

## *Odyssey Through the Operatic Province*

LIKE NEARLY EVERY STUDENT, MAHLER WAS faced with bitter disillusionment when, after graduating from the Conservatory, he had to leave the lofty realm of study for the laborious drudgery of everyday life. He had to accept humble jobs, such as giving piano lessons to the son of a rich Hungarian country squire and conducting miserable operettas at the shabby summer theater of Bad Hall, a modest spa in Upper Austria. His letters from this period reveal the exaggerated emotionalism of a sensitive youth plunged for the first time into the struggle of life. His manner of writing betrays his reading preferences: the rampant, tortuous and often ornate prose of the German romanticists, E. Th. A. Hoffmann, Jean Paul, and others. Some of his most passionate outbursts of grief over the hostile and

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terrifying world even read like quotations from some of these romantic authors.

This is the emotional atmosphere of *Das Klagende Lied*, the earliest of Mahler's compositions to have been preserved and one which he completed during those years of hardship. Perhaps more original than his earlier, lost musical utterances, it is probably because of this originality that it was turned down by the judges for the Beethoven Prize to whom Mahler submitted his "cantata." The jury was headed by the determined anti-Wagnerites, Brahms and Hanslick.

Somewhat more rewarding work was assigned to Mahler in 1881 and 1882 when he became conductor at the small opera houses in Laibach (later called Ljubljana, in Western Yugoslavia) and Olmütz (Olomouc, in Moravia). However, this modest advancement served only to increase his ambition, and he left Olmütz hardly less unhappy than he had embarked on his stage career at Bad Hall.

Although the intellectual circles with which Mahler came in touch at these places were mostly part of the Germanic top layer spread all over the Austrian monarchy, we may assume that his activities in various parts of the polyglot Empire enhanced his sense of universality, which is so characteristic of Mahler's music as well as of all truly symphonic music since Beethoven. It is certainly more than a