The Aesthetics of Alterity in Gustav Mahler's Symphonic Output

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ABSTRACT

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A thesis presented to the Graduate Program in Musicology

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From his early compositional endeavors to the present day, Gustav Mahler has long been studied from various perspectives: musicology, psychology, and even from medical perspectives, to name a few. The intricacies of his idiosyncratic musical style and othered identity can be attributed to his experiences as a marginalized individual. His aesthetics of form, orchestration, scope, and scale were especially unusual and not always well received by conservative audiences; Mahler’s symphonic approach was, at times, as foreign to the audience as he was. His alterity is a significant factor when considering what makes his symphonies so unique. This paper will establish a novel way of examining Mahler’s prolific symphonic output. This will consist considering Mahler’s alterity in the context of his critical reception, but also as a crucial compositional tool Mahler consciously applied to his inimitable musical style.
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Introduction

From his birth into an ethnically Jewish Czech family living in Bohemia, to his immigration to a German-speaking Austria, Gustav Mahler was, from the very beginning, a man on the margin of mainstream society. Acutely aware of his alterity, a perpetual feeling of “otherness”, is something Mahler would have to come to terms with many times over throughout the course of his life. Identifying as a man “three times homeless”, anywhere he went there was a constant rift between himself, the marginalized Other, and the established society, language, and cultural norms in which he found himself surrounded. Mahler’s symphonic soundscape was as foreign to the audience as was the man who composed them. His idiosyncratic approaches to form, orchestration, scale, and harmonies became increasingly modern in style and were not always well received by conservative audiences. Incorporating the sounds of his youth and his lived experienced as an othered individual, Mahler’s alterity is an element that can be discerned in both the sound and composition of his symphonic works.

Theories of alterity and otherness, most often applied to philosophical, anthropological, and humanistic studies, can successfully be used as an analytical tool for the examination of composers and their compositions. This approach is an especially helpful way to examine Gustav Mahler and his particular symphonic style. Due to his religious and ethnic background, Mahler can certainly be considered an “othered” individual. His Jewish heritage and modern tendencies both served as a source of the harsh criticism and biases he received from his contemporaries, even following his conversion to Christianity early in his career. Through a careful
analysis of Mahler’s social background and stylistic symphonic techniques, this paper aims to illustrate the myriad ways in which Mahler’s cognizance of his alterity and his place within it informed his critical reception and recognizable symphonic style.
Mahler in Fin-de Siècle Europe

Though originally hailing from Bohemia, Mahler identified strongly with the German tradition, and especially, with Vienna. His first engagement with the city as a student in the Vienna Conservatory would forever influence the trajectory of his personal and compositional development. His initial visit, as well as subsequent tenures in the city as an adult\(^1\), would forever underscore his cultural leanings, artistic visions, and philosophical ideals. Mahler’s perception of Viennese concertgoers, critics, and the city’s citizenry, greatly impacted his idiosyncratic symphonic sound and inimitable musical style. His characteristic use of compositional tools such allusion, irony, juxtaposition, and parody, were often used to construct a reification of his internal dialectic surrounding the city’s culture, society, and political ideologies. However, in spite of his connection with and love for the city, Mahler never felt as though he had found a true home in Vienna. In his oft cited yet still poignant own words:

“I am thrice homeless. As a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world. Everywhere an intruder, never welcomed.”\(^2\)

Mahler’s alterity and perpetual feeling of homelessness is a recurring theme that is frequently incorporated much of his compositions. One perceives a sense of wandering, restlessness, and journeying present in the manipulation of his

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\(^1\) In 1875, at fifteen years old, Mahler was accepted into the Vienna Conservatory as a piano student. Although he was a gifted pianist, Mahler instead pursued studies in composition. Mahler would not fully return to Vienna until 1897, when, following his conversion to Christianity, he was appointed as the head conductor of the Vienna Court Opera. At this time, Mahler was a celebrated conductor, but had not yet been acknowledged as a serious composer.

\(^2\) Alma Mahler, *Memories* pg. 109
harmonic and thematic materials. Of his own music, Mahler describes the itinerant qualities therein. In the program notes of his second symphony he writes:

“...this always-stirring, never-resting, never-comprehensible pushing that is life becomes horrible to you.”

Having no real homeland, Mahler instead relied on his music to construct a home in which he could return and feel safe. Repeated ontological narratives of being and becoming are often woven into his musical fabric. Much of his music alludes to or directly references central tenets of German metaphysical thought. Mahler’s music certainly makes for a great example of Heidegger’s assertion that “Man dwells in that which he creates,”3 In combination with the sounds of his Bohemian childhood, the din of city life in Vienna, and the learned philosophical foundations he discovered in Germany, Mahler was able to craft a soundscape that embodied his lived experience and embraced his alterity.

Upon his graduation from the Conservatory, Mahler traveled through various parts of Germany and Austria, where he quickly became recognized as a talented conductor.4 Though it was his dream to return to and gain success in Vienna, this nomadic period of his life would have lasting implications on his compositional style and philosophical outlook on life, music, and the arts. In addition to his allegiance with Vienna, Mahler was nearly equally drawn to the cultural and philosophical ideals of German intellectual thought: “Germany represented a cultural heritage

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3 Heidegger, Letter on Humanism (1945). Note, this essay was written after Mahler’s death, but is nonetheless applicable.
4 Following his graduation from the Conservatory, Mahler was had small conducting appointments in Linz, Kassel, Budapest, and Hamburg. Frequently described as an extremely fastidious and detailed oriented conductor, Mahler often experienced creative differences with the head conductor and was faced with opposition from the orchestra members. Consequently, he did not stay in these positions for long.
with which Mahler clearly identified – on a personal level and as an artist and intellectual (Solvik, 126). His membership, for example, in the Pernerstorfer Circle\(^5\), introduced him to classic German literature and philosophy that he would then apply to his own life and incorporate into his compositions; texts from classic German poetry, literature, and song were often directly quoted, paraphrased, or alluded to in both his vocal and instrumental works.

After leaving Germany, the Vienna that Mahler returned to in 1897 was at a critical turning point in history. Indeed, this era of Viennese cultural and economic shifts was aptly deemed "fin-de-siècle" Vienna; the city was swiftly changing. Seemingly overnight, Vienna became an essential commercial and cultural hub of the Habsburg Empire. Consequently, the city's economic success attracted large numbers of immigrants seeking better opportunities and living conditions for their families. It was during this time that Vienna experienced dramatic demographic shifts and rapid population increases. The decreasing numbers of native-born Viennese citizens served as a source of social tension, leading to cultural hostility and political clashes. As a result of the steadily increasing urban development coupled with the great influx of migrants, the native Viennese citizenry began romanticizing the past, longing for the “good old days” of early 19\(^{th}\) century Vienna. In reality, in the first few decades of the 19\(^{th}\) century, Vienna was rife with political,

\(^5\) The Pernerstorfer Circle, just one example of the reading, discussion, and art salons that were popular in 19\(^{th}\) century Europe, was comprised of several influential journalists, authors, politicians, and composers who had an interest in studying the relationships between philosophy, politics, society, and the arts. In addition to Mahler, some notable members included Engelbert Pernerstorfer, Victor Adler, and fellow composer Hugo Wolf. Members were especially influenced by the philosophies of Friederich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Richard Wagner. It is interesting to note that despite Wagner’s reputation for his unabashed anti-Semitic tendencies, Mahler was nonetheless drawn to Wagner’s philosophy.
economic, and social challenges. Napoleonic wars, the 1848 revolution, poor hygienic systems, and widespread revolutions greatly impacted Viennese citizen’s quality of life. Nevertheless, many Viennese citizens became enamored with the idea of reestablishing a bygone era.

Such nostalgia for the past became manifest in the resurgence of Biedermeier aesthetics. The Viennese Biedermeier period, in fashion from around 1815 to 1850, emerged as a result of recurring economic crises that caused a rapid expansion of the middle class. As the middle class grew, Viennese cultural aesthetics quickly adjusted to the wholesome values and simple tastes of the common people. Beidermeier, once used a jocular reference to a fictional schoolteacher and poet, now became a rallying cry for Viennese citizens of all classes dedicated to the Alt-Wein movement.

In music, architecture, and the arts, Viennese audiences searched for elements of what they deemed to be “authentic” representations of the city and its rich cultural history. Music evocative of a romanticized past and with a Biedermeier aesthetic greatly appealed to contemporary audiences. Consequently, composers such as Johannes Brahms and Johann Strauss were incredibly successful during this time. For example, Strauss’ waltz “On the Beautiful Blue Danube”, received with a somewhat lukewarm reception at its 1867 premiere, skyrocketed in popularity towards the end of the century.

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6 Oxford dictionary, “Denoting or relating to a style of furniture and interior decoration in Germany in the period 1815-1848, characterized by restraint, conventionality, and utilitarianism”
7 The term “Biedermeier” was derived from the literary figure “Gottlieb Biedermeier”, a character created in 1850 by author Ludwig Eichardt. The literary Biedermeier was described as a simple man who lived a comfortable, untroubled, bourgeois life.
In a predominantly Catholic Vienna, foreigners, especially Jewish immigrants, attempted to buy into this ideal of authenticity in an effort to bridge the gap between themselves and the “real” Viennese. Affluent and Germanophilic Bohemian Jews, like Mahler, increasingly converted to Catholicism in an effort to improve their social status and secure better, well-paying jobs. They would soon learn, however, that conversion did not necessarily result in a reduction in anti-Semitic sentiments, and many Jews were still seen as “other”. Converted and unconverted Jews alike found it difficult to escape their alterity in both social and professional spheres.

Despite the influx of immigrants, privileged, native Viennese residents still controlled much of the economic, social, and political power. It would be these individuals who mainly filled the concert seats. Dance halls, however, became an integral part of sustaining musical life in the city, even more so than concert attendance. Less costly than attending a performance at a public concert, dance halls allowed citizens of mixed classes to have access to popular contemporary music. Popular genres included “pseudo-folk” chamber music, operetta, and Catholic secular music, to name a few. Mahler had a great disdain for these genres and often mocked or parodied them in his music; characteristics of his music that audiences and critics did not care for.

At the time, only the wealthy were able to attend public concerts. Audience membership fees and concert tickets were extremely costly, and thus, the patrons of concert halls were an exclusive and limited audience of elites. As a result, those who could not afford live concerts formed their musical opinions based mainly on the music criticism section of newspapers. Opinions were formed on the basis of what
was *written* about a composition, rather than on actual concert attendance. Individuals aligned themselves for or against this or that composer having never attended a single concert. A composer’s work was judged from both within and without the concert hall. For Mahler, his intersectional identity and mockery of popular music each factored into his negative critical reception. Much of the public opposition stemmed largely from provincial, anti-Semitic, and conservative right-wing individuals who had significant influence on publications through their newspaper articles.

Mahler’s affinity for modernism also played a large role in his critical and public reception. In addition to his fascination with literature and philosophy in his youth, in the early years of his *Wunderhorn* period, from around 1880 to 1900, Mahler became increasingly interested in fin-de-siècle Viennese modern art. Unlike other composers, Mahler shied away from setting the texts of contemporary authors, most of whose works had been colored by the city’s intensified social and culture politics, as well as debates over ethics and political ideology. Instead, Mahler continued to explore early 19th century German literature and in Vienna, aligned himself with the Viennese Secessionist movement. Founded in 1897 by Gustav Klimt, members of the Association of Visual Artists in Vienna Secession, sought to distance themselves from the dominant conservative style. Rather than the conservative emphasis on historicism, Secessionists were chiefly concerned with exploring artistic possibilities outside the realm of the academy in ways that were not determined by historical precedent. Mahler’s Secessionist affiliations left him
open to a host of negative criticism from those in the *Jugendstil* school⁸, as well as from those conservatives who were entirely opposed to modern aesthetics as a whole. His music was judged harshly, criticized for being too ornamental, maudlin, and greatly lacking internal logic and self-reflection. His critics could not have misunderstood his music any more sincerely. It is necessary to evaluate the alterity strategies at work in those critics to identify how their biases influenced the manifold ways in which they processed his music.

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⁸ The *Jugendstil* School was a faction of the Art Nouveau movement that came out of Germany. *Jugendstil* artists placed an emphasis on psychological drama, modern ornamentation, and dynamic, flowing lines.
“Who Claims Alterity?”

Theories of alterity and constructions of the other are most often used in philosophical, anthropological, and ethnographic approaches to the study of identity within society, politics, and social groups. Music, however, is also a means by which individuals construct and assert their identities and unique perspectives within social groups. Musical practices, genres, and the individuals who construct them, then too can benefit from the use of alterity as a lens through which composers and their compositions can be analyzed. Alterity is defined as “the concept and treatment of the alien objectified other”\(^9\). Alterity, however, is more than an abstract concept, consisting of active, ongoing processes based on dominant ideologies that individuals and groups use to process what they perceive to be irreconcilable differences between and “us” and a “them”. Alterity then, is not a biological certainty, but a socially constructed phenomenon. It is a set of processes and strategies that are dependent on the binary logic that has historically governed much of Western thought.

According to postcolonial scholar Gayarti Spivak, there exist four main modes of being that contribute to constructions of alterity within a social or political framework:\(^10\) (1) Nationalism (2) Internationalism (3) Secularism and (4) Culturalism. In turn, Spivak also identifies four modes of identity that describe how individuals relate to one another and the world around them: (1) Gender (2) Race (3) Ethnicity (4) Class. It is the intermingling of these 8 elements that dictate alterity’s genesis and the subaltern individual’s response to its conception. Each one

\(^9\) Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts*

of these elements is dependent upon Western binary thinking. Such processes could not arise without there having been established a clear distinction between what is acceptable and what is not. The French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, was highly critical of the logic of binary oppositions. Within such a framework, one term or idea is always assigned a more privileged position than that of its opposite, a characteristic trait of any ideology. In fin-de-siècle Europe, especially in Vienna, these modes of being and interactions were particularly relevant. The influx of immigrants, rapid expansion of the middle class, and increasing numbers of Jews in a Catholic-dominated city greatly impacted the myriad ways in which dominant groups and individual actors in the city related to one another.

Gustav Mahler would certainly have been able to perceive these elements and their effect on his personal and professional life. His status as “other”, especially in the beginning of his compositional career, had a marked effect on his music’s critical reception. Within the xenophobic ideology of a predominantly Catholic Vienna, “real”, native born Viennese citizens occupied the privileged position, as did their music. “Foreigners” and their music were much less readily accepted. But why did such arbitrary hierarchical relations exist in the first place? One might consider the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic that essentially posits that the self is not a concrete substance, but rather, a relation. In this case, the Master cannot recognize his mastery without the presence of the slave. Without the slave, he is nothing. It is the very existence of the slave that dictates his own identity. Similarly, the slave exists only in the context of the master. It is their relationship to one another that

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12 Georg Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit (1807)
determines their identity. In this instance, the native Viennese citizenry occupies the position of the “Master”, and the immigrants, modernists, and radicals were the “slave”. In a rapidly changing Vienna, the presence of foreign peoples, ideas, and music were perceived as threats to an established Viennese cultural heritage.

In a real world application of Hegel's idea, it is the slave who is keenly aware of this binary relationship and its social realities. As a subaltern individual, the “slave” must devise ways to function and thrive in an environment that has been designed to keep him in a subordinate position. In his 1903 collection of essays, “The Souls of Black Folks,” W.E.B. Dubois describes and gives name to this mode of being:

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity... one ever feels his two-ness... two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings... [One has] the longing... to merge his double self into a better truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost,”13

Mahler, himself, was aware of this tension in his life. In a letter to Bruno Walter, he writes:

“...[It] is the deepest cause of the life of conflict an artist leads. He is condemned to lead a double life, and woe betide him if it happens that life and dream flow into one – so that he has appallingly to suffer in the one world for the laws of the other,”14

Mahler felt an acute distinction between the man he was in his private life, and the man who he was allowed to be in the public sphere. He simultaneously endeavored to fulfill his artistic dreams while attempting to fit into and be accepted by a social and cultural heritage to which he did not and could not belong.

13 W.E.B. Dubois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903)
14 Mahler, Selected Letters, 346
Consequently, is all too easy to consider alterity and otherness as inherently injurious, however, it is important to remain cognizant of any preconceived biases that lend themselves to perceive the concept of alterity as having steadfast negative connotations. This is not to say that any isolation and suffering undergone by the othered individual should be understated. However, the Other’s position in society, while may not be coveted, pleasant, or ideal, is indeed essential. He offers his unique perspectives and contributes to a group in a way that “insiders” cannot. Georg Simmel refers to this othered individual as “The Stranger”\textsuperscript{15}. Simmel likens the Stranger to a trader:

“The stranger makes his appearance everywhere as a trader, and the trader makes his as a stranger... A trader is required only for goods produced outside the group... the trader must be a stranger; there is no opportunity for anyone else to make a living at it”

In Mahler’s case, he acted as a kind of merchant of a \textit{cultural} good: music. Despite any criticism he received, his alterity was also his strength. His alterity led to an objectivity that did not exist for the “insiders”, or dominant group. As a Stranger Mahler was an outsider within. Here, too, Simmel describes the objectivity of the Stranger:

“...he is not bound by roots to the particular constituents and partisan dispositions of the group, he confronts all of these with a distinctly “objective attitude. Objectivity can also be defined as freedom [my emphasis]. The objective man is not bound by ties... and his actions are not confined by custom, piety, or precedent”

Mahler’s unusual symphonic approach is most definitively emblematic of the kind of objectivity Simmel describes. Deviations from established formal structures,

\textsuperscript{15} Georg Simmel, \textit{The Stranger}
surprising text settings, and interpolations of Bohemian and Jewish street music, too
name a few, were the result of his “outsider” upbringing. It is extremely unlikely that
a Viennese “insider” would construct a symphony in this way. Mahler’s engagement
with the symphony and dialogue with the tradition is markedly different.

In the same way that Simmel outlines the role of the other in the community,
Mark Guillaume describes the interactions of the Stranger with his community. As an
outsider, his dialogue with the insiders is novel.

“It is a form of communicability that causes us to break with the nostalgia of
community, with the traditional dialectic of the individual and the community. I
call this new mode of being and exchanging spectral”
-Mark Guillaume, Radical Alterity

The spectrality of Mahler’s music is manifold. It is his “othered” lived experiences
that dictate, in part, his interactions with a dominant audience. Consider, for
example, Mahler’s use of Jewish Klezmer music in his symphonies. In this way, he
uses his subaltern voice to engage directly with the audience in a way that a native
born Viennese composer would and could not. Mahler challenges normative
expectations of what a symphony should be. For Mahler, “a symphony is like the
world: it must embrace everything”. No sound, regardless of its triviality, lack of
sophistication, or ethnic origins, was off limits for use in the symphony. Indeed, such
“banal” elements are frequently brought to the fore in many of his compositions.
Methods

As previously mentioned, alterity does not simply arise from a single fixed event or particular bias. Rather, alterity, or the state of being othered, is a continual process. Alterity arises when a dominant group, in an attempt to process the other, contextualizes him within the framework of his learned ideology. In order to fully understand the extent to which Mahler’s alterity played a role in both the reception and composition of his symphonies, it is necessary to identify the processes at work within both the critics and the composer.

In his 2014 article, “Music and Alterity Processes”, ethnomusicologist Josep Martí describes six strategies that a dominant group uses in order to make sense of the other and to process the “foreign” music the other creates:

1) **Synecdocization**: A metonymic process that plays a central role in the, often false, understanding of the other. This occurs when a particular feature(s) is essentialized, ascribing negative attributes of a few to an entire group.

2) **Exoticization**: The tendency to see a particular group through those cultural features or traditions that greatly differ from that of the observer. In this construction, aspects common to both groups are not taken into account or are minimized.

3) **Undervaluation**: A strategy that arises when, according to one's cognitive framework, the other's music has features that are determined to have a lower value than those of the dominant group. Sometimes undervaluation is what even makes one distinguish between what is considered “true” music and what isn’t.

4) **Overvaluation**: While overvaluation occurs much less frequently than its opposite, overvaluation does occasionally appear. In this case, the strategy is less judgmental than it is condescending. The romanticization of the “noble” efforts of the subaltern other and the novelty of new sounds and ideas while lacking genuine interest and understanding is as relevant in distancing the other as is undervaluation.

5) **Misunderstanding**: This constitutes an important element in the alterity processes when a group misunderstands what the other’s musical approaches really are, mean, or represent within a framework other than their own; this is a practice that often leads to unwarranted denigratory reception.
6) **Exclusion**: Through this final alterity strategy, the other is excluded from that which is considered to belong to “us”. It is based on the perception of the other in a homogenizing manner determined by the limited set of features that are defined or characterized by the aforementioned alterity strategies.\(^{16}\)

For Mahler, these strategies colored perceptions and criticisms of his music in ways that did not exist for those composers who were insiders within the dominant group. Mahler’s symphonic idiosyncrasies challenged the canonized forms, techniques, orchestration, and sounds that contemporary audiences were conditioned to expect. The juxtaposition between Mahler’s style and that of other popular and conventional composers such as Johann Strauss or Johannes Brahms is particularly striking when considering the fin-de-siècle *Alt-Wein* movement, both of whom were strongly associated with the Viennese cultural tradition.

Eduard Hanslick, one of the most influential music critics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was especially fond of Brahms’ work. He believed that great music history began with Mozart and culminated in the music of Beethoven, Schumann, and Brahms; he was particularly critical of Mahler’s work. A musically conservative man, Hanslick was loath to classify Mahler’s songs as lieder and was highly offended by Mahler’s jarring symphonic sound, saying of his First Symphony that, “the new symphony is the kind of music which for me is not music,”\(^{17}\). Mahler’s departure from a classic Viennese style and sound coupled with his unabashed mockery of social and musical norms left the man and his music open to widespread criticism.

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\(^{16}\) Josep Marti, “Music and Alterity Processes” (2014)

\(^{17}\) Painter, “Mahler’s German-Language Critics,” (pp. 289)
In a similar fashion, the othered individual develops his own strategies simultaneously in response to his treatment and as a means of asserting his subaltern identity, incorporating his lived experience of his alterity into that which he creates. Mahler, for example, is known for the following:

1) Self-Quotation
2) Satire
3) Parody
4) Juxtaposition
5) Narrative Voice
6) Breakthrough, or meaningful disruptions
7) Displacements

Many of these elements are not only self-referential, but are also used as tools to comment on the contemporary social, political, and cultural climates that shaped his identity and the audiences' perceptions of his music. Similar musical tools, gestures, and techniques that Mahler used are, of course, featured in other composer's works; however, it is the manner and intentionality with which he uses these elements that sets him apart from others. When contextualized within the framework of his identity and positionality in fin-de-siècle Vienna and Germany, it becomes abundantly clear that these elements go beyond mere ornamentation. Mahler's alterity has been imparted into the music in a way that at once is perceived and internalized by the audience. The unfamiliar combination of sounds, disruptions, dissonant juxtapositions, etc., leave the audience feeling confused, surprised, and perhaps, othered in the presence of his music.

While these elements are present in many of his compositions, they are some of the most salient features of his symphonies. For example, when developing his
theory of “symphonism”\textsuperscript{18}, Boris Asaf’yev was inspired by, among others, Mahler’s approach to the symphony. Using the French philosopher Henri Bergson’s concept of the \textit{élan vital}, or life force, Asaf’yev applied this idea to compositional approaches to the symphony and theories of symphonism\textsuperscript{19}. For Asaf’yev, the \textit{élan vital} is a component of the compositional process that is imposed on the music by the composer and intuited by the listener. Asaf’yev, then, recognized this phenomenon as pervasive in Mahler’s symphonies.

Through a careful analysis of Mahler’s First, Third and Eighth symphonies, symphonies in which these strategies are most salient, this paper will identify and discuss the features in the music that are most emblematic of the ways in which he constructed his music alterity and how this approach was received by contemporary audiences. A thematic and harmonic examination of the First Symphony, with a special emphasis placed on the third movement, will discuss the foundations of Mahler’s symphonic approach and the relationship between symphony, song, and identity. A formal analysis of the Third Symphony will address alterity in Mahler’s “adolescent” stage, and a literary reading of the Eighth Symphony will serve to adumbrate the ways in which Mahler not only asserted his identity, but also to describe interactions between Mahler’s identity and social commentary.

\textsuperscript{18} Suggested reading: David Haas, “Boris Asaf’yev and Soviet Symphonic Theory” (1992)
\textsuperscript{19} Bergson coined the term in his 1907 book, \textit{Creative Evolution}. Bergson used the term to describe methods of self-organization and the question of consciousness and was strongly linked to the evolution of one’s personal experiences and their inner sense of time.
Symphony 1: A New Kind of Symphony

Composed in 1888 and premiered in 1889 in Budapest, Mahler’s First Symphony was quite ill received by contemporary audiences. Critics and audiences alike did not know what to make of his instrumentation, street music, and klezmer interpolations (e.g. Figure 1). Even Mahler Himself recognized it as the most “spontaneous and daringly composed of [his] works,”.

(Figure 1): A contemporary political cartoon mocking Mahler’s First Symphony

The composition, while including elements that would henceforth be characteristic of his symphonic style did, however, differ from his later works in many ways. Less politically charged than subsequent compositions, the First Symphony is very much
an introspective piece. In this symphony, Mahler laid the foundation for his
symphonic approach, incorporating his lived experience, personal tragedies, and
othered identity within the music. This symphony is a good example of the ways in
which Mahler uniquely approached the symphony from the medium of song,
particularly the song cycle. The importance of his early song cycle, Lieder eines
fahrenden Gesellen, cannot be understated. Indeed, in 1896 Mahler conducted the
symphony in Germany, programmed with the Lieder.

Self-quotation, juxtaposition, breakthrough, and musical representations of
his childhood, are some of the most salient aspects of this piece. Indeed, themes
from the Lieder are extensively paraphrased or directly quoted in all movements of
the symphony. Variations of the descending fourth birdcall motive are introduced in
the opening theme of the first song in the cycle, Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht,
are heard in varied forms throughout the entire symphony. The exposition of the
first movement in fact, directly quotes from themes from the second song in the
Lieder. It is as if these two themes from the song cycle have been directly taken from
the song and re-orchestrated for the symphony with little to no changes.

It is the third movement of his First Symphony, however, that is most
emblematic of Mahler’s symphonic style and lived experiences. The score is marked
‘Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen’20; it is a funeral dirge. The movement
was inspired, in part, by the artist Moritz von Schwind’s woodcarving titled, "Wie
die Tiere den Jager begraben" (e.g. Figure 2).

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20 Solemn and measured, without dragging
The carving depicts a funeral procession led by a group of forest animals mourning the death of a hunter. The procession is headed by a flag-bearing band of Bohemian musicians, an allusion to the Bohemian-style music that will appear later in the movement. The symphony's third movement opens in D minor with a slow parody of the well-known children’s nursery song, 'Bruder Martin’ (Frere Jacques) played by solo bass and accompanied by a somber, steady timpani outlining the minor triad (e.g. Figure 3).

As if the introduction wasn’t strange enough, what follows is perhaps even more unexpected. In an unmistakable allusion to his Bohemian and Jewish heritage, Mahler introduces gypsy-style Bohemian street music, with a klezmer band interruption: music that has no place in the respected symphonic tradition (e.g. Figure 4).
The intrusion of such “inappropriate” music is a means by which Mahler asserts, and indeed flaunts, his othered identity. This disruption of a traditional symphonic sound happens more than once in the movement. In measure 131, the gypsy motive is slowly introduced in the restatement of the ‘Bruder Martin’ theme. Several measures ahead, in bar 139, the Klezmer band announces itself in a much more robust way. Contrasting with the pianissimo of the ‘Bruder Martin’ theme, the Klezmer band enters in a strong, accented forte, marked ‘Ausserst rhythmische’ in the score. In this way, he challenges what is expected and what is appropriate.

In addition to the other movements, here Mahler also quotes extensively from the Lieder in the third movement. The birdcall motive is alluded to in varied forms throughout the movement. More significantly, however, is the presence of themes from the fourth song in the cycle. In a reintroduction of the timpani’s booming V-i motion in D minor, the piece suddenly moves to G major. The expected ‘Bruder Martin’ theme has become supplanted by a diatonic, almost pastoral, folk-like theme. This passage is nearly directly quoted from a passage from Die Zwei blauen Augen, the fourth song in the Lieder (e.g. Figure 6).

(Figure 5.1): Mahler, *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesselen*, “Die zwei blauen Augen” (mm. 40-44)

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21 Extremely rhythmic
The brief respite from the harsh reality of death, however, is short-lived. Modulating to E flat minor in measure 113, the dirge resumes and, save for the final Klezmer interruption, concludes firmly in D minor.
Altered and Adolescence in Mahler’s Third Symphony

Composed during the summers of 1895 and 1896, Mahler’s Third Symphony is both the logical successor of his first forays into the genre as well as a harbinger of musical ideas that would come to define his later symphonic style. These dates are not insignificant; the composition acts as a bridge between his *Wunderhorn* and middle periods and comes at a time directly before his conversion to Christianity. This symphony, then, can be understood as having been gestated during a kind of “adolescent” stage of Mahler’s compositional and professional development. Many things were occurring in both his private and public life: his political and philosophical inclinations were evolving and he was on the precipice of a life-changing job appointment, all the while continuing to manage fin-de-siècle Vienna’s anti-Semitic inclinations. It was also during this period that Mahler began to seriously contemplate the issue of absolute versus programmatic music. In his middle period, he shied away from programs, presumably to appease conservative critics. However, for his Third Symphony, Mahler was very much excited to share the Third’s program with his friends, even to a greater extent than that of its structural and harmonic organization. Mahler’s “adolescent” compositional stage and, by extension, his Third Symphony can be understood as an attempt to use programmaticism as a means of communicating his lived experiences and developing musical ideals by the means of a symphonic narrative voice.

Mahler’s compositional adolescence in fin-de-siècle Vienna was shaped from both within and without. With the first two of his symphonies having received unfavorable critical responses, he was now under pressure to premiere a symphony
that stayed true to his personal voice while at the same time appeasing
contemporary audiences. Jean Baudrillard describes the sort of adolescent tension
that exists between a subject’s longing for individual expression and the yearning
for public acceptance.

“Adolescence is the moment when the subject refuses to be treated as an Other by
others. [However] the adolescent wants to be treated as an Other in his or her
radical singularity... [The adolescent] goes through the process of mourning alterity,
resigning him or herself to being an Other among others.”

Mahler’s adolescent “radical alterity” took the form of his Third Symphony.

Experimental and daring in its form and content, Mahler himself recognized the
novelty of the work:

“My calling it a symphony is really inaccurate, for it doesn’t keep to the traditional
form in any way. But to me, ‘symphony’ means constructing a world with all the
technical means at one’s disposal. The eternally new and changing content
determines its own form.”

The combination of a “rebellion” against tradition and the inclusion of seemingly
banal elements such as military horn calls, fanfares, marches and street music
foreshadowed the idiosyncratic nature of his subsequent symphonies. In the Third,
interactions between thematic content and form reveal the “élan vital” of his
narrative voice.

The structural architecture of the Third Symphony has baffled
contemporaries and current Mahler scholars alike. A colossal work in length and
orchestration, the symphony’s form and program have been interpreted in a wide
variety of ways. The symphony is comprised of six movements divided into two
parts. Part I solely consists of the first movement, and Part II contains the other five.

22 Baudrillard, Radical Alterity (2008)
23 NBL, 35; Engl trans. 40.
It is the juxtaposition and disjointedness of elements within and between movements that scholars regard as especially egregious. Indeed, many view the entire piece as a failure arguing that “elements that should have been welded together fall apart and that disparate ideas have been paratactically juxtaposed,” (Fischer, 276). The First Movement, or Part I, is particularly perplexing. With a performance lasting anywhere from 35 to 40 minutes, the movement defies traditional formal constructions and harmonic logic. While many Mahlerians do agree that the movement is in some way an expanded sonata form, there has yet to be an accepted consensus regarding the organization and structural logic within the form. In a true “adolescent” fashion, Mahler rebelled entirely against traditional and accepted symphonic configurations.

Indeed, the strange manner of the movement’s alternating themes and harmonies is a significant point of contention amongst those who disagree about the piece’s form. Upon first listen, the broad formal divisions of the piece are fairly clear. There is a definite exposition, development, and recapitulation. The material of the development is straightforward enough, recalling themes from the exposition and turbulently passing through several key areas as expected. It is the exposition and recapitulation that strongly defy symphonic expectations.

The primary question: where does the exposition begin? A definitive answer does not quite exist. Analysts tend to agree that the expositional area consists of two
contrasting thematic areas: a funeral march juxtaposed with the pastoral music of Pan\textsuperscript{24}, and a procession of alternating marches, but disagree on how these themes relate to the overall form and function. The cyclical nature of the unfolding of thematic materials – the “eternally changing content” – makes it difficult to apply the traditional formal schema described by Hepokoski and Darcy\textsuperscript{25}. The piece opens with a “Brahmsian” introduction. A solo French horn blasts a stately diatonic melody (e.g. Figure 6) followed by an orchestral cadence in D minor.

![Figure 6](image)

(Figure 6): Mahler, Third Symphony, first movement introduction (mm 1-4).

What follows is thematic material reminiscent of a funeral march (e.g. Figure 7), alternating with a pastoral, shimmering “Pan” theme (e.g. Figure 8). This cycle repeats twice, passing through D and D\textsubscript{b} Major before concluding with a final C Major cadence.

![Figure 7](image)

(Figure 7): Mahler, Third Symphony, first movement, funeral march motive played by the timpani (mm. 27)

\textsuperscript{24} The Greek god Pan was the god of nature, shepherds and their flocks, and the mountain wilds. He was the companion of the nymphs and they were frequently depicted together. Historically, Pan is also strongly associated with rustic and pastoral music. His trademark pipes were always with him and he was often depicted walking through nature singing and playing his pipes.

\textsuperscript{25} Suggested reading: Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, types, and deformations in the late eighteenth-century sonata. (James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, 1911)
For some scholars this section is not at all the beginning of the exposition, but the introduction to the exposition proper, which begins at measure 247. At 246 measures long, this is quite the lengthy introduction. The justification for this analysis relies on the piece’s harmonic, rather than thematic internal logic. In this analytical approach, the exposition proper opens in A minor and progresses to the movement’s “true” tonic, F Major. The thematic material functions in a similar way as in the long introduction: contrasting march themes (e.g. Figure 9) comprise the exposition before ending in a D major cadence. The recapitulation essentially follows the exposition’s pattern in a truncated form.

26 Monahan, “Success and Failure in Mahler’s Sonata Recapitulations” (2011)
Though this method of analysis appears to be at first harmonically sound, I would argue that it is the manipulation of themes and musical motives that determine the form. Mahler himself stated that it is the content that drives the form. When considering his life, positionality, and his own words, an analysis supported by thematic material is the most logical way to consider the movement’s form. The first 246 measures, then, consist of the primary thematic area, and the following 121 measures comprise the secondary thematic area. In my model, I use the term thematic *area* rather than just theme, as the primary and secondary areas are comprised of rotations of alternating themes (e.g. Figure 10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPOSITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRIMARY THEME AREA</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introductory theme</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>March A</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F major</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Figure 10): Structural overview of Mahler’s Third Symphony, first movement

A discussion of thematic material and its hermeneutical implications are necessary for the understanding of the movement’s formal structure. For Mahler, the program titles and themes were of paramount import in the conception of this
piece. An 1896 version of the program titles provides some insight into the narrative structure:

**A Summer’s Midday Dream:**

*Part One:*
Introduction: Pan awakens.
I. Summer Marches in

*Part Two:*
II. What the flowers in the meadow tell me.
III. What the animals in the forest tell me.
IV. What the man tells me.
V. What the angels tell me.
VI. What love tells me.

In the titles alone, it is easy to perceive Bergson’s idea of an “élan vital” at play in the symphony. It is well known that nature had a profound influence on both Mahler’s creative and personal life, and this influence has been woven into the symphonic narrative.

The thematic content of the first movement is especially relevant when contextualized within the framework of Mahler’s personal life. Around the time of its composition, Mahler was considering converting to Catholicism in order to be appointed as the director of the Viennese Court Opera. His choice to draft a programmatic movement with an emphasis on the Greek god Pan is particularly telling, given the relationship between Pan and Christian theology. For some early Christian theologians, the death of Pan coincided with the birth of Christ. The alternating funeral march and Pan themes of the exposition are reflective of this idea, but also reveal Mahler’s internal struggles regarding his identity, otherness,

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27 Mahler’s original program titles were removed for the 1902 premiere, perhaps in an attempt to avoid additional criticism. However, the titles were reinstated in 1906.
28 GMB 196; Engl trans. (192-3).
and his relationship with religion. The “death” of his Jewish identity resulted in the “birth” of his Christian conversion.
The Eighth Symphony: “A Gift to the Nation”

Mahler composed the entirety of his Eighth Symphony in the summer of 1906. Despite his well-established habit of composing mainly during the summer months, Mahler had never before composed an entire symphony in one summer, nor had he ever written a symphony of such magnitude. Out of his impressive ten-symphony oeuvre, Mahler’s Eighth symphony is, perhaps, among the most popular and thought provoking of them all. Nicknamed “The Symphony of a Thousand”, the composition is impressive not only in regards to the sizable performing forces, but also in terms of its hermeneutical depth and novel formal schema. Mahler was well aware of the depth complexity, and popularity of this work, even prior to its official premier. After playing excerpts of the symphony to his friends in the year before it premiered, Mahler wrote to his wife, Alma:

“It’s funny: the work always makes the same, typically powerful impression. It would be absurd if my most important work happened to be the easiest to understand,”

Mahler would, then, be pleased to know that despite being one of Mahler’s more popular symphonies, having received a standing ovation at its 1910 premier, his “most important work” has continued to prove puzzling to both present day musicologist, performers, and theorists alike. The symphony’s unconventional form, textual choices, and theological implications have left it open to a wide range of interpretations across an array of disciplines. Describing his Eighth Symphony as “a gift to the entire nation”, the work is in close dialogue with German cultural traditions and social attitudes. The use of seminal German texts and the choice to

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29 GMB 335, Engl. Trans 294 (undated letter from Gustav Mahler to Willem Mengelberg, [18? Aug. 2906]).
premier the work in Germany, rather than in Austria is indicative of this fact. At once political and deeply personal, the Eighth Symphony is a testament to Mahler’s sense of agency in asserting his identity and social ideals through a hybrid of his preferred musical mediums.

The Eighth Symphony engages with the German tradition in manifold ways. In part, as a “gift to the entire nation”, Mahler may have been both acknowledging the German symphonic tradition while at the same time offering a critique of societal values and norms. At the time of its composition in 1906, Mahler was beginning to outgrow the somewhat conservative values of the Pernerstorfer Circle he belonged to in his youth. He did, however, remain loyal to the German cultural tradition that he became so enthralled with as a young man. Consequently, Mahler selected a seminal German text for use in the second part of his symphony: Goethe’s literary work *Faust*.

Mahler’s decision to set a work by Goethe, rather than Schiller is quite telling. In the nineteenth century, Schiller was by far the more celebrated literary figure. For the most part, Schiller’s work was significantly more accessible and nationalistic in nature. Goethe and his works were much more controversial. Goethe, a considerably modern writer, wrote texts that were considered to be too international, individual, and apolitical. His work did not align with the national and exclusive spirit of Germany. In this capacity, especially in relation to Schiller, Goethe was, to some degree, the subaltern voice. It is for this reason, in addition to *Faust*’s philosophical depth, that Mahler chose to work with Goethe over Schiller. Musicologist Carl Niekerk offers this reading of Mahler’s engagement with German culture:
“Mahler’s primary interest... [was] a counter-reading of the German cultural tradition that emphasizes those moments within its history that showed openness toward other traditions.”

Influenced by his own intersectional identity and shared Jewish heritage, Mahler was drawn to the more international German intellectual who possessed a significantly more global perspective. *Faust* was often regarded as “both the exemplary German national text and as a critique of German national culture,” (Niekerk, 241). In using this poem, Mahler was able to enter the debate surrounding German culture and its canon. As an othered individual himself, Mahler recognized the value in a pluralistic society and used his unusual literary selections as a means to communicate this ideal to his audience; this was his ‘gift’ to the nation. In this way, his Eighth Symphony is a great example of the spectrality of his music. In breaking with traditional forms, texts, and normative cultural values, Mahler, the Other, communicates his perspective to the dominant group in a novel way. The general ambivalence to and ambiguity about *Faust* may have also been appealing to Mahler. The lack of a fixed, accepted interpretation of the work’s meaning allowed him to suffuse it with his own.

Mahler’s interaction with the text of *Faust* is also, in a way, spectral. *Faust* is a play-poem hybrid in two parts. Mahler chose to set the text of Part II, rather than the more accessible Part I. The first part of the poem offers a clear narrative, straightforward text, and traditional characterizations. The second part of *Faust* and its final scenes, which Mahler used, are significantly more complex. The lack of a

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31 Goethe was also Jewish and was heavily associated with German Jewish culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
linear plot, and the incorporation of lofty philosophical abstractions and theological references make the latter half much more difficult to process for common men and scholars alike.

When considering Mahler’s life and music, it is not at all difficult to recognize commonalities between himself, Goethe, and the main character of the poem, Heinrich Faust. Both Mahler and Faust were gifted men focused on their inner worlds and searching for fulfillment and a spiritual home. Mahler and Goethe shared a love of nature, finding in it, a place of renewal and a spiritual home. The final scene from Faust takes place in the wilderness among mountain ravines and forest cliffs, not at all dissimilar to the landscape surrounding his hut in the Austrian mountains.

Even though the Eighth Symphony appears to be among Mahler’s more harmonically accessible works, the piece remains controversial. There is no general consensus, particularly regarding Part II, on the piece’s form, the precise meaning of the text remains speculative, and the overall magnitude of the symphony continues to impress. This complex work is at once introspective, retrospective, and forward thinking. Musical references to his past symphonies are heard tonally and thematically. The text, in part, reveals both Mahler’s personal ideals and national critiques. In revealing his inner life and identity, Mahler strives to challenge the German idea of strict nationalism and make way for an inclusive Germany in which alterity and plurality are accepted and celebrated.

Conclusion
Mahler’s symphonic style is particularly unique in that they are in part, constructions of a musical Other. As an othered individual in his own lifetime, this style of symphonic writing was a direct imposition of his will and experiences on his compositions. Breaking from a musical world of increasing sameness, the subaltern voice, Mahler, offers a fresh perspective in ways that insiders had not previously considered and to which were initially resistant. In doing so, Mahler not only offers novel approach to the symphony, but also gives his audience insight on the effect of alterity on an individual’s identity.

Though this paper examined only three symphonies, this tool is employed and developed throughout all of his symphonies. While it is true that other contemporary composers composed daring works and took harmonic and thematic chances, it is Mahler’s background that sets him apart from the others. In this way, his obstacles became his strengths. His alterity then became not only a social reality, but also a powerful compositional tool.
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