the approximate temporal extent of the symphony is marked by the symbol *00:59'*, and its parts are represented by line segments whose length is directly proportional to their duration. Thus, we can immediately visualize a hierarchy regarding the size of these symphonies, but also the number of parts that make them up. Also, the wavy lines inscribed above each line segment outline, schematically, as we already mentioned, the sound dramaturgy and climaxes existing within the symphonies. Their amplitude is represented by a distance from the zero-position rendered by the straight segment oriented in a horizontal position, this meaning its location at the lower limit of the audible and, implicitly, the absence of any tension.

An overall analysis of this diagram shows the absence of significant climaxes in symphonies 4, 5, 7 and 9. They are present, instead, in the other symphonies that carry the energy specific to creative youth, referring to the first three symphonies. Also, except for the eighth symphony, none of the other symphonies has a large debut in terms of sound intensity,

while their endings, apart from symphonies 4 and 9, bring a significant arsenal of sound means that contribute to the construction of climaxes scope.

If we take the temporal one as the criterion of analysis, then we can note the existence of some *climaxes of plateau formation*, extended for several tens of seconds, but also *climaxes of peak formation*, which are notable for their duration of a few seconds. Plateau climaxes are especially present at the end of symphonies, very rarely at the end of a symphonic part or within it. This is what happens, for example, in symphonies 1, 2, 3, and, especially, 8, the purpose of such a climax being to mediate the experience of aesthetic categories such as the monumental and, above all, the sublime. The non-evolving harmony, the presence of the brass or the choir, the tubular bells, the training of the entire orchestral apparatus, the choral writing contribute to their affirmation.

On the other hand, if we consider the criterion of the accumulations and de-tension of the climaxes, here we have some of the most spectacular situations that contribute to the success of their assertion. Thus, some climaxes intervene without any prior preparation, causing surprise and emotional release, as happens in the sixth symphony, at the beginning of the last part, where three climaxes follow each other at an appreciable distance between them. The affirmative *sforzando* is followed by rebound through the minoring of the C major chord, the climax dissolving into the musical ambience as if it did not exist. Also famous is that B flat minor chord superimposed on a C pedal from the second symphony, which appears towards the end of the third part, and creates a climax whose cry of despair contrasts with the musical ambience that precedes or succeeds it. This reappears at the beginning of the fifth part, or even in the next symphony, towards the end of the last part, thus being invested with a specific symbolic value. Also, most cases of climaxes are achieved through an ascending dynamic, the ramp of which opens the perspective of their affirmation. Many cases are also those in which a climax is the launching pad for another climax, thus constituting a sequence of *gradena-type climaxes*, resulting in a terracing of the emotional discourse. However, there are also situations, and not a few, in which the ascending ramp of the musical discourse is interrupted, having to do in this case with the presence of some *avoided climaxes* that contribute to the realization of a musical dramaturgy that cultivates equivocation, the purpose of which is to the potency of the force of a later climax. And if the tension release of the climax can proceed more or less abruptly, there are also situations, and not a few, in which it intervenes suddenly, thus mediating the presence of some *waterfall-type climaxes*, whose effect is often exploited in post-romantic music. Of course, the post-romantic musical discourse can become excessively complicated, so that a grid of typologies such as those already mentioned can hardly be elucidated. Sometimes the evolution of the climaxes is so complex that, using a metaphor, we can compare the musical discourse to a swirling sea dominated by the anarchic elements of a storm, this image symbolically translating the state of the soul traversed by great existential crises. Thus, the recurrence of climaxes during a symphonic part, within a whole symphony or other symphonies, credits the idea of great historical cycles, echoing both at the level of personal destiny and of eras.

## CONCLUSION

Alternating between platitude and originality, banality and genius, lyricism and monumental, mundane and cosmic, individual and universal, sacred and profane, Gustav Mahler traces the premises of the musical language specific to the 20th century. Deeply attached to the Austro-German tradition that cultivates the established tonality and genres,

very little open to elements of stylistic renewal that came from other ethnographic spaces, his music will naturally incorporate everything related to the sense of the monumental, the cosmic, and the sublime, without for these to be found so prominently in the currents that precede it. In fact, the contemporary man lacks the category of the colossal because the civilization of well-being and efficiency, of easy access to everything, will often extirpate from his soul the perception of cosmicity, the feeling of dependence on the infinite. The dimension of transcendence, of access to the infinity of a *beyond* will be obnoxious by the feeling of paradise here, a paradise that creates the illusion of infinity of any type - be it temporal, spatial or axiological -, created by man and (in)mastered by him, thus becoming the prisoner of a demiurgic mentality. This is why Mahler's music sees the symptom of his decadence and reconnects the contemporary man to the source of his spirituality, thus becoming more current than ever.

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