KS4/5

The story of the symphony, part 3: from Mahler to the moderns

by Jonathan James

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INTRODUCTION

In 1849, Wagner pompously declared that 'the last symphony had already been written', referring to Beethoven's Ninth. He was wrong.

In part two to this three-part resource (*Music Teacher*, March 2019, with part one February 2019), we saw how Romantic composers of all creative persuasions, whether nationalist or individualist, took up the challenge of extending Beethoven's legacy. Some, like Schumann and Brahms, innovated within the constraints and conventions of the form; others such as Tchaikovsky and Dvořák, used it to explore issues of nationhood and cultural identity; while others still, such as Liszt and Berlioz, reimagined both its structure and scope, blurring the boundaries between the symphony and tone poem.

The third and final part of this resource picks up the story at the turn of the 20th century, at that point where late Romanticism brushed up against early modernism. Although some were happy to stick by the symphony, others questioned its role and purpose, claiming it had already outstayed its welcome. We will look at the divergence within the symphony's history by selecting some benchmark works as case studies:

- Mahler Symphony No. 1 (1888)
- Sibelius Symphony No. 5 (1919)
- Debussy *La mer* (1905)
- Shostakovich Symphony No. 5 (1937)

These will be put into the context of the musical aesthetics of their day, before we finish with a quick survey of developments since Shostakovich, asking whether the symphony can still be used by contemporary composers to innovate and express themselves in an orchestral format.

As before, the aim of this resource is to use the story of the symphony to give a context for analysing instrumental writing in the wider listening questions at GCSE and beyond. It gives a historical framework for set works, and outlines the creative principles of key composers, questioning the choices they made as they crafted their symphonies and, in so doing, giving inspiration for the students' own compositional thinking.

Taken as a three-part survey, the resource should develop the vocabulary and analytical thinking required for the higher-scoring evaluative answers in the listening papers in both Key Stage 4 and 5. A Spotify playlist accompanies each part to use in illustrations and listening exercises.

THE LAST ROMANTICS

Even though Wagner proved to be wrong in his premature prediction for the demise of the symphony, he was right that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (1824), two generations on, was still the main blueprint for the Romantic symphony, particularly those in the Austro-Germanic tradition. The Ninth comprises four formidable movements held together by an overarching theme, in this case the unification of humanity under God:

- 1 Monumental musical argument
- 2 Profound adagio
- 3 Complex scherzo in sonata form
- 4 Finale that draws previous ideas together, with triumphant conclusion

Anton Bruckner (1824-96)

This model was clearly in Bruckner's mind as he composed his symphonies in the 1870s and 1880s. Bruckner was a late starter and, like Brahms, did not attempt his first symphony until he was in his forties. Aside from Beethoven, his main idol was Wagner, and the way his symphonies slowly unfold over a long time-scale reflects, in part, the epic proportions of Wagner's music dramas.

There are several key traits to a Bruckner symphony:

- The initial theme can be quite long, often stretched over several octaves (eg the opening to his Seventh Symphony).
- Sections of this theme will be repeated and gradually transformed.
- This very gradual emergence of material slows the pace of the overall argument.
- The tempos are usually moderate – even scherzos are marked to be played at a 'leisurely' pace.
- The harmonies are inspired by Wagner's dense chromaticism.
- The gradual changes in texture and sonority are akin to how an organist would slowly transform material by pulling out a stop at a time.

A typical Bruckner build-up requires patience but it is always worth the wait, as the music finds itself on a path to glory. Even though he kept to a very tonal language and navigated between established key centres throughout, the level of counterpoint in his writing (a symptom of his career as an organist) proved too much for critics of his day. People walked out of his Third Symphony. One critic declared he was a 'tonal antichrist'. Another was particularly venomous after a performance of the Fourth Symphony:

'We recoil in horror before this rotting odour which rushes into our nostrils from disharmonies of this putrefactive counterpoint… Bruckner composes like a drunkard.'

Bruckner filled up 17 notebooks with double counterpoint exercises for his long-suffering harmony teacher to mark!

Bruckner's story, though, is one of perseverance despite these incredibly damning remarks. Composing was for him, as a deeply pious man, a vocation and a God-given duty. 'How could I stand there before Almighty God,' he asks, 'if I followed the others and not Him?'

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Rachmaninov shares Bruckner's length of line and ability to build tension over long paragraphs. His particular brand of lyricism, though, owes more to Tchaikovsky and the Russian Romantics. Where some composers would culminate a phrase, Rachmaninov sustains and grows it for another 32 bars or so, creating a tidal surge of sound. The direct emotional appeal and lush Romanticism of his style was distinctly at odds with the stripped-back, surgical precision of the modernists around him in his later career. Like Bruckner, his symphonies were often pilloried by the establishment in his lifetime, even though his reputation was held intact by his prowess at the piano.

> By way of illustration, play students the slow movement from Rachmaninov's Third Symphony and compare it to the finale from Berg's Violin Concerto, both written in 1935. Both are 'Romantic', in terms of the intensity of the emotion and use of large orchestral forces, but there the similarities end. They sound like pieces from different planets.
>
> See playlist for recordings of both works.

Rachmaninov was aware of all the developments around him, but he remained true to his vision for music, even if it sounded as if it could have been written 40 years earlier. He extends certain ideas that are key to Russian music, the first two of which have no direct translation into English:

- **'Prelest':** music that sparkles and has an attractive allure.
- **'Toska':** a particular quality of melancholia that the writer Nabokov describes as ranging from 'boredom and ennui' through to 'deep existential angst'.
- **Oriental influences:** sumptuous textures, Arab scales and harmonies, seductive melodies.

> Listen again with your students to the slow movement from the Third Symphony, with its harp and glistening solo colours, cymbals and celeste. Aside from being a deeply nostalgic work that recalls past musical successes, this movement is filled with 'prelest', 'toska' and orientalism. See if your students can spot them.

GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911)

Mahler's trajectory runs in parallel to those of Bruckner and Rachmaninov, but he set his own course with a very personal and inimitable style. In just 30 years of symphonic writing, he composed nine symphonies, mainly in the summer breaks when he was not conducting. His work ethic was both impressive and slightly terrifying, as he juggled top conducting jobs in Vienna, Budapest, Prague and New York with an insatiable appetite to compose. His short life – he lived to just 51 – reflects this intensity.

Mahler took up the gauntlet of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and wrote works that share the same breadth of vision and ambition. In a famous meeting with Sibelius, he argued that the symphony should 'be like the world; it must embrace everything'. And so it is in Mahler's symphonies that we encounter both high art and sentimental salon music, Yiddish ditties and funeral marches, mandolin serenades and Austrian *Ländler* (a rustic waltz), Lieder and nursery rhymes – often jarringly juxtaposed for ironic effect. His symphonies manage to be both deeply subjective and universal at the same time, drawing on personal childhood memories and neuroses as much as on broader themes of faith, love and death.

The result is a volatile concoction of ideas that can perplex the listener on first pass. It can make for ideal listening for teenage students, however, with its venting of angst and spleen, and its extravagant declaration of ideals. Listening to Mahler at full tilt can be an overwhelming experience. And yet he marshals his forces with utmost care and precision, maintaining sharply defined textures and neatly counterpointed ideas. Like Beethoven, Berlioz and Liszt, he allowed a programme to shape the course of the symphony, and was not afraid to play with the overall structure if the narrative demanded it. His Third Symphony has six movements, for instance, and his Eighth has just two.

Taking his lead from Beethoven's Ninth, he admitted voices into several of his symphonies, borrowing material from songs he had written and that reinforced the thematic content of the symphonies:

- Symphonies nos. 2 to 4 have solo women's voices and both mixed chorus and boys-only choirs.
- Symphony No. 8, also called the 'Symphony of a Thousand' due to the massed forces required to perform it, requires multiple soloists and choirs.

Aside from his Sixth, his symphonies display 'progressive tonality', where the home key shifts from the beginning to the end of the movement, as well as in the work as a whole. Again, this reflects his commitment to allowing the underlying narrative to dictate the flow and logic of the writing, rather than adhering to pre-set rules.

Mahler's music rarely finds long-lasting peace, despite searching for it. He referred to himself as being a 'three-fold outsider': a 'Bohemian in Austria, an Austrian in Germany and a Jew throughout the world'. That alienation is key to his continual quest to find an identity for both himself and humanity through his symphonies. The saying goes that 'whereas Bruckner found God, Mahler searched for Him'.

Key traits of Mahler's symphonic style are therefore:

- Restlessness and unpredictability, involving emotional extremes.
- Expanded and progressive tonality, with harmonies that sometimes border on dissonance.
- A collage of styles and influences.
- Clear, well-organised textures.
- Imaginative instrumentation (including anvils, guitars and cowbells) and exquisite orchestration.
- Sounds inspired from the natural world.

Case study: Mahler's First Symphony (1888)

'Sometimes it sent shivers down my spine. Damn it, where do people keep their hearts and ears if they can't hear that?' Gustav Mahler, after the premiere of his First Symphony.

Mahler was proud of his First Symphony, even though he felt his first listeners were insensitive to its qualities. It is a remarkable first outing, full of the risk-taking that would define his career. The opening depicts the stillness of pre-dawn as the sun slowly rises over an Alpine scene and the birds begin their call.

Can students spot the following features in the score that add to the magic of this scene?

- The divided strings spanning over seven octaves.
- The use of harmonics and muted wind.
- Off-stage brass to create different planes of sound and perspective.
- The falling fourth, an interval associated with nature.
- The transparency of the scoring as the different birdsong and hunting calls accumulate.
- The apparent freedom in timing of the above, for more naturalism.

Then in the cellos comes a quote from the first song that he would use as seed material for the Symphony, taken from the *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* folk collection. The song is 'I walked this morning over the field' (see playlist), a jaunty tune that you can imagine being whistled while strolling. It sets a deliberately naive and innocent tone that matches the purity of the scene so far. The first two movements maintain this insouciance and sense of well-being, a paean to nature and the simple pleasures of life, with themes that either dance or sing. You can imagine the first audience being charmed by the jolliness of it all.

And then comes the third movement (also on the playlist), an utterly bizarre departure from anything they had heard before.

Inspired by a woodcut showing animals bearing a hunter to his woodland funeral, this movement is full of surprises. The funeral march is introduced by a steady two-note tread on the timpani, then a double bass solo plays a version of 'Frère Jacques'. It is deliberately mawkish and banal, both in terms of tone (the mournful solo bass) and content (the nursery rhyme). It was at this point that booing started to echo around the hall in the work's premiere, and some even walked out in protest. Further provocations are just around the corner, though, as the woodwind and percussion imitate a klezmer band, perhaps representing the cheerful animals as they gloat over the death of the hunter. The whole movement hovers between sentimentality and a dark, corrosive humour.

This movement is a good demonstration of the irony for which Mahler is famed. The placing of light music within the context of a 'serious' symphonic movement causes us to question its symbolism and look for layers of meaning. Is Mahler just being playful, or is he expressing something more profound? Some see the mixture of a Christian song and Jewish elements as symbolising the composer's conflict between Catholicism and his native religion, for example.

The sense of irony is compounded by the extreme contrast and drama of the final movement. The conductor Leonard Bernstein speaks of the 'marches like heart attacks' in Mahler's Sixth Symphony. The finale of his First opens with a mighty paroxysm, too, with a shrill scream and cascade of notes that perhaps echoes the 'horror fanfare' ('Schreckensfanfare') that opens the finale of Beethoven's Ninth. Here are some of the markings for the orchestra:

- 'Moving like a storm'
- 'Rip sharply away'
- 'With extreme wildness'

The storms, however, are overcome. For any student willing to sit through the finale, they will be rewarded with joyful brass choruses that echo Handel's 'And he shall reign for ever and ever' from *Messiah*. For all the quixotic wanderings of before, Mahler shows he can deliver a rousing finale. It was not enough, however, to appease either its first audience, nor the orchestra. Mahler confessed to his friend afterwards: 'Nobody dared talk to me about the performance, and I went around like a sick person or outcast.'

PROGRAMME SYMPHONY?

This Symphony started as a five-movement tone poem based loosely on Jean Paul's novel *Titan*. Mahler then sought to remove the explicit programme from the performance and withdrew one of the more syrupy movements inspired by flowers. And yet, the sense remains of a work that is inspired and controlled by an external narrative, whatever you choose that to be.

JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)

Born just five years after Mahler, Sibelius also struck a very individual, uncompromising path. His aesthetic was often the polar opposite to Mahler, however. Where Mahler emoted and got hysterical, the Finn maintained an apparent objectivity; where Mahler allowed the narrative to run over an hour, Sibelius favoured concision. His Seventh Symphony, through-composed as one movement, is the same length as the first movement alone of Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony.

As described earlier, Mahler sought to 'embrace the world' with his symphonies, whereas Sibelius was content for them to proceed according to a 'profound logic' that allowed for an 'inner connection' between the material. This credo is an important key to understanding his approach and style. Rather like Bruckner, he would let the material expand organically on a motif, although where with Bruckner this would be a generous melodic idea, with Sibelius it could be three notes, an interval, or a short rhythm.

The one thing Sibelius did share with Mahler is a deep love of nature. Both composers saw the beauty of nature as a reflection of the divine and as a place of both awe and, at times, terror. All of Sibelius's seven symphonies seem to reflect some element of the natural world. And, just as Mahler drew on German folklore and poetry, so Sibelius continually referred to the Finnish equivalent, the *Kalevala* and associated Karelian runic songs.

His First Symphony, written when he was 34, has signs of his later individuality, although the finale recalls Tchaikovsky. Sibelius was keen to put a distance between him and the Russian, however, saying: 'I cannot understand why my symphonies are so often compared with Tchaikovsky's. His symphonies are very human but they represent the soft part of human nature. Mine are the hard ones.'

As his symphonic output increased, so certain characteristic colours and devices began to establish themselves:

- A 'cross-hatched' shading in the strings, either through tremolo bowing or through 'circulatio', circular semi-quaver movement.
- Long ostinatos over pedal notes.
- Triple meter used to give a lilt and breadth to the more romantic themes.
- The imitation and, sometimes, quotation of Karelian folk songs.
- Long brass crescendos, with the brass used like a choir.
- Mournful and lugubrious solos on the bassoon and clarinet.
- 'Flams' on the timpani, and extended rolls, often menacing.
- Overlaying of textures, tempos and ideas, as if 'cross-fading' from one state to another.
- Organic development of the material and overall design.

Case study: Sibelius's Fifth Symphony (1915, revised 1919)

Axel Carpelan died in 1919, and the revised Fifth Symphony acted as a requiem to him.

The First World War meant that Sibelius had to resort to writing piano miniatures, since all the income from his German publishers had dried up. He wrote to his friend, Axel Carpelan, that he was 'deep in the mire' as he set about his Fifth Symphony. The heroic struggle that the Symphony depicts borrows from this predicament, as

the composer 'struggled with God' to pull together a 'mosaic' of ideas that he felt he had been given in a vision. This sense of struggle must have taken on an extra urgency when the composer realised he had a tumour in his throat. Luckily it turned out to be benign.

The opening (see playlist) is a great example of the organic development of ideas. The timpani hold pedal notes in a gentle roll as the horns call upwards. Their ascending 4th is stretched to an ascending 5th by the woodwind. The horn call is repeated in the oboe and clarinet, this time with a curling figure at the end, the S motif that was to become a signature shape for the composer. If you flip an S by 90 degrees, you can follow its shape in the semiquaver figure as it dips and the rises, curling back on itself.

The ascending figure will be riposted by a falling one, almost an inversion. After a surge in the strings, the main material of the movement has now been presented. The rest will be one continual development.

One of the major revisions in the version from 1919 was to join the first two movements together seamlessly. This second movement, initially a light dance, has one of the most thrilling endings in the repertoire as the whole orchestra rockets upwards, born aloft by its own momentum.

After a restrained second movement that is beautifully transparent, the finale launches with a blur of tremolo in the strings. The moment everybody has been waiting for is the so-called 'Swan motif' sounded by the horns (and subtly foreshadowed in the lower strings). Three-note phrases rise and fall and combine into a majestic depiction of 16 swans in flight. It is deservedly an iconic moment in Sibelius's output and definitely a great place to start for students, whatever their age.

> The swan was to be symbolic for Sibelius, depicting grace, strength and purity. The vision for the finale's theme came to him as he saw that flock of swans on a walk next to a lake. He had a painting of swans above his desk in Järvenpää, and he chose his early tone poem *The Swan of Tuonela* to be played at his funeral.

A FRENCH INTERLUDE: CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Sibelius's fondness for subtle shading and exploring new tonal colour may have been influenced by hearing the work of his French contemporary, Claude Debussy. Debussy was a musical sensualist who sought to represent a poetic combination of colour, touch and scent in his sound. He was a rebel throughout his career, and the traditional confines of the symphonic form were not for him. However, he did write three 'symphonic sketches' that combined to form *La mer* ('The Sea',1905).

This is the closest the Frenchman allowed himself to the symphonic form, in terms of the coherence of the material, the development of themes and general rationale. It makes for a good comparison to the more traditional approach of Mahler and Sibelius, contrasting their explorations against the burgeoning modernism of the time.

Case study: Debussy's *La mer*

As Debussy sarcastically noted, 'the Atlantic doesn't exactly wash the foothills of Burgundy', where he started composing his vision of the sea. Instead, he drew on his 'endless memories, which are worth more than reality' – and on his fears. He was the son of the sailor and admitted to being terrified by the water. The sea of *La mer* is a mythical one, inspired by oriental and Greek legend. In keeping with Debussy's symbolist approach, it is the spirit and might of the ocean that is being depicted, inspired by the pictures of Turner and the woodcuts of Hokusai.

The constant fluidity of the music makes an excellent partner to the rhythms and capriciousness of the waves. The second movement captures the dance of the sun on the water's surface and is called 'Jeux de vagues'

('Play of the waves', see playlist). Your students could spot the following elements of Debussy's style in this movement:

- The pointillistic scoring: gestures and colours that interlock to give the whole impression.
- Oriental colours on the harps, celesta (or glockenspiel) and cymbals.
- Complex, supple rhythms within a constant meter.
- Whole-tone scale used for exotic colour and brightness.
- Muted brass.
- A Spanish 'bolero-like' rhythm in the flutes to sustain momentum.
- Chamber combinations and delicate solos.
- Dynamic contrast and subtle grading of shade and light.
- A lightness and balletic quality sustained throughout the movement.

It's amazing to think that at the premiere of this brilliantly scored, vital music, some critics claimed to neither 'hear nor smell the sea', and others even said it was 'as lifeless as dried plants'. As is so often the case, though, subsequent performances with more confident and competent orchestras quickly established it as the masterpiece that it is.

Debussy had given his own take on the symphonic form, melding it with the expressive potential of a tone poem. The music seems to evolve according to its own principles and logic, depicting its subject matter with neutrality and reflecting on its own processes. There is, in that sense, a level of detachment and objectivity that brings Debussy's approach closer to that of Stravinsky rather than Mahler, and for that reason it makes for good comparison. Where Debussy observes and patiently assembles an impression of the scene, Mahler's music can seem as if it has been ripped directly from an emotional diary.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-75)

Shostakovich continued the legacy of Mahler with his 15 symphonies, treading a delicate balance between personal statement and 'embracing the world' with universal themes and collages of different styles and cultural references.

His world would be defined by Soviet politics and the brutal control of artistic expression in all media, culminating in persecution and often execution of those poets, playwrights and composers who did not toe the party line. It was a harsh soil for any musician to thrive in, and it meant that Shostakovich was precariously balanced between artistic integrity and state subservience throughout his life. At times, that line becomes so blurred that it is unclear what is parody and what is propaganda.

Shostakovich once tellingly said: 'There is no music without ideology.'

Although it is often the Fifth and Tenth symphonies that get the most attention on the concert platform, it is worth starting a class exploration of Shostakovich with his First Symphony (1925), as it was written when he was just 18 and about to take his first steps after studying at the Leningrad Conservatoire (as it was then called). Most young composers at this stage would probably over-reach with a grandiose symphonic statement to make their mark. Shostakovich, however, starts with a series of comical, terse questions on muted trumpet and woodwind (see playlist).

There is a seditious, circus-like quality to this first movement. It points to the rebellion to come, as Shostakovich pursued radical Bolshevik artistic principles. Soon, after four symphonies and a racy opera, he inevitably collided with the machines of state. Stalin branded him anti-patriotic and by 1935 his career was on the brink of ruin. He feared for his life.

Case study: Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony

The Fifth Symphony was Shostakovich's come-back to Stalin's rebuke and the threat of state censorship. On the face of it, it was a serious attempt at conciliation, filled with patriotic stoicism and topped off with a jubilant finale, a 'Soviet artist's practical creative reply to just criticism', as the official line went. Everything within this Symphony, however, seems to speak of a climate of fear. The smiles, scant as they are, are taut and the dances are stiff. The jubilation of the finale speaks more of forced rejoicing, with the note A being hammered out 252

times in the final paragraph. The first audience instinctively knew what was being expressed and famously gave the work a 40-minute ovation.

This Symphony relies on ambiguity, however, and it seemed that there was enough of that to allow Shostakovich to be reinstated as a state composer. His next symphonies would continue that ambiguity, even though they were more openly patriotic in tone and content. It wasn't until Stalin's death and the Tenth symphony appeared that the gloves came off completely.

Listening to the first movement, what in the music symbolises oppression?

- The strict canon in the strings, with violins obediently following the lead of the lower strings.
- The tension of the double-dotted, jagged rhythm.
- The multiple arrow-head accents.
- The languishing, falling theme in the violins.
- The repeated long short-short rhythm, which would become a motif for the suffering of the people.
- The slow building of tension and systematic quickening of the pace.

The first movement reveals how Shostakovich could work his pithy ideas and taut rhythms into a tightly disciplined structure. Despite the proliferation of these ideas as the movement gathers momentum, he maintains a trademark clarity with their organisation. The focus is tack-sharp throughout, with sparse orchestration.

How the second movement passed by the Soviet censors is a mystery. It opens with a heavy-footed waltz and shrill trills in the wind. Everything about the writing is aggressive and deliberately ugly. It's as if Shostakovich is taking Mahler's lampooning of the Austrian *Ländler* and transposing it into his world. The trio does not give any respite, with a violin solo that has the air of someone being asked to dutifully perform their party piece. It manages to be both playful and unsettling, which aptly describes the tension of the whole scherzo.

Russians have always been able to write strong elegies and laments. There is a clear legacy from Tchaikovsky through his pupil, Arensky, through to his pupil Rachmaninov. They are all able to stretch a weeping melody over a long paragraph, in a spectacular show of 'Toska' (a Russian brand of melancholia, see earlier). Shostakovich picks up on this legacy and makes it his own, by adding more tension and austerity. The third movement of the Fifth Symphony is a celebrated example, taking simple ideas and gradually contorting them, adding dissonance and bringing them – and the listener – to breaking point. Again, it may be that Mahler's adagios acted as a template, even though the political context of Shostakovich's slow movements lifts them into a completely different sphere.

The eeriest moment in the entire Symphony, however, comes after the climb-down right at the end of this movement, when all that's left is a ghost of the main theme on harp harmonics and celeste, like a Hiroshima shadow after the blast.

The finale is the most contentious of the movements, and you can ask students which interpretation they would go with and why: is it genuine jubilation, or forced rejoicing? Vasily Petrenko, a celebrated Shostakovich conductor, insists it is the duty of the interpreter to maintain the ambiguity, as that is where the power of the movement lies. A lot of this is down to hitting the right tempo and the level of accenting in the strings' repeated As.

THE SYMPHONY AFTER SHOSTAKOVICH

Shostakovich carried on writing symphonies until three years before he died. By that time, in the 1970s, the symphony looked as if it had reached its natural conclusion as an art form. Composers perhaps felt that the word 'symphony' connoted being trapped to the past in some way. And yet the genre persisted, with many notable 20th- and 21st-century composers making important contributions to the form. They include:

- Ives
- Szymanowski
- Górecki
- Panufnik
- Messiaen

- Copland
- Vaughan Williams
- Bernstein
- Tippett
- (Havergal) Brian
- Glass
- Maxwell Davies
- James MacMillan

From the 1800s on, the symphony has represented a significant orchestral statement, whether composed at the behest of a rich patron or as a deeply individual expression. It may no longer have the epoch-defining power it did in Beethoven's time, but the legacy of so many powerful works, from CPE Bach to Shostakovich and beyond, still holds its sway in the orchestral writing of today. Symphonic thinking continues to shape major orchestral works, if only in spirit rather than name.