

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Does life have meaning? Mahler's symphonic response

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Last month, I wrote about a piece of music, the "Miserere mei, Deus" by Allegri, that had been performed by the Grand Rapids Choir of Men and Boys.

Another piece that also has had special meaning for me was performed last weekend by the Grand Rapids Symphony, Mahler's Symphony No. 2, the "Resurrection Symphony."

David Lockington, who is retiring as music director after 16 years, chose to feature this piece for his final concert. He explained at the Upbeat lecture prior to the concert this symphony is about change, and this is a time of change for him, as well as for the orchestra as it transitions to a new director.

But, for Mahler, it was a much

bigger change that drove his composition — namely, the change that we anticipate when we face death.

Mahler had lived with death. He was one of 14 children, the majority of whom died in childhood. During the seven-year period when he struggled with writing this piece, both his father and mother died, as well as a brother who committed suicide.

The existential issue for Mahler, which he incorporated into the chorus in the fifth movement, was whether we have lived in vain, and suffered in vain.

It is the fundamental question that most religions also address. What is the meaning of life? Is it

all in vain?

Mahler was Jewish but converted to Catholicism, probably as a political act in order to receive an appointment in Vienna, where anti-Semitism was high.

His question was that of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower, and withers; he flees like a shadow, and continues not. ... If a man die, shall he live again?" (Job 14: 1-2, 14)

Nearly every religion addresses this issue and has some version of a life after death.

Whether it is reincarnation or a conscious continuation of one's life, either in heaven or hell, religions seek to respond to this ultimate question of life's meaning and whether it is found in this life or in the next.



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The religious traditions span a wide swath of perspectives on this question, and to fully explore them would require a book, of which many have been written.

Muslims emphasize the final judgment, followed by either punishment or bliss. Christians consider the resurrection of the body central and celebrate it at Easter.

For Mahler, the clue to finishing his great symphony was at the funeral of the famous conductor and his mentor, Hans von Bülow, when he heard a children's choir sing Klopstock's "Resurrection Ode."

Adding his own verses to what he heard, Mahler has the choir begin singing softly, "Aufsteh'n, ja aufersteh'n" ("Arise, yes, you will arise from the dead").

The English translation continues:

*My dust, after a short rest!
Eternal life, will be given you
by Him who called you.
Oh believe, You were not born
in vain,
Have not lived in vain, suffered
in vain.*

*What was created must perish!
What has perished must rise
again!*

*Tremble no more!
Prepare yourself to live!*

Mahler's resolution of this existential question provides an inspiring musical setting for this basic human quest. What is the meaning of life? Do we have a purpose? It can be approached via religion, through art and literature, or in this case through a powerful musical form.

For me, the music itself points to meaning and purpose far beyond what the words alone can contain.

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