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EXOTIC AND TOPICAL REFERENCES IN  
GUSTAV MAHLER'S *DAS LIED VON DER ERDE*

“The evocation of a place, people, or social milieu that is (or is perceived or imagined to be) profoundly different from accepted local norms in its attitudes, customs, and morals.” This is how Ralph P. Locke defines exoticism, also noting that the evoked scene may be either from nearby, or from a considerable distance (2020). The interest of the Western musical practice in the exotic goes back to medieval times, but it was with the nineteenth century that artists became preoccupied to depict it through the appropriation of local ingredients from the cultures they referred to—or at least what they supposed, even fantasized about being local. Since approximately mid-century, the East began to be heard in musical representations by means of what European composers presented as cultural loans of Asian origin. Such is also the case of one of Mahler's most philosophical compositions, *Das Lied von der Erde*, written between 1908 and 1909, toward the terminus of the colonial age respectively.

Among the most important and vivid examples on how the Far East was being depicted in early 20th-century Western music, *Das Lied von der Erde* occupies a unique place due to the manner in which it brings the communication between the human being and nature to a new level of understanding. *Das Lied* is Mahler's final synthesis between the symphonic thought and the poetic reflection specific to the song. The combination of these mediums is double-sided: first, the structure of the text is altered to suit the formal necessities of each song, but especially to follow the strategy of the work as

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a whole; secondly, the music is in a profound and stratified relationship with the emotional level of the text. Conceived as a work in six symphonic movements, each with a solo vocal part, *Das Lied* surpasses the limits of the song cycle through the intricate orchestral treatment, which also extends to the vocal line, itself often employed as an instrument. It equally surpasses the limits of the symphony through the omnipresence of the voice and the fastidious translation of the poetic details into music. The first, the third and the fifth song are written for solo tenor and stand out by means of rich, often piercing sonorities. The second, the fourth and the sixth are sung by a contralto (or baritone) and their mood is much more intimate, sad and enigmatic.

*Das Lied* is based on seven poems which belong to an anthology of Chinese poetry, translated by Hans Bethge under the name of *Die chinesische Flöte* (significantly, not employing it, but Judith Gautier's French translation, *Le livre de jade*). The title had more than one variant until reaching the final *Das Lied von der Erde. Eine Symphonie für eine Tenor- und eine Alt (oder Bariton-) Stimme und Orchester (nach H. Bethge's 'Die chinesische Flöte')*. Mahler also changed the title of the fifth song from "Der Trinke im Frühling" to "Der Trunkene im Frühling" (which is only a small proof of Mahler's indifference in staying completely faithful to Bethge's translations, themselves only an approximate version of the original Chinese poems; throughout the work, Mahler rearranges the order of the lines, adds his own, changes words and combine stanzas from different poems).

The work opens with a three-note melodic unit that serves as foundation, one of the symphonic attributes of the work. This motif (*a-g-e*) is the unifying element of the entire cycle and the source of its thematic material: it is continuously transformed rhythmically and melodically through augmentation, diminution, inversion, transposition, etc. The choice of the intervals that construct this motif, or rather their vertical disposition (a fourth and a fifth) had already been related to the music of Southeast Asia ever since the 1889 Paris Exposition (Watkins 1994, 25).

The exotic signifiers in *Das Lied* go beyond the overt references in the text, pervading even the subtlest compositional devices. The Oriental sound world is not only achieved through the extensive use of pentatonic scales, a must-have in the evocation of the Eastern locale, but it also permeates the musical substance and the overall conception. Like in the case of many other Western artists, Mahler's description of the Orient is done from within the European stylistic terrain. The encounter with the Far East is mediated through a series of fairly predictable technical choices: the delicacy of the sound colour, timbre

(note, for instance, the use of the oboe, harp and flute, but also the mandolin, an instrument highly unlikely to appear in the symphonic genre), heterophony, harmonic immobility, numerous pedal points and ostinati (equally choices found in other symphonic works by Mahler, with no pretended musical connection to the Far East).

We do not know if and to what extent Mahler knew Chinese music. Peter Revers (2010) mentions some recordings of Chinese field-collected songs, that Mahler might have known, since they appeared in 1906 (346–48). A catalogue of gramophone recordings was also published by *Beka Grand Record* in Berlin the same year, comprising a large number of Chinese and Japanese traditional melodies, and copies were also kept in the *Phonogrammarchiv der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* in Vienna. However, for want of palpable evidence, there is no way of assessing the influence of these sources on Mahler's music. Instead, we must do with his own projection of the musical Orient and, as Watkins (1994, 27) observes, with the audiences of his time regarding the *Chinoiserie* as authentic.

The philosophical premise behind the work is the interaction of the human being with the vital resources of the earthly environment. Mahler's nature is not always and exclusively real but comes from the powerful experiences of the individual in a permanent search of the reason for existence. The starting point of the work is the attitude against vanity, but it gradually turns into a feeling of both resignation and ecstasy in the face of the ultimate blending with the inexhaustible world.

One of the elements that ensure the poetic unity of the cycle is the perpetual succession of the four seasons. Mahler's pantheistic views, in which life and death are integrated in this eternal chain, is evident throughout the work. Within the rich context of philosophical significations, Mahler adopts the compositional technique most appropriate to point out this complex overlapping of ideas and beliefs: the counterpoint. The tonal trajectory is centred on the alternation between the two fundamental poles, A minor and C major, with frequent modulations to B-flat major, B-flat minor, D minor, G minor, E-flat minor, A-flat minor, A-flat major and D-flat major. The omnipresent pentatonic substrate determines both the vertical and the horizontal structures. Although not at all absent, the role of the traditional Western European harmonic language is oftentimes undermined by these pentatonic insertions. Adorno (1992) notices two factors that contribute to the exotic character of the work: on the one hand, "the blurred unison in which identical voices diverge slightly through rhythm," or heterophony (like in the rhythmical combination

of the chords in mm. 10–13); on the other hand, he discusses the absence of the traditional function of the bass: if, for the most part, the musical discourse focuses on the upper level, the bass operates generally in the low alto and high tenor ranges (150).

The first song, *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde* (A minor), is a hymn dedicated to wine drinking, while it also evokes the despair of the individual looking for consolation in face of the futility of human existence. The opening horn call that announces the aforementioned melodic unit seems to deny, by its triumphant tone, the anguish that dominates the entire movement. This expressive field has several signifiers: note, for instance, the sinister “laughter” figures in the woodwinds (mm. 3–4) or the ‘*tempesta*’ topos in the trumpets (mm. 125–126), with their agitated repeated notes (McClelland 2014, 287–88). The three stanzas of the poem are separated by the refrain “Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod”, a bitter realization that all efforts one may make for a joyous living are in vain. The musical setting of these words is opposed to the general frenetic flow: the slow cadence in halves of the soloist, marked *Sehr ruhig* and *piano*, covers the range of a downward octave, which comes in contrast with the sinuous lines on which the power of the wine is eulogised. The regularity of this refrain shatters any consolation and attempt to fight the destiny. Each time, it is brought one semitone higher, a dramatic shift considering that these restatements make the soloist challenge his technical abilities and sing at the upper extreme of his vocal register. Moreover, the lack of a proper bass register to ensure the anchoring of this chromatic elevation seems to point towards what Grimalt identifies as an often-encountered Romantic gesture for the “otherworldly or spiritual” (2020, 56).

The refrain can also be heard as a dysphoric version of a “pastoral” reference, in 3/4 metre, minor mode and slow tempo, with wavelike movements in the harp. The failure of its first appearance to lead to a cadence on the tonic, replaced instead with a diminished seventh chord, points to the very negation of the terrestrial bliss associated with the pastoral topos (see mm. 81–89). This seems to find a resolution with the second refrain: this time it cadences on the tonic of A-flat major, but not before the attention is directed to the expressive Neapolitan, pathetic lowered second degree on the word *der* before *Tod* (see example 1).



Example 1. Second appearance of the refrain (mm. 183–192)

The most rhetorically significant moment of the song occurs before the last refrain, when the speaker becomes aware of the presence of a ghostly ape (see mm. 332–365). Several things are to be noted here:

- the scene taking place in a nocturnal graveyard lit by the moonlight;
- the soloist’s declamatory gestures, obsessively repeating the same few melodic patterns, preponderantly ‘*pianti*’;
- the *fortissimo* dynamics of the entire fragment;
- the long rest on B-flat, the highest pitch in the vocal line, followed by a dramatic descendent leap of a major ninth;
- the operatic gesture in m. 365, prepared by a typically Mahlerian “catastrophic descent” (Grimalt 2020, 57); it might also remind one of the strokes which accompany the fall of the curtain at the end of an opera act (this reminiscence becomes even more distinct in the final measure of the song).

Finally, the third occurrence of the refrain (mm. 385–393), bringing together the A minor in the voice with the A major in the orchestra, leads to another diminished seventh chord and to an orchestral outburst that will find solace no sooner than in the last song of the cycle.

The exhilarating intensity in this song is shadowed by its almost uncontrolled tension, produced by the unusually high tessitura of the tenor part. Paired also with the timbre of the glockenspiel, employed here in a completely different way than, for instance, in *Kindertotenlieder*, it contributes significantly to this musical exercise in Orientalia. The hallucinatory feeling, which dominates the expressive nature of the song, is the result of the extensive use of trills throughout. Moreover, Mahler’s imagination about the Orient nurtures pairs of oppositions musically illustrated through the alternance between ascending and descending melodic lines (Niekerk 2010, 199).

In spite of the hedonistic and lustful life that the poem seems to praise, the third stanza suggests an opposed viewpoint, resulting from the awareness that, if the earth and the seasons cycle are timeless, human existence is not. The nature summoned here is indifferent to any suffering or pain. Julian Johnson

notes that the typical Mahlerian irony bursts out in the vocal part (2009, 14): this operatic tenor, in his introductory address to an imaginary audience, promises to deliver a song, but ends up performing a lament, a broken melody, with irregular rhythms, numerous hemiolic interventions, abundance of ‘*pianti*’ and “sighs” (see, e.g. , mm. 56–74, mm. 156–174).

The second song, *Der Einsame im Herbst*, is the expression of solitude and autumnal shiver. It is one of the saddest texts employed by Mahler: death is awaited with a total resignation, in an isolated inner space. Like in *Nun will die Sonn’ so hell aufgehn*, Mahler opts for two different orchestral densities in order to differentiate the poetic images. Therefore, the first two lines of each stanza are set in a contrapuntal writing, made of the rarefied accompaniment provided by a chamber ensemble; the last two are supported by the entire orchestra, in a harmonically rich texture. This vertical/horizontal interplay contributes to the articulation of the form, a consequence of the poetical structure and its symbolism.

The contrast with the violent protest of the previous song derives mainly from the use of the chamber-like writing, a choice Mahler had already made in *Rückert-Lieder* and *Kindertotenlieder*, and also from assigning a sinuous profile to the melodic lines, with numerous ‘*pianti*’. Listen, for instance, to the heartbreaking oboe theme accompanied by the hexachords of the violins and the haunting fifths of the horns, later echoed in the vocal line sustained by the counterpoint between strings and winds. All the opening gestures point toward the pastoral semantic field as the main topical premise of the song:

- the metre of 3/2,
- the simple melodic contour of the oboe theme, answered by the flute,
- the rocking accompaniment,
- the parallel thirds in the violins,
- the empty fifths in the horns,
- the quiet dynamics,
- the consonant harmony and its slow rhythm.

But the pastoral quality of this moment is troped by a melancholic, tragic ethos: the key of D minor and the omnipresence of ‘*pianti*’ lead to the intersection with the ‘lament’ topos often associated by Mahler (Agawu 2009, 47).

The poem speaks about the transition from autumn to winter frost, but also about the nostalgia for the summer warm days. If, in the first song, the protagonist belonged to a social environment, in the second one he is abandoned in his own loneliness, in the middle of the dark and cold nature, contemplating life from a radically different angle. Sleep seems to be the only way out, but

the perspective is sombre: what the exhausted hero really wants is to reach freedom through death. *Der Einsame* becomes a poem about the final moments in one's life and, thus, it makes an efficient transition to the following two songs about the joy of youth and the nostalgia of times long gone. This song functions as a musical image of the Freudian death instinct, while the following two represent another phase in the mourning process: the individual creates psychological connections with the departed, with past times and loved places.

In *Von der Jugend* (B-flat major), friends, drinking and chatting, write poems in a porcelain pavilion. The exotic sonorities result from the luxurious instrumentation (enriched with the timbre of the triangle), the pentatonic and whole-tone scales,<sup>1</sup> the predominance of the high register, embellishments and trills. This description of the ordinary human life contrasts heavily with the first two poems by what Danuser identifies as a reminiscence of the *Jugendstil*, with its predilection for stylized, ornamental and miniature decorations (1991, 215–30). But the most conspicuous difference lies in the treatment of the vocal line, here handled with delicacy and refinement (see example 2).

Mit-ten in dem klei-nen Tei-che steht ein Pa-vil-lon aus grü-nem und aus wei-ßem

Por-zel-lan Wie der Rü-cken ei-nes Ti-gers wölbt die Brü-cke sich aus Ja-de

14 zu dem Pa-vil-lon hin-ü-ber.

Example 2. *The soloist's line* (mm. 13–29)

<sup>1</sup> Quite erroneously still considered in Mahler's time to be specific to Chinese music, ever since Rossini had composed his notorious *L'amour à Pékin: Petite mélodie sur la gamme chinoise* (1867).

Mahler's ability to project his music onto a genuine stage where the plot unfolds reaches its utmost efficiency. The poem underlines the social function of the art and its privileged status as a natural condition for the human life. Therefore, markers of the social interaction among the happy friends are to be expected and one should not be surprised that the Orient is seen yet and again through the lens of the Western imagination: from m. 39 onwards (see the viola, the clarinet, then the bassoon and the horn lines), a typical polka-like accompaniment occurs, which makes a Viennese ballroom of the 19th century rather than a Chinese pavilion the locus of the sound world.

The apparent simplicity of the music is given a new meaning starting with m. 70, where the text speaks about the water reflection of the group of friends. It is like a *tableau vivant* and this distorted, quasi-comical image offers Mahler the ground to briefly darken the ambiance: the mode changes to minor, the tempo slows down, as if to stop the time, and the melodic contour enhances the melancholic touch of this episode through the languid '*pianti*'. The pentatonic melodies roll one after the other in a flow seemingly without purpose, on an accompaniment of ostinati sustained by harmonic blocks. The latter avoid the stability of root positions, and the song concludes on the third inversion of the B-flat major chord, described by Adorno thus: "Like a transparent mirage, [it] calls to mind the Chinese tale of the painter who vanishes into his picture, a trifling and inextinguishable pledge" (1992, 152).

*Von der Schönheit* (G major) glorifies the feminine beauty and sensuality. The setting moves to a sunny, perfumed river bank, where maidens pick up lotus flowers. The water reflection appears once again, this time mirroring the girls' eyes and silhouettes, later the group of riders storming the scene. The narrator sings this story by means of gracious lines with a swinging character, resulting from the alternations between duple and triple metres.

There follow two unleashed orchestral interludes, in fact two marches (mm. 50–95), that interrupt the girls' idyllic activity, as a group of young men on horsebacks pass by the meadow. We enter the world of Mahler's deafening military fanfares and martial references, with their strident and violent sonorities. The change in the speaker's discourse is abrupt: he sings at the lowest extreme of the register, the tempo gradually increases until he seems out of breath, the words tumble on each other and become unintelligible. This middle section comes in opposition with the rest of the song, and this is essential to its dialectics, but also to the development of the thematic material. The transformations it is subjected to unify and also differentiate the impassionate masculinity from the intimate, but equally intense femininity. The maidens and the



riders are fashioned from the same material, and Mahler both creates distinct entities and makes evident their close relatedness.

The last stanza recounts about the most beautiful of the girls casting lustful glances towards one of the men. The song turns towards the erotic awakening, a memory, possibly far-fetched, of the river bank as once a place of rendezvous and love. The feeling of distance and unreality has several signifiers:

- rarefied orchestration;
- lavish motifs in the solo violin and horn;
- the significant tonal leap from B-flat major to G major;
- the stream of successive eighths in the high register of the first violins, with an almost mechanical repetition of the same notes, infusing this passage with a hypnotic power;
- the brief excursion to G minor, glooming the mood, in mm. 133–135;
- the fade-out effect of the *morendo* violas;
- a melodic contour sometimes at odds with the inflections of normal speech; see, for instance, mm. 107 and 111, where the unstressed syllables are set to higher pitches reached through intervallic leaps;
- the ending on the second inversion of the tonic chord.

*Der Trunkene im Frühling* (A major) returns to the Bacchic theme, without displaying the philosophical attributes of the first song. It begins in a similar manner, with heroic horn calls, once more a choice that seems to deny pessimism. The pentatonic scales and the high register of the winds are tokens of the protagonist's exaltation, musically symbolised on two levels: on the one hand, the squeaky interjections of the oboes and clarinets (with short trills and grace notes) and the appoggiaturas of the violins (Mahler's famous '*Naturlaute*' topos); on the other hand, the contrasting vocal line, built primarily of leaps and hilarious combinations of downward and upward motions.

The middle section (from m. 31) allows a moment of quiet reflection: the narrator speaks about the spring, preparing the transition towards the complex final song. This section stands out by means of the deceleration of the tempo (from *Allegro* to *Ruhiger*) and the rarefaction of the orchestral texture. The text describes the dialogue between the hopeless protagonist and a bird heralding the spring and bringing a message of hope. As usually with Mahler, bird calls do not simply imitate their natural models, but are highly stylised structural elements, with a strong sense for melody, symmetrical phrases and an amazing ability to develop out of the main motifs of the work (see example 3).

1. Violin

Solo

**Ruhiger**

*mf* *zart hervortretend*

Tutti

*sempre pp*

Example 3. *Bird call* (mm. 31–34)

The singer's monologue is interrupted by numerous rests and in m. 40 his hesitations take the form of a rising *passus duriusculus*. This motif is, in fact, a quotation from the first song of *Kindertotenlieder* and is here repeated in mm. 56–58, in the low register and in the unfamiliar key of D-flat major. It expresses the hero's indifference to the spring renewal, which instead becomes the reason to continue drinking (from m. 65). Significantly, this denial of the reality takes place in C major, one of the main keys of the work, which gives it a tragic ironical tone and announces the last part.

*Der Abschied* (C minor/C major) stirred up many discussions around what scholars often saw as Mahler's farewell to life. It is a unique accomplishment in the demonstration of how the most intimate expression and the depths of sorrow may sound like. From the first measure we realize we no longer inhabit a familiar world of nature, love, despair, nostalgia and intoxication. The stroke on the tam-tam initiates a new journey: the separation from the world and its beauties as a final solution for every being. The use of the tam-tam by Mahler is always linked to death and to all the indexicalities around it (Floros 2014, chap. 13 and 26), but here it is also used as a reference to the Far East and to the diversity of gongs employed in its musical and religious practices.

All the oppositions and contrasts that have so far articulated the musical process reach their climax. The orchestra is treated with utmost refinement and Mahler blends thematic ideas from each of the previous songs by establishing various relationships between their motifs. The most prominent characteristic is the repetition of the ostinato elements, which combine the main topical references of the work, like the '*pianti*', the "bird calls", the pastoral wavelike harp figurations (see example 4), called by Floros "sleep motifs" (2014, 358–59). They are used to create the musical image of the hero who,

overwhelmed by the remembrances of times forever gone, alternates between the dramatic present and the meditation on the terrestrial life.

(a) 1. Oboe (m. 3). The notation shows a melodic line starting with a forte (*sf*) dynamic, followed by a crescendo leading to a piano (*p*) dynamic.

(b) 1. 3. Hn. The notation shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic.

(c) 1. 2. Cl. in B. The notation shows a melodic line with trills (*tr*) and a piano (*p*) dynamic.

(a) Oboe (m. 3).

(b) Horn (m. 12).

(c) Clarinet (m. 27).

(d) 1. Hp. The notation shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a forte (*f*) dynamic, followed by a decrescendo (*dim.*).

(e) 1. Oboe. The notation shows a melodic line with dynamics ranging from piano-piano (*pp*) to fortissimo (*ff*), including a section marked *veloce*.

(d) Harp (m. 17).

(e) Oboe (mm. 14-15).

(f) 1. Hp. The notation shows a simple melodic line with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a fermata over the final note.

(f) Harp (m. 55).

#### Example 4. The ostinato patterns in *Der Abschied*

The song has a binary structure, resulting from the use of two different poems, modified and extended by Mahler. The three “recitatives” (mm. 19–26, 158–165, 375–381), another topos regularly used by Mahler (Agawu 2009, 47) carry with them the force to affect, or rather suppress the temporal flow. This also influences the musical strophes, which avoid developing compositional devices and distinct phrasings. In the first part of the song, any attempt to reach a climax is undercut by the immediate withdrawal and disintegration. This fluctuation between forwards and backwards, between becoming and collapsing is Mahler’s strategy par excellence. The rhythmic pulsation is unstable because of multiple metrical combinations, meanwhile a clear tonal orientation is almost completely impossible to follow due to the use of heterophony, pentatonic structures, whole-tone scales or elements bordering atonality.

In the extended introduction to the second section (see mm. 303–374), opened by the tam-tam, a new cello motif joins the previous ones in building a “funeral march”, sometimes sharply dissonant, other times impassioned and languid. It prepares the immense void of the third recitative: completely lacking the nature motifs heard in the other two, it features the voice sustained only by the bass pedal and the tam-tam strokes. The crossing to other side is

now accomplished and Mahler's changes in the text suggest that the hero and the archetypal figure of Death have become one and the same.

The sense of freedom felt at the end of the song is the result of a delicate heterophonic texture made out of '*Naturlaute*'—bird calls and water streams. It is not only about the return of the spring, but also about the beginnings of Mahler's career as a composer: one hears echoes of *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* and the First Symphony, in a typical reinterpretation and rewriting of his own music.

So far, the main three-note motif, which connects all the songs of *Das Lied*, has been manipulated mainly horizontally. In the last measure it is displayed in a vertical disposition, making it the musical equivalent of eternity. Moreover, it combines the two main tonal centres, A minor and C minor. We are dealing with an open ending, signified by the repetition of the word *ewig* and the augmentation of the corresponding melodic motif.

The absorption of the exotic traits in Mahler's late style leads to more loose, sometimes even ambiguous formal designs, to the predilection for the lyrical and the expressive and to the extensive use of the chamber/soloistic orchestral resources. Far from being imagined as a monolith, the Far East is described as a highly diversified entity, seen between night and day, autumn and spring, intoxication and introspection, masculine and feminine, exuberance and contemplation. *Das Lied* dives into the existential isolation of the death-facing human being, nevertheless in desperate need to make this entire process comprehensible. This is nowhere more distinct than in the last stanza, where the lyrics describe the blue horizon and the spring renewal as the hero is breathing the final moments.

The formidable way in which Mahler builds the last pages leads to the only possible resolution if we look at the work in retrospect: the C major chord is added an *a*, while the vocal line ends on *d*. The pentatonic scale is thus complete and the infinite universe aesthetically affirmed. West may not meet East in the proper, authentic musical sense, but it meets Nature and it does so through the musical overlapping of quasi-static textures, transparent instrumentation and pedal points—typical for the Western appropriation of the Oriental exoticism—with energetic symphonic fragments—typical for the Occidental musical art. Time itself receives a different meaning, articulated by the primordial difference between being and becoming.

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## Summary

This article discusses the topical content of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* in the context of the "exotic" character of the work. The work combines the formal layout of the symphony with that of the song, thus bringing together the extrovert attributes of a social genre with the introvert touch of a private musical manifestation. This also means the synthesis of elements apparently disparate, but that with Mahler become amazingly similar. *Das Lied von der Erde* is set in a timeless, seductive Far East, in which nature functions as the main actor and the human subject gradually becomes a part of its forces. Seen through Mahler's eyes, the musical Orient is allotted a vocabulary of signifiers that stand rather for the long Western canonical tradition than for a genuine representation of the "Other".

**Keywords:** musical topoi; exoticism; Orientalia; *Jugendstil*; Mahler