

**“What nature tells me”:
Semiosis, narrative, death and nature in Gustav Mahler's “Der Abschied”**

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Doctor of Music Degree Thesis
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November 2013



ABSTRACT

This study takes as its subject the idea of nature in the music of Gustav Mahler, and how this extramusical concept can be said to manifest in Mahler's works. The focus of the study is a multi-faceted analysis of the final movement of the 1908 song symphony *Das Lied von der Erde*, the epic song "Der Abschied" ("The Farewell"). The analysis explores aspects of nature in relation to their semiotic manifestations in the structure of the music, with these semiotic signs arranged hierarchically according to the degree of specificity of extramusical reference (concrete or abstract), as well as according to the type of fundamental temporal motion, static or linear, giving rise to them. This semiosis of nature is examined for its relation to the Romantic narrative archetype Mahler employs for the work, that of the human protagonist venturing into nature, and seeks to posit a semiotic identity within that narrative for the two types of temporal motion. The narrative analysis is based on the song text, which was adapted from Hans Bethge's 1907 poetry collection *Chinesische Flöte* ("The Chinese Flute"), and whose particulars place "Der Abschied" more broadly within the nineteenth-century *Lied* cycle tradition. Topics in the textual discussion feature Mahler's redactions to the original Bethge poems chosen for "Der Abschied", the origins of the texts in ancient Chinese poetry, and the role of Eastern thought in revitalizing a common Western textual narrative. Subsidiary ideas explored include the idea of nature as popular cultural construct in nineteenth-century central European society; the important role of death as a mediating act between human and nature; the historical formation and perpetuation of a standard critical reception of "Der Abschied" in the field of Mahler scholarship; the treatment of musical topic as an act of parody; the role of Mahler as composer-individual within the narrative of the work; the evolution of the protagonist-in-nature narrative over Mahler's career, as compared with the early song cycle *Lieder Eines Fahrenden Gesellen*; and the dissolution of conceptual polarities in the creation of a new type of rhetorical synthesis. The aim of the study is ultimately to posit a revised, contemporary reading of "Der Abschied" that eschews the heavy biographical emphasis of much existing analysis of the work in favor of evidence from the substance of the music, as well as to reframe the debate regarding the work's significance for Mahler personally, in terms of it being an engagement with a compositional and narrative problem rather than a strictly biographical confession.

Keywords: Mahler, nature, *Das Lied von der Erde*, semiosis, narrative, death, Eastern philosophy

Acknowledgments

This project, with its sheer scope and magnitude, would not have been possible without the knowledge, guidance, insight and support of my study supervisor at the Sibelius Academy, Prof. Lauri Suurpää. His kindness, patience and confidence in my ideas and scholarly abilities over the period of many years it took to research and complete this thesis were invaluable in bringing this project to fruition. Belated thanks are also due to Prof. Joseph Auner, currently of Tufts University, for sparking my interest in Mahler studies during his inspiring historical seminar at SUNY Stony Brook in 2000, and for his encouragement of my analytical ideas in their fledgling form, which led directly to the present study.

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Introduction

“[...] the idea of nature in Mahler lies not in those overt moments of nature representation, but rather in the larger symphonic process to which they belong. [...] Mahler's music, rather than being concerned with a *representation of nature*, is better understood as a *discourse on nature*.”¹

In the annals of Gustav Mahler scholarship, the topic of nature is surprisingly unexplored territory. Surprising, in that nature as an aesthetic and musical concern is widely held to be one of the central animating forces in Mahler's output, and yet with a few notable exceptions the discussion tends overwhelmingly to center on the most obvious instances of the invocation of nature: the cataloguing of specific gestures in which nature sounds such as birdsong are imitated; musical topics, such as fanfares or horn calls, which refer specifically to conventional presentations of the natural world as distant or wild in Western symphonic music; texts from vocal works and Mahler's own writings dealing explicitly with the theme of nature or the fetishized nature worship common to the period; and, most particularly, on the controversial programmatic outlines dealing in nature themes left behind by Mahler for certain early works like the so-called “Wunderhorn” symphonies. However, lost in the minutiae of nineteenth-century nature music conventions is the wider significance of nature as a general idea in Mahler's music: how the composer can be said to invoke that idea musically on a level that delves beyond mere *kitsch*; and how this idea of nature relates to the biographical background that plays such an important role in reading Mahler's works, the biography generally being held up as inseparable from the music arising from it. This is the aim of the present study: to delineate through examination of one of Mahler's works where and how the idea of nature can be said to manifest, the musical specifics of Mahler's interaction with the idea of nature, and what meaning can be inferred from this interaction, both in reference to the music and for Mahler himself.

The study will take as its musical focus the work which could fairly be said to epitomize Mahler's lifelong preoccupation with the idea of nature: the song symphony *Das Lied von der Erde* (1908), specifically the final movement, “Der Abschied” (“The Farewell”). Julian Johnson, perhaps the only researcher to explore the meaning of nature in Mahler's music on a deep level, writes, “As *Das Lied von der Erde* exemplifies, not only does the latent theme of withdrawal in Mahler become explicit in his late work, but its link to the musical construction of nature is also

¹ Johnson 2005, 25.

definitive.”² Certainly the latter part of Johnson’s assertion easily finds supporting evidence in scholarship. The work is replete with the kind of pictorial nature symbolism mentioned above, and has been extensively discussed in relation to this subject. The texts for *Das Lied*, drawn from a collection of translations of classical Chinese poetry and vivid in their nature imagery – which doubtless would have made them an object of fascination for Mahler even had he not chosen to set them – can and have been the subject of study. However, I am concerned with the interaction of all elements of the work – structural, textual, orchestrational or timbral, and semiotic – in manifesting nature, and how the musical discourse of the work is affected in turn by its engagement with the idea of nature.

It is my contention, supported by Johnson, that, leaving aside the surface manifestations of nature *kitsch* as found in much contemporaneous music, the primary impact of nature as an idea on Mahler’s music is a *structural* one, affecting its discourse on multiple levels ranging from harmonic development, musical and textual narrative, musical topics (*topoi*), considerations of temporality and instrumental texture. Thus, aspects of musical structure and their relation to the conventions of nature representation in nineteenth-century music will be paramount in the early stages of the discussion. In discussing these structural facets, I mean to show that beneath the music’s gestural surface lies a complex network of conceptual polarities which Mahler attempts to mediate through the vehicle of the music, and that this mediation is a perceptible structural element with central importance to the formal course of the movement.³

Secondary to structural considerations will be elements of Mahler’s biography that lend themselves toward a greater understanding of the structure and meaning of “Der Abschied”. Of primary importance is the process by which Mahler arrived at the selection of the texts for *Das Lied* generally, and “Der Abschied” in particular. Viewed from the perspective of nineteenth-century song cycle conventions, the selection of Chinese-based poetry for a work on this scale is both a departure and an apotheosis in terms of the evolution of Mahler’s interaction with *Lied* narrative and his relation to the idea of nature. Central to this part of the discussion will be changes the composer made to the texts, which exert a perceptible influence on the formal course of “Der Abschied”, and tie directly into the *Lied* tradition and its theme, latent and explicit, of the protagonist in nature. Although Mahler scholarship tends on the whole, I believe, to overvalue the importance of biographical trivia in reading Mahler’s works, a judicious examination of Mahler’s

² Johnson 2005, 34.

³ John J. Sheinbaum, in the introduction to his article “Adorno’s Mahler and the Timbral Outsider” (Sheinbaum 2006), points to the importance of “physiognomy”, an inference of deep meaning from surface characteristics, in Adorno’s reading of Mahler. I believe the idea, if not the specific term, to have analytical relevance in this project.

life surrounding the composition of the work can lead to a fuller appreciation of the expressive content of the music. I intend, as Johnson would have it, to use “the biographical detail to enlarge our understanding of the music as a specific, individual mediation of cultural ideas.”⁴

As an extension of the discussion of *Lied* narrative, I will also consider the theme of withdrawal or leave-taking and its specific relation to the idea of nature. The sending of a protagonist (or poetic/lyrical subject) into nature is a powerful narrative gesture in the *Lied* tradition. Viewed from this perspective, the act of withdrawal from the human or cultured world, and the music by which this act is signified, emerges as a central force in the formal and narrative structure of “Der Abschied”. In particular, the role of funeral or mourning music as an expression of leave-taking will be explored – the concept of leaving-taking in Romantic aesthetics corresponding with ideas of death and loss of self, among others. The subject’s reasons for venturing into the natural world, leaving behind society and human companionship, what it is hoped will be found in nature, and the darker reality ultimately encountered there, will be shown to have great importance in the narrative unfolding of “Der Abschied”.

This theme of withdrawal of the subject into nature is one that can be seen to preoccupy Mahler throughout his compositional career. As an additional point of reference to the study of “Der Abschied”, I will also look briefly to a similar treatment of the idea in one of Mahler’s earliest mature efforts, the song “Die Zwei Blauen Augen” from the cycle *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen* (1883-85). Aside from possessing a similar profile in terms of thematic content and musical topics, this song also occupies a corresponding position in the nature-related narrative of its cycle to that of “Der Abschied”, albeit on a smaller scale. The dramatic arc Mahler traces in “Der Abschied” can be seen as an expansion of elements found in the smaller form of “Die Zwei Blauen Augen”, and musical and narrative traits common to the two can be shown to change in the intervening years, with profound consequences for the outcome of the later work.

It is my intent over the course of this study to elucidate what I hold to be the musical import of an idea of central significance both for Mahler as individual subject, but also for the course of Western symphonic music more generally. Far from being steeped in the prevalent Romantic view of nature common to his day, I mean to show Mahler as actively challenging this view through his music, and that, rather than approaching the natural world with pictorial or sentimental intent, Mahler was engaged in a thoroughly modernist revision of traditional forms of nature evocation, a “transformation from nature towards a fulfilled spirituality.”⁵

⁴ Johnson 1999, 3-4.

⁵ Ibid., 41.

Chapter 1 – “Wie ein Naturlaut”: Nature as sound

“If Mahler’s development as a composer mediates between the world’s course and that which is other, the mediation, in order to go deep enough, should be detectable in the substance of the music itself.”⁶

The central question that must be asked at the outset of this study concerns how nature can be said to manifest in musical structure. If nature, as posited above, is not necessarily to be found in the descriptive onomatopoeia of nineteenth-century nature music – with which *Das Lied von der Erde* is nonetheless replete – then how does the idea make its presence known otherwise, and by what means? The purpose of this chapter is to detail the philosophical underpinnings of the project, and to outline the tools, both concrete and conceptual, which I mean to apply in my analysis. Part I will focus on nature as embodied through specific musical topics, and the significance of these in the semiotic discourse of the work. In Part II, I will work toward a definition of nature as musical temporality, again located within the context of the semiotic significance of temporality within the narrative of “Der Abschied.”

Part I – Nature as topic

Although I have made reference earlier to obvious nature topics in Mahler as a kind of *kitsch* code signifying the presence of nature, for example the stylized birdsong mentioned in the Introduction, this should not be understood in the pejorative, by which such onomatopoeic representational devices are rendered unimportant in the discussion of Mahler’s musical evocations of nature. Rather, I mean to imply that these gestures comprise only the most immediately observable layer of the composer’s interaction with the idea of nature, and thus detract attention from a more abstract, more loosely referential set of nature topics, the identification of whose meaning is dependent to a greater degree on the surrounding musical or narrative context. The issue of topical representation is further complicated by other surface topics making clear stylistic, sonic or timbral references to specific genres of music such as dance or march forms, lending the impression that the entire range of topics within Mahler’s musical language is to be encountered on the most superficially audible level.

⁶ Adorno 1992 [1960], 14.

The establishment of a terminology for discussing topics (i.e. representational musical devices or gestures) owes much to the efforts of scholars like Leonard G. Ratner, whose early efforts at classifying and describing the use of topics in Baroque- and Classical-era music form much of the foundation of contemporary discussion of musical topic.⁷ However, where Ratner describes topics as a set of “characteristic figures” that tie a musical gesture to a particular style or group of rhetorical figures within the larger musical (i.e. linear) discourse, I mean to differentiate between simultaneous *levels* of topical representation within Mahler’s music. Rather than focus exclusively on the purely representational topics mentioned above, I aim to distinguish between those gestures and a broader group of musical behaviors underlying them.

In my view the central problem in the interpretation of these topical/stylistic gestures, especially those signifying nature, is a lack of hierarchy, one which separates them according to the concreteness of the extramusical idea to which they refer, such that the more specific gestures do not obscure the topical relevance and structural importance of the more abstract ones. What I propose, therefore, is not only a Ratner-type classification of topical gestures according to extramusical association (style, object of representation, etc.), but the wholesale division of musical topics into two broad layers according to the *degree of specificity* of their object of extramusical reference, as follows:

Level 1: Imitative/onomatopoetic topics and stylistic/genre-related references

Level 2: Abstract/contextual topics

Into the first category would fall such topics as the oft-mentioned birdsong and other such clearly onomatopoetic gestures – what Theodor W. Adorno called “second nature”, or “the conventional passed off as natural”⁸ – as well as clear stylistic references to musical types or forms such as dance and march rhythms, military music, etc. which can be identified as being from “outside” the abstract working-out process of the music.⁹ The second category encompasses those gestural types which are still quite explicit in their references, but are more local to the internal working processes of the music, such as harmony, rhythm, texture and temporal organization, and are thus more general and less audibly identifiable in their extramusical associations.

⁷ See Ratner 1980, 9-27.

⁸ Johnson 1999, 71. “Conventional” here is not used in the sense of “usual” or “traditional”, but rather to the idea of the use and reception of a gesture arising from broad cultural agreement as to its meaning. Thus, “conventional” for Adorno can be understood to mean “artificial”.

⁹ One such topic figuring prominently the analysis to follow, the funeral march, will be discussed in more detail as a function of narrative in Chapter 2.

Despite this division in terms of their specific degree of referentiality, though, both layers make reference to the category of semiotic interpretation Kofi Agawu (via Roman Jakobson) terms extroversive semiosis, “the referential link with the exterior world.”¹⁰ Thus, those topics related to nature on both layers should be understood as constituent parts of the same complex of topical nature references, both in the vertical sense of simultaneous references to nature overt and abstract, as well across the rhetorical span of the piece, forming a larger dialogue around the idea of nature. As Agawu argues, “Just as low-level signs can combine to form higher-level ones, so topics in a particular local function can combine to form topics on a higher level [...] reaching beyond the individual phrase, section or movement to the work as a whole, and beyond.”¹¹ Thus, the upper-level topics act as a kind of window into the deeper semiotic background that gives rise to them.

It is the identification and explanation of the broader topics in the second layer that most concern this study. By examining and cataloguing these types, I mean to highlight a set of common characteristics interlinking these second-level nature topics, and which also create connections with first-level topics. In doing so, I aim to form for the reader a clearer picture of the essential qualities that mark Mahler’s various evocations of the natural world in “Der Abschied”, and of the larger themes that can be extrapolated from them and subsequently applied to the work’s narrative as a whole.

The definition of these Level 2 topics is by no means widely agreed upon, by reason of their referential vagueness and contextual dependence. Nonetheless, creditable attempts have been made to classify such “abstract” topics. The most germane to this study is a set of musical gestures put forth by Johnson (in his study of Anton Webern) as commonly encountered devices for nature representation in much late Romantic music.¹² Johnson’s categories are derived in concept from Eric Sams’ series of forty “motifs” (i.e. topics) in the songs of Hugo Wolf,¹³ although Sams’ motifs are not borrowed wholesale (Sams does not address the idea of nature directly except as a general topic denoting “contentment, the open air”).¹⁴ Rather, the concept is reworked to form an overview of the means of nature depiction in late Romantic song and symphonic practice, with a particular focus on Webern’s early works. Although Johnson quotes these topical categories with specific passages from Webern in mind, his topics, adapted slightly to fit a more general context, present a workable means of understanding the less overt references to nature in Mahler’s work.

¹⁰ Agawu 1991, 23.

¹¹ Ibid., 39.

¹² Johnson 1999, 52-72.

¹³ Sams 1983, 18-34.

¹⁴ Ibid., 22.

These Level 2 topics are presented below, categorized according to the primary musical parameter which they affect, as a series of analytical tools through which I mean to examine the music of “Der Abschied” and, to a lesser extent, “Die Zwei Blauen Augen”, where they are observable in embryonic form. Although the topics interrelate to a certain extent and will be shown to be present largely in groups rather than as discrete entities, as with all such semiotic complexes, they represent broadly distinct types that are readily identifiable within the music.

It should be pointed out that while Johnson outlines several other topical gestures which could be applicable to a study of “Der Abschied” and Mahler’s nature music more generally, the one overriding characteristic that unites the second-level categories listed below is a marked preoccupation with nature as embodied through musical stasis. It is on the various facets of this idea of that I mean to focus the bulk of my energies over the course of this study: the idea of nature-as-stasis, represented in materials that are essentially static or progressively become so; the ways in which stasis is used to construct and evoke images of the natural; and the structural effects of stasis on the narrative form of “Der Abschied”. In this sense, this study is concerned less with gestures that resemble natural sounds (the first-level topics mentioned above) than with music that refers to nature in a more abstract, less imitative way. The primary object of interest here, as the composer John Luther Adams puts it, is music that evokes more specifically “the *feeling* of nature than the sound of nature.”¹⁵

1) Pitch-related topics

1A) The pedal (or sustained harmonic entity)

Johnson says of this device that “its primary associative function in nineteenth-century music [is] an idea of the timeless immutability of nature. [...] Its acoustic image of unity, completion and stasis embodies an ideology of nature conceived in exactly those terms.”¹⁶ Although Johnson discusses this function in reference to the specific interval of the fifth, pedals and drones of one kind or another can and should be viewed, in my opinion, as having a similar topical function in evoking nature’s primal aspect, hence the enlargement of this category. “Der Abschied” is marked by varied use of pedal points, each type of which will be examined in turn for its relation to the topic of nature.¹⁷

¹⁵ Adams 2004, 123.

¹⁶ Johnson 1999, 52.

¹⁷ Johnson later identifies the separate category of “Sustained tonic chord as the totality of nature” (Johnson, 1999, 64), calling it “an image of an *Ur-Natur*, a primeval totality which both pre-exists and concludes the play of

1B) Saturation of the diatonic field

This category has particular relevance to the closing section of “Der Abschied”, characterized as it is by “ ‘saturation’ of the tonic chord by other diatonic but non-triadic pitches.”¹⁸ This function of nature representation will also be examined in terms of its effect on harmonic function and temporal structure at various points throughout the work.

2) Rhythmical/metrical topics

2A) Weakening of metrical divisions

Although not identified as a separate gestural category (it is brought up in association with Johnson’s discussion of sustained tonic harmony), this function is mentioned as being “a traditional device for music’s temporal construction of timelessness.”¹⁹ The closing section of “Der Abschied” especially presents a gradual erosion of metrical emphasis, shifting attention from the beat, measure or phrase level progressively toward a metrically undifferentiated stasis, which greatly affects the temporal perception of this music, and ties into several other categories, notably diatonic saturation and harmonic pedal, to create a complex of interrelated nature representation devices.

2B) Contained movement

This is another category referring to rhythm or meter and its effect on temporal perception. Johnson here highlights “the relationship between a global stasis and the possibility of more or less movement contained within it but which is denied any directional tension by the static nature of the global parameters [of] harmony, dynamic and register.”²⁰ Although many of the specific examples he chooses from Webern are not applicable to the present subject, Johnson’s definition of the general characteristics of this gestural type are clearly recognizable in the highly rhythmicized, registrally confined texture of the Coda of “Der Abschied”, as well as in other passages featuring comparatively dense, but highly restricted textural activity.

subjective forms that constitutes the core of the work.” However, this category refers to Johnson’s reading of Webern’s tone poem *Im Sommerwind*, and is thus more specific in its associations within that context, making this division unnecessary in the current project. For this reason, I have opted to integrate triadic, fifth and other drone or sustained harmonic structures, which bear more similarities than differences in my reading of “Der Abschied”, into a single gestural category.

¹⁸ Johnson 1999, 57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

3) Textural topics

3A) Background-foreground conflation

This category deals with passages in which the textural functions of musical elements, namely melody and accompaniment, are unclear, blended, reversed or isolated in such a manner that “what normally constitutes ‘background’ material is allowed to stand alone.”²¹ In addition to the heterophonic texture of the coda music in “Der Abschied”, where the vocal line and accompaniment share material and prominence almost equally, the movement on the whole exhibits many instances where the distinction between foreground and background elements is blurred or momentarily erased.²²

3B) Distance as mystery

This category is as much a function of register as of distinction between textural functions, in which a solo voice is foregrounded in the upper register against a pedal (or noise element like a gong stroke) in the low register, a gesture that “posits a differentiated individuality against the otherwise potentially amorphous material of the totality”.²³ This gestural type, a kind of *vox clamans in deserta*, is most clearly represented in the oboe call at the outset of the movement, which reappears at intervals later, as well as in the vocal recitatives for the alto soloist. The gradual erosion of this element of distance over the course of the song toward the markedly less differentiated perspective of the Coda will be shown to have direct relevance to the nature topic, and also to the issue of Mahler’s interaction with the conventions of *lied* cycle narrative.

4) Harmonic topics

Evaporation of directed motion

This term is given very specific treatment by Johnson in his dealings with Webern’s *Im Sommerwind*,²⁴ but can be broadly defined as a gradual, global cessation of teleological tonal processes in the music involving harmony, contrapuntal elaboration and rhythmic cohesion at

²¹ Johnson 1999, 69.

²² One such figure in “Der Abschied”, labeled the “lullaby” figure later in this study, is given importance as a separate category by Johnson (Johnson 1999, 68). However, for typological reasons I here include this type under the rubric of background-foreground conflation, of which it is an outgrowth. The lullaby topic proper, like the funeral march, is best discussed as a Layer 1 (concrete semiosis) topic in the context of narrative, and will be presented more thoroughly in subsequent chapters.

²³ Johnson 1999, 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

both the pulse and metrical levels. The most obvious example of this gesture is again the Coda music of “Der Abschied”, in which several topics will be shown to merge, but where the dominant topical impulse is best described under the present rubric. This area of inquiry into the concept of directed motion also bridges into the idea of tonality-as-topic, which will be more fully explained in the discussion of deep-level semiosis below.

Taken together, these topical categories form a coherent semiotic language through which Mahler will be shown to signify the presence of nature in the music, a language in which the idea of nature is overwhelmingly expressed through various types of musical stasis. In the discussion on temporality in Part II below, the idea of nature-as-stasis – and nature-as-topic – will also gain a broader semiotic significance in opposition to a non-static, more abstract (i.e. less specifically topical) music.

Part II – Nature as time

The subject of musical stasis on the global level necessarily leaves incomplete the analytical model. Mahler’s musical language in “Der Abschied,” despite its many passages of rhetorical suspension, cannot be described as fully static. Indeed, although “Der Abschied” will be shown to be predominantly static in its temporal structure, these periods of extended stasis are contrasted at key points by music of a more traditionally goal-directed, contrapuntal nature. The idea of stasis must be now placed in a context of opposition to another type of music which is not static, thereby bringing a temporal parameter to the study.

A significant question arises here: if nature is said to be represented by different forms of stasis, thereby invoking a suspension or interruption of linear progress in the music, by what specific means is the idea of “not-nature” articulated, and what is its structural and expressive significance in opposition to the idea of “nature,” in the temporal and, more importantly for this study, the topical sense? In order to illuminate this issue, a certain amount of energy must be devoted to examining how different types of temporal activity interact on the topical level as signifiers in the musical narrative.

Once again, a system of classification is needed in order to categorize different types of music according to temporal type. Although time and temporal ordering are obviously essential components in the perception of musical structure and meaning, surprisingly few scholars have undertaken to systematize temporal organization and its effect on music in any coherent way. However, two modern temporal theories, by Raymond Monelle and Jonathan Kramer,

respectively, present possible models for understanding the temporal and semiotic function of the music of “Der Abschied.” Of these, the model best suited to the present purpose is Monelle’s simple division of musical topics and the temporal states from which they derive into one of two types of time, linear and static (or, respectively, “progressive” and “lyrical”, as Monelle labels them).²⁵ In Monelle’s theory the animating temporal force in tonal music is the interplay between these two temporal poles, all semiotic meaning inferred from the topical surface of the music therefore arising from one of the two states.

Adapting Monelle’s theory to examine a work of Mahler’s in the topical/semiotic sense is not without its problems, however. Monelle is very much a Classicist in his aesthetic leanings (in contrast with Kramer’s more analytically dispassionate views). The foundational idea of Monelle’s theory, the opposition between “progressive” and “lyrical” time, finds its starting point in the distinction between “Satz” and “Gang” in A.B. Marx’s discussion of Beethoven, an association by which Monelle concedes his classical orientation, albeit within a nineteenth-century theoretical framework.²⁶ Monelle refers tellingly to “a meaningfulness without meaning, a semiosis unburdened with truth-references or metaphysics,”²⁷ which points to a preference for the formally self-referential abstraction of Classical topics over the more representational/pictorial tendencies of Romantic music. Despite his division of temporality into categories of motion and non-motion, Monelle’s application of his theory stresses the formal, dialectic strength of the “progressive bichrony”²⁸ of Classical-era music, essentially the overall linear, goal-directed tonal narrative produced by the constant ebb and flow of the music between the states of linearity and stasis. Monelle’s principal aim is not to classify musical gestures according to clear temporal type, but to highlight the constant ambiguity between the two states in Classical music. Thus in Monelle’s view, the semiotic richness of a musical gesture lies not in the temporal state from

²⁵ As detailed in *The Sense of Music*, (Monelle 2000). For reasons pertaining to the generally lyrical expressive mode of much of the music of “Der Abschied”, I prefer to use the more analytically neutral terms “linear” and “static” in order to avoid confusion. The other possible temporal model, that of Jonathan Kramer in *The Time of Music* (Kramer 1984), is also surveyed by Monelle (pp. 84-86). Although Kramer departs in his temporal conception from a similar two-part framework of “linearity” versus “non-linearity”, his theory then fans out to include many categories, such as “vertical” and “moment” time, which lend themselves more easily to understanding the temporal discontinuities of post-tonal music than to earlier tonal practices. Additionally, with particular reference to the present study, Kramer’s theory concerns itself more with issues of form and perception arising from the effects of temporal interplay than with semiosis at any level. Monelle’s critique: “Kramer’s formal concerns [...] are with tempo, meter, rhythm, implication and realization, phrasing and closure, the ordinary components of musical time. His failure to identify these as chiefly syntactic features, not necessarily linked to any semantic level, hampers him in analyzing older music.” (Monelle 2000, 84)

²⁶ Monelle 2000, 104-110.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

which it arises, but rather in its potential to enter the other state, thereby producing a Classical synthesis between temporalities.

In Romantic music, according to Monelle, the two states of linearity and stasis become less mutable, the interaction between them less fluid; he refers to “the hard won balance between the two temporalities in Classical music, and its dissolution amid the powerful emotional evocations of the next century.”²⁹ The two temporal states take on separate, block-like functions in the musical structure, each with its own set of mutually exclusive topical/semiotic signs, the static state encompassing those topics which refer to elements outside the structure of the music proper, and the linear state containing topics referring to the abstract formal working-out processes of tonal music. As he states: “In nineteenth-century music there were two sets of signs, one to elicit the listener’s complicity in the verisimilitude of expressive genre or to isolate passages of realistic evocation, the other to convince her of the integrity of structure.”³⁰ Linear and static thus become incompatible, irreconcilable, their lack of mutual fluidity leading to an overall weakening of formal musical discourse and thereby lessening (or denying outright) any possibility of synthesis.

Indeed, Monelle’s theory, as applied by its author, finds precious little of value in the semiotic discourse of certain Romantic forms. Schumann is given cautious approval when he does not attempt to engage Classical symphonic forms like sonata, but it is toward Mahler that Monelle turns a particularly jaundiced structural eye. Although his semiotic appraisal yields dividends in his overview of some of the smaller vocal movements of the symphonies, overall Monelle finds that “the old pattern of bichronic temporalities, which was the achievement of the Classical style, is present only in token [...]”³¹ He speaks repeatedly of the “rawness” of Mahler’s obvious topical references,³² labeling them as simple pictorial “realism” devoid of formal or discursive function, so disruptive to the musical discourse that no synthesis of temporalities is possible.

While Monelle’s structural perspective on Mahler’s music³³ is generally accurate and in line with much recent Mahler scholarship (a field in which these formal disruptions, “undigested”³⁴ topics and lack of synthesis are viewed rather more charitably), I believe he makes a fundamental error. Monelle’s focus in Romantic music, despite the clearly topical nature of many of the musical gestures he highlights, is nevertheless on the abstract formal dialogue between the linear and static states. By this standard, with the static state increasingly isolating

²⁹ Monelle 2000, 110.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 177 (in reference to the opening movement of Mahler’s Symphony no. 4).

³² *Ibid.*, 184, 186, et al.

³³ See Monelle 2000, 170-195, for full discussion.

³⁴ Monelle 2000, 172.

itself from the larger musical structure, constantly frustrating its overall linear development (or “progressive bichrony”), Romantic music that takes on the mantle of classical symphonic discourse would seem to be aspiring to a degree of formal and semiotic synthesis which it can never attain. However, by focusing on the “raw” pictorial realism of Mahler’s surface topics – the Level 1 topics detailed above – Monelle fails to note the common temporal framework from which many of these gestures arise, namely the static temporal state. This commonality suggests a collective semiotic meaning to these representational surface topics, in opposition to the more abstract/formal linear state. As these topics arise, in my view, from a common temporal impulse, I would argue that the two temporal states *themselves* take on a semiotic function in Mahler, by their very presence possessing a meaning beyond their structural roles in the formal working out of the music.

It is my contention that the static and linear temporal states form an essential semiotic dichotomy in the narrative of “Der Abschied”, a fundamental tension articulated on the musical surface through the interaction between, on the one hand, the network of referential topics detailed in Part I above, and on the other by more abstract, more traditionally goal-oriented contrapuntal musical textures. This suggests a need to take our semiotic analysis to a still deeper level, showing the essential temporal states which give rise to the topical surface of the music. The expanded analytical model could be described as follows:

Level 1: Imitative/onomatopoetic topics and stylistic/genre-related references

Level 2: Abstract/contextual topics

Level 3: Essential temporal states

Thus, the network of topics of Levels 1 and 2, held to be a common expression of the idea of nature through musical stasis, is shown to be united at the deepest level of semiosis in opposition to another set of musical signs which express the idea of “not-nature”, i.e. music which displays linear or contrapuntal structural characteristics. In contrast with Monelle’s model, in which stasis (or lyrical time) is nonetheless subsumed into the overall linear developmental course of the music, the model toward which I am striving suggests a non-hierarchical structure in which the two states exist independently of each other, interact and are subject to each other’s influence, and periodically attain a degree of prominence over the other, but whose large-scale interaction does

not imply a common narrative goal – nor can it even necessarily be said to be goal-oriented in the traditional, teleological sense.

The precise semiotic meaning to be inferred from the idea of “not-nature” requires further discussion, and a final refinement of the analytical model. The structural tension between “nature” as represented by musical stasis and “not-nature” by linear motion brings the discussion full circle back to the quote by Adorno at the head of this chapter, a central construct in his important reading of Mahler’s expressive language. Adorno’s preoccupation with the tension in Mahler’s music between “the world’s course and that which is other” points to an essential structural dichotomy similar to that posited above. He sees the musical work in Mahler as the locus of a grand mediation between two tendencies: 1) an abstract, linear, self-referential formal design resulting from rational human thought processes (“the world’s course”); and 2) a set of signs pointing outside the strictly abstract, internal world of the musical work toward more primal, less structured, atemporal material signifying the world beyond human thought (“that which is other”). In this sense, Adorno’s reading of Mahler corresponds broadly, if not forming an exact correlation with Monelle’s description of Romantic music as possessing “two sets of signs”, one self-referential set governing the formal working out of the music (the linear state) and another referring to objects outside the music (the static or “lyrical” state).³⁵

It is tempting, given the current form of our analytical model, to assign the role of “world’s course” in Adorno’s reading to the linear/abstract state, and that of “other” to the static/topical state, therefore implying that “other” refers to the idea of nature. However, such one-to-one correspondences are very difficult to make when dealing with Adorno’s ideas, primarily because of the difficulty of divining explicit meaning from his writing. Adorno’s style in writing about Mahler is very much like his perspective on Mahler’s music: elusive, contradictory, paradoxical, meaning hinted at in brief flashes of insight and quickly subsumed by the larger discourse. Furthermore, where Adorno’s ideas regarding meaning in Mahler’s work have validity in the broader sense, they quickly lead to inconsistencies and confusion when dealing with the actual music. Although criticism of this facet of Adorno’s readings is hard to come by, one recent study by Christoph Metzger neatly summarizes the difficulties inherent in the wholesale appropriation of Adorno’s theory:

³⁵ It is worthy of mention that Adorno’s reading of Mahler strongly informs Monelle’s, as it does most contemporary semiotic analyses of Mahler.

Adorno's analytical process leaps between separate, widely scattered sections of music and in many cases is not fully understandable because he subsumes all of Mahler's work under one topic. Because of this the temporal unfolding of works is broken up and individual passages are mostly snatched out of context and viewed in isolation.³⁶

Despite this, Adorno's core idea of Mahler's work as entirely semiotic is helpful in the present context, which is the fundamental narrative of the work. For Adorno, every element in Mahler's work has symbolic importance beyond the work itself, to the point where seemingly abstract formal concepts like "sonata" acquire a semiotic function within the musical discourse. Although Adorno does not make explicit reference to temporal states, his concept of Mahler's work emphasizes, as mentioned above, the idea of a dichotomy between a linear, goal-directed (teleological) process on the one hand, and an external, non-linear, atemporal presence on the other. To highlight this idea of essential dichotomy, Adorno uses three terms to describe the way abstract linear processes in Mahler's narratives are disrupted (or completed) from without: breakthrough (*Durchbruch*), a sudden, violent interruption of material alien to the local context of the music; suspension (*Suspension*), a quieter pause that dissolves forward motion and points toward timelessness; and the more nebulous fulfillment (*Erfüllung*), an emphatic formal close that overrides and resolves any doubt or uncertainty posited earlier in the work.³⁷

More broadly stated, these categories represent formal solutions that manifest themselves from beyond the traditional, abstract formal framework Mahler employs in his music. Of particular interest given the preceding discussion, obviously, is the category of suspension, the interruption of timelessness (i.e. stasis) into the larger linear discourse of the work. Beyond its conceptual relation to atemporality, though, most of the musical examples of suspension cited by Adorno relate to Level 1 topics such as fanfares or birdcalls which, in Adorno's theory, refer explicitly to the natural world. However, I maintain that these are merely surface-level projections in the music of a deeper narrative shift, one that in the end has little to do with musical evocations of nature sounds. Indeed, it is at the most fundamental narrative/textual level that Adorno's model will be shown to be most helpful in bettering our understanding of Mahler's complex mediation in "Der Abschied" (see Chapters 2 and 4 later).

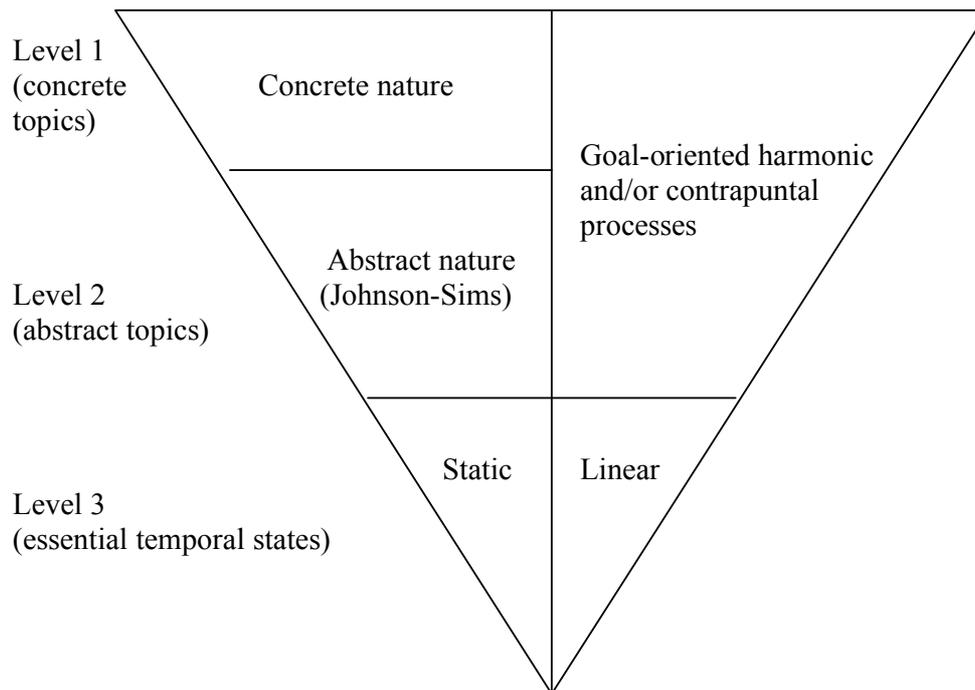
For now, though, Adorno's model provides us with the last tool necessary in the deconstruction of Mahler's nature dialogue more generally, and of the narrative of "Der Abschied" in particular. Whereas before our levels of semiosis portrayed only those topics related to nature,

³⁶ Metzger (trans. Barham) 2007, 210.

³⁷ Adorno 1992 [1960], 41.

the Adorno refinement brings us to a deeper, more abstract level of interpretation, presenting the other side of the dichotomy, the abstract/formal side, with the third level clearly visible as the point of divergence between the two temporal states, such that the semiotic model can be redrawn thus:

Table 1.1: Semiotic hierarchy in “Der Abschied”



The static temporal state is thus shown to give rise to both upper levels of nature topics, in opposition to the linear state. However, the graph is still partially incomplete in that it as yet implies no semiotic function for the linear state, the thus far ill-defined category of “not-nature”. As implied by Adorno’s theory, the abstract linear processes of music (form, harmony, counterpoint) cannot be viewed as completely abstract, but take on a semiotic function in the larger narrative.

However, the precise semiotic identity of “not-nature” in relation to the idea of nature is better explained as a function of the cultural, historical and narrative tradition in which Mahler was working. The discussion in Chapter 2 will attempt to place the music – and equally importantly, the text – of “Der Abschied” in a more specific nature-related context, with the elucidation of the role of linearity within that context being one of the early goals of Chapter 3. However, the present model fulfills its purpose in showing that the semiotic layering in Mahler’s mode of nature representation goes much deeper than the surface details of style, specificity of

reference and notation, to the level of essential temporal construction. It is to the ordering within the musical narrative of those temporal states, and their associated semiotic networks, that we now turn our attention.

Chapter 2 – “Ich geh’, ich wand’re in die Berge”: Nature as narrative

"[...] nature is frequently a symbol of homecoming in an extreme sense, as death, offering an embrace unforthcoming in life by which the suffering individual is reclaimed by the body of nature [...]."³⁸

In building a framework for reading Mahler’s representations of nature in “Der Abschied”, equally important to establishing a proper semiotic hierarchy among the various musical expressions of the idea of nature, is the formation of a proper understanding of the historical background of the narrative tradition within which Mahler cast the work, namely, the nineteenth-century German *Lied* tradition, and nature narratives common to the song cycle in particular, as this tradition holds sway over much of his compositional thought and output. Over the following pages, it will be shown clearly how, and to what degree Mahler interacted with *Lied* tradition, how the idea of nature functions in a narrative type specific to the German *Lied* cycle, and what the significance of that narrative is through its incarnation in Mahler’s works. Part I will deal with the role of nature in the lyric poetry and song of the German Romantic period, as well as providing an overview of the complicated genesis of the text Mahler set in “Der Abschied”. Part II will discuss briefly the idea of nature as commonly portrayed in much nineteenth-century art, and the influence of that construct on song cycle narrative. Part III will touch on the semiosis of the narrative outcome of the tension between nature as cultural construct and nature as “other”. In Part IV, by way of transition to the actual analysis of “Der Abschied”, I will bring forth analytical implications of the narrative and semiotic ideas discussed previously in this chapter.

Part I – Nature as text and song

The connection between Mahler’s larger works and the German Romantic *Lied* tradition is one that is well established and has been extensively studied, particularly in reference to Mahler’s hybridization of song cycle conventions with those of other genres, primarily opera and the symphony. John Williamson³⁹ points to a fusion in Mahler’s earliest major work, the cantata *Das Klagende Lied*, of the grand and the intimate. On the one hand, the work combines certain traits of the music drama, such as its grand scale, musical characterization devices and intensity of expression (not to mention the Wagnerian touch of Mahler writing his own text for the work) with the epic Brucknerian symphonic model; on the other hand, it engages with narrative conventions

³⁸ Johnson 1999, 44.

³⁹ Williamson 1999, 44-46.

more commonly found for example in Schubert's cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin* (and the operas of Weber), such as the simplicity of the crime-and-retribution folk tale that forms the basis of the work, a sharp contrast with the tendency in Wagnerian opera toward the epic or universal.⁴⁰

Of particular importance for this study, though, is Mahler's appropriation in "Der Abschied" and more generally, of one of the core narrative archetypes of song cycle dramaturgy: the venturing forth into nature of the lone subject, his reasons for doing so, and his ultimate fate there. It is a narrative of nature found in German song at least since Schubert and which gains a new resonance in Mahler's hands, one whose cultural construction is of central importance to understanding the arc of *Das Lied von der Erde*, which reaches its conclusion in "Der Abschied".

In approaching such a broad and multifaceted topic as the protagonist in nature in nineteenth-century German song, though, one must be wary of overgeneralization. Such is the specificity of individual songs and song cycle narratives to the poetry they employ and the particular concerns of the composer that one cannot trace any overarching conclusion regarding the function of nature as a symbol in these narratives. However, I believe that by focusing on the text Mahler chose for the final song of *Das Lied*, his redactions of that text, and to some extent on the larger narrative that precedes it, it is possible to extract from these observations a clearer picture of Mahler's interaction with this specific strand of nineteenth-century nature thought.

The text of "Der Abschied", like the rest of the poems Mahler selected for *Das Lied*, is famously drawn from a collection by Hans Bethge titled *Chinesische Flöte* ("The Chinese Flute"), published in 1907, the year before Mahler composed *Das Lied*. Though nominally a volume of poems translated from classical Chinese works, the lineage of *Chinesische Flöte* from its source materials is much less direct. In fact, Bethge's work was, in the words of Fusako Hamao, a "free imitation" of another recently published anthology, Hans Heilmann's *Chinesische Lyrik* of 1905, which was itself an adaptation of two earlier French sources, *Poésies de l'époque de Thang* ("Poems of the Tang Dynasty") of 1862, by Le Marquis d'Hervey-Saint Denys, and Judith Gautier's *Livre de Jade* ("The Jade Book"), from 1867. (The previous fin-de-siècle clearly espoused a more liberal interpretation of copyright and intellectual property than our current age.) These poems in turn had been rather freely translated, sometimes in varying degrees of completeness, with Romantic imagery and atmosphere frequently added by the translators to the starker, more minimal Chinese originals, in keeping with the prevailing tastes of the period. Such

⁴⁰ Also noteworthy is the habit of song composers in Mahler's time of setting texts by the same poets employed by Schubert, et al, whose ideas and themes regarding nature hail from a different period; thus, the conception of nature in late nineteenth century song is not contemporary with the late Romantic philosophical conception of nature, and points to a special kind of narrative nostalgia on the part of song composers. Williamson says of the wanderer-in-nature narrative to be discussed below: "the *topos* is far stronger in German literature before 1850 than after, which partly explains the curiously anachronistic character of the verse in [*Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen*]." (Williamson 2011, 213)

is the number of layers of editorial insight and stylistic overlay that precious little of the original Chinese texts remained by the time they found their way into Mahler's hands.⁴¹ And yet, the basic kernels of the Eastern thought behind the poems will be shown in Chapter 4 to be of great significance in terms of how they interweave with evolutions in the essentially Western narrative within which Mahler worked.

Further complicating this situation are the redactions Mahler himself made to the texts in setting them. Whereas Arthur Wenk points to this as a departure from *Lied* tradition, which generally assumed "a scrupulous regard for the integrity of the chosen text",⁴² it was in fact a common practice of the composer in his vocal music, albeit one taken to a far greater extent in "Der Abschied". In most cases, as with the texts for the first five movements of *Das Lied*, such changes consisted of altering a word or line for musical purposes, but in the case of "Der Abschied", the changes are more radical and far-reaching. Foremost, the text of "Der Abschied" is not truly a single poem, but rather five.⁴³ Despite containing a relatively straightforward and unified narrative of a protagonist taking leave of human society and venturing into nature similar to that of "Die Zwei blauen Augen", the poetry for "Der Abschied" is drawn from a comparative plethora of poetic sources; the immediate predecessors of "Der Abschied" are two of Bethge's adaptations, which in turn are drawn from four originals by Meng Hao-Ran and Wang Wei, to which Mahler himself added some fourteen lines of text – most notably the final, iconic lines that comprise the coda of the song – while also extensively altering others. (Ex. 2.1 shows the two Bethge poems that comprise the bulk of the text of "Der Abschied" as compared with Mahler's edited text.) In addition to imposing another layer of editorial complexity, Mahler's changes also introduced the most significant oddity in the text, to my mind, namely the sudden change of narrative perspective Mahler inserts during the latter part of the song, moving from the traditional first-person protagonist of most song poetry, which heretofore dominates "Der Abschied", to the more detached third person. As the text transitions from the Meng Hao-Ran lines to the contributions from Wang Wei and Mahler, the German "Ich" ("I") is replaced for four lines by "Er" ("he"). Although the reason for this may appear to be the multiplicity of source texts for "Der Abschied", scholarship has shown that the perspective of the Bethge texts remains in the first

⁴¹ Fusako Hamao's excellent and informative article "The Sources of the Texts in Mahler's *Lied von der Erde*" (1995) outlines a brief but comprehensive lineage of the texts to their respective sources, and resolves long pending issues such as the provenance of certain highly redacted poems. So great is the number of editorial changes that were made to the poetry that it was not until Hamao's study that all the texts were traced conclusively to their Chinese originals. In the wake of these late discoveries, a Chinese-language performing version of the text, based on the original poems, was produced by David Ng, with contemporary translations of Mahler's additional lines. This version is documented in a recording by the Swedish BIS label, with the Singapore Symphony conducted by Lan Shui (BIS-SACD-1547, 2007).

⁴² Wenk 1977, 41.

⁴³ Wenk counts the two Bethge poems Mahler adapted for "Der Abschied" as single works, but Hamao reveals each of these poems to be based respectively on two Chinese originals. I use Hamao's numbering here.

Ex 2.1 Textual origins of "Der Abschied"
(Source: www.mahlerarchives.net, Sept. 2010)

Hans Bethge's Version

Poem by Meng Hao-Ran

Die Sonne scheidet hinter dem Gebirge.
In alle Täler steigt der Abend nieder
Mit seinen Schatten, die voll Kühlung sind.
O sieh! Wie eine Silberbarke schwebt
Der Mond herauf hinter den dunkeln Fichten,
Ich spüre eines feinen Windes Wehn

Der Bach singt voller Wohllaut durch das Dunkel.
Von Ruh und Schlaf...

Die arbeitsamen Menschen gehn heimwärts,
voller Sehnsucht nach dem Schlaf.

Die Vögel hocken müde in den Zweigen,
Die Welt schläft ein!

Ich stehe hier und harre des Freundes;
der zu kommen mir versprach

Ich sehne mich, o Freund, an deiner Seite
Die Schönheit dieses Abends zu genießen.
Wo bleibst du nur? Du läßt mich lang allein!
Ich wandle auf und nieder mit der Laute
Auf Wegen, die vom weichen Grase schwellen -
O kämst du, kämst du, ungetreuer Freund!

Poem by Wang Wei:

Ich stieg vom Pferd und reichte ihm den Trunk
Des Abschieds dar. Ich fragte ihn, wohin
und auch warum er reisen wolle .
Er sprach mit umflorter Stimme: Du mein Freund
Mir war das Glück in dieser Welt nicht hold!
Wohin ich geh? Ich wandre in die Berge.

Ich suche Ruhe für mein einsam Herz.

Ich werde nie mehr in die Ferne schweifen.
Müd ist mein Fuss und müd ist meine Seele!

Die Erde ist die gleiche überall

Und ewig, ewig sind die weissen Wolken...

Text of "Der Abschied"

(Mahler's alterations in bold type)

Poem by Meng Hao-Ran

Die Sonne scheidet hinter dem Gebirge.
In **allen Tälern** steigt der Abend nieder
Mit seinen Schatten, die voll Kühlung sind.
O sieh! Wie eine Silberbarke schwebt
Der Mond **am blauen Himmelssee herauf**.
Ich spüre eines feinen Windes Wehn
Hinter den dunklen Fichten!

Der Bach singt voller Wohllaut durch das Dunkel.
Die Blumen blassen im Dämmerchein.
Die Erde atmet voll von Ruh und Schlaf,
Alle Sehnsucht will nun träumen.

Die **müden** Menschen gehn heimwärts,
Um im Schlaf vergeßnes Glück
Und Jugend neu zu lernen!

Die Vögel hocken **still in ihren** Zweigen.
Die Welt schläft ein!

Es wehet kühl im Schatten meiner Fichten.
Ich stehe hier und harre **meines** Freundes;
Ich harre sein zum letzten Lebewohl.

Ich sehne mich, o Freund, an deiner Seite
Die Schönheit dieses Abends zu genießen.
Wo bleibst du ...? Du läßt mich lang allein!
Ich wandle auf und nieder mit **meiner** Laute
Auf Wegen, die vom weichen Grase schwellen.
O Schönheit! O ewigen Liebens - Lebenstrunkne
Welt!

Poem by Wang Wei inserted here by Mahler:

Er stieg vom Pferd und reichte ihm den Trunk
Des Abschieds dar. **Er** fragte ihn, wohin
Er führe und auch warum es müßte sein.
Er sprach, **seine Stimme war umflort:** Du, mein
Freund,
Mir war **auf dieser Welt das Glück** nicht hold!
Wohin ich geh? **Ich geh**, ich wandre in die Berge.
Ich suche Ruhe für mein einsam Herz.
Ich wandle nach der Heimat, meiner Stätte.
Ich werde **niemals** in die Ferne schweifen.
Still ist mein Herz und harret seiner Stunde!

Die **liebe** Erde **allüberall**

Blüht auf im Lenz und grünt aufs neu!

Allüberall und ewig

Blauen licht die Fernen!

Ewig... ewig...

person, and that Mahler effected this change himself.⁴⁴ Why this should be remains unclear, as there is no obvious role for a narrator persona in this context, where the first person would seem to be more appropriate; indeed no narrator has thus far entered the proceedings, either in “Der Abschied” proper, or in the previous songs. As will be shown later in the present study, this change is potentially of profound narrative consequence for both the outcome of “Der Abschied” and for Mahler’s interpretation of the human-nature relationship in song cycle narrative (see commentary in Chapter 4, Part III).

The narrative of “Der Abschied” at its most essential is one of leave-taking, of a protagonist going out into the natural world as a final, definitive act. The act itself of venturing into nature is a common image in the Romantic *Lied* cycle, one that frequently serves as both a point of departure and a conclusion. However, the difference in terms of narrative function between turning to the natural world as an initiating act as opposed to a concluding one is quite stark, and needs to be explored in detail. Much of the role of nature in this musical narrative tradition has to do with the particular way nature is constructed as a cultural idea by central European society in the nineteenth century.

Part II – Nature as cultural construct

Broadly stated, nature in nineteenth century aesthetics frequently took on a consoling role, as a kind of anthropomorphized mother goddess figure whose primary function was the care and restoration of a humanity plagued by the psychic ills of urban life: stress, overwork, loneliness, anonymity, alienation, claustrophobia, agoraphobia, etc. For the urban dweller in the nineteenth century – a group that overwhelmingly (and ironically) numbered both the creators and consumers of the nature art of the period – the natural world would come to be seen as a refuge, a place of timeless balance and healing for the ills of modern life in the city. As Carl Woodring puts it: “For most of the early nineteenth century, nature was womb, bosom, lap, mother and goddess whose temple was the organic world.”⁴⁵ As such, the theme of withdrawal or leave-taking and its relation to nature is very much a creation of Romanticism, preoccupied as it was with the fast-changing relationship between humanity and its natural surroundings during the industrial revolution, and art played a major role in the construction of central European society’s sense of its place in relation to the natural world. The lyric/pastoral genre in Romantic poetry (and, by extension, song)

⁴⁴ Wenk 1977, 41.

⁴⁵ Woodring 1989, 11.

was formed partly in opposition to the increasing urbanization of European society, and its concomitant alienation from nature.⁴⁶

The theme of nature-as-consolation is where Mahler's interaction with this particular strand of thought finds its focus. It is an idea that can be shown to have preoccupied the composer from an early age, predating even his earliest mature compositional efforts. A famous and oft-quoted letter written by Mahler to his friend Josef Steiner in 1879, around the time of *Das Klagende Lied*, shows a young artistic sensibility deeply immersed in the popular cultural construction of nature of his time:

O my beloved earth- when, oh when, will you enfold this
unhappy and abandoned one? Look, men have cast him away.
He flees their cold embraces, their heartlessness- toward you,
toward you! Receive this solitary one who knows no rest, oh
eternal mother!⁴⁷

In this brief excerpt, we find encapsulated the feeling of longing for relief (or release) from worldly troubles that characterizes the nature-urge of the nineteenth-century urban aesthete. The cure for malaise of the psyche – specifically, longing or rejection in one form or another – was not to be found among one's fellow humans, but exclusively in the warm, enfolding embrace of Mother Nature. Woodring's assertion regarding the conception of the human-nature relationship of the time finds correspondence in Johnson's distillation of the presentation of nature in the lyric poetry favored by German Romantic composers for *Lied* settings. The context for the quote presented between ellipses at the head of this chapter, Johnson's summary of the Romantic nature ideal is so thorough in its pithiness that it can scarce be bettered. He writes:

[...] nature is here usually presented as a source of comfort and solace. It is explicitly defined in the ideas of 'home' and 'homecoming', standing as a symbol for a self-identity which the suffering romantic subject is unable to find in the world of human affairs (usually 'love' in lyric poetry). [...] Nature often becomes the object of a deeply nostalgic yearning, a distant, even utopian symbol of a reconciliation not to be found in this world.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ For a more thorough discussion of this topic, see the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2 of Johnson 1999, which together present a concise and convincing history of the construction of nature in nineteenth-century aesthetics. The above overview suffices for the purpose of discussing Mahler's interaction with the idea in his vocal works.

⁴⁷ Quoted in La Grange 1973, 57.

⁴⁸ Johnson 1999, 44.

Out of this basic Romantic-era sentiment would grow Mahler's first mature composition, the compact song cycle *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen* of 1883-85, which traces in a clear manner the precise arc described by Johnson. The text, like that of the earlier *Das Klagende Lied*, was written by Mahler himself, this time in the wake of a failed, youthful love affair. The narrative across the four songs presents the story of a protagonist – eerily familiar given the biographical background to the work – forced to contemplate the wedding of his beloved from afar, who then goes forth into nature to find consolation for his broken heart. However, the crux of the narrative comes when the protagonist finds no comfort in his wanderings. The assumption of a receptive mother figure is shown to be false; our hero finds no solace, no nurturing from the natural world, only a vast, uncaring void into which his sorrows echo hollowly. Hurt and dejected by this realization, the protagonist's anguish returns, his pain relieved only by finding rest under a linden tree at the end. But there can be no true relief from suffering, only release; rest, here, carries with it only the promise of forgetting, the mitigation of suffering by suppressing the subject's awareness of it.

This turning point between the two visions of nature, one welcoming, one not, is another archetypal theme in Romantic nature art. Johnson, previously to his conception of the Romantic view of nature, invokes the two aspects of the “beautiful” and the “sublime” from Kant's *The Critique of Judgment* as a means of describing the two ways in which nature is constructed in Romantic culture.⁴⁹ Woodring also points to this construct, this time through Schiller's concepts of the “naive and sentimental” in poetry.⁵⁰ For Woodring, the “sentimental” subject approaches nature as an object to be related to, and reflecting human emotion, as opposed to the more direct, “naive”, at-one experience of nature *an sich*, “in itself”.

The beautiful-sublime dichotomy is perhaps best illustrated through the visual rather than the poetic arts. I have recourse here to two iconic and roughly contemporaneous canvases by major European landscape artists of the early Romantic era: *The Hay-Wain* of 1824, by the British painter John Constable (Ex. 2.2), and *Traveler Above a Sea of Clouds* from 1818 by his German counterpart Caspar David Friedrich (Ex 2.3).

⁴⁹ Johnson 1999, 44.

⁵⁰ Woodring 1989, 6.

Ex. 2.2 John Constable, “The Hay-Wain” (1824)



These two paintings, considered central works in the output of their creators, present quite clearly the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime in nature, and the relation between humanity and the surrounding natural world. On the one hand, Constable’s canvas presents an image of humanity comfortably, organically integrated into the natural world, toiling within it in harmony, central to creation, exploiting it for survival, but not in a dominating or destructive manner. Russell Noyes says of this painting, “The figures [...] all seem naturally called forth by, and form part of the landscape.”⁵¹ Contrasting this pastoral idyll is Friedrich’s depiction of a lone wanderer faced with the enormity of creation. Nature here is presented as distant, wild, awesome, threatening. The foregrounding of the human figure lends the image a faint air of desperation, as if by enlarging humanity in the face of sublime nature, its centrality to creation can be emphatically confirmed. Whereas Constable’s figures are shown in profile, their individuality at least partially revealed, Friedrich’s traveler is shown with his back to the viewer: faceless, a cipher, his selfhood subsumed by the vastness of nature.⁵²

⁵¹ Noyes 1968, 77.

⁵² It should be pointed out that, although Friedrich’s depiction of the “sublime” in the human-nature relationship in this canvas is visionary, it is in this regard quite exceptional in Friedrich’s output, which consists largely of Romantic-pastoral portrayals of humanity at one with nature (or dominating it) not dissimilar to Constable’s conception.

Ex. 2.3 Caspar David Friedrich, "Traveler Above a Sea of Clouds" (1818)



Nature is thus like a coin, possessing two faces: one warm and comforting, the other distant, ungraspable. The moment of narrative tension arises when the beautiful (or culturally constructed) gives way to the sublime (or “true” nature), joy and relief turning to awe, fear and incomprehension. Nature shifts from being a place of solace and comfort to a closed system, unknowable, inaccessible to humanity, at least on a conscious, emotional level. The tension is only resolvable in some other form of release.

Johnson’s examples of this narrative are Schubert’s two great nature-themed song cycles, *Die Schöne Müllerin* and *Die Winterreise*, both of which are obvious influences on Mahler’s *Gesellen* cycle in musical and narrative terms. The Mahlerian, perhaps proto-Expressionistic twist in the conventional venturing-into-nature narrative arc is how quickly in the process the protagonist realizes the falseness of the image of nature-as-mother: in the final bars of the otherwise brightly optimistic second song, “Gieng heut’ Morgen über’s Feld”. The hero’s joy at leaving behind his sorrows and immersing himself in the warm, nurturing cradle of nature are soured when he realizes that his joy is merely self-projection, with the natural world as canvas. The final lines of the text, meltingly beautiful in their musical setting, conceal the beginnings of a bitter disappointment: “Now surely my happiness begins?! / No! No! What I love / can never bloom for me!”⁵³ If the beautiful aspect of nature is presented in this context as comforting, it is ultimately short lived, as the initial tone, almost forcibly joyous following the melancholy of the first song, rapidly gives way to a quieter uncertainty before the pain of the end.⁵⁴ Now lost to humanity, the protagonist is at the mercy of a natural world that offers him nothing of that which he seeks.

At this early point, the reality of an uncaring, sublime nature, a dark undercurrent of the pastoral myth informing the lyric poetry of the era – and the music composed to it – is made unusually and cruelly explicit. This notion as well can be shown to have preoccupied Mahler from his earliest engagement with the idea of nature. Indeed, a different quotation from the letter referred to above reveals a deep ambivalence about the truth of the popular construction of nature as home or mother, an unease that takes aria-like form as Mahler addresses himself once again to the world at large:

⁵³ Mahler 1883-85 [Dover 1991], vii.

⁵⁴ The tonal scheme Mahler adopts for the song also points to a lack of resolution of the protagonist’s grief: beginning in a chirpy, rhythmically upbeat D major, the music modulates halfway to a distant, static, undulating B major symbolizing the protagonist’s immersion in the beauties of nature. The B major sonority begins to hover in the dominant region as the hero realizes his image of nature is a false one, and makes another surprise turn, modulating to F sharp major at the end, leaving the journey incomplete.

Now at last I know you as a liar! You have not deceived me with your illusions. Behold before you a man strong and unbowed, in spite of your playful gibbering deceits and the terrible strokes of your irony. [...] Can you conceive the unspeakable sorrow that through the ages has accumulated here until it has formed mountains? And on their peaks you sit enthroned, and laugh! How then will you reply to all this one day before the Avenger, you who have not allayed the sorrow of a single tormented soul!!!⁵⁵

The protagonist in the *Gesellen* songs thus suffers a twin rejection, first at the hands of his fellows, then by the natural world, heretofore mythologized as a locus of consolation for the world-weary human. The arc from initial suffering to false relief, secondary rejection, anger, resignation and the oblivion of rest are characterized in the cycle in almost bullet-point form in the texts of the four songs. Indeed, so sharply differentiated are the images and atmosphere of each of the songs that it is tempting to create a progression in a corresponding number of stages to trace this narrative of the protagonist in nature. It could be presented thus:

Stage 1: Suffering/longing	→	“Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht”
Stage 2: Consolation in nature, disappointment	→	“Ging heut’ Morgen über’s Feld”
Stage 3: Rejection, anger	→	“Ich hab’ ein glühend Messer”
Stage 4: Resignation, release/rest, forgetting	→	“Die zwei blauen Augen”

This progression, viewed here in embryonic form, maps broadly onto the subtler, more epic, more emotionally complex landscape of *Das Lied von der Erde*. The later work, for all its vastness of form and content,⁵⁶ at its core retains this essential narrative of the suffering wanderer seeking relief in nature (although nostalgic reminiscence and alcohol are also important way stations here), finding none, and embarking on a final journey into the wild, one with no return. The precise nature of the end point of this journey of leave-taking, though, is the one aspect of the progression that has yet to be discussed in any detail. The final outcome in Stage 4 of the protagonist finding no relief from his sufferings either in human society or in nature – with release or resolution here meant in an emotional, conscious sense – is an alarmingly final, seemingly unavoidable one, which takes a very specific musical form in Mahler.

⁵⁵ Quoted in La Grange 1973, 56.

⁵⁶ Wenk 1977, 41 points to the exceptional number of narrative personae in *Das Lied*, in contrast with the unified single perspective of the earlier song cycle.

Part III – Nature and the semiosis of death

Here we reach a point with a rather explicit outcome in the *Gesellen* cycle specifically, but which question is central to this nature narrative archetype more generally, and to the unfolding of “Der Abschied” as well. If the goal of withdrawal from society into nature – the finding of solace from human suffering – is ultimately denied the lyric protagonist in this narrative, what, then, can the outcome of this impasse be? If, as Johnson posits above, suffering cannot be alleviated here and now by abandoning oneself to the embrace of nature, and simple acceptance of suffering is untenable, what other possible escape is there? The question is once again one of mediation between poles – the human and natural worlds – and highlights an essential dichotomy similar to that detailed in Chapter 1, albeit this time on the narrative rather than strictly musical level. Similarly to the interaction between the linear and static temporal states, the two poles are presented as irreconcilable. Suffering or longing finds no outlet at either pole, thus requiring a drastic, explicit mediating act to achieve the goal of relief.

Confronted with the immutable fact of his humanity, with all its accompanying handicaps – consciousness, awareness, subjectivity – and the impassivity of the closed, non-conscious system of nature, the protagonist seeks a kind of dissolution into that system, a state of oneness with nature. If relief is unattainable from without – from the external world – then the only possible solution is to turn inward, to eliminate suffering at the source: to suppress the self, the conscious mind that enables the awareness of suffering, and forms the barrier between the individual subject and the larger, unconscious system of nature. The protagonist therefore turns on himself in a literal act of self-obliteration, characterized in any number of ways in the Romantic *Lied* repertoire: physical withdrawal (often expressed as a return “home”),⁵⁷ forgetfulness, intoxication, sleep or dream, and, at the extreme, death. Sleep in particular was closely linked with death in popular Romanticism, after its reintroduction into the discourse regarding death during the Enlightenment. As Nicholas Saul points out, “the analogy was the favorite instrument of Enlightenment philosophers for managing the fear of death, then particularly heightened thanks to the process of secularization.”⁵⁸ However, though the act itself may take various forms, the goal is one and the same. Therefore, within the parameters of this study, I feel comfortable drawing together all these manifestations under the simpler rubric of *loss of self*.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ It is telling that at this endpoint in the narrative of *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen*, the text makes literal reference to the concept of “Abschied”, of taking leave from the world of feeling.

⁵⁸ Saul 2009, 168.

⁵⁹ Saul also equates death with this notion, referring in one of his examples of Romantic attitudes toward death to the concept of “dissolution of the self” as a means toward “unity with the infinite” (Saul 2009, 167).

Similarly, while the language of loss of self may vary in the literature, in the works of Mahler under examination, the music that leads to it takes a singular, specific semiotic form. It is at this point that the discussion returns from the broader abstractions of narrative conventions to the specifics of musical topic. Faced with the impossibility of relief in either the human or natural worlds, the protagonist enters a kind of self-mourning I have termed the “death rite”, in which he resigns himself to oblivion. The music accompanying this process is a common musical topic in general, and especially so as an expression of finality or leave-taking in Mahler: the funeral march. The funeral march topic is an all-encompassing one that takes many forms in Mahler’s output, ranging from the quiet, contained march at the end of the *Gesellen* cycle to the heroic, dramatic, deeply theatrical funeral rites of the symphonies. One such example, the opening movement of the “Resurrection” Symphony, famously began its existence as a symphonic poem entitled “Totenfeier” (“Funeral Rites”), in homage to the departed hero of the First Symphony, itself based on music from the *Gesellen* cycle. However, I would submit that the funeral marches employed in “Die zwei blauen Augen” and “Der Abschied”, viewed in the context of the *Lied* narrative tradition, take on a different weight of meaning from the heroic marches of the symphonies.

Complicating the concept of self-mourning is the fact that neither of the two songs deals with images of literal death, approaching the topic only by inference or suggestion. As Donald Mitchell writes of the protagonist’s final sleep beneath the linden tree in “Die zwei blauen Augen”, “It would be possible, perhaps, to interpret the hero’s farewell to life as typically romantic posturing, not a declaration of fact.”⁶⁰ (However, one could counter this with Williamson, who says of *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen*, “In that cycle, losing oneself to nature is the only cure for a broken heart, and one suspects that to cure is to kill.”)⁶¹ “Der Abschied” is even more oblique in its references to the act of final leave-taking, speaking only of ideas of homecoming and an end to roaming. In addition, in the more complex form of the larger song, the funeral march is presented as an isolated musical interlude, rarely interacting with the text, an aspect of the form of “Der Abschied” which will receive more detailed discussion in subsequent chapters. However, the literalness of the funeral march topic in both songs, together with the relatively contained emotion or sense of purpose, the fundamental “seriousness” of these passages when compared with the outsized drama of the symphonies, suggest a common meaning.⁶²

⁶⁰ Mitchell 1975, 33. Mitchell also points to another song, “Nicht Wiedersehen” from 1888-89, which makes reference to the death of the protagonist’s beloved, whose music clearly recalls the funeral march of “Die zwei blauen Augen”. Mitchell also highlights Mahler’s wandering tonal schemes, which in his opinion suggest a journey without return.

⁶¹ Williamson 2011, 213.

⁶² Wenk 1977, 42 also points to the derivation of the music for the voice recitatives in “Der Abschied” from the theme of the funeral march in that song.

In addition to its defined role in the narrative structure of the text indicating self-mourning preceding loss of self, the music of the death rite also has a temporal dimension that links it to the scheme proposed in Chapter 1. Generally speaking, the funeral march, as a clear extra-musical stylistic reference, falls under the rubric of Level 1 topics, or those gestures with obvious references to objects or styles outside the abstract musical context of the work. Additionally, the harmonically and rhythmically static nature of the march topic casts it somewhat in opposition to the more progressive, contrapuntal, abstract music (i.e. non-topical, referring to the internal working-out processes of the music) occupying the other pole of the analytical model. Thus, while not specifically “of nature”, neither is the funeral march presented as exclusively of the human domain of progressive, teleological thought. The funeral march topic is a kind of procession without progress, whose goal is not a place toward which one moves, but an atemporal state outside the physical world. Thus does the funeral march act as a bridge between the “world’s course and that which is other”, to use Adorno’s phrasing; not being entirely of either pole, death mediates the two by straddling the threshold between them. The protagonist’s physical being is destroyed, and with it the idea of a self separate from the larger system of nature that denies him the sought-after sense of oneness or completion, of relief from suffering. Through death, writes Johnson, “the suffering individual is reclaimed by the body of nature.”⁶³

Completing the preliminary discussion of musical topics referring to nature, an interesting corollary to the death rite in Mahler is its close association with images of the maternal. Here Woodring and Johnson take the same view of nature as mother figure, with Johnson writing of the idea of homecoming or death that it “often comes with a strong maternal connotation.”⁶⁴ In Mahler’s music this idea also has a specific semiotic manifestation, a rocking figure oscillating between two static pitches, usually on the interval of a minor third. Briefly footnoted in Chapter 1 as an example of the category of background-foreground conflation, this musical figure is yet again adapted from the Johnson-Sims categories and termed the “lullaby”. Although the figure is quite consistent in its incarnation in Mahler, the gestural type itself has a long history of invoking the maternal vision of nature in the *Lied* repertoire. Of this type of figure, Johnson writes that the “alternation of two pitches, with its connotations of sleep, lullaby and the maternal” not only portrays “the landscape as ‘sleeping’, but [as] inviting the subject to be fused with it in sleep.”⁶⁵ The figure is readily observable in both “Die zwei blauen Augen” and at several points in “Der Abschied”,⁶⁶ texturally isolated at the outset of each appearance before giving way to, or gradually

⁶³ Johnson 1999, 44.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 44.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 68.

⁶⁶ See examples in Chapter 3.

becoming a more specifically melodic line. As will be argued in subsequent chapters, this figure, in association with the more stylistically obvious death rite music, also participates in the complex of semiotic ideas that signal the desire for a return to nature for Mahler.

Part IV – Narrative and semiosis in analysis

That death as the end point to the nature narrative is presented as an inevitable outcome is a central problem of the narrative of the *Gesellen* cycle, and goes to the core question of the ultimate meaning of “Der Abschied” as seen in the light of this important *Lied* narrative. More specifically, it presents a problem by the very fact that Mahler returns to this arc – of suffering leading to death in the cradle of nature – at the end of his career, having previously explored the idea repeatedly and quite conclusively. If death is the only possible end to suffering in this context, why does Mahler retrace his steps, metaphorically speaking, knowing where they lead? Although re-investigating a formal idea is in itself not impermissible, one does note in studying Mahler’s works that the composer was loath to repeat himself literally, and that despite broad thematic similarities between certain works (e.g. death, resurrection, heaven) Mahler never returned to a favorite concept – be it musical, structural or narrative – in quite the same way, subtly altering his outcomes with each iteration.

This question of repetition or retreading is an important one, in my view, because it creates a troubling dissonance between certain commonly accepted notions – about the *Lied* tradition in general and the meaning of “Der Abschied” more specifically – and the clear signals I believe are embedded in the music which can be used to formulate answers. It is broadly agreed in Mahler scholarship, based on voluminous correspondence documentation and other, more general Mahler lore, that *Das Lied von der Erde*, and “Der Abschied” in particular, are an expression of readiness for death, both within the narrative of the cycle itself, and on a personal level for Mahler, whose own approaching demise from an incurable cardiac condition is believed to have preoccupied him during the time of composing *Das Lied*. Thus far, the music does indeed seem to point in that morbid direction. As Carl Niekerk states in a recently published study of the composer, “*Das Lied von der Erde* is about the existential loneliness of human beings when facing death.”⁶⁷ But if abandoning oneself to nature inevitably equals death, then it would seem that returning to the idea, for Mahler, is something of an exercise in futility. Perhaps somewhat perversely, I would submit here that a sense of futility is exactly what Mahler signals through his

⁶⁷ Niekerk 2010, 206. Niekerk refers in the same passage to a “dying protagonist” at the end of “Der Abschied”. Niekerk’s statements here are meant to serve as an encapsulation of the general attitude toward the role of death in *Das Lied*. Similar interpretations by other authors will be presented and engaged in Chapter 4.

complex of semiotic ideas referring to nature, and that “Der Abschied” can actually be read as a critique of this narrative. The musical topics discussed in the preceding pages, most especially the funeral march, when examined from certain expressive and topical parameters like harmonic elaboration, orchestration, figuration, dynamics, and various kinds of stasis, can yield an impression of a “death rite” that is far from conclusive in its outcome. Indeed, I believe that Mahler in fact engages in a powerful act of satire or parody of the death-rite idea, as a means of re-evaluating the ultimate necessity of death as a part of the experience of at-oneness with nature. Despite a penetrating discussion of the possible meanings of the conclusion of “Der Abschied”, one that is equally impressive for its brevity, Niekerk nonetheless arrives at what might be called the standard interpretation of the significance of *Das Lied*. And while Niekerk may be correct in his overall statement about existential loneliness and death in *Das Lied*, I would submit that to apply this theme to the outcome of “Der Abschied” is to misunderstand (or overlook) the nature of the signals the music is sending. If this is the case, it would indicate that “Der Abschied” and, by extension, the whole of *Das Lied von der Erde*, have been misinterpreted as an expression of death for its protagonist.

As a corollary to this idea of parody as a re-examination of received wisdom, Mahler’s choice of texts for “Der Abschied” will be shown to play a central role in the outcome. Through his very choice of an Eastern-derived text, however numerous the layers of editorial patina, I mean to show that Mahler sought a radical solution to the problem of the inevitability of death in nature by importing one from outside that narrative. In a very Adornian act of redefinition of traditional thought patterns, I believe Mahler’s chosen texts, and the music they engender, lead in *Das Lied von der Erde* to an endpoint in the narrative that is very different from what he found at the conclusion of the *Gesellen* cycle.

Now that the background for my perspective on the music has been sufficiently laid out, we may turn our attention to the music itself. Chapter 3 will present, in concentrated form, my analysis of the complex of semiotic and temporal cues that manifest the idea of nature, with examples to illustrate the different semiotic categories detailed in Chapter 1, as well as encompassing aspects of textual and musical narrative from Chapter 2. The remainder of the study will be devoted to critical commentary on this analysis, as well as to how my interpretation interacts with existing ideas regarding the meaning of “Der Abschied”.

Chapter 3 – “Ich suche Ruhe für mein einsam Herz”: Nature in analysis

Whereas the construction of a general background to a reading of “Der Abschied”, as in the preceding chapters, is a relatively linear, easily categorized process, the analysis of the work itself is unfortunately not. While it is perhaps tempting to present an analytical portrait of the movement that encompasses all of its aspects under consideration in one illustration, in reality this would be to deny the multiple, simultaneous and, sometimes, non-temporal levels on which the music communicates. Since music signifies in so many superimposed ways, many without reference to linear temporal flow, the risk of becoming lost in the multitude of details, both semiotic and narrative, is too great. For this reason, I have opted in this chapter to present my deconstruction in somewhat piecemeal fashion, proceeding from the general to the particular, with the aim of first unraveling part of the complex system of signifiers, and basing on these analytical findings a more global interpretation of the work’s narrative and expressive content in Chapter 4.

Given the two-part structure of the analytical background posited in Chs 1 and 2, my presentation of the semiotic analysis itself will of necessity follow a similar outline. In Part I, I will provide a graphic overview of the various types and sub-types of semiotic gestures referring to nature which manifest over the course of “Der Abschied”, drawing on the three-level analytical model proposed in Chapter 1, and how these devices interact broadly with other main musico-analytical parameters, principally tonality and temporal unfolding. The aim will be to provide the reader with a sense of the larger semiotic picture of “Der Abschied” preceding a more detailed discussion of the various semiotic devices employed by Mahler. Following this, I will present an equally brief overview of the narrative trajectory in the text of the movement, with some discussion of how text and music interact on the general level. The more substantial Part II will consist simultaneously of: 1) a detailed presentation of the semiotic categories outlined in Chapter 1 and put into practice here, with numerous score examples to illustrate their musical manifestations, as well as a zoom-in on some sections for closer analysis; and, 2) a more fine-grained discussion of text-music relations, and their implications for the larger reading of the work going forward. Part III features an overview of the Layer 1 (concrete semiosis) topics touched on in the previous chapters, briefly outlining the relationship between them, and their function as narrative devices, as a way of transitioning to the larger discussion of narrative in Chapter 4.

Part I – Charting the semiosis of nature

Below is the principal analytical material of this chapter, a chart giving a formal semiotic overview of “Der Abschied” (see Table 3.1). The movement has been divided into six broad sections based on relatively straightforward criteria such as tonality, large-scale cadential gestures, and broad stylistic, textural and gestural cohesion within the divisions. The graphic preserves the three-level semiotic structure detailed in Chapter 1, dividing the semiotic complex of the music into concrete, abstract and temporal layers. The graph also contains a condensed legend for understanding the semiotic shorthand employed on Level 2 (Abstract semiosis).

Before proceeding, however, I feel it important to discuss those elements the graphic does not contain, and the reasons for their omission. As in Chapter 1, the focus here will be primarily on the two lowest layers of semiotic manifestation, Levels 2 (Abstract semiosis) and 3 (Temporal state, i.e. static vs. linear), with Level 1 left largely empty, except to note the few appearances in the movement of obvious extramusical gestural or stylistic references. As mentioned above, in this model the majority of upper-level, concrete semiotic signs of the nature idea are regarded as manifestations of the same deep-level static temporal state, and are thus treated as manifesting nature collectively despite their disparate surface characteristics.⁶⁸ As such, when a topic of this type appears, for example a birdcall, it can be linked to the static temporal state more generally, and to one or more of the abstract textural topics on Level 2 specifically. Furthermore, the primary focus of attention on Level 1 has been, and will continue to be the funeral march topic, a much more important concrete reference for the narrative of the piece.

Likewise, the reader will notice that despite “Der Abschied” being a vocal work, the text is not taken into account in the strictly musico-semiotic analysis. This is mainly due to the nature of setting text to music, whose interactions are far too subtle and complex to be summarized in the manner below. In presenting the semiotic overview of the movement, I wanted to sidestep the risk of implying direct, one-to-one structural or semiotic correspondences between music and text, where such certainties are difficult to establish, and the interaction between music and text is better done via inference and interpretation than strict association. For these reasons the text will be treated separately in this section in order to avoid creating the impression that the music is a direct depiction of the text, or vice versa. Kofi Agawu, in his seminal article on *Lied* analysis,

⁶⁸ Johnson, in his more recent work dealing specifically with Mahler, groups such Level 1 topics under three broad rubrics: birdsong (including other animal sounds), horn calls and bells. (Johnson 2009, 53 etc.). While the present study is written with an awareness of Johnson’s categorization, it is not taken into account as an analytical parameter. The reason for this is the greater focus here on temporal states and abstract semiosis, as detailed above, but also due to the simple fact that, while birdsong is certainly present in “Der Abschied”, the latter two of Johnson’s categories cannot be said to play a role in the movement, and therefore do not warrant their receiving special attention in this context.

surveys (albeit somewhat critically) a model for this type of analytical consideration of song, whereby text and music can be considered separately, but also together under a third analytical rubric of “song”, whereby the relationship between the two elements is one of free interaction rather than necessarily causal connection. As he writes:

[S]ome of the function of words may be explained exclusively in terms of the poem, just as the music may also have independent existence outside the song. At the same time, the explanatory domains of both words and music retain a degree of autonomy – words need not always be tied to musical functions, just as interesting or striking musical features need not be explained away as motivated by the words.⁶⁹

While most of the thematic and semiotic materials of “Der Abschied” are put forth in the opening section (section I in Table 3.1 below), the examples chosen in Part II are generally those that best illustrate the musical topics under discussion, irrespectively of whether or not the chosen passage represents the first appearance of a topic in the music. Moreover, while the following semiotic overview strives to be comprehensive, I will elucidate musical features in some passages that will also appear prominently in the narrative analysis to be presented in Chapter 4. Certain longer-term processes, notably those under semiotic categories 2 and 4 in Chapter 1, will be addressed in several ways over the remainder of the study owing to the complex nature of their constituent features, which range across several structural parameters of the music. This cross-relation between certain Layer 2 semiotic types is an important facet of this study. Although these topics are divided here into discrete categories, this is not to imply that they are by definition mutually exclusive. Rather, the Layer 2 topics should be seen as supporting each other, as well as describing similar musical phenomena. The distinction, then, is only that these topics are based on differing musical factors, but will be shown to possess a collective meaning.

⁶⁹ Agawu 1992, 7.

Formally speaking, the above graph does not follow more commonly agreed divisions of “Der Abschied” along textual and vocal lines. In standard interpretations of the song, it is generally divided into two large sections, placing the dividing line not coincidentally between the two Bethge poem adaptations, with the funeral march section (Section IV above) as the link between them.⁷⁰ These two primary units are then further divided into subsections tracking closely with the expressive quality of the vocal part, generally Recitatives versus Arias. I have eschewed this type of division for the simple reason that the present focus is on semiosis and temporality, and while changes in the vocal part’s expressive mode can be said in many places to agree with the sectional markers in Table 3.1, the vocal setting also frequently carries over the boundaries indicated above. For this reason, I have chosen to observe more closely the formal role of temporality in deciding where formal boundaries are to be placed.

In bringing text and music into closer proximity, more revealing than focusing on the type of vocal writing per se, I feel, is to observe independently the broader changes in expressive tone in the text itself, and to speculate on how these changes can be said to function in the larger musical context. To this end, Table 3.2 below posits an analytical overview of the text of “Der Abschied” taking into account two general modes of expression: 1) neutral or descriptive text (i.e. a tableau-like scene setting), and 2) emotional expression or reaction. This analysis, as well as the division into neutral and expressive modes, is loosely modeled on one given by Andrew Deruchie in his recent study of “Der Abschied” (although Deruchie uses the term “reflective” for the latter category).⁷¹ Also along the lines of Deruchie’s model, although my interpretation ultimately differs from his, the present analysis recognizes a more ambiguous emotional state in the final lines of the text, those of the Coda (See Table 3.1, Section VI), neither neutrally descriptive nor obviously emotional, as indicated in italics.⁷²

Despite departing from more conventional formal divisions, it is still worth noting that that in the course of the vocal part, the arioso and recitative passages that more usually mark sectional divisions track broadly with the neutral/descriptive and emotionally expressive text passages indicated in Table 3.2, with a few minor exceptions. More interesting for the present purpose, though, is to note how closely the two expressive states match with the basic temporal divisions on Level 1 of Table 3.1. To a very accurate degree, the two temporal states of static and linear in Table 3.1 coincide in Table 3.2 with text passages featuring, respectively, the neutral and emotional expressive modes, as shown in Table 3.3 below.

⁷⁰ See Deruchie 2009, 85, or Hefling 2000, 106, for examples of such formal perspectives on “Der Abschied”.

⁷¹ Deruchie 2009, 86-87.

⁷² Following Deruchie’s model, the use of metaphor, or comparisons of nature imagery to human structures (eg. “O sieh! Wie eine Silberbarke schwebt der Mond...”) are treated as emotional expression, in that they project human reactions onto natural phenomena, and thus cannot be labeled as purely descriptive language.

Table 3.2: Expressive structure of text in “Der Abschied”

Legend → Normal type: Neutral, descriptive
 → **Bold type**: Emotional expression

→ *Italics*: Blending of two states

Die Sonne scheidet hinter dem Gebirge.
 In allen Tälern steigt der Abend nieder
 Mit seinen Schatten, die voll Kühlung sind.
**O sieh! Wie eine Silberbarke schwebt
 Der Mond am blauen Himmelssee herauf.**
 Ich spüre eines feinen Windes Wehn
 Hinter den dunklen Fichten!

The sun departs behind the mountains.
 Into all the valleys the evening descends
 With its shadows, which are full of coolness.
**Oh see! Like a silver barque
 The moon floats upward on the blue lake of heaven.**
 I feel a soft wind blowing
 Behind the dark spruces.

Der Bach singt voller Wohllaut durch das Dunkel.
 Die Blumen blassen im Dämmerchein.
 Die Erde atmet voll von Ruh und Schlaf,
**Alle Sehnsucht will nun träumen.
 Die müden Menschen gehn heimwärts,
 Um im Schlaf vergeßnes Glück
 Und Jugend neu zu lernen!**
 Die Vögel hocken still in ihren Zweigen.
 Die Welt schläft ein!

The brook sings, full of pleasant sound, through the dark.
 The flowers pale in the twilight,
 The earth breathes, full of quiet and sleep.
**All longing now wants to dream,
 Weary men go homeward
 To learn again in sleep
 Forgotten happiness and youth**
 The birds perch quietly in their branches,
 The world falls asleep

Es wehet kühl im Schatten meiner Fichten.
 Ich stehe hier und harre meines Freundes;
 Ich harre sein zum letzten Lebewohl.

A cool breeze blows in the shade of my spruces.
 I stand here and await my friend;
 I await him for a final farewell.

**Ich sehne mich, o Freund, an deiner Seite
 Die Schönheit dieses Abends zu genießen.
 Wo bleibst du ...? Du läßt mich lang allein!**
 Ich wandle auf und nieder mit meiner **Laute**
**Auf Wegen, die vom weichen Grase schwellen.
 O Schönheit! O ewigen Liebens –
 Lebenstrunkne Welt!**

**I long, O friend, to enjoy
 The beauty of this evening at your side.
 Where are you? You leave me alone so long!**
 I walk up and down with my lute
 On paths that swell with soft grass
**O beauty! O world drunk with eternal love and
 life!**

Er stieg vom Pferd und reichte ihm den Trunk
 Des Abschieds dar. Er fragte ihn, wohin
 Er führe und auch warum es müßte sein.
 Er sprach, seine Stimme war umflort: Du, mein
 Freund,
**Mir war auf dieser Welt das Glück nicht hold!
 Wohin ich geh? Ich geh, ich wandre in die Berge.
 Ich suche Ruhe für mein einsam Herz.
 Ich wandle nach der Heimat, meiner Stätte.
 Ich werde niemals in die Ferne schweifen.
 Still ist mein Herz und harret seiner Stunde!**

He alighted from his horse and offered him the draught
 Of farewell. He asked him where
 He was bound and also why it had to be.
 He spoke, his voice was veiled: My friend,
Fortune was not kind to me in this world!
 Where do I go? I walk, I wander into the mountains.
**I seek peace for my lonely heart.
 I go to my homeland, my abode!
 I will never roam in distant lands.
 My heart is still and awaits its hour.**

*Die liebe Erde allüberall
 Blüht auf im Lenz und grünt aufs neu!
 Allüberall und ewig
 Blauen licht die Fernen!
 Ewig... ewig...*

*The beloved earth everywhere blossoms and greens in
 springtime anew.
 Everywhere and forever the distances brighten blue!
 Forever... Forever...*

Translator: Deryck Cooke (Mitchell 1985, 337)

Table 3.3: Emotional expressive mode and linear temporality in “Der Abschied”

Legend → Normal type: Neutral, descriptive
 → **Bold type**: Emotional expression
 → *Italics*: Blending of two states

Incidence of linear temporality

Die Sonne scheidet hinter dem Gebirge.
 In allen Tälern steigt der Abend nieder
 Mit seinen Schatten, die voll Kühlung sind.
**O sieh! Wie eine Silberbarke schwebt
 Der Mond am blauen Himmelssee herauf.**
 Ich spüre eines feinen Windes Wehn
 Hinter den dunklen Fichten!

mm. 32 → 39 ca. (Reh. 4 → 5)
 ↓

Der Bach singt voller Wohllaut durch das Dunkel.
 Die Blumen blassen im Dämmerchein.
 Die Erde atmet voll von Ruh und Schlaf,
**Alle Sehnsucht will nun träumen.
 Die müden Menschen gehn heimwärts,
 Um im Schlaf vergeßnes Glück
 Und Jugend neu zu lernen!**
 Die Vögel hocken still in ihren Zweigen.
 Die Welt schläft ein!

Reh 14 → 17 incl.
 ↓
 ↓
 ↓

Es wehet kühl im Schatten meiner Fichten.
 Ich stehe hier und harre meines Freundes;
 Ich harre sein zum letzten Lebewohl.

**Ich sehne mich, o Freund, an deiner Seite
 Die Schönheit dieses Abends zu genießen.
 Wo bleibst du ...? Du läßt mich lang allein!**
 Ich wandle auf und nieder mit meiner **Laute**
**Auf Wegen, die vom weichen Grase schwellen.
 O Schönheit! O ewigen Liebens –
 Lebenstrunkne Welt!**

Reh. 24 → 29 incl.
 ↓
 ↓
Reh. 31 → 35 incl.
 ↓
 ↓
 ↓

Er stieg vom Pferd und reichte ihm den Trunk
 Des Abschieds dar. Er fragte ihn, wohin
 Er führe und auch warum es müßte sein.
 Er sprach, seine Stimme war umflort: Du, mein
 Freund,
**Mir war auf dieser Welt das Glück nicht hold!
 Wohin ich geh? Ich geh, ich wandre in die Berge.
 Ich suche Ruhe für mein einsam Herz.
 Ich wandle nach der Heimat, meiner Stätte.
 Ich werde niemals in die Ferne schweifen.
 Still ist mein Herz und harret seiner Stunde!**

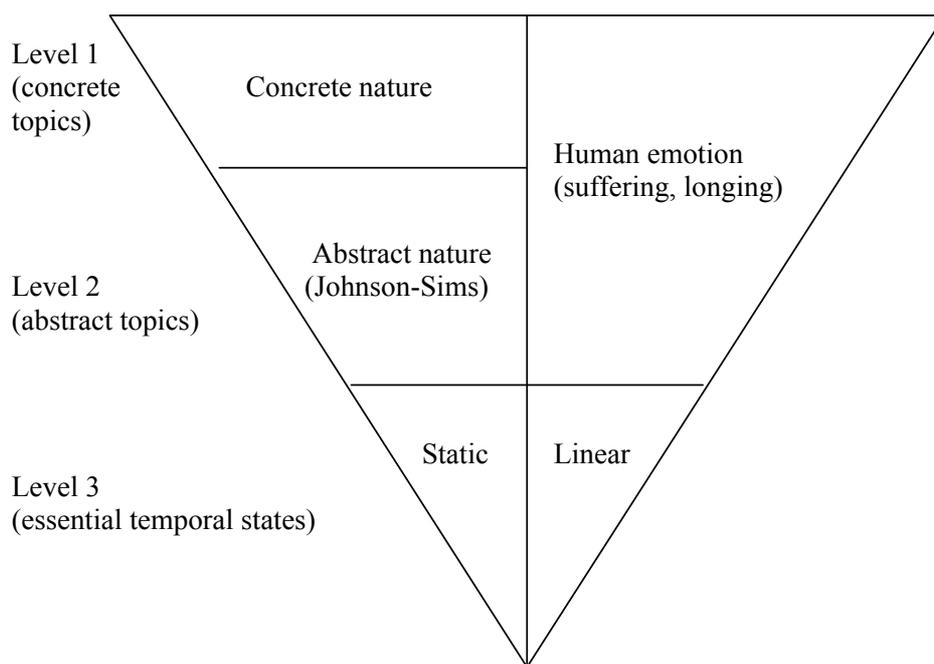
Reh. 51 → 54 incl.
 ↓
 ↓
(Reh. 55-56: briefly Static/slow Linear to m. 441)
m. 442 → Reh. 57 incl.
 ↓

*Die liebe Erde allüberall
 Blüht auf im Lenz und grünt aufs neu!
 Allüberall und ewig
 Blauen licht die Fernen!
 Ewig... ewig...*

Reh. 58 → 61 incl.
 ↓
 ↓
Reh. 62 → 63 incl. (very weak Linear)
[STATIC]

This observation is important for the semiotic analysis because it completes at last the model proposed in Chapter 1 (see p. 16). While the static temporal state had been posited as the source of the upper-level manifestations of nature topics, the linear temporal state was heretofore said to refer to the more abstract, goal-oriented working-out processes of the music, and had yet to acquire a semiotic identity or significance of its own beyond the label of “not-nature” in Chapter 1. However, proceeding from Adorno’s notion of all elements of Mahler’s music having a semiotic function, the association of text and music here suggests a strong semiotic connection between linear (i.e. contrapuntal, harmonically functional) musical motion and the expression of emotion on one hand, and between nature and the more neutrally descriptive text passages on the other (as shown in Table 3.4 below). More notable still is the *quality* of emotion encompassed in those linear passages of “Der Abschied” under consideration: longing, weariness, loneliness, the search for an end to wandering (the “lute” metaphor being emblematic of wandering). In this sense, the linear state is very much representative of “the world’s course”, as Adorno would have it, the constructs of human consciousness and individuality posited against the unconscious mass, the “other” of nature. In the narrative sense, the emotional suffering or longing that sends the protagonist into nature to find relief is quite concretely embodied in the teleological, goal-directed, striving processes of contrapuntal harmonic relationships. Thus, the tension between the polar states of linear/static and suffering/nature is made explicit in the structure of the music itself, and the model from Chapter 1 can be revised as follows:

Table 3.4: Semiotic hierarchy in “Der Abschied”, revised



The implications of this association, and the completion of the semiotic model, are manifold, and will be explored in several ways over the remainder of the study. For one, the way in which the two polar states of linearity and stasis (and therefore human suffering and neutral nature) interact, and how that interaction plays out over the span of the piece, will need to be examined from the perspective of several musical parameters: semiotic, harmonic and textual (in the sense of vocal setting). On the purely narrative level, this duality will be revealed to have a major effect on the final outcome of the protagonist-in-nature plot, in particular how the “death rite” stage of that narrative is negotiated. As mentioned in the caveat heading this chapter, at this point musical and narrative ideas have become so intertwined as to be inseparable, and are thus difficult to discuss in isolation. For this reason, subsequent discussion will of necessity blend the two in a freer manner than previously, with musical ideas having narrative implications, and narrative ideas requiring support from the musical structure. However, in keeping with the established pattern of musical considerations occupying the first position in the discussion, I feel it is best to proceed with a closer examination of the semiosis of nature in “Der Abschied”, as detailed in Layer 2 of Table 3.1 above.

Part II – Abstract semiosis in detail

By way of preface to a more detailed analysis of selected sections from “Der Abschied”, it is perhaps best to provide concrete examples of the various types of nature-as-stasis semiosis referenced in Table 3.1, in order that the reader may gain a greater familiarity with them on a purely visual level, the better to observe them from the score. Therefore, below is a detailing of the semiotic types from Layer 2 in Table 3.1 (see Chapter 1 for definitions), with a selection of score examples drawn from various points in the song. As many of these devices recur throughout the song in both concept and musical character, the examples will highlight their first notable appearance, with further examples showing elaborations or variations on the basic semiotic premise. As such, a significant number of the examples will be drawn from the opening section of the piece (Table 3.1, Section I), as this is where the main musical materials are first presented. Category 4 (Evaporation of directed motion), because it refers to a longer-term process encompassing a number of musical parameters – pitch, harmony, rhythm, meter, texture and register – requires a more detailed division into its constituent components. As the main appearance of this type is in the Coda (Section VI), the examples will be drawn from this section and discussed as a global phenomenon. As mentioned in Chapter 1, these semiotic types tend to manifest in groups rather than as discrete entities, so while examples may feature several types simultaneously, initially the focus will be placed on the specific type under discussion.

I have opted to show these semiotic devices in full score rather than piano reduction. Despite Mahler having made the highly detailed piano score of *Das Lied von der Erde* himself, as he did for all his songs,⁷³ (and contrary to the reductions of his symphonies, which were done by others) these nature semiosis devices are frequently highly dependent on texture, instrumentation and spatial perspective within the full orchestra for their effect. For this reason, it is important, I believe, to show as much detail as possible beyond simply pitch and register.

1) Pitch-related topics

1A) The pedal (or sustained harmonic entity)

This is perhaps the simplest and most common semiotic type used in “Der Abschied”, emphasizing nature’s primal, immutable aspect. Its initial appearance is at the opening of the song, a subterranean stroke in the lowest orchestral register combining pitch and noise over a pedal C (Ex. 3.1).

Ex. 3.1, “Der Abschied”, mm. 1-6

The musical score for Ex. 3.1, “Der Abschied”, mm. 1-6, is presented in a full orchestral score format. The instruments listed on the left are: 1. Oboe., Kontra-Fagott., 1. 3. Horn. in F., 2. 4. Horn., Tamtam., 1. Harfe., 2. Harfe., Violoncell., and Kontrabaß. The tempo is marked **Schwer.** (Adagio). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and the time signature is 4/4. The score shows a complex texture with a prominent pedal point in the lowest register, primarily in the Kontrabaß and Violoncello parts. Dynamics range from pianissimo (pp) to fortissimo (ff). The Oboe part has markings *f* and *p*. The Horns and Tamtam parts have markings *pp* and *ff*. The Harps have markings *f* and *pp*. The Violoncell. and Kontrabaß parts have markings *pp* and *ff*. The score is marked with *pp* and *ff* dynamics. The Oboe part has markings *f* and *p*. The Horns and Tamtam parts have markings *pp* and *ff*. The Harps have markings *f* and *pp*. The Violoncell. and Kontrabaß parts have markings *pp* and *ff*. The score is marked with *pp* and *ff* dynamics.

Although the gesture itself is repeated over many strokes of various durations, the C pedal itself acts as the structural underpinning for the entire opening of the song through Reh. 4 and beyond, encompassing different types of pedal-point texture. The other common type of pedal, used throughout the song, occurs in the first recitative, another simple texture involving the vocal line and a long sustained tone (Ex. 3.2).

⁷³ See Hefling 1992, 296-7, for detailed discussion of Mahler’s piano reductions.

Ex 3.2, “Der Abschied”, mm 21-26

1. Fl. *pp* *sempre pp*

Alt-St. bir - ge. In al - le Tä - ler steigt der A - bend nie - der mit sei - nen Schat - ten,

Vlc.

1. Fl. *pp* *morendo*

Alt-St. die voll Küh - lung sind.

Vlc. *morendo*

It is worth noting at this point that, despite identifying both the above types of gesture as pedals, they are in certain respects quite different. Most obviously, the musical execution of the “pedal” concept differs in the two previous examples in that the latter features a sustained drone in a single instrumental color, while the former presents a more atomized perspective, fracturing the actual pitch across several instruments, with the added element of noise from the tam-tam, as well as rearticulations of the pitch at increasingly irregular intervals as the section progresses past the passage shown in Ex. 3.1 (see to Reh. 2 in the score). In this sense, it is worthwhile to note the intimate connection between the pedal idea and harmonic stasis more globally. Thus, while a pedal device may be fractured in execution, and even sometimes venture away briefly from the focus pitch, the basic element of music gravitationally bound to an unchanging pitch and register is the factor that unites all such gestures in this category. As will be shown later, further fragmentation of the idea of a harmonic pedal as a sustained tone occurs as the song develops, and the pedal type begins to interact with other semiotic categories.

1B) Saturation of the diatonic field

This semiotic type is one which occurs very gradually over the course of the movement, slowly making its presence felt in a way that makes it difficult to isolate a specific appearance. Nonetheless, as its manifestations center around the same musical idea throughout “Der Abschied”, it is relatively easy to track. Ex. 3.3 below shows the first appearance of the saturation idea.

Ex. 3.3 “Der Abschied”, mm. 165-171

Although its appearance is brief and gives way immediately after the excerpted passage to linear music with a clear melodic profile, these few measures highlight the pitch-saturating tendency that will ultimately be shown to dominate the entire texture by the end of “Der Abschied”. Over a stable, rocking figure in the mid-register⁷⁴ that outlines the upper third of an implied B \flat major triad – the key is only firmly established by the B \flat introduced in the bass immediately after the passage above – the flutes begin a fragmentary, additive rising gesture that comes to encompass six of the seven diatonic pitches of the B \flat scale. While in this spare texture the saturation effect is not yet fully felt, as the motif recurs it acquires more support from the surrounding texture, creating a kind of artificial resonance in which all the pitches ring more or less simultaneously. With reference to this topic, pitches lying outside the tonic triad are not dissonances in the conventional sense, whereby they would require resolution at some point. Rather, they form a stable, saturated harmonic structure in which the tonal impetus of the non-triadic pitches toward resolution, the contrapuntal tension in the music, is lessened or negated. Ex. 3.4 (from Reh. 30) shows the next occurrence of this topic, in which the scale begins to saturate the texture more obviously.

⁷⁴ The further semiotic significance of this figure, the “lullaby” idea signaling a desire for unity and oneness with nature first mentioned in Chapter 2, will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, and also as a narrative function in Chapter 4.

Ex. 3.4 "Der Abschied", mm. 225-234

30

Poco rit. a tempo, sehr fließend

1.2. Fl.
1.2. Kl.
in B.
B.-Kl.
in B.
1.2. Fag.
3. Fag.
1.3. Hr.
in F.
2.4. Hr.
1.2. Pos.
3. Pos.
Mandol.
1. Harfe.
2. Harfe.
1. VI.
2. VI.
Br.
Alt-St.
Vlc.
Kb.

du läßt mich lang al - lein!

30

Ex. 3.4 cont. “Der Abschied”, mm. 235-244

zu 2 **Sich beruhigend.**

1. & 2. Fl. zu 2

1. & 2. Kl. in B zu 2

1. & 2. Fag. zu 2 *pp*

1. Hr. in F *pp*

Mandol.

1. Harfe.

2. Harfe.

Sich beruhigend.

1. Vl. *sempre pp*

2. Vl. *pizz.* *arco* *pizz.* *arco* *pizz.*

Br. *arco* *pp*

Alt.-St. Ich wand - - le auf und nie - - der mit mei - ner

Vlc.

The fullest manifestation of the diatonic saturation device, of course, appears in the Coda section. So much is made in studies of “Der Abschied” about the supposed pentatonicism at work in this passage, and in *Das Lied* more generally, that it has become virtually axiomatic in the field of Mahler research to mention this facet of the work. Even more recent studies concerned with renewing the way *Das Lied* is viewed make reference to pentatonicism in some form in passages like those in Exs. 3.3 and 3.4.⁷⁵ However, this bit of orientalism on Mahler’s part is better viewed, in my opinion, as a function of the static temporal state, and its associated invocation of nature, than as a specific leaning toward Asian melodic elements. Ex. 3.5 shows the Coda music at its most diatonically saturated point (although the process begins earlier, at Reh. 63), in which six of the seven pitches of the scale, this time C major, are active in the texture simultaneously.

⁷⁵ See eg. Johnson 2009, 69, and Deruchie 2009, 97.

Ex. 3.5 "Der Abschied", mm. 529-539

68

1.2. Fl. zu 2
1.2. Ob. zu 2
1.2. Kl. in B.
1.2. Fag.
1.2. Hr. in F.
4. Hr.
1.2. Pos. offen
3. Pos. offen
Cel.
Mandol. p
1. Harfe.
2. Harfe. p
1. Vl. G-Saite ppp espr.
2. Vl. G-Saite ppp espr.
Br. mit Dämpfer pp
Vcl. pizz. pp
Kb. pizz. pp

68

In addition to clearly illustrating the saturation idea at its most developed, this passage also serves to put the lie to the notion of pentatonicism, at least as far as “Der Abschied” is concerned. The argument supporting the presence of the pentatonic scale in this music tends to center around the final chord of the song, a pitch cluster rising upward from middle C in close formation, C-D-E-G-A. While it is possible to apprehend a sense of pentatonicism in the absence of semitones in this texture (which creates the “gapped” or anhemitonic effect characteristic of many such scale collections), this piece of received wisdom fails to acknowledge the leading tone B repeatedly emphasized in the texture by the upper winds as the endpoint in their rising line, but which crucially does not resolve upward to C. Despite the fact that the B is progressively left out of the texture toward the end, this lack of resolution means that it remains an active tone in the harmony, alive in the ear of the listener if not literally present in the texture. In light of this, it would seem that the conclusion of “Der Abschied” is hexatonic rather than pentatonic, and this phenomenon more properly belongs under the diatonic rubric, in my view, and is why the designation of diatonic saturation is appropriate here.

By way of a final point regarding this important semiotic type, it is important to note that by the end of the movement, the feeling of diatonic saturation is as much a function of rhythm and meter as it is of pitch, in the sense that, as the music progresses, the surrounding rhythmic texture slowly dissolves, making pulse and metrical reference more difficult to perceive, thus lessening the tonal impetus of the pitches of the scale and creating a sense of saturated stasis. In this way, diatonic saturation ties significantly into several of the other semiotic types to be discussed below, and illustrates the claim that, despite their superficial differences, these types function as a global unit in manifesting the idea of nature in “Der Abschied”.

2) Rhythmical/metrical topics

2A) Weakening of metrical divisions

The weakening of metrical divisions or emphasis is another semiotic type, like the saturation effect describe above, that accretes very slowly over the course of the song, and only occurs in small patches in the early stages. The first clear early instance occurs in a passage covered above under diatonic saturation (see Ex. 3.3, score Reh. 23). In this passage, although the meter is indicated as 3/4, the emphasis within the measure is audibly a two-beat pattern in 6/8. Over the top of this rocking figure, the flute melody seems to occupy a rhythmic sphere of its own, starting from the prevailing 6/8 pulse, but quickly moving out of synchronization with it as the line moves upward. The effect of metrical distortion is further compounded by the violins and violas. Respectively, the two string groups echo the initial rising third of the flute melody and the rocking

The most decisive occurrence of metrical weakening occurs later in the Coda section, at Rehs. 58-59 (Ex. 3.8), where the indicated 3/4 meter is pulled at from all quarters, such that divisions of the meter range from 2 to 12, with frequently adjacent (and rhythmically non-compatible) subdivisions of 2 against 3, 3 against 4 against 9, etc. The cumulative effect as the Coda progresses and the subdivisions give way to a rhythmically animated, but aimless stasis, is a gradual opening outward of metrical emphasis, from beat to measure to long, breath-like phrases of irregular length, in which the prevailing 3/4 measure itself becomes the basic pulse unit. In this way, metrical division, or counted time, gives way to a pulsed, but in the hypermetrical sense only sporadically articulated rhythmic structure.

Ex 3.8 “Der Abschied”, mm. 460-466

The musical score for "Der Abschied" (mm. 460-466) is presented in a multi-staff format. The score includes parts for two harps (1. Harfe and 2. Harfe), two violins (1. Vl. and 2. Vl.), a viola (Vcl.), a cello (Kb.), a double bass (Kb.), and a vocal line (Alt-St.). The tempo and dynamics are marked as *Langsam! PPP! Ohne Steigerung. NB.*. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "lie - - - le Er - - de all - ü - ber - all". The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and irregular groupings, which contribute to the metrical weakening described in the text. The score is marked with measure numbers 58 and 59 at the beginning and end of the excerpt.

Ex 3.8 cont. "Der Abschied", mm. 467-473

The musical score for Ex 3.8 cont. "Der Abschied", mm. 467-473, is a complex orchestral and vocal work. It features a variety of instruments including woodwinds (flutes, bassoons, oboes, clarinet), brass (trumpets, trombones), strings (violin, viola, cello, double bass), harp, and voice (alto). The vocal line, marked 'Alt-St.', has the lyrics: "blüht auf im Lenz und grünt aufs". The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *sf*, and *pp*, and performance instructions like "zu 2" and "arco". The music is characterized by a contained movement, with rhythmic activity restricted to a narrow register and a harmonically static texture.

2B) Contained movement

Contained movement is another topical category with implications for others. Simply put, the topic features the restriction of rhythmic activity to a very narrow registral band within a harmonically static texture, contained within an equally narrow dynamic range. Such figuration has already been seen in Exs 3.3 through 3.5 above, in which the oscillating third figures and rising "pentatonic" melodic fragments are confined to a narrow register. The former neither vary nor develop rhythmically, and the latter feature little in the way of melodic aim, rather focusing on cycling through the available pitch material in slow, upward expanding gestures, but with no pitch given particular rhythmic or metrical emphasis. In Ex. 3.7 a similar effect is observed, with the rhythmic activity confined to a third-sized slice of the bass register, while melodic and motivic gestures proliferate above it in irregular fashion, and again at Reh. 55-56 (Ex. 3.9), where the contained movement is shifted back to the mid-register. Although the flute melody in Ex. 3.9 grows to occupy a larger tessitura as the texture develops and its tune becomes more *arioso* in quality and expression, in the static, oscillating opening its activity is also limited to a small wedge of its available register. This division of the registral material into discrete, quasi-independent

Ex. 3.10 "Der Abschied", mm. 520-528

The musical score for "Der Abschied" (mm. 520-528) is a complex orchestral arrangement. It features the following instruments and parts:

- 1.2. Fl.** (Flutes): Part of the woodwind section, marked "zu 2".
- 1.2. Ob.** (Oboes): Part of the woodwind section, marked "zu 2".
- 1.2. Kl. in B.** (Clarinets in B): Part of the woodwind section.
- 1.2. Fag.** (Bassoons): Part of the woodwind section.
- 1.2. Hr. in F.** (Horns in F): Part of the brass section, marked "mit Dämpfer" (with mutes).
- Cel.** (Cello): Solo part with intricate rhythmic patterns, marked "pp".
- 1. Harfe.** (1st Harp): Solo part with intricate rhythmic patterns, marked "pp".
- 2. Harfe.** (2nd Harp): Solo part.
- 1. Vi.** (1st Violin): Part of the string section.
- 2. Vi.** (2nd Violin): Part of the string section, marked "zu 2" and "pp".
- Br.** (Trombone): Part of the brass section, marked "zu 2" and "pp".
- Alt-St.** (Alto Saxophone): Part of the woodwind section, playing the vocal line "e - wig, e - wig,".
- Vlc.** (Viola): Part of the string section, marked "zu 2" and "pp".
- Kb.** (Cello/Double Bass): Part of the string section, marked "zu 2" and "pp".

The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp* (pianissimo) and *p* (piano), and the instruction "zu 2" (ritardando). The page number "65" is visible at the top and bottom of the score.

In this manner, the contained movement topic creates an impression of ceaseless rhythmic activity and fullness within the texture, but without implying forward motion in the tonal sense, grounded as it is to its harmonically static surroundings. Likewise, though the resulting texture can and should be viewed as a single gestural and topical entity, the relative rhythmic independence of the individual layers of material is a notable feature of the contained motion topic.

3) Textural topics

3A) Background-foreground conflation

In this topic, the textural functions of musical materials as melody or accompaniment are rendered ambiguous or dissolved altogether into a unified field of sound. The topic is also one that increases in importance over the course of “Der Abschied”, again playing a significant role in the inexorable move toward the final stasis of the Coda. It is also linked intimately to the rocking third figure discussed above, which makes its first, ephemeral appearance at Reh. 7 (Ex. 3.11).

Ex. 3.11 “Der Abschied”, mm. 55-61

1. Cb. **7**
Sehr mäßig. (♩ wie vorher ♩)
1. & 2. Kl. in B. *zu 2*
1. Hfe. *p* mit Mediator
2. Hfe. *p*
7

Although the topic only appears in embryonic form, the effect is immediately noticeable. The rocking third figure is isolated as a foreground element for a longer interval than might be expected. This tiny lag creates, however briefly, a sense of possible melodic direction until the oboe enters above it, providing perspective within the texture, and relegating the rocking third figure to the background or accompaniment level.⁷⁷ The rocking figure recurs within a very different texture at Reh. 18 (Ex. 3.12), in which its expected role as accompaniment material is subverted by the fragmentary nature of the surrounding, birdcall-like melodic gestures. In this passage, where even the solo vocal part cannot be said to have a true melodic profile, the difference between foreground and background is obscured to the point of irrelevance, granting all gestures a relative importance within the texture.

⁷⁷ A similar passage at Reh. 13 features an even longer delay before the entry of the melody line, thus affording the rocking figure even more prolonged prominence in the texture.

The truest example of background-foreground conflation can be observed in a type of texture that has already been explored in conjunction with diatonic saturation (type 1B) and contained movement (type 2B). At Reh. 23 (see Ex. 3.3 above), in the first appearance of the so-called “pentatonic” or gapped-scale flute melody, the difference between foreground and background material is further obscured by the cyclical, aimless nature of the melodic line. Despite its entry soon after the rocking figure starts, it does not come to dominate the texture in a directional manner, as happens with the oboe entry in Ex. 3.11. The two elements are in essence equal, neither having a profile strong enough to differentiate it as either foreground or background. The effect is strengthened by the absence of bass in the texture, giving a free-floating feeling to the gapped-scale material, anchored to no specific pitch harmonically.

This same texture becomes a recurrent element throughout the song, deepening the effect of foreground-background conflation with each appearance. The next such occurs at Reh. 30 (see Ex. 3.13), in which even the vocal part is subsumed into the surrounding material, sharing the rising gapped-scale material with the woodwinds in a free, heterophonic⁷⁸ canon while the rocking figure is shared around the mid-register in the harps and violas. Even the decorative upper violin line, a new feature in this texture, has a cyclical quality to it, hovering around the same few pitch cells in free contrary motion to the flute/voice line below. This magical suspension effect is only disrupted at Reh. 31 with the entry of a moving bass line, which once again restores functionality to the pitch material, as well as greater perspective to the texture. The vocal part immediately assumes a more conventionally melodic, directional profile, and the rocking figurations recede to their expected function in the background. This texture is then taken to its fullest extent in the Coda, in which progressively the melodic material is pared down to the smallest possible oscillations between pitches: the rocking, arpeggiated thirds, and the gapped-scale cluster (C-D-E-G-A-[B]). The vocal part is given no melodic prominence, oscillating between the pitches E and D, becoming only one contained, cyclical element among others of equal textural importance (see Exs 3.10 and 3.16).

⁷⁸ Heterophony (rather than homophony or polyphony) will be shown in Chapter 4 to become the dominant textural idea in the Coda section, with repercussions on the music that are better discussed in the context of narrative.

Ex. 3.13 "Der Abschied", mm. 225-234

30

Poco rit. a tempo, sehr fließend

1.2. Fl. *zu 2*
1.2. Kl. in B. *fp cresc. - ff*
B.-Kl. in B. *fp cresc. - ff*
1.2. Fag. *zu 2 fp cresc. - ff*
3. Fag. *ff p cresc. - ff*
1.3. Hr. in F. *molto cresc. - f*
2.4. Hr. *p cresc. - f*
1.2. Pos. *fp p cresc. (Pedalton.) - f*
3. Pos. *fp p cresc. - f*
Mandol. *p*
1. Harfe. *ff*
2. Harfe. *pp*
1. VI. *ff sf p cresc. - f pp subito espress. pizz. arco*
2. VI. *ff sf p cresc. - f pp zu 2 pizz.*
Br. *sf p cresc. - f*
Alt-St. *du läßt mich lang al - lein!*
Vlc. *ff p molto cresc. - ff*
Kb. *sf f*

30

Ex. 3.13 (cont.) "Der Abschied", mm. 235-253

Sich beruhigend.

1. & 2. Fl. *zu 2*

1. & 2. Kl. in B.

1. & 2. Fag. *zu 2*

1. Hr. in F

Mandol.

1. Harfe

2. Harfe

Sich beruhigend.

1. VI. *sempre pp pizz.*

2. VI. *arco pizz.*

Br. *arco pp*

Alt-St. *2*

Vcl. *2*

Ich wand - - le auf und nie - - der mit mei - ner

31 *Wieder sehr ruhig. (3/4)* 32

1. Harfe

2. Harfe

Wieder sehr ruhig. (3/4)

1. VI. *pp*

2. VI. *arco pp*

Br. *pp*

Alt-St. *2 (pp)*

Lau - - - te auf We - gen, die von wei - chem Gra - - -

Mit großer Empfindung, aber zart und weich.

Vcl. *pp*

Kb. *arco pp*

31 32

3B) Distance as mystery

This topic is one of the most prominent textural ideas relating to nature in “Der Abschied”, one of the most readily observable in both score and listening, but whose transformation over the course of the movement is perhaps the most radical, and remarkable. Its first incarnations are seen in Exs. 3.1 and 3.2 above, as a partner with the pedal topic (type 1A). In Ex. 3.1, the oboe call above the noise-colored C pedal fits to a tee Johnson’s description of this topic in Chapter 1 as positing “a differentiated individuality against the otherwise potentially amorphous material of the totality”. The initial voice recitative in Ex 3.1 presents a different version of the same textural idea, with a lone voice foregrounded against a static, unprofiled background element, the *vox clamans in deserta*, as it were: the individual at the mercy of a vast, unconscious nature. The sheer amount of space within the texture, especially in Ex. 3.1, is perceptible in the music in listening as well as in its notation, a high melodic element suspended above an extremely low pedal, with octaves of distance between the two. (In performance, this opening moment is visually impressive as well, with the lone oboe calling out from the center of the huge orchestral forces Mahler employs.)

The distance-as-mystery topic returns with great frequency throughout the movement. Ex. 3.14 shows a representative passage, in which the vocal and instrumental elements are blended, as the *vox clamans* figure assumes a birdsong-like quality in accompaniment to the voice.

Ex. 3.14 “Der Abschied”, mm. 156-164

Sehr gleichmäßig. Nicht eilen.

1. Fl. *morendo* *ppp* *sempre pp*

B.-Kl. in B.

1. Harfe. *p* *pp*

Alt.-St. *pp* *sempre pp*

Kb. *sempre pp*

22

22

1. Fl. *rit.*

Alt.-St. *rit.*

Kb.

Es we-het kühl im Schat-ten meiner Fich - ten. Ich ste-he hier und harre mei-nes Freun-des. Ich har-re sein zum letz - ten Le - be - wohl.

While these appearances are straightforward, one use of this topic shown in Table 3.1 at Reh. 62 presents an entirely different perspective on the notion of a voice posited against a “potentially amorphous totality”, in which the voice part (with small support from divided violins) sings its arioso against the slowly saturating background texture (Ex. 3.15). Here, the texture does not feature the same vast space between the individual components. Rather, as the harmonic rhythm of the music slows – an effect discussed in greater detail below under evaporation of directed motion – the registral space is gradually filled in from all directions with free-floating figuration, creating a different kind of amorphous, atemporal totality, a far more sensuous one than the stark voice-and-pedal elements seen previously. Stasis starts to take hold of the texture, the distances close in and the distance-as-mystery topic recedes, or perhaps transfigures, losing its former sense of a menacing or alienating void, as the voice is dissolved into the shimmering spaces enveloping it.

4) Harmonic topics

Evaporation of directed motion

Categorizing this topic under the rubric of harmony is very much the least of several evils, given that its appearance in the music is a long-term process, and is an effect more felt than seen or heard. Furthermore, the nature of this topic is perhaps better described as a result of the convergence of several semiotic types than as a discrete nature reference in itself. Summarized in Chapter 1 as a “gradual, global cessation of teleological tonal processes in the music involving harmony, contrapuntal elaboration and rhythmic cohesion at both the pulse and metrical levels,” the evaporation of directed motion is primarily a rhythmic effect deriving from metrical weakening (type 2A) which, when combined with pitch-related devices under category 1 (pedal and diatonic saturation) and the textural topic of background-foreground conflation (type 3A), conspire to arrest the sense of forward motion in the music at the end of “Der Abschied”. However, despite this combination effect, the ultimate result of rhythmic weakening and textural and pitch saturation is to render harmony non-functional in the contrapuntal sense. As Richard Taruskin writes, albeit of a very different kind of music, “functional harmony is as much a function of rhythm as it is of pitch relations; distend the former enough and you dissolve the latter.”⁷⁹ This equation, as it were, the cumulative effect of rhythmic distortion and textural saturation on tonal impetus, is the principal justification of classing semiotic type 4 as a harmonic topic.

⁷⁹ Taruskin 2005 [2010], 378.

Ex. 3.15 "Der Abschied", mm. 494-499

62

63

1.2.3. Fl. *pp* zu 8

1.2. Ob. *pp* zu 2

Engl. Hr.

1.2. Kl. in B.

1.2. Fag. *pp*

Cel.

1. Harfe. *pp* 3

2. Harfe.

1. Vl. *sempre pp* zu 2

2. Vl. *sempre pp* zu 2

Br. *pp sempre* zu 8

Alt-St. *sempre pp* blau - - - en - - - licht - - - die - - - Fer - -

Vic. *pp* zu 8 arco

Kb.

62

63

Texturally speaking, the process of evaporation of directed motion can be said to begin at Reh 55-56 (see Ex. 3.9), as the familiar rocking classed under semiotic type 3A figure reasserts itself, only to be interrupted by a linear passage just before Reh. 57. In a sense, this rocking pattern, which is consistently undermined by linear music throughout the song, is a kind of foreshadowing of the final, complete stasis to come as semiotic type 4, evaporation of directed motion, comes to dominate the texture. While quite different in execution, the two topics of foreground-background conflation and evaporation of directed motion are bound at the cellular level: the rocking third motif that characterizes both the music at Reh. 55 and the arpeggiated harp/celesta patterns of the Coda, which are gradually reduced from full harmonies to the same oscillating minor-third motif by Reh. 63.

The effect of tonal dissolution also, in a way, justifies the somewhat eccentric inclusion here of Ex. 3.8 above, a temporally linear, texturally contrapuntal passage, in an analysis focused on the static temporal state. However, the origins of the rhythmic processes that contribute to the evaporation of directed motion in the music must frequently be sought in the linear passages that precede them. For this reason, the passage in Ex. 3.8, which illustrates the final, decisive weakening of metrical divisions in “Der Abschied”, is also the first point in the movement where one can perceive audibly the beginnings of disintegration of tonal impetus in the music, at least in the rhythmic sense. As the various subdivisions pull at each other, the sense of ordered progression is lessened. As the groupings of conflicting subdivisions become more sporadic through Reh. 63, the attention is drawn outward from the beat toward the larger metrical framework of the passage, namely the 3/4 meter, an entire bar of which becomes the smallest basic pulse unit by which the music is counted.

The diatonic saturation topic (1A), in addition to its previously discussed role of inducing stasis by flooding the texture with clusters of adjacent pitches, also has a role to play rhythmically (see Ex. 3.16). The rising flute line also pulls gently at the 3/4 meter, rarely emphasizing the downbeat after a few measures, such that it becomes unclear which beat within the 3/4 meter is the actual pulse. As the flute line slows gradually over the remainder of the song (see score for continuation), its individual pitches lengthening with each iteration, pulsed time is forsaken altogether for a feeling of metrically undifferentiated flow, in which a “beat” unit can last any number of measures without establishing any sense of meter, except perhaps for the more primal unit of the length of the vocal soloist’s breath.

Ex. 3.16 "Der Abschied", mm. 500-509

1. 2. 3. Fl. *zu 3*

1. 2. Ob. *zu 2*

1. 2. Kl. in B.

1. 2. Fag.

Cel. *p*

Mandol. *kaum hörbar*
ppp

1. Harfe. *ppp*
Flageolett.

2. Harfe. *ppp*

1. Vl. *ppp*

2. Vl. *ppp*

Br. *morendo*
ppp
zu 2

Alt-St. *nen,*
e - -

Vlc. *zu 3*
ppp

Kb.

64

64

Ex. 3.16 (cont.) "Der Abschied", mm. 510-519

65

1.2. Fl. zu 2

1.2. Ob. zu 2

1.2. Kl. in B.

1.2. Fag. pp

1.2. Hr. in F. mit Dämpfer p

Cel. pp

1. Harfe. pp

2. Harfe.

1. Vi.

2. Vi. zu 2 pp

Br. zu 2 pp

Alt-St. e - wig, e - wig,

Vlc. zu 2 pp

Kb.

65

In the specifically harmonic sense, the lengthening of rhythmic values, or the increase in the distance between harmonic events, is also a major component of evaporation of directed motion. The start of the evaporation process (Reh. 58, Ex. 3.8) features a fairly straightforward tonal progression in C major, from tonic to dominant and back at Reh. 59, upheld by a bass line emphasizing the downbeats in regular fashion, with the inner voices above providing contrapuntal impetus. In the following passage (Reh. 59→60), after a highly chromatic predominant prolongation, the bass comes to rest on a dominant pedal (m. 478), itself chromatically prolonged, and which significantly does not resolve directly to the tonic, eliding the resolution via an A \flat dominant-seventh sonority (Reh. 61).⁸⁰ The bass then settles into a simple I-V $\frac{4}{3}$ -I \flat progression against the vocal melody, emphasizing every second downbeat in 3/4. Rather than moving forward in contrapuntal fashion, as previously, the progression repeats, again without continuation. As the movement heads toward its conclusion, strong bass motion is increasingly absent, replaced with a loosely articulated mid-register texture of alternating, ever-lengthening tonic and dominant-seventh harmonies. Eventually the music comes to rest in the diatonically saturated texture over the iconic word “ewig” – “forever” – (Reh. 64→), the tonic triad (and thus the “pedal” semiotic type) only peripherally implied by its sporadic, open-voiced appearances in the quiet trombones and pizzicato cellos.

Thus, the examination of semiotic topic type 4 as a global phenomenon, involving several other topics across a number of structural parameters of the music, aptly illustrates the central contention of this study: namely, that the semiotic devices used by Mahler in manifesting the idea of nature in “Der Abschied”, despite their superficial differences, are in fact part of a unified, coherent, readily observable network of signs arising from (or leading toward) a single temporal state, that of stasis. Equally, the association between the temporal states of the music and the narrative tones of the text make clear the semiotic association of linearity and emotional expression or suffering, which occupies the opposite pole of the essential temporal and semiotic dichotomy at the heart of the narrative of “Der Abschied”, the one between linearity and stasis. However, before proceeding to the discussion of the larger meaning of these abstract nature topics within the narrative of “Der Abschied”, it is necessary first to touch upon the level of semiosis in our hierarchy heretofore given little attention, that of the concrete topics contained in Layer 1.

⁸⁰ This A \flat sonority cannot be said to resolve to C major in any conventional manner, as the two harmonies are superimposed or conflated at Reh. 61, with the former simply dissolving into the latter over two measures. Challenges to the resolution of the dominant in “Der Abschied” will be discussed in greater detail in Ch. 4.

Part III – Concrete semiosis and its narrative relevance

Although previously somewhat downplayed in terms of their semiotic importance, the rather looser grouping of Layer 1 topics referred to in Table 3.1 will be shown to have an extremely important nature-narrative function in “Der Abschied” in Chapter 4. In order to prepare that discussion, it is necessary here to highlight the specific musical form(s) these Layer 1 topics take, as well as their extramusical connotations in relation to the larger narrative themes to be broached.

1) Birdcalls (nature onomatopoeia)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter (see footnote 68, p. 35), birdcalls are the only prominent onomatopoeic nature gesture to play a significant role in “Der Abschied”. Although the birdcall topic takes a specific and recurrent musical form in the song, its initial appearance is difficult to isolate, in that the topic tends to appear together with (or grow out of) the *vox clamans* oboe figure shown in Ex. 3.1. In addition, the birdcall topic is quite malleable musically, frequently growing into or out of more conventionally melodic or “musical” gestures (as opposed to rhythmically free birdsong, a kind of nature *an sich* within the composed fabric of the music). The birdcall topic proper is most clearly shown in its incarnation as an unmetred upper accompaniment to the voice recitatives, the earliest being shown in Ex. 3.2. This type of texture exhibits the protagonist-in-nature idea in its purest form, with an individual voice pitted against an unmoving pedal, the birdlike flute line acting as the “Naturlaut”, the sound of the natural world given its own voice.

A more complex type of birdcall texture can be observed in Exs 3.7 and 3.12, in which multiple, largely unmetred versions of the birdcall idea proliferate over a static bass. Here, in addition to the ornamented *vox clamans* figure, with its characteristic initial melodic turn, birds are invoked through staccato iterations on the interval of the minor third. A further outgrowth of the birdcall topic can be seen in Ex. 3.11, in which the *vox clamans*-derived birdcall slowly grows from the unmetred quality of Ex. 3.2 toward a more metrically specific countermelody to the solo voice.

Taken together, these various elaborations of the birdcall topic form the most obvious and immediately perceptible layer of nature semiosis to be encountered in “Der Abschied”, concretely embodying the presence of nature on the surface of the music. And yet, as shown by the analysis of the underlying abstract topics above, the birdcall topic is intimately connected to the static temporal state, and its accompanying abstract semiotic topics in Layer 2. The following two topical types, while superficially quite different, in that they do not refer to nature in the imitative/onomatopoeic sense, will nonetheless be shown to be linked to the birdcall topic in terms of their various representative functions, and to possess a collective meaning in the narrative arc of the song.

Ex. 3.18 “Der Abschied”, mm. 27-31

4

Tempo I.

1. Ob.

1. & 2. Kl. in B.

K. Fag.

1. & 2. Hr. in F.

1. Harfe.

2. Harfe.

Alt.-St.

Vlc.

4

The funeral march in “Der Abschied” will be discussed in greater analytical detail as a narrative function in Chapter 4. However, it is worth noting here its connection to similar music in “Die zwei blauen Augen” from *Lieder Eines Fahrenden Gesellen*, whose musical and narrative connections with “Der Abschied” were initially discussed in Chapter 2. This song, posited as an early example of the “death rite” in the protagonist-in-nature narrative, also features a funeral march beginning in a similar quiet, halting manner, as shown in Ex. 3.19 below. The march in “Die zwei blauen Augen”, like the one in “Der Abschied”, is also marked by prominent use of parallel thirds, lending the earlier song a comparable lamenting character, albeit one of a more dignified, Schubertian nature, without the chromaticism that colors the march in “Der Abschied”. While these superficial similarities do not in themselves link the two songs conclusively, Mahler’s expressive treatment of the material in both contexts will be of great relevance in the discussion in Chapter 4 of the funeral march topic as parody, and the very dignity of the funeral procession in “Die zwei blauen Augen”, when compared with the more exaggerated gestural language of that in “Der Abschied”, is one of the key points in understanding Mahler’s revision of the protagonist-in-nature narrative.

Ex. 3.19 "Die zwei blauen Augen", mm. 1-4

26

Mit geheimnissvoll schwermüthigem Ausdruck. Ohne Sentimentalität.

1. Flöte.

2. 3. Flöte.

1. Oboe.

Englisch Horn.
(2. Oboe.)

1. 2. Clarinette in B.

Bassclarinette in B.

Harfe.

Mit geheimnissvoll schwermüthigen Ausdruck. Ohne Sentimentalität.
ohne Dämpfer

1. Violine.

2. Violine.

Viola.
ohne Dämpfer

Singstimme.

Violoncell.

Contrabass.

26

Ex. 3.19 (cont.) "Die zwei blauen Augen", mm. 5-10

1. Fl. *p*

2. 3. Fl.

Engl. Horn *p*

1. 2. Cl. in B *p* *pp*

Basscl. *p* *pp*

Pauk. *p*

Harfe *p*

1. Viol. *pp* *sempre pp* *ppp* *mit Dämpfer*

2. Viol. *pp* *ppp* *mit Dämpfer*

Vla. *pp* *mit Dämpfer*

Singst. *espress.*

schickt. Da muss'ich Abschied neh - men vom al - ler - lieb - sten Platz! O Au - gen, blau! Warum habt

Cello *mit Dämpfer*

Bass *pp* *pizz.* *ppp* *arco* *pizz.* *ppp*

3) The lullaby

This oscillating minor-third gesture, briefly noted in Chapter 1 (see footnote 22, p. 9) and Chapter 2 (see discussion pp. 31-32), though less evident in terms of extramusical reference than the more stylistically obvious birdcall and funeral march topics, still belongs in the category of concrete semiosis due to the specific nature of the thing it signifies, namely the idea of sleep in the arms (or “womb”, as Woodring would have it) of nature. Sleep, here, as discussed in Chapter 2, carries with it notions of oblivion, of loss of self in the face of the vastness of nature, the one sure way of attaining the sought-after relief or oneness with the “other”.

Complicating the placement of the lullaby topic in Layer 1 is the fact that it is essentially an outgrowth of the Layer 2 topic 3A, or background-foreground conflation, wherein an accompaniment-type gesture is momentarily foregrounded or given unexpected prominence in the texture. The earliest example of the lullaby gesture is shown in Ex. 3.11, with the isolated rocking figure preceding the birdcall-like oboe melody, and the voice entry at Reh. 9. This gesture also has clear precedent in “Die zwei blauen Augen”, where the weary, suffering protagonist finds the linden tree under which he falls asleep (Ex. 3.20), and will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Although in its first appearance in “Der Abschied”, the lullaby figure is not associated with images of sleep in the text – the voice part sings of the pleasant sound of a brook – its return at Reh. 13 is set to the line “Die Erde atmet voll von Ruh’ und Schlaf” (“the earth breathes full of quiet and sleep”), again making explicit the connotation of sleep inherent in the rocking third interval.

Significantly, in the following, temporally linear passage (Rehs 14-17 incl.), the text speaks again of longing, forgetfulness and dream as the antidote to weariness, before falling back into stasis at Reh. 18, where the three Layer 1 figures, birdcalls, funeral march (as represented by its gong pedal incipit gesture, and the rocking thirds of the lullaby in the low register) are presented in a kind of unmetered cacophony (see Ex. 3.12, score Reh. 18). In a certain sense, the lullaby is the topic providing a conclusive semiotic link between the three types identified in Layer 1, in that it unites the two concepts embodied in the birdcall and funeral march topics: respectively, nature and death.

Ex. 3.20 "Die zwei blauen Augen", mm. 37-41

1. Ob.
Engl. Ho
1. Cl. *ppp*
2. Cl.
3. Cl. Bassclar. *pp*
1. 2. 4. 1
Pauke
Harfe *ppp*
1. Viol.
2. Viol.
Vla.
Cello ohne Dämpfer
Bass

1. Fl.
Engl. Horn
Basscl.
Harfe
1. Solo-Viol. ohne Dämpfer *pp*
2. Solo-Viol. ohne Dämpfer *pp*
3. Solo-Viol. ohne Dämpfer *pp*
Singst. *Leise bis zum Schluss.*
Auf der Stra-
sse stand ein
Cello pizz. *pp*
Bass pizz. *ppp*

A further refinement of the lullaby topic is shown in Exs 3.3 and 3.4, where the lullaby topic ostensibly becomes a two-part gesture: the familiar rocking third, with an oscillating neighbor-note second figure above it, its emphasis of scale degrees 2 and 3 lending it a non-resolving character. The gesture also recurs at Reh. 55 (see Ex. 3.9). In the instances where the voice appears (Exs 3.9 and 3.4), the text speaks of wandering, and a need for rest or homecoming, ideas intimately linked with sleep in the protagonist-in-nature narrative, thereby reinforcing the notion of nature as home, and suppression of consciousness as the key to attaining it. Crucially, the oscillating second above the “lullaby” third figure will become the alto voice’s repeated “Ewig... ewig...” at the end of the work, deepening the narrative link between sleep and relief. Thus, while not precisely equivalent to death, the idea of sleep is presented as offering a similar, if temporary gateway to the state of oneness with nature, and can be seen as occupying a mediating position between the ideas of nature and death in this narrative.

With the more easily quantifiable part of the analysis of “Der Abschied” presented, and the various semiotic devices of “Der Abschied” given concrete musical form, we now turn to the less tangible, but ultimately more satisfying question of what larger role this semiotic idea of human-vs-nature plays in the narrative sense, and what meaning can be inferred from a reading of “Der Abschied” done from this perspective.

Chapter 4 – “Still ist mein Herz und harret seiner Stunde”: Toward a deeper reading of “Der Abschied”

Although the primary focus of this study has been analytical to this point, its overarching theme has been the re-examination of the way in which the expressive content of “Der Abschied” – and of *Das Lied* more broadly – can be understood, with a view toward updating contemporary views of the work’s significance, first as a musical narrative in its historical context, and also for Mahler as the creator of that narrative. Thus far the study has been careful to take as neutral a stance as possible with regard to the place in the work’s narrative of Mahler the individual, keeping the man himself at a critical remove from the music in the interest of treating the work as an independent object with its own life. However, a deeper reading of “Der Abschied” demands that Mahler’s biography, considered by many to be inextricable from his work, must be engaged to a certain degree. In order to create a renewed understanding of “Der Abschied” based on the semiotic analysis in Chapter 3, however, it is important first to summarize the conventional reception of the work’s meaning, and how that reception was formed and perpetuated.

To this end, Part I of this final chapter of the study will begin with an overview of the standard critical interpretation of “Der Abschied”, examining the ways in which that reception formed, and speculate as to why certain aspects of received wisdom continue to influence views on this work to the present day, despite a wealth of information pointing at a different meaning for “Der Abschied”. However briefly, the aim in this first section will be to show that a standard view of the music’s significance, both as an independent work and for Mahler personally, indeed exists, and continues to exert its influence on contemporary reception of the work in spite of the clear signals I believe the music contains of an alternate meaning.

Part II will focus mainly on a deeper analysis of the funeral march section, as understanding the nature and narrative function of this music is critical to reading the song as a whole. The central focus of this section will be the idea of the funeral march as parody, and the means by which parodic intent is expressed musically; additionally, notions of futility in the enactment of the “death rite” stage of the protagonist-in-nature narrative will be discussed, as well as the means by which this idea is conveyed in the music.

Part III will deal with the outcome of what I believe to be Mahler’s renegotiation of this narrative archetype, as expressed in the aftermath of the funeral march, and the preamble to the Coda. Here the focus will be on what role death can be said to play in Mahler’s revised narrative, as well as on the crucial, and unusual, change in narrative perspective – from a single persona to three distinct voices – that leads out of the main quandary facing the protagonist seeking relief from suffering in nature: namely, the death of the physical body. The chapter will end in Part IV by

drawing together the various analytical threads of the discussion in an attempt to posit a new, modernized reading of “Der Abschied” in consequence of the work undertaken in the study.

Part I – *Das Lied von der Erde* and received wisdom

While one must acknowledge that there exists within Mahler scholarship a certain diversity of opinion regarding the expressive meaning of *Das Lied von der Erde*, and specifically “Der Abschied”, equally inescapable is the broad critical consensus regarding this work as a valedictory statement by a composer facing his own imminent end. Examples of this reception of the work abound. Peter Franklin, for instance, writes that in *Das Lied*, “the music of radiant affirmation [which ends the Eighth Symphony] was replaced by a fading reiteration, as of one who bade farewell to life.”⁸¹ Constantin Floros asserts that “[t]he basic theme of *Das Lied von der Erde* is [...] above all the mortality of mankind,”⁸² and, on the setting of the text in “Der Abschied, that “Mahler’s music makes it even clearer that the departure spoken of here is the one from life”.⁸³ Mitchell writes that in “Der Abschied”, “the farewell to the world [...] is a farewell to life itself.”⁸⁴ Other writers are more cautious in their specific wording, but the idea of the protagonist’s death occurring in “Der Abschied”, and the concomitant association of the themes of *Das Lied* with Mahler’s own life events, is widespread enough that it has become the mainstream interpretation. Mitchell even goes so far as to state that the protagonist of the cycle “has to die”.⁸⁵ Deruchie, at the outset of his recent study, provides an excellent overview of the conventional critical wisdom regarding “Der Abschied” in particular, stating that the work “has long been understood as a more or less autobiographical farewell to life”.⁸⁶

While this study seeks to challenge – or at least to refine – this conventional interpretation of “Der Abschied”, it also concedes that the composer’s personal circumstances surrounding the composition of *Das Lied von der Erde*, as well as Mahler’s own habit, in speech and writing, of intimately linking his personal life to his compositions, do conspire to create an unassailable impression of morbidity in the work. The specific trials that Mahler faced in the period surrounding the conception and composition of *Das Lied* are well known and often repeated. In 1907, Mahler’s life was rocked by three personal crises: his departure from the Vienna Court Opera after his controversial tenure as director, the death of his eldest daughter from scarlet fever, and the

⁸¹ Franklin 1997, 165.

⁸² Floros 1993 [1985], 245.

⁸³ Ibid., 263.

⁸⁴ Mitchell 1985, 431.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 355.

⁸⁶ Deruchie 2009, 75.

subsequent diagnosis of the fatal heart condition that would eventually claim his life.⁸⁷ It is in the wake of these events that Bethge's volume *Chinesische Flöte*, first published in October 1907, came into Mahler's possession.⁸⁸ These facts are undisputed, and Mahler's grieving state at the time would certainly, and very naturally, have left him predisposed toward such themes of death and leave-taking as feature prominently in the Bethge texts he chose for *Das Lied*.

In addition to these biographical circumstances, the origin of the received wisdom regarding the work seems to lie, at least partially, in a series of statements Mahler himself made around the time of its composition, ideas that superficially reinforce the notion of *Das Lied* and "Der Abschied" as a renunciation from life. The source of many of these citations is the conductor Bruno Walter, who would lead the first performance of *Das Lied* in 1911, after Mahler's death, and to whom Mahler related many thoughts regarding the work. During the composition of *Das Lied*, he wrote to Walter, "I think that it is the most personal work I have ever written."⁸⁹ Upon first showing the manuscript to Walter, Mahler is reported to have said, with specific reference to "Der Abschied", "What do you think? Is that to be endured at all? Will not people do away with themselves after hearing it?"⁹⁰ The tendency to conflate Mahler the individual with the dramaturgy of his works is surely compounded by the oft-quoted maxim he gave about his compositional process, one which invariably surfaces in discussion of the biographical connection between Mahler and *Das Lied*: "[I]t is always thus for me: only when I experience do I 'compose', and only when I compose do I experience!"⁹¹ Another famous anecdote, most likely first related by Mahler's wife Alma,⁹² concerns the very title of *Das Lied*, which Mahler may have considered his ninth symphony, only later changing its title out of superstition, in order to avoid the iconic number that felled Beethoven and Bruckner.

In light of such events, combined with Mahler's own contributions to his lore, the idea of "Der Abschied" as an expression of mourning, of a creative artist dealing with grief and facing approaching death, seems unavoidable. Certainly, at the very least it is a work composed, as Hefling puts it, "*sub specie mortis*."⁹³ However, the significance of a number of pieces of the above anecdotal evidence is debatable. Regarding his own health, while certainly the diagnosis of the heart condition, then incurable, was a blow to Mahler, La Grange presents strong evidence that the composer's frame of mind around the time of *Das Lied* was not as morbid as previously believed,

⁸⁷ Hefling 1992, 294 provides an overview of the biographical specifics surrounding these events.

⁸⁸ The precise time at which Mahler obtained the volume remains in dispute. La Grange 2008, 1294 shows that the book was likely available in print before its official release date, and that Mahler may have acquired an advance copy.

⁸⁹ La Grange 2008, 219.

⁹⁰ Cited in Hefling 2000, 56.

⁹¹ Cited in Hefling 1999, 439.

⁹² La Grange 2008, 219.

⁹³ Hefling 2000, 30.

citing his intense professional schedule in the months and years following the diagnosis. With reference to the large number of writers, Walter included, were tempted to read “Der Abschied” as Mahler’s self-eulogy, La Grange puts it succinctly when he writes, “[...] Mahler’s desire to live life to the full was undiminished. Contrary to what is too often claimed and written, he had certainly not succumbed to an obsessive anguish at the thought of his imminent end.”⁹⁴ During the summer of 1908, when Mahler did the bulk of the compositional work on *Das Lied*, La Grange writes that he had “regained much of his confidence in his own physical condition”⁹⁵ following the diagnosis. Concerning Mahler’s comment to Walter about the music making people want to “do away with themselves”, one may suspect Mahler of engaging in a bit of ironic humor. La Grange, in a footnote to his discussion of the famous exchange, observes that Mahler made a similarly arch remark to his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner about the *Kindertotenlieder* in 1901.⁹⁶ Regarding Mahler’s supposed superstitious avoidance of the ninth-symphony designation for *Das Lied*, the song-symphony hybrid form of the work seems to have preoccupied him greatly throughout its composition, and Mahler apparently thought of the work in symphonic terms – a “symphony of songs” – for some time before finally settling on the present title.⁹⁷ Even after naming it, for a while *Das Lied* still bore the subtitle of “symphony”.⁹⁸

Many views of “Der Abschied” as an expression of morbidity are, of course, entirely valid in the broader sense, and are in most cases informed by a deep knowledge of Mahler’s life, aesthetics and writings. The loss of his daughter, of the blows he took in 1907, would alone have been cause enough to succumb to a defeatist attitude. However, the conflation of the composer’s own life events with the creative process behind his music – particularly in Mahler’s late music – falls short of forming a complete picture of the meaning of “Der Abschied” in several ways. First, and most importantly, in my view, is that this method of interpretation fails to treat the larger narrative of the piece as primarily a compositional problem to be solved rather than a direct translation, or confession, of Mahler’s biography at the time of its composition. Overreliance on biography in reading “Der Abschied” robs the work of its own agency and inner necessity, substituting Mahler the individual for the more abstract, impersonal protagonist of the work, an analogue to Friedrich’s traveler in Chapter 2 (Ex. 2.3), and subjecting understanding of the music to the vagaries of personal experience versus more empirical observation.

Secondly, and as a result, the biographical interpretation often presented in the literature also denies Mahler creative agency over his work, and assumes a lack of critical detachment on the

⁹⁴ La Grange 2008, 511.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 217.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 510. See also La Grange 1983 [1995], 368.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 219-220.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 627.

part of the composer from the work as an external object with its own rules, history and demands, rendering the music oddly inert, a mere vessel for feeling, like the pages of a diary. It is this unquestioning attitude toward the conventional reception of “Der Abschied” that leads us to contemporary assertions like the following one from a recent article by Christian Wildhagen: “Mahler’s setting leaves no doubt that the farewell between two friends [...] is also a farewell to life.”⁹⁹ Wildhagen does not state what in the music prompts this assertion, beyond a vague reference to extreme contrast between moods of lamentation and affirmation. The conventional reception of “Der Abschied” as an individual’s confrontation with death is reiterated as a matter of fact, a century after the work’s composition, unencumbered by serious doubt or critical re-evaluation of the real context of the work beyond Mahler’s immediate experience.

This analytical attitude, which has stood largely unchallenged since the composition of *Das Lied*, does both the composer and the music a disservice by refusing to separate them and, by ignoring or downplaying certain aspects of the music, forces the work to fit a predetermined interpretation based largely on biographical events. As I have maintained throughout this study, it is only by looking at the work – and its embedded network of gestures and semiotic signs – as a product of its historical and social context, and as a negotiation of a compositional and narrative problem, that it is possible to form a view of it that departs decisively and convincingly from received tropes about its meaning. To this end, the central idea in the following section will be that of parody, and the ways in which I believe Mahler engages in an ironic send-up of the narrative archetype he chose for “Der Abschied”. The aim here is to show that, rather than wallowing in a self-serious rite of mourning for his own end, as posited in the standard critical reception of the work, in “Der Abschied” Mahler is in fact offering an ironic rejection of the central tenet of the protagonist-in-nature narrative: that death is inevitable.

Part II – The “death rite” as an act of parody

As posited in Chapter 2 above, in the seeking of solace in nature, the protagonist in this narrative archetype is faced with the dilemma of being a conscious, self-aware being in a larger, closed, unconscious system to which he has no immediate, direct access. In this view, the barrier between the individual and the oneness with nature he seeks is the body that separates him from nature. Death, in this narrative, is seen as the mediating act, liberating the suffering protagonist from earthly woes and uniting him at last with the body of nature. Relief from the suffering of earthly life necessarily involves leaving that life behind. The musical means by which this

⁹⁹ Wildhagen 2007, 142.

mediating act is signified in the narrative has been termed the “death rite”, and its semiotic manifestation, as seen in Chapter 3, is the funeral march topic.

Beyond these basic concepts, though, lies the more ambiguous territory wherein the specific meaning of these musical gestures representing the funeral march topic in the work must be examined. The larger question here, beyond the use of the funeral march topic to invoke death or mourning as a path to oneness with nature, is that of the “tone” of the music. If death is the idea being invoked by the presence of the funeral march topic, is it meant to be taken literally, or is Mahler hinting at some other meaning in the use of the gesture? Additionally, how can a conclusive answer be formulated, positive or negative?

I believe one way of answering this important question lies in examining the gestural language of the funeral march of “Der Abschied” in comparison with its corresponding section in the earlier song “Die zwei blauen Augen”, with a view toward highlighting not the ways in which they resemble each other, but rather those in which they differ. It is my contention that, while the funeral marches of both songs serve the same narrative purpose – i.e. to invoke the death considered necessary in mediating the human-nature dichotomy – the outcome of the “death rite” in “Der Abschied” is radically different from that of “Die zwei blauen Augen”. I will base this comparison primarily on the idea of parody, showing that through a series of progressively exaggerated musical gestures, Mahler conveys the idea that the funeral march in “Der Abschied” is not meant to be taken seriously as an act of mourning, but rather one of ironic questioning of the “death rite” and its necessity in the narrative.

An accompanying concept to the idea of parody, and tying the funeral march section into the broader narrative course of the work, is that of futility, and the musical means by which Mahler communicates this impression in “Der Abschied”. Futility, as expressed in this context, will be shown to have two dimensions: a harmonic one as well as a gestural one. I will demonstrate that, through a series of challenges to the resolving potential of the dominant harmony, Mahler undermines the “death rite” procession during the funeral march by disrupting its course repeatedly, actively preventing it from acquiring a sense of finality. This type of harmonic situation, wherein the dominant is challenged, occurs many times during the course of the work, and its various outcomes can be of assistance in forming a final reading of “Der Abschied”. The notion of futility can also be seen to recur throughout the work in the use of a simple, chromatic scalar gesture, through which Mahler repeatedly frustrates the forward progress of tonal harmony throughout the course of “Der Abschied”, further conveying a sense of futility in the linear sections of the work. Thus, the idea of futility acquires a temporal semiotic function as well, and will be shown to constitute a commentary on the goal-directed processes of functional tonality. The first order of business here, though, is a definition of “parody” by which to examine the music.

Parody in the funeral march: Challenges, definitions and components

Parody, as an expressive function of irony, is a difficult concept to quantify in music, especially instrumental music, for the simple reason that to do so presumes knowledge at some level of the composer's intent. Although the task is made easier in vocal works, when associations between words and musical gestures can be fruitfully explored for possible ironic commentary, the funeral march in "Der Abschied" presents a special challenge in its nature as an instrumental interlude within a largely vocal work. In this way, any claim of ironic or parodic intent must be made by inference rather than outright correspondence between music and text. Johnson notes that ironic speech is the difference between "what is said (the words) and how it is said (the tone)".¹⁰⁰ He further writes that this idea "is problematic in relation to music because what music says is already more a matter of tone than material and because that material resists the specific meaning of words."¹⁰¹ He concludes his conception of the ironic tone in Mahler thus:

This by no means precludes musical irony, but it underlines why it is generally constructed in relation to highly conventional materials with a fixed and immediately recognizable semantic reference. As Mahler demonstrates, musical irony is therefore inseparable from the use of "borrowed" and familiar materials.¹⁰²

Thus, the way in which ironic or parodic intent is divined can be said to be in the manner in which a familiar musical object or style is treated. In this case, the familiar style invoked is the funeral march, whose outer trappings evoke images of mourning and procession. Therefore, the funeral march, as it appears in "Der Abschied", must first be examined in isolation for parodic traits before an attempt can be made to fit this alleged parody into the larger narrative framework of the song and posit a meaning for this section of music.

The first task of this stage is to define the terms by which irony or parody can be inferred from the music of this particular funeral march. A secondary challenge here is that the inference of ironic intent is highly dependent upon context: the composer, time period, compositional practices, external circumstances, all these affect how musical gestures can be said to convey irony. Currently, there exists no large-scale study into Mahler's use of irony, despite frequent references to the idea in the literature.¹⁰³ However, one recent study of another composer offers a workable means of

¹⁰⁰ Johnson 2009, 134.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 134.

¹⁰² Ibid., 134.

¹⁰³ Johnson, in addition to featuring the topic of Mahlerian irony under its own heading (see Johnson 2009, 137-51), provides a useful summary of important writings relating to Mahler and the use of irony (see Johnson 2009, 141).

understanding Mahler's use of irony in the present context. Esti Sheinberg's *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich* divides the gestural language of the composer into the four rubrics mentioned in the title, defining each term separately in applying it to the music. However, since the aim of the present study is to show general ironic intent in a relatively short span of music, I prefer to consider these four elements related aspects of ironic expression in music, and thus will use the terms "irony" and "parody" interchangeably here.

Of particular interest for the subject under discussion is Sheinberg's definition of the grotesque in early twentieth century music. She writes that "[t]he grotesque is an unresolvable ironic utterance, a hybrid that combines the ludicrous with the horrifying."¹⁰⁴ As such, "the grotesque can be regarded as a particular case of existential irony. [...] [B]oth regard doubt and disorientation as the basic condition of human existence".¹⁰⁵ Sheinberg identifies hyperbole or exaggeration as one of the main components of grotesque irony. She writes: "The grotesque [...] conveys a distorted reality of a hyperbolic nature. A grotesque object is thus never 'comic', but rather 'ludicrous'; never just 'unpleasant', but rather 'repellent' or 'horrifying'."¹⁰⁶ This, along with Johnson's concept of irony as a function of the treatment of borrowed materials, presents a workable definition of the type of irony Mahler employs in the funeral march. As will be shown below, the funeral march music relies heavily on a progressive exaggeration or distortion of its basic gestures, which together lend the impression of a statement not meant to be taken in earnest.

I have identified two different but interrelated means by which Mahler uses exaggeration in the funeral march of "Der Abschied" to convey a message of irony or parody. On the one hand, Mahler can be seen to subject the basic gestural or motivic ideas of the funeral march to a series of progressively greater exaggerations in terms of dynamics, ornamentation and durational overextension (i.e. extending a gesture far past its natural proportions and point of conclusion) in order to convey a sense of irony or parody. On the other hand, the music contains passages that rely primarily on orchestration or instrumental timbre (or more precisely, the accumulation of timbres), as well as extreme registers, as a means of undermining the supposed seriousness of the funeral rite. These two types will be dealt with in turn below.

¹⁰⁴ Sheinberg 2000, 207.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 208.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 208.

Parody as a function of gestural exaggeration

One of the principal means by which Mahler can be said to engage in a parody of the funeral march topic is through the gradual distortion of the main motive in sections featuring the funeral march topic, the halting, stumbling processional figure first described in connection with the horn thirds in Ex. 3.18 above.¹⁰⁷ It reaches its fully developed form for the first time at Reh. 4 (Ex. 4.1). The processional motive is shown here in its two recurrent guises: in the first case, ornamented with trills in the clarinets, and unornamented in the horns, both of which reappear in the main funeral march section at Reh. 39.

Ex. 4.1 “Der Abschied”, mm. 27-30 (upper texture)

Fragments of this motive continue to haunt the texture through the alto soloist's first major-key arioso passage between Rehs 4 to 6 (incl.) before fading out, not heard again until the procession begins in earnest at Reh. 39, when the treading motive reappears in the clarinets (Ex. 4.2).

Ex. 4.2 “Der Abschied”, mm. 308-310 (clarinets only)

¹⁰⁷ Although this processional motive is identified here as the main motive of the funeral march, Deruchie points to the appearance at Reh. 39 of a falling melodic cell in the bassoons, low brass and low strings, which subsequently grows into the principal melodic line dominating the funeral march texture. This melodic element, the sole introduction of new musical material after Reh. 7, figures prominently in Deruchie's narrative reading of “Der Abschied” (see Deruchie 2009, 92-93). However, since the focus here is materials which are subjected to parodic exaggeration, this melodic motive will not be a focus.

The use of the forceful low register of the clarinet at a *ff* dynamic here is significant, as is the contrast in Ex. 4.1 between the appearances of the processional motive in the low clarinets, followed by its ornamentation in the high horns. These aspects will be discussed again below as a function of timbral exaggeration, but what concerns us in the present context is the progressive use of the trill ornamentation of the basic processional motive to create a grotesque, monstrous version of the normally reserved funeral march topic. Exchanges of the unornamented processional motive between low clarinets and high horns continue through Reh. 42 (incl.). Reh. 43 marks the first appearance of the grotesquely distorted trill version of the motive, again in the horns (Ex. 4.3).

Ex. 4.3 “Der Abschied”, mm. 333-340 (horns only)

The trills, combined with the higher register and the dynamic, fluctuating wildly between dynamic extremes, conspire to create a disruptive effect, challenging the nominal solemnity of the funeral march topic. The horn/clarinet combination continues to dominate the texture through the climax of the funeral march, at Reh. 46-47, becoming more and more raucous as the procession continues. At the climactic point (Reh. 47), the trilled processional motive is passed into the lower register, to the bassoons and lowest strings. (Ex. 4.4) This effect is also an exaggeration, as the trill figure is heard *fortissimo* in a register not normally associated with graceful execution of such gestures, and the effect is awkward, almost comical, as the trilled figures descend into noise. This type of exaggerated gestural treatment is one means by which Mahler turns the tragic tone of the funeral march topic into a kind of bitter joke.

Ex. 4.4 also illustrates another means by which Mahler creates parody within the funeral march, namely through the distention of the climactic gesture long past its point of resolution. The descent of the trill figures into the bass register, noted above for its awkward sound, is coupled here with the rhythmic augmentation of the processional motive by the low strings. Following the protracted textural and dynamic buildup to the climax, the grotesque extension of the trill gesture creates an effect of lingering overlong at the grave, as it were, turning tragedy into farce. It is worth noting that the processional figure examined here (Ex. 3.1) is itself a kind of parody, or perhaps the foreshadowing of one, derived as it is from the alto's lamenting opening recitative at Reh. 3 (Ex. 4.5). Thus, even though the voice (and its text) is absent, the alto's initial tone of mourning remains as another familiar object being distorted or mocked in the funeral procession.

Ex. 4.4 "Der Abschied", mm. 363-370

47

1.2. Fl. *zu 2* *p* *ff*

3. Fl.

1.2. Ob. *zu 2* *p* *ff*

3. Ob.

1.2. Kl. in B. *zu 2* *p* *ff*

3. Kl. in B.

B.-Kl. in A. *in B.*

1.2. Fag. *zu 2* *p* *ff dim.* *p*

K.-Fag. *p* *ff dim.* *p*

1. Hr. in F. *ff* *Schalltr. auf.* *ff*

3.2. Hr. in F. *ff* *Schalltr. auf.* *ff*

4. Hr.

1. Pos. *ff* *pp*

2.3. Pos. *ff* *zu 2* *pp*

Tamtam. *p* *pp*

1. Harfe. *ff* *3* *3* *ff*

2. Harfe. *ff* *3* *3* *ff*

1. Vi. *ff* *pizz.* *sf*

2. Vi. *ff* *pizz.* *sf*

Br. *arco* *ff* *pizz.* *sf*

Vlc. *dim.* *ff dim.* *tr* *tr* *p* *dim.* *tr* *tr* *pp* *tr* *tr* *sf* *pp* *morendo*

Kb. *ff dim.* *arco* *tr* *tr* *p* *dim.* *tr* *tr* *pp* *tr* *tr* *sf* *pp* *morendo*

47

NB. Nur die mit Kontra-C versehenen Bässe.

Ex. 4.5 “Der Abschied”, mm. 17-20 (alto solo only)

Alt-Stimme. (In erzählendem Ton, ohne Ausdruck)
sempre p
Die Son - ne scheidet hinter dem Ge -

Parody as a function of orchestration or timbre

Another related means by which Mahler creates a tone of parody or irony in the funeral march is through the exploitation of timbral extremes in his orchestration. Mentioned briefly above, the opposition at loud dynamics of the dark lower register of the clarinets and the more raucous upper register of the horns (see Exs. 4.1-4.3), a sound that dominates the funeral march for long stretches, is one such use of extremes. Although well within the practical tessitura of the instruments, the opposition of the two colors creates a kind of aural disjunction, as if the two parts had been switched specifically in order to avoid their best sounding register for the given octave transposition of the material. Likewise, as the funeral march section progresses, the horns are pushed higher and higher into their playable register, sounding more strained with each iteration of the processional motive. The trills only add to the tension in the sound. The discussion of Ex. 4.4 also touches on the timbral exaggeration aspect, in the way the trilled gesture descends ever more clumsily into the extreme bass register, finally reaching the lowest notes available in the orchestra. In this sense, the use of the extreme register also reinforces the notion of the overlong drawdown after the climactic point at Reh. 47. It is as if the motive must continue until it reaches the lowest possible point.

Still another means of timbral exaggeration is to be found in Mahler's use of overdoubling in his orchestration, specifically with regard to his use of the woodwind section. Although Mahler's orchestration in general relies on heavy doubling for its massive effect, this aspect of his orchestrational craft is of particular import in “Der Abschied” for the melodic emphasis placed on the woodwinds. Ex. 4.6 illustrates one such passage, in which the tripled upper winds are used at extreme dynamics in the melodic line.

Ex. 4.6 “Der Abschied”, mm. 326-332 (upper winds only)

Musical score for Ex. 4.6, measures 326-332, upper winds only. The score includes parts for 1.2. Fl., 3. Fl., 1.2. Ob., 3. Ob., and 1.2. Kl. in B. The music features dynamic markings such as *p*, *f*, *sf*, *ff*, and *pp*, and includes the instruction "zu 2".

Ex. 4.6 (cont.) “Der Abschied”, mm. 333-340 (upper winds only)

Musical score for Ex. 4.6 (cont.), measures 333-340, upper winds only. The score includes parts for 1.2. Fl., 3. Fl., 1.2. Ob., 3. Ob., and 1.2. Kl. in B. The music features dynamic markings such as *p*, *ff*, *sf*, and *f*, and includes the instruction "zu 2". A measure number "43" is visible in a box.

Particularly notable when seen in full score, in addition to the overdoubling effect, is the near total absence of strings. Indeed, with the exception of a few melodic interruptions and the unobtrusive use of *pizzicato* in the low register, the string family, normally the main component of orchestral texture, is largely absent in the funeral march. Instead, the melodic weight of the texture, and much of the internal figuration, is placed in the winds and brass. The overdoubling of the high register instruments in this context, which only increases in intensity as the climax nears (Ex. 4.7), creates a strident, “village band” effect in the funeral march: harsh, and slightly, intentionally out of tune. Thus, the sense of a solemn ritual is lost in the shrill octave doublings of the high winds.

Ex. 4.7 "Der Abschied", mm. 357-362

46 ^{zu 2}

1.2. Fl. *ff* *dim.* *ff*

3. Fl. *ff* *dim.* *ff*

1.2. Ob. ^{zu 2} *ff* *dim.* *ff*

3. Ob. *ff* *dim.* *ff*

1.2. Kl. ^{zu 2} *ff* *dim.* *ff*

in B.

3. Kl. *ff* *dim.* *ff*

B.-Kl. in A. *f* *p* *fp* *p* *cresc.* *ff*

1.2. Fag. *f* *p* *fp* *p* *cresc.* *ff*

K.-Fag. *f* *p* *fp* *p* *cresc.* *ff*

1. Hr. in F. *f* *ff*

3.2. Hr. in F. *f* *ff*

4. Hr. *f* *ff*

1.2.3. Pos. *ff* *ff*

Pedaltou *ff* *ff*

Tamtam. *ff* *ff*

1. Harfe. *ff* *ff*

2. Harfe. *ff* *ff*

1. VI. *f* *dim.* *p* *ff* *G-Saite*

2. VI. *f* *dim.* *p* *ff*

Br. *f* *dim.* *p* *ff* *pizz.*

Vlc. *f* *dim.* *p* *ff* *pizz.* *arco* *ff*

Kb. *f* *dim.* *p* *ff* *ff*

46

This raw, “village band” coloration is not limited to the high winds, and Ex 4.7 illustrates the grotesque distortion of the orchestration at its most extreme. At the fifth measure of Reh. 46 (m. 361), the strings are left out entirely, and the *fortissimo* cadential gesture is limited to the winds in octaves, with no inner voicing save the horns’ processional motive. The tripled low C on trombones (with a horn added for good measure), the noise of the tam-tam and the rattling low register of the harps combine to create a macabre sound which seems to denote something other than final rest. The gesture is repeated a few measures later, at Reh. 47, this time with horns played with bells up, a gesture that again causes grotesque distortion of the tone toward the metallic or brassy. In this way, the use of instrumental timbre, combined with extreme dynamics and overdoubling, conspire to distort the sense of solemn procession to the grave in the funeral march section. (It is worth noting here that at Reh. 47, the avoidance in the low strings of the tonic C also detracts from any sense of finality or cadence.)

In contrast, the corresponding “death rite” music in “Die zwei blauen Augen” is marked not by a tone of dramatic hyperbole, but rather of contained mourning. The gestural language is restrained, with little to no ornamentation. The instrumentation is more traditionally orchestral in style, with no single color dominating the texture, and no use of extreme registers. Although the winds again play a significant role in the opening measures, announcing the procession in the manner of a military or village band, they are soon balanced by the entry of the strings (see Ex. 3.19, p. 72). Beginning in the second section in m. 17 (Ex. 4.8), the treading, processional bass line typical of the funeral march topic oscillates between tonic and dominant in quarter note beats, ceaseless and unwavering until the halfway point of the song, when an equally stable “lullaby” rhythmic pattern takes over (see. Ex. 3.20, p. 74). Throughout the song the dynamic rarely rises above a whisper, with the statement of the funeral march theme in the final measures marked *pppp*. Juxtaposing the expressive tone of the two funeral marches in this way, it is evident that, despite the narrative similarities between the works, the “death rite” music in “Der Abschied” is altogether less emotionally contained and more exaggerated in its gestural language, suggesting a different, more complex meaning from the solemn procession of “Die zwei blauen Augen”.

This question of tone in the music, while a nebulous one, indicates strongly that Mahler, through his use of various kinds of hyperbole or dramatic exaggeration in the funeral march of “Der Abschied”, is engaged less in a serious enactment of a ritual than in the satirizing of it. However, the tone of irony is not confined to orchestration and gesture alone. As we shall see in the following section, Mahler’s use of harmony and other strictly pitch-related parameters (which admittedly has an orchestrational dimension) also figures prominently in creating a sense of futility in the funeral march, contributing to the tone of parody of the topic.

Ex. 4.8 "Die zwei blauen Augen", mm. 15-19

1. Fl. *poco rit.*

2. 3. Fl. *pp*

Engl. Horn *poco rit.*

1. 2. 3. Cl. *pp*

1. 2. 4. Horn *p*

Pauke *ppp*

Harfe *poco rit.*
pp

1. Viol. mit Dämpfer 3 fach geth. pizz. *ppp*

2. Viol. mit Dämpfer

Vla. mit Dämpfer geth. *pp*

Singst. Ich bin aus - ge-gan-gen in stil-ler Nacht. in_

Cello mit Dämpfer geth. *pp*

Bass *ppp*

Parody as a function of harmonic futility

Comparison between the funeral marches of “Die zwei blauen Augen” and “Der Abschied” reveals a further means by which Mahler undermines the fundamental seriousness of the rite in the latter work, namely the harmonic realm. The subject of harmonic elaboration in this context is a rather contradictory one, since the funeral march, both stylistically and as a semiotic topic, is generally harmonically – and thus temporally – static, as noted in the earlier semiotic analysis (see Chapter 2, Table 3.1). The funeral march, as it appears in the *Lied* genre, tends to be governed harmonically by pedals of one kind or another, or at the furthest extreme by simple, largely diatonic harmonic progressions revolving around a central tonality. This proves to be the case in “Die zwei blauen Augen”, whose three sections feature three keys: a functional though harmonically simple E minor at the outset, a static C tonality marked by Mahler’s characteristic major/minor oscillations for the middle procession, and F major for the lullaby, progressively colored by minor (as well as Phrygian) modal inflections, finally settling into F minor at the end. In the latter two sections, while the specific pitch content of the scale in use may vary, the harmony is grounded above a tonic pedal tone (or alternating tonic-dominant bass line). Despite the functional harmony of the initial E minor section, none of the subsequent keys is reached through anything resembling conventional modulation: the C key appears without preparation, F major through the single common tone of C. Thus, while functional harmony plays a part in the song at the local level, the song as a whole is harmonically static, in the sense that it features no governing, functional tonal progression. Thus, while the funeral march does move through a series of tonalities, it cannot be said to do so teleologically; this is the “procession without progress” mentioned in Chapter 2, where the final destination is not a place reached through goal-directed motion, but rather a state existing within a series of embedded static tableaux. The funeral march does not progress, it merely transforms.

By contrast, the funeral march of “Der Abschied”, while superficially static in C minor – it both departs from and returns to a long C pedal, frequently referencing the tonic in between – features a number of harmonic deviations that, when considered in the light of the narrative function of the section as a whole, further emphasize the tone of irony or parody. Of specific interest here is the manner in which Mahler repeatedly frustrates the resolution of dominant to the C minor tonic, which suggests a sense of futility or incompleteness in the harmony underlying the funeral procession. The first such instance occurs after Reh. 40 (Ex. 4.9) when, after being bound to a C pedal since its inception at Reh. 38 despite heavy chromaticism in the upper texture, the music ventures briefly into functional territory. The harmony eventually suggests, in however skeletal a fashion, a tonicization of V in the two measures before Reh. 41, before the texture simply dissolves, leaving the progression unfinished. C minor resumes at Reh. 41 without preparation.

Ex. 4.9 “Der Abschied”, mm. 317-325 (reduction)

The second instance of frustration of the music’s attempts at linearity comes soon after. From Reh. 41 onward, the bass line becomes functional, soon followed by the upper texture. This motion culminates both harmonically and dynamically in a clear V of C minor at Reh. 42 (Ex. 4.10), which is then expanded, in a manner reminiscent of Wagner’s *Tristan* prelude, through a series of dominant-seventh sonorities before abruptly collapsing again to C minor, without resolution, four measures after Reh. 42. The lack of resolution is explicit in the texture, in the sudden shift from *ff* to *p*, and the reduction of the bass line to its previous role of *pizzicato* articulations of the downbeats (see score, Rehs 41-43). In the full orchestration, this moment also coincides with a sudden reduction of the forces, as the overdoubled winds drop out of the texture. The effect of this passage, as with the one before, is to create a sense of questioning of the C minor stasis of the funeral march.

On the expressive level, the two passages examined above suggest an override of the music’s attempt to break free of the C minor stasis imposed by the funeral march topic. In the narrative sense, it is as if the material of the music were struggling against the topic, unwilling to submit to its static pull, attempting either to confirm the situation or break away from it, and achieving neither. Although the music returns to C minor after both of these harmonic excursions, it does so inconclusively. Thus, the idea of the funeral march as a solemn, final ritual is here undermined.

Ex. 4.10 “Der Abschied”, mm. 332-335

The musical score for Ex. 4.10, "Der Abschied", mm. 332-335, is presented in a standard orchestral format. It begins at rehearsal mark 42. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staves are for the piano accompaniment, including Violin I (VI. Vla.), Viola (Vla.), Horn (Hr.), Trombone (Kb.), and Tam-tam. The score is in 3/4 time and C minor. Dynamic markings include *p*, *sf*, *ff*, and *p subito*. The score shows a climactic buildup with a final cadence to C minor.

The final challenge to the dominant occurs at the climactic point of the funeral march, just after Reh. 46. Following the previous harmonic collapse after Reh. 42, the music again acquires functionality in the same manner as before, with the bass line first articulating only the downbeats in simple harmonic progressions, and later becoming a functional, contrapuntal element in the texture. This passage, however, is much longer than the previous attempt at linearity, lasting from Reh. 43 to the climactic buildup at 46, in which the music finally arrives at a clear dominant indicating a cadence to C minor (Ex. 4.11). Once again, though, the texture does not comply. Just before the potential cadence, the leading tone B slips downward to B \flat . The bass motion from scale degree 5 to 1 suggests a functional confirmation of the C minor tonic, but the voicing is stripped to bare C octaves, with no real cadential motion implied by the inner voices. Once again, an attempt to impose a degree of finality on the funeral march is foiled, and the C pedal reasserts itself for the final time during the march interlude, dragging the music down into the depths of the orchestra.

The cumulative effect of these failed attempts in the music to either veer away from or confirm C minor is indicative of struggle, a notion made explicit in Mahler's indication at the start of the funeral march interlude at Reh. 38: *Schwer* ("difficult" or "heavy"). Harmonically speaking, this is not the resigned, mournful rite of "Die zwei blauen Augen", quietly laying to rest its protagonist, who meets his end calmly, almost meekly submitting to the narrative inevitability of death as the price of relief from his worldly suffering. In "Der Abschied", the music constantly resists the static pull of the funeral march topic, striving to become linear, creating a tone of questioning. The implication of futility here arises from the ambiguity of the purpose of that linearity: is the music attempting to confirm the tragic situation, or to break free of it? The absence of a clear cadence to C minor suggests that the funeral march topic is simply imposing itself on the music by force rather than as a linear consequence. The undermining of the confirming power of the dominant will be seen to play a significant role in the outcome of the song in the Coda (see Part IV), but a related gesture signaling futility in motion more generally must be addressed at this point.

Futility as a function of chromatic dissolution

Another means by which Mahler repeatedly frustrates forward motion in “Der Abschied” is a downward chromatic gesture heard very early in the song, again in the wind family, and originally as an outgrowth of the *vox clamans* oboe call at the opening (see Ex. 3.1, score from beginning). This chromatic figure makes its initial appearance in the upper winds at Reh. 2 (Ex. 4.12), reappearing at the end of the alto soloist’s first recitative (see Ex. 3.2, score Reh. 3), as the flute’s birdsong-like accompaniment loses its melodic profile and dissolves into a simple downward chromatic scale. Generally speaking, with the exception of the more stripped-down texture of the recitative passages, the gesture derives its force throughout the song from the same type of unison overdoubling or extreme registral coloration as previously seen in the funeral march section (see Rehs 5-6 in the score). It is also generally characterized either by an abrupt crescendo that propels it to the foreground of the texture, with the sonic effect of obscuring or wiping away other foreground melodic elements; or, conversely, by a long diminuendo, frequently marked *morendo* (“dying away”), dragging the music to a complete standstill.

Ex. 4.12 “Der Abschied”, mm.13-16

The musical score for Ex. 4.12, "Der Abschied", measures 13-16, is presented in a standard orchestral format. It includes staves for the following instruments: 1. Fl., 1. Ob., 1.2. Kl. in B., 1.2. Fag., K-Fag., 1.3. Hr. in F., 2.4. Hr., 1. Harfe., 2. Harfe., 1. Vi., Vlc., and Kb. The score shows a downward chromatic gesture across several instruments, particularly in the woodwinds and strings. Dynamic markings include *veloce*, *pp*, *ff*, *f*, *p*, and *sempre p*. A box with the number "2" is placed above the first staff and below the last staff.

The downward chromatic gesture reoccurs across the span of the song, sometimes briefly as a melodic outgrowth, as seen above, at others as an extended drawing-down gesture across several instruments, as shown in Ex. 4.13. Whether appearing in linear or static contexts, this gesture functions as a neutralizing agent, arresting any sense of forward flow or harmonic potential through its undifferentiated chromaticism, as if the music were being drained of purpose. There is in the music a feeling of lassitude after its appearances, a questioning similar to the struggle for confirmation in the funeral march, a sense of any effort to move forward being in vain. This futility, the feeling of resistance to movement in the music throughout the work, is crucial to understanding the transformation that takes place in the wake of the “death rite” phase of the narrative (discussed in detail in Chapter 2). It is important to note that futility, as implied here, is not likewise a function of the textual narrative so much as a *commentary* made by the music on the text. This tone of futility in motion on the one hand, and the struggle against stasis in the funeral march on the other, is of great importance on both the temporal (and therefore semiotic) level as well as for the narrative outcome of the song. In the poetic sense, the music’s resistance to linear motion is a critique of the longing expressed in the text, as embodied in the linear processes of tonality.

Ex. 4.13 “Der Abschied”, mm. 144-149

kl. Fl. 20 Langsam.

1. Fl. *sf* *pp*

1. Ob. *sf* *pp*

1. Kl. in B. *sf* *pp*

B.-Kl. in B. *sf* *pp*

1. Fag. *sf* *pp* *more:do* *ppp*

1. & 2. Hr. in F. *gestopft* *sf* *pp*

1. Harfe. *f* *ff*

2. Harfe. *pppp gliss.* *F dur*

1. Vl. *zu 2 am Steg* *sf* *ppp* Langsam.

Alt-St. *gen.* Die Welt schläft ein!

Kb. *arco* *pp*

20

This tone of struggle against the funeral march topic, as mentioned above, is entirely absent in Mahler’s earlier treatment of the narrative archetype in *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen*. There is no harmonic ambiguity in the final song, “Die zwei blauen Augen”, to indicate resistance on the part of the protagonist to his fate. The protagonist of the earlier cycle, haunted by the memory of his love (and thus the suffering it brings), takes his leave of the world (called “allerliebsten Platz”, the “most beloved place”), setting out into the night, and finding rest under the linden tree, all to the calm, untroubled procession of the music. The wandering key scheme of the music, from the recounting of the protagonist’s pain (E minor) to the literal funeral march (C major/minor) to the finding of rest (F major, ending F minor), once again implies a journey without return (see footnote 62, p. 30). Further, in “Die zwei blauen Augen” the semiotic surface of the music also emphasizes the inevitability of death by its association with rest and relief. The funeral march topic (see Exs 3.19 and 4.8) gives way at the midpoint to the lullaby topic (see Ex. 3.20, p. 74), implying that relief is to be found in sleep in the maternal lap of nature, which is ultimately equated with death as the funeral march motive returns in the final bars of the song, making the protagonist’s fate explicit. There is no resistance to the idea of death here, no questioning of its

inevitability. In fact, death is embraced, seen as the only solution to the problem of suffering and rejection, both from the human and natural worlds. The topical surface of the music merely confirms this acceptance.

A similar conflation of nature with rest and death takes place in “Der Abschied” at an important point, in the preamble to the funeral march (see Ex. 3.7, score Rehs 36-37), in which the three principal Layer 1 topics – birdcalls, lullaby (marked by its rocking figure) and funeral march (represented by its initial gong pedal tone), denoting respectively nature, sleep and death – are present in a passage of unmetered cacophony. This moment is adumbrated earlier in the song by a shorter passage (see Ex. 3.12, score Reh. 18.) Furthermore, the three topics are linked in this passage at the intervallic level by the minor third, which is equally present in the chirping birdcall gestures, the rocking third of the lullaby, and the shivering string tremolo underlying the funeral march’s gong stroke. In the context of this study, the implication seems clear: there can be no relief from human suffering in nature, and there can be no oneness with nature without the destruction of the self, the cessation of individual being, which is only achieved through death. Sleep is merely a gateway to the final, inevitable outcome for the suffering protagonist.

In such an interpretation, the tone of struggle in the ensuing funeral march further bolsters the notion of resistance against the inevitability of death. Seen in this light, the cruelest irony in the funeral march of “Der Abschied” is twofold: the “death rite” is seen as inescapable, but the repeated denial of confirmation of the tonic of C minor suggests that its inevitability is merely an imposed solution rather than one of necessity. Death for the protagonist is unavoidable only because the narrative archetype of the human in nature demands it, as Mitchell posits, and as played out in “Die zwei blauen Augen”. But this narrative of inevitability fails to address the *necessity* of death as the ultimate mediating act. In “Der Abschied”, the funeral march music’s tone of resistance or struggle amounts, I believe, to a questioning of that necessity, one that plays out in explicit terms in the latter part of the song, with profound consequences for the narrative outcome. The turning point, as will be seen in Part III, occurs literally at the crossroads of the piece, in the long-awaited meeting between the two friends that launches a final transformation. The narrative function of this encounter, following on the heels of the parodic funeral march, and the identity of the protagonist’s friend, will be shown to be essential components in revising the meaning of “Der Abschied”.

Part III – A crucial change of perspective

The aftermath of the funeral march section in “Der Abschied” (see score, Rehs 48 to 54 incl.), in which the literal farewell of the song’s title takes place, presents one of the most quizzical

events in the text of “Der Abschied”. At the point where Mahler introduces the Wang Wei poem (see Ex. 2.1, p. 21), the heretofore unified perspective, the “Ich” of the narrative’s protagonist, abruptly fractures into three distinct personae: two characters, one presumably the protagonist, the other the long-awaited friend spoken of in the Meng Hao-Ran poem, the whole scene related by a narrator, and set to the music of the song’s bleak opening recitative. This sudden shift in perspective has proven one of the most difficult to interpret of Mahler’s compositional choices in “Der Abschied”, and perhaps for this reason has become the locus of much disagreement as to the function of this scene, and its import for the conclusion of the work.

Aside from the fact that Mahler introduced this change into the text himself, breaking apart the unified protagonist persona of Bethge’s original, at the center of this analytical dilemma, in my opinion, lies the very tendency to conflate Mahler’s biography with his music and place the composer at the center of his own musical creation. When composer and protagonist are made inseparable, the fracturing of the unified perspective of the pre-death rite music into many viewpoints represents a quandary to the biographer-analyst. Of the three personae, which one is Mahler? Does he become the narrator of the scene, or is he still the protagonist? For that matter, is the protagonist still the same one as previously? Who is the friend? Does this character have a concrete identity, either within the musical narrative or biographically for Mahler? Moreover, what does this persona represent, and what is its function for the narrative? Who, of the two, is the one to depart at the end after the farewell scene? And what is his fate?

Speculation ranges from the guarded to the frankly unfounded, and is where the greatest diversity of opinion is to be found in interpretations of the song. Many of these explications of the perspective shift are, as Deruchie puts it, “attempts to explain it away”.¹⁰⁸ Mitchell, for instance, in one of the longer discourses on the subject, ultimately treats the narrative change as a distancing device, separating Mahler from the pain of his impending end, making it easier to approach, and to compose. “[Mahler] was writing about his own destiny, reconciling himself to his own death”,¹⁰⁹ he writes. Mitchell ultimately concludes that the personae are not intended to be taken as separate entities, but rather different facets of the composer himself: “There is not more than one voice in *Das Lied* [...]. It is the composer who speaks to us throughout. If at this stage it is still necessary to name the protagonist, it is Mahler himself, whose Passion ‘Der Abschied’ was.”¹¹⁰ At the furthest extreme of biographical inference into this exchange is Franklin’s query, “Who is the ‘friend’ to

¹⁰⁸ Deruchie 2009, 89.

¹⁰⁹ Mitchell 1985, 431.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 432.

whom Mahler addressed his ‘Abschied’ if not Alma?”, a charming if perhaps sentimental suggestion, and unsupported by anything concrete from the music itself.¹¹¹

More persuasive and, perhaps significantly, more contemporary readings are offered by Johnson and Deruchie. To try to summarize in this space Johnson’s book-length argument about the multiplicity of voices within Mahler’s oeuvre would be to do it a grave injustice. However, his essential conception of this scene in “Der Abschied” is as a fracturing of the protagonist’s voice into its component dichotomy: the factual, fatalistic narrative voice that states the inevitability of death, and the lyrical voice that resists this outcome, ultimately prevailing as the Coda begins. The return of the lyrical voice, writes Johnson, “is therefore also a revocation of death”.¹¹² Likewise, Deruchie interprets the scene differently from the heavily biographical readings of the previous scholarly generation, going further than Johnson in his conception of the narrative’s timeline. In Deruchie’s interpretation, “the protagonist has become an *object*, an Other to the narrator, who now treats the protagonist’s final farewell and death as a *topic*.”¹¹³ The protagonist, moreover, is no longer part of the musical drama, except in retrospect. “The protagonist,” writes Deruchie, “does not die at the end of the piece (as the received interpretation has it) but before his funeral march.”¹¹⁴ The narrator “subsequently recounts the protagonist’s final farewell, after the fact and in the past tense.”¹¹⁵

The purpose of the above overview of readings of the farewell scene of “Der Abschied”, and its overall import for the narrative of the song, is not specifically to engage them argumentatively, but rather to show the clear dividing line between two radically differing interpretations. On the one hand, that the scene constitutes a final acceptance of death and its inevitability, both on the part of the song’s protagonist and its composer, which could be called the standard view, regardless of how various authors qualify the specifics of their arguments. On the other, that the meeting between friends is in fact a revocation of death, a negation of it. This study finds itself on the side of Johnson and Deruchie, and contra Mitchell, et al. in believing that the scene does not function as a confessional readying for death, either within the abstract narrative of the music, or for Mahler himself. On the contrary, when examined from the perspective of the parodic treatment of the funeral march topic, the futility implied by the arresting of linear motion, as well as the textual narrative itself, the music offers a radically differing solution to the end described as inevitable in the earlier “Die zwei blauen Augen”.

¹¹¹ Franklin 1997, 172.

¹¹² Johnson 2009, 86.

¹¹³ Deruchie 2009, 89.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 92.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 92. Deruchie’s argument does not end here, and his ultimate conclusion regarding the role of death in “Der Abschied” is far more subtle and radical in terms of revising readings of “Der Abschied” than is implied by the cited excerpts. However, his position cannot be fully engaged within the confines of this study without significant digression.

At the heart of the farewell scene lies a kind of negotiation that, in its semiotic and temporal expression, lays bare the narrative problem of the work. At Reh. 48 (Ex. 4.14), to the tones of the opening recitative – so mercilessly parodied in the funeral march (see Exs 4.1 and 4.5) –

Ex. 4.14 “Der Abschied”, mm. 371-381

48 Nicht eilen.

1.2. Fl. *p*

1.2. Ob. *p*

1.2. Kl. in B *p* zu 2

B-Kl. in D *f* in B

1.2. Hr. in F *f*

Tamtam. *pp* *scharf abreißen* *pp* *sempre pp*

1. Harfe. *ff* *ff* *sf* Nicht eilen.

2. Harfe. *ff* *ff* *sf*

Alt. St. *(erzählend und ohne Espressivo)*
Er stieg vom Pferd und reich-te ihm den Trunk des Abschieds

Vlc. *ppp*

Kb. *ppp*

48 *ppp*

49 *A tempo.*

1.2. Fag. *f*

Tamtam.

Alt. St. dar. Er frag-te ihn, wo-hin er füh-re und auch war-um, war-um es müß-te sein.

Vlc. *pp*

Kb. *pp*

49

the newly introduced narrator relates that one of the characters (the protagonist? the friend?) alights from his horse and offers the other the drink of farewell. The following question, presumably posed by the protagonist, highlights the struggle in the preceding death rite: “Er fragte ihn [...] warum es müßte sein” (“He asked him [...] why it must be”). The question here, then, is not the Beethovenian “Muß es sein?”, but rather, “*Warum* muß es sein?” (Mahler even repeats the “warum” in the vocal setting.) Put more simply, the question asked in the wake of the parodied funeral march is, “Is there not another way?” By way of answer, the bassoons launch into the funeral march’s processional motive again. There is no “why?” of death, only the fact of it. Further reinforcing the idea of inevitability is the chromatic “futility” figure, overtaking the texture after Reh. 49 and bringing the music to a halt again (Ex. 4.15). Not only is death inevitable in this narrative, its necessity must not be questioned, either.

Ex. 4.15 “Der Abschied, mm. 382-385

What happens following this exchange is central. The question itself, and its musical answer, are intoned over the static C pedal that ends the funeral march section proper. At Reh. 51, the music suddenly shifts toward the C major mode and becomes linear as the departing persona speaks of his disappointment in life at the hands of fortune, again equating functional tonality with

worldly suffering. The dominant pedal over which this phrase takes place emphasizes the tone of longing (Ex. 4.16). Here the textual narrative situation begins to resemble that in “Die zwei bauen Augen”, as the departing character speaks of taking his leave into a beautiful death. At Reh. 52, though the bass resolves downward to C, the tone of the music once again sours, the inner voices taking on an augmented triad coloration, neither major nor minor, once again denying a strong resolution to a C tonic in any mode. The challenge to the dominant’s resolving potential from the funeral march is resumed here.

Ex. 4.16 “Der Abschied”, mm. 400-408 (reduction)

The feeling of modal ambiguity continues in the following passage at Reh. 53, as the bass settles once again onto a dominant pedal as the departing persona speaks of wandering into the mountains to seek solace for his lonely heart. Between Rehs 53 and 54 (Ex. 4.17), the bass repeatedly references a cadential dominant-tonic motion, but upper texture’s constant wavering between major and minor again denies a sense of conclusive tonic resolution.

Ex. 4.17 “Der Abschied”, mm. 409-419 (reduction)

53

Hfe. *dim.* - *pp* Wo - hin ich
Vie. *pp*

Hfe. *dim.* *morendo* *ppp*

Langsam
Rit. *sehr ausdrucksvoll*

geh? *espress.* Ich geh, ich wand-re in die Ber - ge.

Vla. Kl. Engl. Hr. *molto espress.* Hr. *p*

Ich su - che Ru - he, Ru - he für... mein

Fl. *espress.* *Str. allein* *una corda*

Bkl. Kb. *pp*

54

ein - sam Herz!

pp *mp* *Ob.* *molto espress.* *vi.*

Following this, the music enters a string of wandering harmonies consisting largely of third-related major triads, and is again brought to a sudden halt by the chromatic “futility” gesture in the high clarinet the measures before Reh. 55 (Ex. 4.18). Here, though, the futility idea seems to be questioning something else. Since Reh. 53, the funeral march’s characteristic processional motive has been progressively drained from the texture, making it difficult to state that death and futility are still linked. What seems to be questioned as possibly futile in the passage before Reh.

55 is the harmonic context itself, the linearity of the music and, by association, the idea of seeking or striving implied by the text. And yet, the situation still greatly resembles “Die zwei blauen Augen” as, at Reh. 55 (see Ex. 3.9), the lullaby figure interrupts, as does the static temporal state (with F major as the implied pitch center), the world of nature inviting the departing persona “to be fused with it in sleep”, as Johnson says.¹¹⁶ This call does not last long, however, as the music once again changes abruptly in a linear direction halfway between Rehs 56 and 57. This time, though, the quality of linearity is lessened somewhat, and a tone of questioning invades the harmony as the augmented sonorities return, eventually subsuming the entire harmonic (as well as orchestral) texture in a complete whole-tone scale in the measures leading into Reh. 58.

Ex. 4.18 “Der Abschied”, mm. 421-429 (reduction)

The image displays a musical score reduction for three systems of staves. The first system includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Violin (Vl.), Viola (Vi.), Bassoon (Fag.), Horn (Hr.), and Cello/Double Bass (Bkl. tre corde). Dynamics range from *mf* to *sf*. The second system features Clarinet (Kl.), English Horn (Engl. Hr.), and Bassoon (Bkl. Fag.). Dynamics include *pp*, *sf*, *ff*, and *sf dim.*. The third system includes Flute (Fl.), Bassoon (Fag.), and English Horn (Engl. Hr.). Dynamics include *pp*, *sf*, and *ppp*. The score concludes with a *morendo* marking and a *pp* dynamic.

¹¹⁶ Johnson 1999, 68.

Here the tone of ambiguity in the music is palpable, and it clearly reflects a shift in the tone of the text as well, as the music underpins the lines “Ich werde niemals in die Ferne schweifen. / Still ist mein Herz und harret seiner Stunde!” (I shall not roam in distant lands. / My heart is still and awaits its hour!). This represents a dramatic change from the lines of a few moments earlier, as the departing persona spoke of world-weariness and seeking peace. This sudden change in tone coincides with a line Mahler introduced into the Bethge poem. The original also speaks of an end to roaming (see Chapter 2, Ex. 2.1, p. 21), but Mahler himself inserted the words speaking of the stilling of the heart and waiting. This is the crucial change that shifts the narrative away from death as imminent event and into a different conceptual dimension. The reason for this, in my opinion, lies in the origin of the text itself: not Bethge’s poems, but their far-removed sources, and the conception of life and death that underlies them. A brief digression into this topic will yield what I believe to be the most satisfactory explanation for the fracturing of the protagonist persona during the passage discussed above, and can help in reframing the terms by which the end of “Der Abschied” is to be interpreted.

“Der Abschied” and Eastern thought

Although Bethge’s poetic adaptations depart significantly from their Chinese source materials, the farewell scene in “Der Abschied” presents a core problem that, while central to the Western narrative archetype of the protagonist in nature, as detailed in Chapter 2, is also common to a number of Asian philosophical and religious traditions. Namely, the problem confronted at the moment the protagonist’s perspective fractures is the one of worldly suffering. In the Western narrative, as we have seen, the problem of suffering is ultimately only resolvable in death, after the suffering protagonist experiences rejection in both the human and natural worlds. However, in many Asian philosophical traditions, notably Taoism and Buddhism, the problem of suffering is dealt with in a rather different manner. The concept at its most simplified is described in a formulation commonly known as the Four Noble Truths, as follows:

- 1) Life is suffering (*dukha*: also variously frustration, grief, sorrow)
- 2) The cause of suffering is attachment (*trishna*: clinging, grasping, ego or self)
- 3) Relief from suffering is the ending of attachment (the attainment of *nirvana*)
- 4) Attachment is ended by the negation of the self (*Dharma*: Buddhist practice)¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Adapted from Watts 1957 [1989], 46-52. La Grange 2008, 1310 offers a similar formulation: 1. There is an illness (*Dukkha* [sic]) 2. There is a cause(s) for this illness (*Tanha* (the self)) 3. There is a possible cure for this illness (overcoming *Tanha*) 4. A method can be prescribed to bring about a cure (*Madhiyamika*, the Middle Path).

In both traditions, the solution to suffering is the negation of the self. In the Western narrative, despite the many ways in which that negation occurs – taking leave of society, drink, sleep, dream – they cumulatively lead to the loss of self in the most extreme terms, or death. Relief from suffering is sought in oneness, first with society, then with nature, the rejection from both being the turning point beyond which the self must be destroyed in order to attain oneness with the world, the Other. As Mitchell asserts, the protagonist must die in order for the narrative goal to be realized.¹¹⁸ That this loss of self is played out in literal terms is the central dilemma of the narrative Mahler employs, and the central question in the farewell scene.

From the Eastern perspective, though, the conception of the self is more subtle, and the solution to the problem of suffering is diametrically opposed. As Alan Watts writes, from the Buddhist perspective, “there is no Self, or basic reality, which may be grasped, either by direct experience or by concepts.”¹¹⁹ The self, in other words, is simply a construct of the mind that separates subject from object, or individual and other, not a reality. “The ego,” says Watts, “exists in an abstract sense alone, being an abstraction from memory.”¹²⁰ In this conception of identity, the accumulated troubles suffered by the self are illusory, irrelevant to the problem of being, easily dismissed if the construct behind them is abandoned. In these terms, the solution offered by Eastern philosophies to the seeking of relief is not the loss of the self through death, but the ending of the search itself, the roaming, the longing that leads to suffering. Loss of self here occurs not in the literal, physical sense, but rather metaphorically. Once the construct of selfhood is set aside, oneness is not only possible, but actual.

It is this idea that, I believe, may have attracted Mahler to the Bethge texts, however far removed from their Chinese sources they may have been, and however overlaid with romantic sentiment; for, in their basic conception of humanity and nature, and of life and death, they offered a solution to the narrative problem he faced in *Das Lied* that did not involve a literal retread of the Western narrative already seen in *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen*. Viewed in this way, Mahler’s fragmentation of the protagonist’s perspective into three personae can be read not as a dialogue of farewell between composer/subject and world, as the conventional interpretation would have it, or a meditation on mortality, but as a frank dialogue about the problem of earthly suffering, held within the narrative of the work. In this sense, Mitchell is perhaps correct in his analysis of the perspective fracture as a distancing device, but not quite as he intended. Far from a way of making the composing of his own death more approachable, the effect of distancing in the fracturing of perspective is a means of rising above the narrative problem, of viewing it dispassionately before

¹¹⁸ Mitchell 1985, 355.

¹¹⁹ Watts 1957 [1989], 47.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 47.

moving forward. The departing protagonist in effect states, “I suffer, therefore I must die.” But the musical context suggests otherwise. The struggle in the funeral march and its collapse, as discussed above, the harmonic resistance to the static finality of the funeral march topic, and the ceaseless intimations of futility in linear motion throughout “Der Abschied”, seem to point out that striving, the seeking of relief implied by tonality, is itself the problem, and that death, while an option, is not the only solution, and perhaps the least desirable. As Johnson writes of the farewell scene, “The restoration of the opening recitative [at Reh. 48] seems to function as a kind of negative recapitulation, not so much a structural arrival as the confirmation that real progress remains impossible.”¹²¹ This is not to imply that temporality itself in this narrative acts as a barrier to the fulfillment the protagonist seeks, only that the role of death as the sole mediating portal between the two temporal states of stasis and linearity is here undermined, and a different means of negotiating this temporal/semiotic polarity is sought.

Thus, in the wake of the collapse of the Western narrative’s drive towards death, depicted with such calm and beauty in “Die zwei blauen Augen”, and parodied in the hyperbolized gestural language of the funeral march of “Der Abschied”, death as a necessary outcome is questioned. Deruchie, in his survey of the nineteenth-century Western attitude toward death, writes that “Europeans commonly viewed dying as an awesome, transcendental and even sublime act. The prevailing mythology held, as it had for centuries, that death offered a repose and a desirable refuge from worldly turmoil.”¹²² However, by Mahler’s lifetime the outlook had changed drastically.

[T]he comforting romantic notions of ecstatic death that have featured so centrally in the reception of ‘Der Abschied’ came to seem like hopelessly lost ideals. And it was these new challenges to European attitudes and values that mandated Mahler’s turn to the East and the thought of ancient China for a new way of coming to terms with death.¹²³

Mahler thus splits the narrative perspective of the protagonist into the suffering self (the one who departs) and the more neutral querying one, with the narrator persona arbitrating the discussion, as it were. In this sense, Mitchell is again correct in his assertion that there is only one voice in “Der Abschied”, that of Mahler. However, it is not Mahler the person, the individual, but Mahler the creator, solving a structural problem in his music. In this situation, with the protagonist’s suffering finally viewed dispassionately, from the outside, the answer to the question, “Warum muß es

¹²¹ Johnson 2009, 85.

¹²² Deruchie 2009, 78.

¹²³ Ibid., 77.

sein?” becomes, “Es muß nicht.” The farewell, in the end, is not of a person to life, the absencing of oneself *from* the world, but a dissolution of the self as a barrier *to* the world. The key point of transition from suffering self to a different state, from this viewpoint, is in the intimation of stillness and waiting. In the Eastern worldview, the escape from suffering is not attained through action or striving toward relief as a goal, but through its opposite, a kind of passive stillness, a patience that waits in tranquility. Watts here cites the Tang-era Buddhist leader Huángbò, saying, “[The Dharma] cannot be looked for or sought, comprehended by wisdom or knowledge, explained in words, contacted materially [...] or reached by meritorious achievement.” Further, Watts adds that it is through “the non-action [...] whereby ‘spring comes, and the grass grows itself’”, a description of the state attained at the end of the farewell scene that also features a high degree of commonality with the final lines of “Der Abschied”, added by Mahler to Bethge’s poem (see Chapter 2, Ex. 2.1, p. 21).

Here, at the end of the farewell scene, Mahler’s music subtly and brilliantly conveys a shift from Western conceptions of self and its relation to the larger world to a more Eastern-influenced outlook. As the harmonic striving, the sense of effort implied throughout the song through the use of linear, goal directed music, finally ceases – or is abandoned – the protagonist reaches a state of calm preparedness, signaled by the dissolution into the somewhat characterless whole-tone scale (see score, Reh. 57, m. 449→). The music is voided of intent, as it were, and freed of the specter of death as a new possibility for a mediation between subject and object, human and nature, reveals itself. However, the specific nature of the mediating act that replaces death in “Der Abschied” is only seen in the concluding span of the Coda.

Part IV – A third state

The ending music of the Coda from Rehs 58 to the end has been partially described from the semiotic viewpoint in Chapter 3, under the rubric of evaporation of directed motion (see pp. 62-67). However, the semiotic language of this final passage of the song also has great narrative importance, as the music acts out the very solution to the problem of suffering, as outlined in Part III above. As with the funeral march, the harmonic behavior of the music is central to understanding the function of the semiotic complex above it. As shown in Chapter 3, the passage from Reh. 58 features a progressive cessation of teleological processes in the contrapuntal structure of the music, proceeding from linear music in C major at 58 to a progressively less articulated metrical and harmonic space, and finally drawing in toward stasis. The harmonic process underlying this semiotic progression confirms the tendency toward stasis, as functional tonality gives way to the harmonic fragment $I-V_3^4-I^6$, an initiating gesture that is reiterated rather

than continued (Reh. 61→63 incl.), and which is finally reduced to a simple alternation of tonic and dominant harmonies as the texture floods with diatonic pitches.

This description, however, only goes some of the distance toward explaining the full semiotic significance of the final pages of “Der Abschied” in the context of narrative, and it is at this point that the idea of challenges to the dominant’s resolving potential, explored in the context of the funeral march and its aftermath, returns. At Reh. 63, after the final iteration of the initiating progression $I-V_3^4-I^6$, the music enters a peculiar harmonic state. From 63, the music ostensibly extends the I^6 harmony that ends the initiating progression. The lower voice E descends through a chromatic E_b passing tone to the fifth (D) of a dominant seventh harmony, which resolves to the C major tonic two measures later, at Reh. 64 (Ex. 4.18), reinforced by the alto soloist’s 3-2-1 scalar descent to the tonic, on the first iterations of the word “Ewig” (“Forever”).

While on the surface offering the long-sought conclusive resolution to the C tonic of the song, this cadential gesture at Reh. 64 cannot truly be said to be conclusive in any traditional sense when examined from the textural point of view. Aside from the lack of cadential bass motion from the dominant pitch to the tonic – the lowest voice descends to the tonic from the fifth (D) of the dominant seventh – the fragmentation of the harmonic syntax of this potential resolution throughout the orchestral texture makes it difficult to apprehend any sense of conclusion. Proceeding from the I^6 harmony left hanging at Reh. 63, the strings exit the texture, leaving only the mid-register winds and the arpeggiating harps and celeste, in which color the V_3^4 is prepared. But the resolution of this dominant seventh sonority crucially does not occur in the same color, passing instead to the strings, which enter at Reh. 64 on the root position tonic in close voicing. Further, the alto’s 3-2-1 descent, thought appearing superficially to be a cadential gesture, is in fact part of the same voice exchange initiating progression ($I-V_3^4-I^6$), thereby undermining its cadential impact.

This fragmentation of harmonic resolution is repeated at Reh. 65, as the winds prepare the dominant seventh, only for the resolution to occur in the strings. Thus, despite the strong melodic cadential motion implied by the 3-2-1 scalar progression in the voice, the texture does not support that cadence. The fragmentation occurs again and again in this final passage, with preparation in one color and resolution in another. As the orchestration pares down toward Reh. 66, the dominant seventh is reduced to only a bare outline in the middle-low register winds and harps (Ex. 4.19), its resolution given by trombones and pizzicato celli an octave lower. From then onward the dominant ceases to appear as a discrete harmony, its constituent pitches absorbed into the cluster forming above it in the middle register. Furthermore, as the harmonic events become increasingly widely spaced, the syntactical relationship between dominant and tonic begins to

degrade, to the point where the polarity of the two harmonies is obscured, rendered irrelevant. In the final pages of “Der Abschied”, the distinction between consonance and dissonance, or dissonance and its resolution, as expressed in the causal relationship between the simplest tonal materials, evaporates into a state of diatonically saturated stasis.

Ex. 4.19 “Der Abschied”, mm. 500-509

The musical score for "Der Abschied" (mm. 500-509) is presented in a standard orchestral layout. The instruments and their parts are as follows:

- 1. 2. 3. Fl.**: Flutes, with markings "zu 3" and "morendo".
- 1. 2. Ob.**: Oboes, with markings "zu 2" and "morendo".
- 1. 2. Kl. in B.**: Clarinets in B-flat, playing sustained chords.
- 1. 2. Fag.**: Bassoons, playing sustained chords.
- Cel.**: Cello, with markings "p" and "3".
- Mandol.**: Mandolin, with marking "kaum hörbar" and "ppp".
- 1. Harfe.**: First Harp, with markings "pp" and "Flageolett.".
- 2. Harfe.**: Second Harp, with marking "pp".
- 1. Vl.**: First Violin, with marking "ppp".
- 2. Vl.**: Second Violin, with marking "ppp".
- Br.**: Brass, with marking "morendo" and "ppp".
- Alt-St.**: Alto Saxophone, with marking "nen," and "e -".
- Vlc.**: Violoncello, with marking "zu 3" and "ppp".
- Kb.**: Kontrabaß (Double Bass), with marking "ppp".

The score is marked with a box containing the number "64" at the top right and bottom right corners.

Ex. 4.19 "Der Abschied", mm. 529-539

68

1.2. Fl. zu 2

1.2. Ob. zu 2

1.2. Kl. in B.

1.2. Fag.

1.2. Hr. in F.

4. Hr.

1.2. Pos. offen

3. Pos. offen

Cel. *ppp* *pp*

Mandol. *p*

1. Harfe.

2. Harfe. *p* *pp*

1. Vl. G-Saite *ppp espr.*

2. Vl. G-Saite *ppp espr.*

Br. mit Dämpfer *pp*

Alt-St.

Vlc. pizz. *pp*

Kb.

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This elision, or better yet, liquidation of boundaries also applies in the semiotic realm, as several semiotic types, as seen in Chapter 3, can be shown to merge under the rubric of evaporation of directed motion (see pp. 62-67 and Chapter 3, Table 3.1). Of particular interest here is the topic of background-foreground conflation (type 3A), which asserts itself in this final passage. Partially as a function of diatonic saturation (type 1B), the perception of separate lines becomes increasingly difficult from Reh. 66 onward, as the individual pitches cease to function melodically and instead become sustained textural elements. Also in melodic terms, the extreme reduction of the alto voice part to two pitches, E and D, of increasingly irregular and longer held durations, reduces the melodic primacy of the voice, thus rendering it an equal textural component to the ostensible “accompaniment” behind it. At Reh. 67, the harps and mandolin, which had previously doubled rhythmically the voice’s infrequent pitch changes, cease this doubling activity, their iterations of the E-D dyad moving out of synchronization with the soloist, further diminishing the voice as primary focus of the texture. The textural distance between the lone voice and its background, previously dark and threatening (as described in semiotic type 3B) closes in, and is filled with quiet activity, like the line “Blauen licht die Fernen” (“The distances brighten blue”). As the orchestral colors fragment into groups, it is as if the components of the texture become unmoored, each group taking an element and moving with it into its own asynchronous cycle, like a multitude of different-sized wheels turning against each other, with the self, as embodied in the solo voice, only one among equals.

Further, the concrete semiotic topics (Layer 1) discussed as an important narrative function through the funeral march and its aftermath, from Reh. 58 onward, cease to function as elements in the music. All surface references to nature, death and sleep are left aside as the deeper, more abstract semiotic process referring to nature moves into the foreground. In this way, the semiotic complex of the work, and its attendant dualities, can be seen to be subsumed into a single topic, as the conceptual boundaries between polarities – foreground and background, tonic and dominant, stasis and motion, human and nature, suffering and relief, life and death – dissolve. In this sense, the description of the end of the Coda as temporally static, while accurate, is insufficient as a qualifier of the actual musical situation. Although bound to a single harmony, the C major triad intoned by the trombones, the ending music of the Coda is static in a much different way from that previously seen in “Der Abschied”. Where before stasis, in addition to lack of harmonic direction, also implied a more general absence of motion, this music is filled with gestural activity, though none of it purposeful or directional in nature. In this way, the music at the end of “Der Abschied” reaches a kind of third temporal state – a kind of heterophony – beyond either the striving of functional tonality or the absolute stillness of stasis, one that echoes the final lines Mahler added to Bethge’s text, in which neither emotional expression nor neutral description

dominates. This transcending of dualities, in the end, proves to be the ultimate point of “Der Abschied”, and the most deeply felt influence of Eastern philosophy on Mahler’s compositional process. In the end, “Der Abschied” is neither a sentimental, and thereby self-pitying farewell to life nor a resigned acceptance of death, but a transcendence of any meaningful distinction between the two states.

The above is not to suggest, however, that Mahler had embraced either Buddhism or another Eastern philosophy to any degree at the end of his life. For one, evidence for such an assertion would be difficult to provide, and suspect as to its significance. Although Mitchell, for example, points to Mahler’s awareness of Wagner’s planned opera about the final journey of the Buddha,¹²⁴ little proof can be shown of Mahler having a specific interest in Eastern or Buddhist philosophy, which had yet to make its way West in any significant form. Deruchie points to a growth in interest, during the nineteenth century in Viennese consciousness, in Asian, and more specifically Chinese aesthetics and philosophy. Taoism, according to Deruchie, was held in particular esteem for the solutions it offered to philosophical problems that preoccupied Romantic thought. Of particular relevance here is the Taoist perspective on “the apparent incongruity between the transience of human life and the permanence of nature and the cosmos”, the very duality that lies at the heart of the narrative of “Der Abschied”.¹²⁵ Nonetheless, it would still be more accurate to state that Mahler had absorbed a Viennese adaptation of Taoist or Buddhist ideas, in much the same way as he took up a Romantic translation of classical Chinese poetry for *Das Lied*.

Rather, the implication here is that Mahler’s worldview evolved toward the end of his life to the point where it was compatible with certain precepts of Asian philosophies like Taoism or Buddhism. Mitchell admits as much, saying, “[a]s Mahler himself moved into his final years, his personal philosophy moved nearer to a position that, at least in the West, we would recognize as sharing common ground with an identifiably ‘oriental’ approach to matters of life and death.”¹²⁶ This would be of a piece with Mahler’s late-life interest in the philosophical writings of Gustav Theodor Fechner, who espoused, as La Grange terms it, “a quasi-gnostic nature religion”¹²⁷ that envisions a state beyond death having little to do with Western notions of an afterlife divided between “heaven” and “hell”. Hefling’s quotation of Fechner’s description of this “third state” of existence is worth citing in full, both for its resemblance to Eastern conceptions of the afterlife (or more specifically, “after-death”), and for its striking parallels with the text of “Der Abschied”:

¹²⁴ Mitchell 1985, 449.

¹²⁵ Deruchie 2009, 84.

¹²⁶ Mitchell 1985, 448.

¹²⁷ La Grange 2008, 1382.

...our future life will merge as one with waves of light and sound... The spirit will no longer wander over mountain and field, or be surrounded by the delights of spring, only to mourn that it all seems exterior to him; but, transcending earthly limitations, he will feel new strength and joy... Stilled is all restlessness of thought, which no longer needs to seek in order to find itself...¹²⁸

This, it would seem, rather than a specifically Eastern ideology, is the more pantheistic sentiment expressed in “Der Abschied”, and for which Mahler saw the potential in Bethge’s texts. Rather than having its focus in personal grief or suffering, though, in “Der Abschied” any biographical events are universalized in the search for a solution to its narrative’s core dilemma: the necessity of death as a mediating act between the individual and the larger, unconscious system of nature. The events of the composer’s life, though significant and affecting, are only truly relevant in this reading of “Der Abschied” insofar as they show that, through his involvement with, and development of a core Western narrative of nature, Mahler arrived at a point where the expected outcome became unpalatable to him, necessitating a radical departure from the conventions of that narrative. In other words, faced with a problem with no desirable solution within his own cultural narrative, he appropriated a more acceptable alternative from a different tradition. It is at this level – that of the narrative – that the truest breakthrough in the Adornian sense (see Chapter 1, pp. 14-16) happens in *Das Lied*. At its point of greatest crisis, in the face of both the certainty of the conclusion and its inherent futility, the musical and textual narrative is literally invaded from without, as a non-Western solution imposes itself on an archetypally Western problem. If we are to push the idea of the dissolution of boundaries even further, the coda of “Der Abschied” embodies the Adornian qualities of breakthrough, suspension and fulfillment in one passage: breakthrough in the quality of importing something foreign and disruptive into the local context at the textual or narrative level; suspension in the music’s quality of stillness and detachment from the preceding strife; and fulfillment in the coda’s overriding of previous uncertainties.

In this way, Mahler defies, or at least reinvigorates Romantic convention in terms of the human-in-nature narrative archetype. In Johnson’s formulation, nature in this conventional narrative becomes the locus of “a reconciliation not to be found in this world”,¹²⁹ with the only means of actualizing that reconciliation being the obliteration of the physical self. This being the case, “Der Abschied” thus represents a dramatic revocation of that outcome in that the transcendence at its conclusion is very much in the here and now, an enlightenment in the Eastern sense, actual and accessible in this life. In this way, Mahler’s vision is a fully modernist one in his subversion of the Romantic nature narrative – rather than the acquiescence to it represented in

¹²⁸ Cited in Hefling 1999, 442.

¹²⁹ Johnson 1999, 44.

“Die zwei blauen Augen” – and points away from classical, dialectic synthesis, the quandary of “either/or” that plagues the song’s narrative and semiotic course, at a state beyond such dualities.

The closest visual analogue to the vision of death presented at the end of “Der Abschied” is perhaps Gustav Klimt’s late canvas “Death and Life” (Ex. 4.20). Painted between 1908-1911, this work is exactly contemporaneous with both the composition and first performance of *Das Lied*, as well as with Mahler’s demise. It provides a stark contrast with Klimt’s earlier depictions of humanity in various states of dying, decay and corruption, in keeping with the Expressionist values of his middle period work – life seen as an endless, inevitable progression toward darkness and oblivion. In “Death and Life” humanity is presented as a gentle, colorful, enveloping, ever growing and ever renewing stream. All stages of the human life span are represented, from birth to old age, yet without specific direction or linear progression, rather favoring a cyclical depiction of all stages of life in simultaneous flux.

Ex. 4.20 Gustav Klimt, “Death and Life” (1908-1911)



Most notable is the placement of the Death figure outside this stream, off to one side, its colors muted, its figure stooped, contained and weak, gazing jealously at the warm stream of life that, in return, takes no notice of it.¹³⁰ The cruciform symbols covering its shroud mark it as a death figure of Western belief, but the Christian/Western symbolism of death is here banished from earthly life. Instead of a great scythe, Death holds a small cudgel; the fearsome reaper figure of Western mythology, gatherer of souls, is here reduced to a common thug, laying in wait to pounce on the unsuspecting. Death still exists as a fact awaiting all life, but as a force its potency, and potential to induce fear, are here greatly diminished.

This is the modern vision of death I maintain Mahler presents to us at the conclusion of “Der Abschied”: a radiant, enveloping one in which physical death – that inescapable Romantic trope – is merely a distraction from the real process of attaining singularity between human and nature, conscious and unconscious: it is rendered irrelevant. (Klimt’s own demise would follow that of his generational contemporary Mahler a few years later, giving special resonance to this renewed conception of death, so close to Mahler’s own, in his late work.) Far from the Romantic narcissism implied in the conventional reading of “Der Abschied” as its composer’s self-eulogy, the song is, to me, an uncompromising redefinition of the terms by which Mahler would live the remainder of his days, however many their number, an optimistic look forward rather than an act of renunciation. If “Der Abschied” can still be said to be about death in the larger sense, it is not about *dying*, either for the protagonist of the narrative, or for Mahler himself as creator and individual. There is no mourning because the self, that construct, is no longer there to mourn or be mourned. All that remains is an eternal Now, a steady-state of wakeful awareness, intoned over and over to the deep-breathed, mantra-like “Ewig”. The end of “Der Abschied” is no end, only a cessation of sounding. The music, it is implied, continues infinitely after the song stops.

¹³⁰ For comparison, see especially Klimt’s “Medicine” (1901) in which death is portrayed as a corrupting presence floating within a similar river of life, rather than outside it.

Coda: “Ewig... ewig...”

That the avoidance of reference to Mahler’s life events has been a recurrent theme in this study does not completely negate their importance in reading Mahler’s music. Indeed, as admitted in Part I of the previous chapter, while the series of shocks to Mahler’s personal life do not figure prominently in my conception of “Der Abschied”, they were undoubtedly prominent background elements in the composition of the work, particularly the tragic loss of his daughter. And yet, it is still possible to integrate those events into the framework proposed here without recourse to the overemphasis of subjective biographical data, and with reference to the specific narrative of the work. Indeed, as the clinical psychiatrist Stuart Feder proposes in his unique study of the composer, “Der Abschied” presents itself as a way of channeling the traumatic background events surrounding its creation. He writes, “[a] degree of detachment from lost objects is part of the work of mourning [...]. This is confronted extraordinarily in the words and music of ‘Der Abschied’. There the promise of what lies beyond remains ambiguous in terms of life and death, but implies rather some third state of being. However, its achievement requires the detachment characterized by the parting of friends and the retreat from humanity into nature.”¹³¹ Here, the detachment described does not denote the Romantic leave-taking of the kind seen in “Die zwei blauen Augen”, but rather a detachment in the Eastern sense, as Feder points out in the same passage. That detachment, a necessary preparation for the anticipated “third state”, does not necessarily also connote a departure without return, only a temporary separation from the sources of suffering in order to process them.

This detachment from emotional trauma is paralleled in a work contemporaneous with *Das Lied*, and composed under similar, if not exactly analogous circumstances. Schoenberg’s String Quartet no. 2 of 1908 also famously marks a significant departure for its composer, from tonality into atonality, as well as for its inclusion of voice in the ensemble for the last two movements. Like *Das Lied*, Schoenberg’s quartet was composed during a period of personal crisis, in the wake of his wife’s affair with their neighbor, the painter Richard Gerstl, who later committed suicide. The progress of the quartet, and its gradual abandonment of tonality, can be read, as Feder reads “Der Abschied” for Mahler, as a coping device for Schoenberg on a personal level. As Christopher Fox writes in a recent article on the piece, “the gradual dissolution of the music’s connection to any sense of secure tonality is a potent expression of Schoenberg’s anguish, and the final movement embraces atonality as a metaphor for a psychological haven beyond

¹³¹ Feder 2004, 149.

suffering.”¹³² The text of that fourth and final movement, like the preceding one a setting of a poem by Stefan George, speaks in parallel, albeit more Expressionistic terms of leave-taking to “Der Abschied,” beginning with the iconic line “Ich fühle Licht von anderem Planeten” (“I feel air from another planet”), an analogue to the late Romantic “Still ist mein Herz, und harret seiner Stunde” in Mahler. Viewed in Fox’s terms, the overheated expressive modes and dense counterpoint of late Romantic tonality may have exerted undue stress upon a composer already coping with emotional trauma, necessitating a move into a less emotionally fraught tonal space. In this way, perhaps this is the true distancing device in “Der Abschied”. Whereas Schoenberg’s distress can be seen as having prompted a move away from the functional strictures of the tonal system toward atonality, Mahler’s response to personal trauma was a state of pan-diatonic stasis, whose basic musical materials derive from familiar tonal building blocks, but whose behavior features none of the teleological striving intrinsic to tonality.

One is tempted, perhaps unjustifiably, to describe the place Mahler finds at the end of “Der Abschied” as a kind of proto-minimalism (the style referenced in the Taruskin citation on p. 62). To be sure, the process-driven forms, flatter emotional affect and other general traits of that style, still lying half a century in the future after a series of global traumas, were undoubtedly the furthest thing from Mahler’s mind in writing *Das Lied*. The diatonically saturated stasis he finds in “Der Abschied” is, in the context of this study, an object, a semiotic sign like the others. While it may reveal much about Mahler’s own state of mind, as well as his aesthetic interests, his intent cannot have been to abandon tonal pull altogether; the insistence over the course of this study has been that Mahler simply found it the best solution to a narrative problem presented by the unique situation of “Der Abschied”. However, there remain parallels with minimalism’s use of saturated diatonic textures and undifferentiated or unarticulated rhythmic structures from the point of view of the latter style’s intended effect on its audience and performers. To wit, Steve Reich has written about the purpose of early minimalism’s process-driven structures that it amounts to “a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outward to *it*.”¹³³ While distant from Mahler’s expressive aims, speaking of minimalism in these terms bring it closer to the ultimate denial of ego – the suppression of individuality in favor of the wider collective – implied by the text and music of the Coda of “Der Abschied”. In both cases the self dissolves into the wider, cyclical fabric of the music.

¹³² Fox 2009.

¹³³ Reich 2002, 36.

Whether one chooses to view “Der Abschied” as emotional balm or starkly modernist revision of traditional forms, it represents a new and in some sense unique stage of musical rhetoric in Mahler’s output. It is a project that would remain unfinished, a world to which Mahler would open a door, but never fully enter. Certainly, elements of “Der Abschied” remain in the works that followed it, the Ninth and Tenth Symphonies, notably the ambiguity implied in harmonic resolutions not supported by the orchestral texture. However, the specific nature mediation in “Der Abschied”, the portrayal of the natural world as a still, near-affectless system, both near to humans and distant from it, unresponsive to attempts to engage it on an emotional level, is a project that would fall to others to explore. Notably, Schoenberg himself would step briefly into Mahler’s new world in the third movement of his op. 16 *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, “Farben” (“Colors”), subtitled “Summer Morning by a Lake”. A still, quiet, texturally rather than melodically or contrapuntally oriented piece, it was composed in 1909, before the first performance of *Das Lied von der Erde*, and thus cannot be said to derive any influence from it. However, it shows that a new conception of nature, and of the portrayal of nature in music, was emerging during the period, and that far from wallowing in the conventions of nature representation of the previous century, Mahler was actively engaged in redefining them. The brevity of “Farben”, no longer than the coda of “Der Abschied”, also suggests that this new, flatter emotional topography would in some way still have been uncomfortable for composers steeped in the excesses of late Romanticism, thus occasioning only cursory initial forays into these uncharted expressive waters.

In light of the unfinished state of Mahler’s nature project, it is inevitable that one should speculate as to the might-have-been aspects of Mahler’s unfortunately curtailed career. Had he survived longer into the modern age, would Mahler’s ceaseless intellectual curiosity have mandated a deeper exploration of the new spaces “Der Abschied” announces, and what would his influence have been? As the conductor Daniel Barenboim put it in a 2009 *New York Times* interview, “[i]f Mahler had lived longer, we wouldn’t have needed Schoenberg.”¹³⁴ An intentionally provocative statement, to be sure, but it emphasizes the view of Mahler as modernist rather than exclusively late Romantic. It has been the position of this study, and its aim to show, that the composer of one of the most oft-misread works of the early twentieth century was indeed a composer of the twentieth century rather than of the previous era. And, by extension, that the work itself, rather than a grand farewell to the trappings of an already past age, can and should be read as a fully modern act of revision, a statement of purpose for a new musical era, and a new phase of life for its composer.

¹³⁴ Interview with James Oestreich, 2009.

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