

# Classical Style, Childhood and Nostalgia in Mahler's Fourth Symphony

Ryan R Kangas  
University of Houston  
Email: rrkangas@gmail.com

*According to the critical consensus on Gustav Mahler's Fourth Symphony, Mahler seems, through both his orchestration and musical material, to be evoking both the composers who preceded him and childhood. Many scholars have claimed to hear specific allusions in the first movement to pieces composed in a classical style, and Mahler's use of simple themes with ornamented melodies in the Fourth Symphony also seems to suggest a classical style.*

*At the same time, however, most writers hear a disparity in the movement between Mahler's nominal late romantic compositional style and his use of simpler or more naïve-sounding materials. Nostalgia – defined here as a simultaneous acknowledgment of and rebellion against the irreversibility of time – offers one way of examining Mahler's juxtaposition of traits of music from the past and present. Using nostalgia as a theoretical frame, we can examine how music might be able to suggest a relation between the past and present akin to memory.*

*In the first movement, Mahler's late romantic treatment of 'classical' materials seems to depict an unsuccessful attempt to recapture an idealized past, and the fourth movement's depiction of heaven in childlike terms set predominantly in the style of a lullaby suggests the irretrievable – perhaps even non-existent – past in which the soothing tones of a mother's voice hold the promise of calming all worry.*

When Alma Schindler first heard Gustav Mahler play some of his Fourth Symphony for her, she replied with characteristic bluntness: 'I feel Haydn has done that better.'<sup>1</sup> However harsh her initial reaction to the symphony was, Alma is far from alone in suggesting that Mahler's Fourth hearkens back to an earlier musical style. As early as a review of a January 1902 performance of the Fourth Symphony by the Vienna Philharmonic under Mahler's direction, Robert Hirschfeld trenchantly comments: 'I lack sympathetic feeling for Mahler's affected folksiness, prepared naivety, artificial childishness. We think we see father Haydn bumping along in an automobile with a cloud of gas fumes'.<sup>2</sup> Hirschfeld's incongruous image of Haydn in a car provides a striking visual analogue to his criticism that Mahler's Fourth is not truly simple but is instead a modern composition masquerading as something that it is not.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, ed. Donald Mitchell, trans. Basil Creighton (New York: Viking Press, 1969): 24.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Hirschfeld, 'Vierte Symphonie von Gustav Mahler', *Wiener Abendpost* (14 January 1902): 2. Für Mahler's affectierte Volksthümlichkeit, zubereitete Naivität, künstliche Kindlichkeit fehlt mir die sympathische Empfindung. Man meint Vater Haydn im Automobil mit brenzlichen Benzindämpfen vorüberholpern zu sehen.

For Hirschfeld the Fourth Symphony suggests, however artificially, both childhood and a musical style from the late eighteenth century. In another review of the same 1902 Vienna Philharmonic performance, Theodor Helm concurs: 'Apparently this time he made a point of working with the simplest possible folksy (or at least intended to be folksy) old-fashioned, even childlike melodies'.<sup>3</sup> Helm, like Hirschfeld, hears the old-fashioned style and childhood suggested by Mahler's purportedly simple melodies as more apparent than real. Similarly, recalling his impression of the November 1901 premiere of Mahler's Fourth in Munich, William Ritter evokes Haydn and also comments in striking language on the dubious innocence of the first movement:

A sleigh bell accompanied by two staccato flutes, and the A clarinet sketches in slow motion a reverent drawing... And immediately the first theme ... But such as from Haydn—only with such spices!—never did a symphony have one so graceful, so enticing, so melodic, and so prolonged... It is simultaneously childlike and, well, not half vicious ... and above all by no means innocent... Such as when, in the theatre, the ingénue is played by the most corrupt member of the troupe.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps in the spirit of Friedrich Schiller's *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*, Ritter, Helm and Hirschfeld each imply that true simplicity could never be cultivated; any attempt to cultivate simplicity will invariably betray the underlying artificiality.

More recent criticism of the Fourth Symphony echoes the tension observed by the early critics between Mahler's allusions to both classical style and childhood and the marked artificiality of those allusions. For Theodor Adorno the Fourth's 'image-world is that of childhood' and the first movement's 'main theme, which to the uninformed sounds like a quotation from Mozart or Haydn, which is in fact from ... Schubert's Eb major sonata for piano, op. 122, is the most inauthentic of all in Mahler'.<sup>5</sup> Although Michael Kennedy disagrees with Adorno regarding the source of the allusion, writing that 'the lucidity and freshness of the material often recall Haydn rather than Schubert', he also observes a contrast between the musical material and the manner of its presentation, which he phrases in a less pejorative manner: 'One cannot speak of naivety in connection with such a subtle and disciplined composition, but its mood is certainly childlike in the most felicitous way.'<sup>6</sup> Regardless of whether the main theme alludes indirectly to Mozart and Haydn or directly to Schubert, the critics each locate a fundamental tension between musical material that sounds old-fashioned and a concomitant presentation of that material that is too sophisticated or insufficiently naïve.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor Helm, *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* (23 January 1902): 69. 'Anscheinend hat er sich diesmal angelegen sein lassen, mit möglichen einfachen volksthümlichen (oder doch volksthümlich gemeinten), altväterischen, selbst kindlichen Melodien zu arbeiten'.

<sup>4</sup> William Ritter, 'Souvenirs sur Gustav Mahler', *Schweizerische Musikzeitung* 101/1 (1961): 30. Ellipses appear in the original. My thanks to this journal's anonymous reviewer for pointing me to this reference. 'Un grelot accompagné de deux flûtes staccato, et la clarinette en la esquisse au ralenti un dessin révérencieux ... Et aussitôt le premier thème ... Mais tel que depuis Haydn – seulement avec quelles épices! – jamais symphonie n'en a eu de si gracieux, de si alluciant, si mélodique, et si prolongé ... C'est à la fois enfantin et, ma fois, pas rosse à demi ... et surtout rien moins qu'innocent ... Comme quand, au théâtre, l'ingénue est jouée par la plus corrompue de la troupe.'

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 52, 56.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Kennedy, *Mahler* (London: Dent and Sons, 1974): 106.

Indeed, observations of the strain between simplicity and sophistication or between naivety and artificiality continue to permeate critical discourse on the Fourth. According to Deryck Cooke:

If the actual materials of the Fourth sometimes recall Haydn and Mozart (in the opening movement), Schubert (in the scherzo), and even the classical Beethoven (in the slow movement), they are developed in an entirely late-romantic way in the interest of expressing a personal vision.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Henry-Louis de La Grange argues:

The apparent simplicity of the overall structure is of course totally deceptive, for Mahler has pushed the motivic development techniques invented by the eighteenth-century Viennese classical composers, and perfected by Beethoven, further than perhaps anyone before him.<sup>8</sup>

Julian Johnson aptly labels the disconnect between the musical material and its presentation within the Fourth Symphony as 'studied naivety' and goes on to claim that its first movement 'is not a real classical allegro, but the reminiscence of one'.<sup>9</sup>

The prominent juxtaposition of simplicity and sophistication observed by many critics in Mahler's Fourth suggests that, as a reminiscence, the symphony is coloured specifically by nostalgia. Marjorie Hirsch observes such a fusion of the simple and the sophisticated in musical evocations of nostalgia in Brahms's 'Heimweh' Lieder. Hirsch argues that the songs' texts express 'an adult's yearning for a simpler more natural existence – an imagined return to the golden age of childhood', which Brahms conveys musically 'by introducing the folklike traits of children's song into art song'.<sup>10</sup> Hirsch's description of the superimposition of two musical styles in the 'Heimweh' songs echoes to a striking degree the critical reactions to Mahler's Fourth: 'By incorporating aspects of *Kinderlieder* into otherwise highly artful compositions, he conveys musically that the "Heimweh" songs are presented from the perspective of an adult who longs for the bygone days of youth.'<sup>11</sup>

As Hirsch implies, nostalgia is dependent on the almost intuitive understanding that the remembered past is forever gone and cannot be truly recovered, even in memory. Making a similar claim, Stuart Tannock argues more explicitly that nostalgia is dependent on a clear separation, or discontinuity, between the past and the present and works 'as a periodizing emotion: that was then, and this now'.<sup>12</sup> In order for the past to be irretrievable, it must be truly past and therefore absent in some way and inaccessible from the present. The periodization inherent to nostalgia, claims Tannock, is not imposed by the world on the nostalgic subject, but by the nostalgic subject on the world: 'discontinuity, far from being simply experienced by the nostalgic subject, and far from being the engendering condition

---

<sup>7</sup> Deryck Cooke, *Mahler: An Introduction to His Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980): 67.

<sup>8</sup> Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, 4 vols., vol. 2, *Vienna: The Years of Challenge (1897–1904)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 763.

<sup>9</sup> Julian Johnson, *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 107.

<sup>10</sup> Marjorie Hirsch, 'The Spiral Journey Back Home: Brahms's "Heimweh" Lieder', *The Journal of Musicology* 22 (2005): 455, 470.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 456.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart Tannock, 'Nostalgia Critique', *Cultural Studies* 9 (1995): 456.

of nostalgia, is also and always at the same time a discontinuity posited by the nostalgic subject.<sup>13</sup> In drawing the arbitrary line between the past and the present, it is the nostalgic subject who excludes the past from the present, imposing the very conditions that give rise to nostalgia in the first place.

Even from its early history as a supposedly curable but potentially fatal medical condition that affected those, especially soldiers, who were far from home, nostalgia has been associated with music.<sup>14</sup> Particularly vivid memories of home were apt to trigger bouts of nostalgia, and music was considered especially dangerous in its power to bring to mind a distant homeland. For example, as early as 1710, Theodor Zwinger notes that a 'certain rustic cantilena, to which the Swiss drive their herds to pasture in the Alps' inevitably provoked a nostalgic reaction among Swiss soldiers deployed far from home.<sup>15</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau reproduces the Swiss melody mentioned by Zwinger and discusses its relation to nostalgia in his *Dictionary of Music*:

The above celebrated Air, called Ranz des Vaches, was so generally beloved among the Swiss, that it was forbidden to be play'd in their troops under pain of death, because it made them burst into tears, desert, or die, whoever heard it; so great a desire did it excite in them of returning to their country. We shall seek in vain to find in this air any energetic accents capable of producing such astonishing effects. These effects, which are void in regard to strangers, come alone from custom, reflections, and a thousand circumstances, which, retrac'd by those who hear them, and recalling the idea of their country, their former pleasures, their youth, and all their joys of life, excite in them a bitter sorrow for the loss of them. The music does not in this case act precisely as music, but as a memorative sign.<sup>16</sup>

For Rousseau the *ranz-des-vaches* is not powerful in itself or even as music *per se*, but in its ability to conjure mental sounds and images of Switzerland for the Swiss soldiers. The music helps retrieve not only the memory of a place, but of pleasures, youth and joy, all of which have apparently been lost. The *ranz-des-vaches* embodies those places and emotions for the Swiss soldiers, however momentarily, and makes them present. After the sound ceases, however, the distance from home becomes even more palpable, leading to the onset of the potentially fatal 'bitter sorrow' associated with nostalgia.

According to Vladimir Jankélévitch, such yearning for an absent home prevents the nostalgic subject from being able to account for where he truly is:

The nostalgic is at the same time here and there, neither here nor there, present and absent, doubly present and doubly absent; one can thus say at will that he is multi-present, or that he is nowhere: here as he is physically present, but he feels absent in spirit from this place where he is present in body; there, in the inverse, he feels

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 456.

<sup>14</sup> For a summary of the early history of nostalgia, see Svetlana Boym, 'From Cured Soldiers to Incurable Romantics: Nostalgia and Progress', in *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 3–18 and Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (London: Free Press, 1979): 1–4.

<sup>15</sup> Theodor Zwinger, 'De Pothopatridalgia', in *Fasciculus dissertationum medicarum selectiorum* (Basel, 1710). Quoted in Jean Starobinski, 'The Idea of Nostalgia', trans. William S. Kemp, *Diogenes* 14/54 (June 1966) 90.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Complete Dictionary of Music: Consisting of a Copious Explanation of All Words Necessary to a True Knowledge and Understanding of Music*, trans. William Waring (London: Fielding and Walker, 1779): 266–7.

morally present, but he is in fact currently absent from these dear places that he previously left.<sup>17</sup>

Although Jankélévitch focuses explicitly on the nostalgic subject's disorientation in space, the 'dear places' are located elsewhere not only spatially but also temporally. The relation of nostalgia to the past was already implied in Rousseau's account of the *ranz-des-vaches* in the late eighteenth century via the equation of the distant homeland with the lost youth of the Swiss soldiers. Svetlana Boym pushes the connection between nostalgia and time further, claiming that:

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to ... revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.<sup>18</sup>

For Boym, the modern conception of time as irreversible made the separation from one's past more acute, because people in the modern world conceive of any return to the past – a specific type of homecoming – as fundamentally impossible.

The knowledge of the impossibility of returning to the home of one's youth means that 'the return to the motherland believed to be the best remedy for nostalgia' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would no longer have any efficacy as a cure: if time is irreversible, the motherland as we knew it no longer exists.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Jankélévitch notes that because 'the true object of nostalgia is not absence in opposition to presence, but the past in relation to the present; the true cure for nostalgia is not the backwards return in space, but the regression toward the past in time'.<sup>20</sup>

Even as the nostalgic subject creates the line of demarcation between the past and the present, the subject simultaneously attempts to mitigate the separation by remembering the past. Memories of the past, however, exist only in the present and cannot represent a true return to the past. In the words of Janelle Wilson: 'Individuals decide – in the present – how to recall the past and, in this process, imbue the past with meaning, which has evolved over time and is relevant in the present.'<sup>21</sup> Nostalgia, then, is both predicated on a clear division between the past and present and motivated by the desire to bring the past in relation to the present. The meaning carried by the past is entirely dependent on the present circumstances of the person who remembers, who has the power to decide how to remember. As Jankélévitch implies, through the process of bringing

---

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'irréversible et la nostalgie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974): 281. 'Le nostalgique est en même temps ici et là-bas, ni ici ni là, présent et absent, deux fois présent et deux fois absent; on peut donc dire à volonté qu'il est multi-présent, ou qu'il n'est nulle part: ici même il est physiquement présent, mais il se sent absent en esprit de ce lieu où il est présent par le corps; là-bas, à l'inverse, il se sent moralement présent, mais il est en fait et actuellement absent de ces lieux chers qu'il a autrefois quittés.'

<sup>18</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xv.

<sup>19</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Jankélévitch, *L'irréversible et la nostalgie*, 299. 'Le véritable objet de la nostalgie n'est pas l'absence par opposition à la présence mais le passé par rapport au présent; le vrai remède à la nostalgie n'est pas le retour en arrière dans l'espace, mais la rétrogradation vers le passé dans le temps.'

<sup>21</sup> Janelle L. Wilson, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005): 7.

the past in relation with the present, the nostalgic subject inhabits the past and the present simultaneously while also remaining distanced from both. Rather than exhibiting an oppositional binary relationship, the past and the present are always already mutually implicated: any understanding of the past must take place in the present and that understanding of past can be mobilized to change the present.

Such a thorough imbrication of the past and present in the nostalgic worldview undermines Raymond Knapp's critique of the relationship between Mahler's Fourth Symphony and nostalgia:

Nostalgia might help to explain the substantial and often antagonistic tension in the symphony between childly images and musical sophistication, with the latter perhaps representing an adult perspective that demarcates the object of nostalgic contemplation as unattainably separate. Ultimately, though, this approach is also unsatisfactory, since the symphony does not set childhood apart as an idealized, remembered past; quite the contrary it instead removes childhood altogether from the possibility of pure idealization.<sup>22</sup>

Although the nostalgic subject does idealize the past, the subject's inability to recapture or to express adequately how it supposedly had been to inhabit the 'unattainably separate' or 'idealized' past is itself the motivating cause of nostalgia's characteristic yearning. If the symphony were able truly to set the past apart and to express its ideal aspects, there would be no cause to be nostalgic for it; a past that can be recaptured is neither unattainable nor ideal.

In most discussions of nostalgia in relation to Mahler, however, the term is used not as an analytic category dependent on a clear definition of nostalgia conceptually, but to describe one of the prominent 'moods' in his music, to use La Grange's term.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as a relatively vague mood, nostalgia becomes slippery and often remains indistinguishable from other forms of longing or sentimentality.<sup>24</sup> Although Knapp dismisses nostalgia as an 'unsatisfactory' approach to understanding Mahler's Fourth, he suggests that within the first four bars of the piece, the opening sleigh bells 'produce a tone of nostalgia' and the violin melody in bar 3 is 'nostalgically rendered' through both its 'nostalgic allusion to Schubert' and 'the sense of nostalgia accompanying the shift to G major'.<sup>25</sup> Knapp's repeated use of nostalgia to describe the mood of individual passages in Mahler's Fourth even as he dismisses its usefulness as an interpretive framework exemplifies how slippery the term can become when it has been freed from conceptual moorings.

If it is used to describe an amorphous mood, nostalgia will remain difficult to pin down musically and will continue to be heard both everywhere and nowhere. Only when a conceptual understanding of nostalgia informs the discussion of its possible musical evocations will it become possible to distinguish clearly between what does

<sup>22</sup> Raymond Knapp, *Symphonic Metamorphoses: Subjectivity and Alienation in Mahler's Re-Cycled Songs* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003): 210.

<sup>23</sup> Henry-Louis de La Grange, 'Music about Music in Mahler: Reminiscences, Allusions, or Quotations?' in *Mahler Studies*, ed. Stephen Hefling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 148.

<sup>24</sup> La Grange's translation of *Sehnsucht* [longing] as 'nostalgia' is perhaps emblematic of the frequent conflation of nostalgia with a more general form of longing. Theodor Adorno, *Mahler: Eine musikalische Physiognomik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1960), 83: '...keine Transzendenz ist übrig als die von Sehnsucht'; La Grange, *Vienna: The Years of Challenge*, 772: '...all that remains of transcendence is nostalgia'.

<sup>25</sup> Knapp, *Symphonic Metamorphoses*, 217, 222, 224, 225.

## Ex. 1 Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 4, mvt. I, bars 3–7, 17–21, 76–80

*Etwas zurück-Recht gemächlich  
haltend (Haupttempo.)*

*3 grazioso  $p < pp$  espress.*

*17 Tempo I. (Hauptzeitmass.)  $f < p$*

*76 Tempo I.  $pp < pp$  poco rit.  $sf$*

and what does not sound nostalgic. As a starting point, I will suggest that for a passage to sound convincingly nostalgic, it should offer a musical analogue of nostalgia: the music should not only suggest a yearning mood but should also specifically evoke a past that is somehow irretrievable.

One past evoked by Mahler's Fourth, especially in its first movement, is the classical style referenced by numerous of the symphony's critics. Constantin Floros itemizes several musical traits that create a 'classicistic' impression, including 'the simplicity and treatment of themes, to the simple key relationships, to individual melodic turns (such as the chromatic suspensions), and to the ornamentation (occasional grace notes, written-out turns, and inverted mordents).'<sup>26</sup> Upon a first hearing, the opening theme of the first movement seems to exemplify the characteristics of the classical style suggested by Floros: a relatively simple G major melody in the first violins, ornamented with a written-out turn and grace notes, takes the form of a four-bar phrase, complete with a perfect authentic cadence at its close (see Ex. 1).<sup>27</sup> The unobtrusive accompaniment, played pizzicato by the rest of the strings allows the melody to stand out prominently, a texture characteristic of classical compositions. As a seemingly exemplary model of a classical phrase, the first theme simultaneously goes too far, however, by cadencing solidly in the tonic after only four bars, leaving no room for a consequent phrase.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, over the course of the following eleven bars the orchestra suggests a number of ideas to complete the theme, none of which seem satisfactory, because what should have been an antecedent phrase already achieved closure.

While the orchestra struggles unsuccessfully to find a convincing way to close off a theme that has closed prematurely, the French horns offer a version of the

<sup>26</sup> Constantin Floros, *Mahler: The Symphonies*, trans. Vernon and Jutta Wicker (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 1993): 119.

<sup>27</sup> All musical examples are derived from Gustav Mahler, *Symphony Nr. 4 in vier Sätzen für grosses Orchester und Sopran-Solo*, Sämtliche Werke kritische Gesamtausgabe, vol. 4 (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1963).

<sup>28</sup> Julian Johnson notes this premature close and other 'gentle incongruities' between the first movement of Mahler's Fourth and the classical style. See Johnson, *Mahler's Voices*, 110–13.

accompanimental quaver figure decorated by written-out mordents. Although the musical substance of the melodic idea – a simple melody decorated by an ornament – fits within the stylistic norms of the classical era, a natural horn from the eighteenth century would struggle mightily to play the figure as written. What we hear, then, sounds both convincingly classical and completely foreign to the classical sound world. The orchestra's inability to deliver an appropriate response, however classical the melodic ideas that it suggests might sound, also contributes to the sense that the music is somehow simultaneously classical and impossible for the classical era.

By bar 17, the orchestra's attempt at an acceptable consequent phrase begins to sound more and more like an extended antecedent phrase, driving toward what could be interpreted as a half cadence to D major. Before the ascending scale in the low strings can reach a final D, however, the violins enter pre-emptively with another statement of the opening phrase. The melody in the first violins and the accompaniment played by the second violins and violas remain practically unchanged, but the cellos add a counterpoint that imitates the melody, while the clarinets and bassoons suggest a new melodic idea in bar 20. The addition of a contrapuntal melody in the cellos, and yet another motive in the winds, renders the texture, which previously had been nearly translucent, a bit more opaque; the simple classical melody seems to maintain its identity while moving a little further out of earshot as it competes with other sounds.

With the concise phrase that follows in bars 21–25 the low strings offer a corrective, both to the original sprawling eleven-bar response to the main theme and to the complex texture of the second version of the theme, by adhering to a simple texture and maintaining a four-bar structure. The extreme simplicity of the phrase, which consists almost exclusively of stepwise motion, includes skips no larger than a third and features a steady stream of semiquavers, sounds conventional and empty when compared with the engaging melody that preceded it. Once again, as if overcompensating, the low strings exemplify the classical style almost to the point of caricature, reducing it to a hollow-sounding formula. As formulaic as the passage in bars 21–25 might sound, it serves the necessary function of responding to the opening phrase, successfully leading to a transition to the secondary group rather than another relapse into the main theme.

Bar 76 features a third statement of the opening melody in its original key, which for Johnson sounds at first as if it could be 'a genuine exposition repeat or the beginning of a development section by reusing the principal theme' common in sonata-form movements, but is instead 'a revisiting of the opening material far more akin to the returns found in rondo form'.<sup>29</sup> The theme's melody in the violins is once more nearly indistinguishable from the two previous iterations, but the overall sound is completely different: the oboes, the clarinets and bassoon, as well as the cello add new contrapuntal lines, rendering the texture even more dense. Almost as soon as the familiar anacrusis signals the return of the melody, a surprisingly complex polyphonic web subsumes it.

Sounding at first almost too classical, the opening melody is clothed on its return in a contrapuntal texture that denatures the markers of a classical style that had once been so clear. The stubborn identity of the theme in each of the three different iterations – the only differences consist of slight alterations in articulation and dynamics – is just as striking as the drastic changes that surround it (see Ex. 1). In the first movement's exposition, the various iterations of

---

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *Mahler's Voices*, 111.



## Ex. 2 Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 4, mvt. I, bars 106–107



the main theme seem to suggest that having a solid sense of a past event – implied by the identical returns of the melody – does not prevent its memory from being altered and coloured by new experiences that have occurred in the interim. Moreover, just as any nostalgic recollection of the past is necessarily idealized, even if it supposedly consists only of an event's essential facts, Mahler's main theme is in some ways so ideally classical that it fails as a classical theme. The gradual accretion of new material to the main theme, which itself recalls the classical style yet sounds like no classical theme could have ever sounded, suggests a musical analogue for the manner in which memories can only capture the past as it never was, because memory cannot help but be coloured by the present.

Beginning in the development, no statement of the main theme repeats the original version precisely. Instead, a semiquaver turn motive, which as La Grange notes is derived from the formulaic consequent phrase to the main theme in bars 21–25, replaces the original demisemiquaver turn motive in every subsequent statement of the theme.<sup>30</sup> In its first appearance in bars 21–25, the semiquaver turn motive was completely unremarkable, becoming worthy of notice only when singled out as a motive *per se* starting in bars 106–107 (see Ex. 2). Indeed, the new turn motive is notable not for its striking difference from what has come before, but instead for its ability to insinuate itself almost seamlessly into the musical fabric of the main theme beginning in bar 116 (see Ex. 3).

Indeed, after bar 107 the new turn motive has permanently inflected the main theme, finding its way into each of the three versions starting in bars 187, 191 and 204 (see Ex. 3). All three iterations begin with an ascending anacrusis, but after the first three notes, each restatement differs in varying degrees from the original main theme. In bar 188 the first violins repeat the downward leap heard in the original version of the theme, but they fall a major sixth rather than a minor sixth. Moreover, after playing the new turn motive at the end of the bar, the contour of the melody is the reverse of the original theme, descending where the original ascended and ascending where it descended. By the end of bar 189 even the instrumentation has changed, as the violin drops out and the flutes, oboes, and clarinets take over. In bar 192 the downward leap occurs one note later than it had previously and by bar 205 the rhythm has also been altered. A truncated version of the turn motive even concludes the theme, demonstrating the extent to which it has been absorbed into its melody.

Following the exposition, another precise restatement of the main theme is heard only at the start of the recapitulation, but it is incomplete, consisting only of the theme's final bar. Because the moment of recapitulation is 'unprepared', as Johnson suggests, and 'fails to appear as a logical structural outcome' of the preceding material, the sudden reappearance of the main theme sounds entirely unexpected.<sup>31</sup> By playing only the concluding bar of the original version of the main theme, the violins add another layer of surprise and suggest 'starting over' far more palpably than they would have if the main theme reappeared fully.

<sup>30</sup> La Grange, *Vienna: The Years of Challenge*, 762.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, *Mahler's Voices*, 112.

## Ex. 3 Gustav Mahler, Symphony No., mvt. I, bars 116–120, 187–191, 191–195, 204–208

116 1. VI.  $p < p < sf > p < < < < < >$

187 1. VI. Fl., Ob., Cl.  $f > < < < < > p < f >$

191 1. VI. + Fl.  $p < > p < > < > p cresc. - - -$

204 1. 2. VI.  $p < > < > > < > < > molto cresc. ff$

Whereas in classical practice the return of the main theme is motivated by the developmental material that precedes it, Mahler's unprepared and truncated recapitulation of the main theme highlights the impossibility of any identical, perfect or even satisfying return. Indeed, the truncated main theme seems to exclaim, as Mahler himself once did, 'each repetition is already a lie'.<sup>32</sup>

As the orchestra relies increasingly on the new turn motive to make it through the recapitulation, the main theme fades into the background. Although the violins had played three nearly identical versions of the main theme in the exposition, a complete statement appears only once in the recapitulation, starting in bar 340 (see Ex. 4). According to Adorno:

The violin passage from the coda of the first movement ... the three *sehr zurückhaltend* quarter notes before the last *grazioso* entry of the main theme, are like a long backward look that asks, Is all that then true? To this the music shakes its head, and must therefore buy courage with the caricaturing convention of the happy close of the pre-Beethovenian symphony and cancels itself out.<sup>33</sup>

The violins do seem to look back across the movement, seeming to acknowledge that even the theme that they are playing is no longer 'true': the downward leap only falls a fifth, no longer a sixth, and the new turn motive makes two full

<sup>32</sup> Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, ed. Peter Franklin, trans. Dika Newlin (London: Faber & Faber, 1980): 147. This quotation is drawn from comments Mahler made on the music of Franz Schubert: 'No elaboration, no artistically finished development of his original idea! Instead, he repeats himself so much that you could cut out half the piece without doing it any harm. For each repetition is already a lie. A work of art must evolve perpetually, like life. If it doesn't, hypocrisy and theatricality set in.'

<sup>33</sup> Adorno, *Mahler*, 57.

## Ex. 4 Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 4, mvt. I, bars 340–344

appearances, while at the outset it had made none. Adorno claims, however, that the closing bars of the first movement look backward not only across the movement itself but also to stylistic conventions from the past. In the first movement's closing bars, the final iteration of the main theme seems to lament its inability to recapture the classical style or even the theme's original version, which itself had already failed in recapturing a convincingly classical sound. To the extent that this moment portrays a yearning for a past that it acknowledges will always evade capture, Adorno's 'long backward look' evokes nostalgia musically.

If the music – including both the final iteration of the main theme and the ensuing 'happy close' – does indeed shake its head regarding its capacity to tell the truth, the dishonesty of the preceding music is not the only reason: it shakes its head as well at its own dishonesty, the inherent dishonesty of memory. Ralph Harper claims that 'nostalgia is neither illusion nor repetition; it is a return to something we have never had'.<sup>34</sup> If it is a nostalgic utterance, the final statement of the main theme could not merely repeat the past, but must instead acknowledge its own distance from the past. What Adorno hears as a 'caricaturing convention of the happy close of the pre-Beethovenian symphony', neither ignores nor cancels out the larger truth that nostalgic utterances are necessarily prone to caricaturing the past – by exaggerating the supposedly ideal aspects of a past that never was ideal, any nostalgic utterance cannot help but distort the features of the past, often in an effort to address present concerns. Pointing out the inaccuracy of such distortions only underscores the fundamental unreliability of memory and the extent to which recollection is necessarily situated in the present.

In *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1909–22), Marcel Proust argues for an even more extensive imbrication of the past and the present, claiming that the very distance of the past is what makes it seem so ideal from the point of view of the present:

Yes: if, owing to the work of oblivion, the retuning memory can throw no bridge, form no connecting link between itself and the present minute, if it remains in the context of its own place and date, if it keeps its distance, its isolation in the hollow of a valley or upon the highest peak of a mountain summit, for this very reason it causes us suddenly to breathe a new air, an air which is new precisely because we have breathed it in the past, that purer air which the poets have vainly tried to situate in paradise and which could induce so profound a sensation of renewal only if it had been breathed before, since the true paradises are the paradises that we have lost.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ralph Harper, *Nostalgia: An Existential Exploration of Longing and Fulfillment in the Modern Age* (Cleveland: Case Western University Press, 1966): 26.

<sup>35</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright 6 vols., vol. 6, *Time Regained* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999): 260.

Proust claims paradoxically that the air seems refreshingly new when it is air that we have already breathed in the past. Heard with Proust's observation in mind, when the violins restate the main theme after taking a moment to respire, looking back to the irretrievable past, the fresh air from the past that they inhale might allow the 'convention of the happy close' to sound new, vibrant and convincingly happy precisely because the pre-Beethovenian symphony comes from the seemingly distant past. For Proust, looking to such an unrecoverable past is the only way to suggest the type of true happiness that simultaneously echoes and heralds the utopian joy of paradise.

In addition to the classical style, critics suggest that childhood is another past toward which Mahler's Fourth looks. Mahler himself reportedly told Natalie Bauer-Lechner 'in the last movement, the child ... explains what it all means'.<sup>36</sup> Implicitly drawing on the text of the final movement, which describes heaven from a childlike point of view, La Grange affirms the connection between childhood and paradise: 'Mahler then creates a state of static bliss that takes his listeners through the wide open gates of the only heaven accessible to humans, that of childhood.'<sup>37</sup> As already mentioned, Hirschfeld and Helm both suggested in early reviews of the Fourth that Mahler's musical material throughout the symphony, not only in its last movement, is simplistic to the point of childishness. Adorno, who goes so far as to claim that the Fourth's 'image-world is that of childhood', hears the symphony echoing the eighteenth-century 'Toy Symphony' for orchestra and *Kinderinstrumente* once attributed to Haydn.<sup>38</sup>

Unpitched bells were often included in the group of *Kinderinstrumente* called for in pieces such as the 'Toy Symphony', and critics often associate the sleigh bells that open Mahler's Fourth and then return throughout the first and the fourth movements with childhood.<sup>39</sup> Mark Evan Bonds, for example suggests that 'the sleighbell in particular symbolizes the innocence and faith of childhood'.<sup>40</sup> Bonds opens his discussion of Mahler's Fourth by alluding to the central role played by a sleigh bell in Chris van Allsburg's *The Polar Express* (1985), a children's story in which the ability to hear a sleigh bell taken from Santa Claus's sleigh is associated with childlike faith in Santa.<sup>41</sup> Noting Bonds's 'telling references to *The Polar Express*', Raymond Knapp also claims that sleigh bells are 'regressive in their childish exuberance and in their general association with childhood' and that 'sleigh bells are more a token of childhood than a threat to it'.<sup>42</sup>

Santa's magical sleigh, however, is encountered far less frequently than the everyday sleighs used for transportation in winter months. Knapp also connects Mahler's use of sleigh bells to more quotidian sleighs by way of an allusion to the carol 'Jingle Bells', which functions for Knapp 'independent[ly] of either composer intention or historical plausibility' based on what he calls 'parallel

<sup>36</sup> Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections*, 178.

<sup>37</sup> La Grange, *Vienna: The Years of Challenge*, 768.

<sup>38</sup> Adorno, *Mahler*, 53, 55.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the use of toy instruments in late eighteenth-century Vienna see John A. Rice, *Empress Marie Therese and Music and the Viennese Court 1792–1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 143–51.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Evan Bonds, *After Beethoven: Imperatives of Originality in the Symphony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996): 173.

<sup>41</sup> Bonds, *After Beethoven*, 175. Chris van Allsburg, *The Polar Express* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1985).

<sup>42</sup> Knapp, *Symphonic Metamorphoses*, 41, 46.

motivic representations of sleigh bells' in the two pieces.<sup>43</sup> James Pierpont's song, originally published as 'The One Horse Open Sleigh' by Oliver Ditson in Boston in 1857, logically associates jingling sleigh bells with riding sleighs, a practice which does not sound entirely appropriate for children in the context of the song.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the text of 'The One Horse Open Sleigh', and especially its second and fourth verses, paints those whose ride open sleighs in nineteenth-century America as focused on speed, reckless behavior and spending time with women:

A day or two ago,  
I thought I'd take a ride  
And soon Miss Fannie Bright  
Was seated by my side,  
The horse was lean and lank  
Misfortune seem'd his lot.  
He got into adrifted bank  
And we—we got up sot.

Now the ground is white  
Go it while you're young,  
Take the girls to night  
And sing this sleighing song;  
Just get a bob tailed bay  
Two forty as his speed  
Hitch him to an open sleigh  
And crack, you'll take the lead.

According to the speaker, the open sleigh seems ideal for courting the opposite sex: the couple could ride unsupervised in wintry conditions that would encourage them to sit as closely as possible to one another. In the second verse, the speaker is able to convince Miss Fannie Bright to accompany him on a ride, and in the fourth verse he exhorts listeners to 'take the girls to night' in their own sleighs. When the speaker tells his listeners to 'go it while you're young', he is clearly speaking to young adults – those who would be interested in solitary rides with women – rather than children. With its emphasis on courtship and a direct reference to a fast horse capable of travelling briskly at over twenty miles per hour, 'The One Horse Open Sleigh' suggests the type of sexual awakening and reckless behaviour associated with adolescence far more than with the guileless innocence of young children.<sup>45</sup>

A sleigh also provides the setting for a more explicit seduction recounted in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), a novel with which Mahler was quite familiar.<sup>46</sup> As part of a longer confession, Dmitri Fyodorovich admits to his brother Alexei:

in the darkness, in winter, in the sleigh, I began squeezing a girl's hand, the girl who was next to me, and forced her to kiss me – an official's daughter, a poor, nice,

---

<sup>43</sup> Knapp, *Symphonic Metamorphoses*, 227, 296–97.

<sup>44</sup> James Pierpont, 'The One Horse Open Sleigh' (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1857) <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.music/sm1857.620520> (accessed 20 April 2010).

<sup>45</sup> 'Two forty as his speed' means the horse would cover one mile in two minutes and forty seconds.

<sup>46</sup> Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Mahler* vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 104.

meek, submissive girl. She let me, she let me do a lot in the darkness. She thought, the poor dear, that I would come the next day and propose.<sup>47</sup>

Such uses of sleighs to aid in the seduction of women indicates that although bells would be associated with children due to their classification as *Kinderinstrumente*, the potential significance of sleigh bells is necessarily more complex than a direct correlation with childhood. Indeed, for Pierpont and Dostoevsky, sleighs are associated with the types of sexual experiences that, on the contrary, would mark a definitive end of a child's innocence.

Walter Benjamin's brief mention of sleigh bells in his reminiscences of his childhood in Berlin around 1900 also complicates the relationship between sleigh bells and children:

When we then stepped out into the twilight, with the things under our arms all wrapped and tied up with string, with the cab waiting there at the front door, and the snow lying pristine on ledges and fences, more dully on the pavement, with the jingling of sleigh bells rising from the banks of the Lützow, and the gaslights coming on, one after another, to reveal the progress of the lamplighter, who, even on this sweet evening, had to shoulder his pole – then was the city wholly immersed in itself, like a sack that sagged, heavy with me and my happiness.<sup>48</sup>

For the adult Benjamin writing *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* in the 1930s, the distant sleigh bells evoked a scene from his childhood, but from the young Benjamin's perspective in 1900, those sleigh bells, like the gas lamps that were gradually lit, signify his experience of Berlin and his exposure to the world rather than his sheltered innocence. The ringing bells indicating the presence of a distant sleigh simultaneously represent the author's attempt to remember and recapture his childhood and the child's desire to venture outward, to see what lies barely visible on the horizon and to hear what is only barely within earshot.

Benjamin's recollection also underscores the ubiquity of sleighs even in urban areas such as Berlin or Vienna around 1900. Indeed, at the very beginning of the twentieth century, gasoline-powered motorcars would have been novelties encountered far less frequently than horse-drawn vehicles. Hirschfeld, by placing Haydn in an automobile in his review of Mahler's Fourth, seems to suggest that Mahler has outfitted supposedly Haydnesque melodies with novelty orchestration.<sup>49</sup> The clear association of sleigh bells with a specific mode of transportation, the sleigh, might have been one of the reasons Hirschfeld chose to use another more modern vehicle, the automobile, as his metaphor.

On an even more literal level, sleigh bells were used as functional instruments to provide a sonic warning that a sleigh was approaching, thereby potentially preventing harmful accidents. Unlike carriages and carts with wheels that make a lot of noise as they roll over uneven streets, sleighs glide over the snow almost silently. Combined with the difficulties inherent to controlling a large, relatively fast vehicle on a nearly frictionless surface, the absence of noise makes sleighs particularly dangerous to pedestrians. Sleigh bells help to mitigate the danger by

<sup>47</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brother's Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002): 109.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006): 92.

<sup>49</sup> Hirschfeld, 'Vierte Symphonie von Gustav Mahler', 2.

drawing attention to an approaching sleigh with a sound that can be easily both heard and identified.

When considered in terms of this complex network of associations, the sleigh bells in Mahler's Fourth Symphony begin to sound like a token of childhood in some ways and a threat to it in others. Heard specifically in the context of their functional use, the sound of sleigh bells would be quite arresting, encouraging those who hear them to pay more attention to their surroundings to avoid the possibility of being injured. To the extent that sleigh bells would encourage such attentiveness, perhaps Mahler draws on their presence in a shared experience of winter travel to reinvent the *premier coup d'archet* heard at the beginning of a symphony, another eighteenth-century convention.

The sound of the sleigh bells is equally arresting when they return intermittently throughout the fourth movement, which sets a text, 'Das himmlische Leben', about paradise described from a childlike point of view. Mahler instructs that this last movement should be sung 'mit kindlich heiterem Ausdruck', reflecting the 'childlike' or 'innocent' depiction of heaven in simple, easily understood terms. In the text, heaven contains a bountiful supply of food and is populated by biblical figures and saints who each seem to be employed in familiar trades: Herod butchers, Saint Peter fishes and Saint Martha cooks. Walter Frisch claims that this 'image of heaven is very materialistic or hedonistic', but the text's reliance on such familiar topics and well-known figures who undertake recognizable tasks also makes heaven seem more concrete and 'earthly' and therefore less terrifyingly abstract and foreign.<sup>50</sup>

The style of the movement, especially after the sleigh bells have rung the final time near its conclusion, shares several characteristics of lullabies, including, as Mark Evan Bonds suggests, 'a repeated gentle rocking motion in the bass, limited melodic range, and subdued dynamics that become increasingly softer'.<sup>51</sup> The claim that the movement is or perhaps becomes a lullaby suggests, however, that the vision of heaven is not the child's own, but one sung for a child by a parent, likely a mother given the gender of the singer. Knapp concurs that in a lullaby 'it is the adult who creates the fantasy of heavenly bounty, in order to lull the child to sleep'.<sup>52</sup>

The implied child for whom the lullaby is sung in the Finale of Mahler's Fourth Symphony seems to have some trouble falling asleep. Bonds notes 'it is difficult to imagine a more serene passage than the opening of the Finale; yet the recurring urgency of the instrumental interludes flatly contradicts the second line of the text', which states that worldly tumult is not heard in heaven: 'Kein weltlich' Getümmel hört man nicht im Himmel!'<sup>53</sup> If the Finale is indeed a lullaby, the mother would in all likelihood be singing to assuage her child's fears. Her specific reference to the absence of 'weltlich' Getümmel' in heaven would seem to indicate that the child is worried about just that: scary worldly noises. Each instrumental interlude is introduced by the sound of sleigh bells, which would quite possibly have been frightening to a child, considering the bells' function as a warning to everyone within earshot about an approaching, potentially dangerous sleigh that would be silent without the bells. Mahler's indication that the interludes should be played faster than the corresponding music in the first movement – 'Hier muss dieses Tempo bewegter genommen werden, als an den correspondierenden Stellen im

---

<sup>50</sup> Walter Frisch, *German Modernism: Music and the Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 206.

<sup>51</sup> Bonds, *After Beethoven*, 181.

<sup>52</sup> Knapp, *Symphonic Metamorphoses*, 230.

<sup>53</sup> Bonds, *After Beethoven*, 181.

ersten Satze' – suggests that the memory of the sleigh might have become even more menacing than the original encounter had been.

As the mother assures the child that heaven is a peaceful place with no danger of being run over by a terrifyingly fast sleigh, the sound of the sleigh bells continues to intrude, but gradually recedes into the distance. The mother attempts to distract that child from his fear by describing how easy life is in heaven: food is readily available and vehicular traffic is conspicuously absent – only deer and hare use the roadways: 'Willst Rehbock, willst Hasen auf offener Strassen/sie laufen herbei!' Knapp argues that 'we may ... take the subsequent intrusions of sleigh bells as reality checks, disturbing the child's slumber either directly or through nightmare'.<sup>54</sup> If, however, the child is being sung a lullaby, she has probably not yet fallen asleep, making the sleigh bells' intrusions obstacles to rather than interruptions of sleep.

In any case, by bar 122 the sleigh bells have faded away for the last time, as the music fully takes on the characteristics that Bonds associates with lullabies. The text at this moment describes the music one hears in heaven: 'Kein Musik ist ja nicht auf Erden/die uns'rer verglichen kann werden'. (There is truly no music on earth with which ours can be compared). As the text tells of the unparalleled music in heaven, what we hear is the sound of the mother's voice singing a lullaby, trying to lull her child asleep. This moment powerfully suggests that the soothing strains of a lullaby are the closest approximation on earth for heavenly music. Awakening, the music seems to say, would only disturb the joy to be found in falling asleep. Paradise, then, lies not in the future but in an irretrievable past moment when a mother's voice was enough to dispel all worry.

According to Adorno, the final movement of Mahler's Fourth Symphony 'paints paradise in rustic anthropomorphic colors to give notice that it does not exist'.<sup>55</sup> Those colours not only tell us that utopia does not exist, they also situate paradise in the irretrievable past of nostalgia. Along these lines, Andreas Huyssen claims that 'nostalgia itself, however, is not the opposite of utopia, but, as a form of memory, always implicated, even productive in it'.<sup>56</sup> Utopia, that is, grows up around the past that no one ever had, the paradise that is true only because it was lost before it could even exist. Ralph Harper confirms this assessment, noting, 'In lingering homesickness just as in short intense nostalgic flashes, paradise is, as it were regained. One feels as if one were there, except – and this is the other side of nostalgia – one knows one is not there'.<sup>57</sup> The text of 'Das himmlische Leben' paints heaven in rustic colours, which Mahler then swaddles in the comforting tones of a lullaby, precisely because paradise can be seen and heard most palpably when it is depicted as an idealized, non-existent past.

As a nostalgic utterance, the text of 'Das himmlische Leben', like the text of any lullaby sung by an adult, expresses not a child's perspective, but rather an adult's version of that perspective. Moreover, the last movement of Mahler's Fourth draws on the traditional function of a lullaby – comforting a child to help her sleep – in the context of a musical piece clearly intended for adults who, unlike children, are not expected to fall asleep listening to it. Such a confluence of an adult expression of a childlike perspective intended for consumption by other adults resonates with

<sup>54</sup> Knapp, *Symphonic Metamorphoses*, 230.

<sup>55</sup> Adorno, *Mahler*, 56.

<sup>56</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995): 89.

<sup>57</sup> Harper, *Nostalgia*, 28.



Matthew Riley's comments on the relationship of childhood and nostalgia in Edward Elgar's *The Wand of Youth* suites. For Riley, Elgar's music 'was capable of laying bare the truth about the Romantic child' – who was thought to have the ability to perceive the world in ways adults no longer could, by virtue of supposed proximity to nature – that it does not ultimately revolve around children at all, literal or metaphorical, but is concerned with the staging of adult desires and dissatisfactions'.<sup>58</sup> The nostalgic depiction of childhood in *The Wand of Youth* suites and in the final movement of Mahler's Fourth cannot capture the actual experience of a child, but only those idealized aspects of a non-existent childhood for which adults yearn. Indeed, according to David Schiff:

In setting the naïvely Christian poems, ... Mahler was, in one sense returning to a world that was never his—though in another sense he was creating an appropriate metaphor for his own childhood, or for anyone's, a metaphor which reveals and conceals. Here is the childhood everyone had and no one had.<sup>59</sup>

Proust's extremely detailed account of a child's experience of going to bed in *À la recherche du temps perdu* indicates that even the ability of the mother's voice to soothe a child to sleep might be a part of the childhood no one had. Although a goodnight kiss from the young narrator's mother should offer him respite from the pain of being separated from her, it actually results in more pain than solace, because it invariably reminds him that his mother cannot stay with him. After an exceedingly brief moment she must leave him alone again:

My sole consolation when I went upstairs for the night was that Mamma would come in and kiss me after I was in bed. But this goodnight kiss lasted for so short a time, she went down again so soon, that the moment in which I heard her climb the stairs, and then caught the sound of her garden dress of blue muslin, from which hung little tassels of plaited straw, rustling along the double-doored corridor, was for me a moment of utmost pain; for it heralded the moment that was to follow it, when she would have left me and gone downstairs again.<sup>60</sup>

Even on the one night that his father allows his mother to spend the night with him in his room, the narrator is still pained by the impermanence and unrepeatable nature of the moment. The separation from his mother becomes even more profound and irrevocable for the adult narrator, who says of their night together: 'Never again will such moments be possible for me'.<sup>61</sup> As a child he knew the night would not be repeated, but by the time he became an adult such repetition was utterly impossible.

A large part of the wrenching power of the narrator's yearning for a goodnight kiss derives from the understanding that the mother's 'goodnight' has never worked and will never work: it never helps the narrator to fall asleep. Instead of being comforted, he frets about the short duration of his time together with his mother. At bedtime, the mother's soothing voice should ideally ease the child to sleep, allowing her absence to pass completely unnoticed as he sleeps. What the

---

<sup>58</sup> Matthew Riley, *Edward Elgar and the Nostalgic Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 117.

<sup>59</sup> David Schiff, 'Jewish and Musical Tradition in the Music of Mahler and Schoenberg', *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 9 (1986): 217.

<sup>60</sup> Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1, 49.

narrator seems to want, however, is never to be apart from his mother, and sleep only ensures their separation. In *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Walter Benjamin relates a similar story of a maternal goodnight kiss:

And when my mother – although she was staying at home this evening – came in haste to say goodnight to me, I felt more keenly than ever the gift she laid on my bedspread every evening at this time: the knowledge of the hours which the day still held in store for her, and which I, consoled, took with me into sleep, like the rag doll of old.<sup>62</sup>

His mother's kiss comforts the young Benjamin only because it allows him to imagine that that he was able to remain with her even after he had gone to bed, that he was really still awake with her and not asleep at all.

Successful lullabies, then, are part of an adult's nostalgic view of an idealized, non-existent childhood rather than a child's own experience. According to Jankélévitch, nostalgia itself originates in a desire to undo such separation from the mother: 'the profoundness of nostalgia is a biological profoundness and that this profoundness is called: rupture of the umbilical cord, separation of the newborn and the maternal organism, attachment to the mother.'<sup>63</sup> From the moment we are born we long for a unity that we feel we must have experienced, but which we could never remember, even as children. Mahler seems to acknowledge that the incomparable music of paradise could sound only like a lullaby, because as Proust observed, 'the true paradises are the paradises that we have lost'. If the conclusion of the Fourth sounds nostalgic, it is because it both evokes and yearns for a paradise that takes the form of an irretrievable past that never existed in the first place.

As a method of mediating between the past and the present, the nostalgia in Mahler's Fourth should not be in any way embarrassing. On the contrary, as Stuart Tannock suggests, nostalgic texts offer valuable insights into their authors' visions for the future:

We may consider the extent to which the nostalgic text is taken to be prescriptive for an historical future, as opposed to being descriptive of an historical past. And we may also recognize the way in which the search for possibility has enabled the nostalgic author to read the past in new and productive ways, or has facilitated the recuperation of previously overlooked historical materials and practices.<sup>64</sup>

Determining what musical passages evoke nostalgia in a strict, conceptual sense is a necessary first step before beginning to explore how such passages might contain a prescription for the future. Of course, the project of reading the music of the past in new and productive ways is in itself a nostalgic undertaking. As we pursue that project, we should be careful to acknowledge that the nostalgia we hear in Mahler is at least partially responsible for the production of our own nostalgia, which continues to bring us back to his music and allows us to remember our own lost paradise: that impossible, non-existent moment when Mahler was able to witness the joy that we experience each time we hear his music and inhale fresh air from the past.

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, 139.

<sup>63</sup> Jankélévitch, *L'irréversible et la nostalgie*, 298. 'On peut certes dire que la profondeur de la nostalgie est une profondeur biologique, et que cette profondeur s'appelle: rupture du cordon ombilical, separation du nouveau-né de l'organisme maternel, attachement à la mère.'

<sup>64</sup> Tannock, 'Nostalgia Critique', 457.