



Conducting a personal relationship with Mahler

For acclaimed baton-wielder Vladimir Jurowski, the music of the Jewish-born composer goes to the heart of his identity

By Jessica Duchon, September 21, 2010

Gustav Mahler is without a doubt the musical flavour of 2010. But not only that - the anniversary celebrations currently in full swing will extend into 2011, since the 150th anniversary of the composer's birth and the centenary of his death fall in these consecutive years.

There is good reason for his prominence. Mahler's gigantic symphonies seem to tackle issues of existential angst, cultural heritage, spirituality, mortality and more - matters that emerge as both deeply individual and of universal significance. Since the mid-20th century Mahler has become increasingly central to the orchestral repertoire - today, for many he has come to represent the pinnacle of classical music's achievements.

Vladimir Jurowski has just opened the London Philharmonic's new season by conducting Mahler's Symphony No 3; he and the orchestra will be following this with two more Mahler works next month. For him, connections with the composer run deeper than most.

Jurowski, music director of the LPO and Glyndebourne Festival Opera, has waited longer than others might have before tackling Mahler - mainly, he says, because to approach this music is "to touch on something that is for me extremely precious and personal".

Jurowski, who is 38, was born into a Jewish family in Moscow, all of whom are musicians. He is intensely aware of the cultural roots he shares with this greatest of Jewish-born composers. He suggests that Mahler's Jewishness is high on the list of factors that determined the nature of his music.

"Mahler's Jewishness was something he felt as a great burden. He spent his entire life trying to escape his roots. Yet his music wouldn't have been the same had he not been part of the diaspora culture."

Mahler's musical language, says Jurowski, was formed by the cultural melting-pot of the Austro-Hungarian Empire yet also by the old shtetl culture that underpinned the small-town Jewish community of Jihlava (known in German as Iglau) in Bohemia where he grew up. "The folk songs and dances, the military calls, the irony, all those distinctively Mahlerian sounds are drawn from his experiences of his roots in the diaspora," he says. "But he wanted to be seen as an Austrian if not a German composer - his ambitions were very much in the direction of Beethoven and Wagner."

Mahler eventually converted to Catholicism, in 1897 - a political move that permitted him to be appointed music director of the Vienna Opera. Yet it seems he was unable ever to forget his background. His conversion became, in Jurowski's view, "a kind of capital sin that haunted him. Especially in the Sixth Symphony you can hear - and this is a very subjective interpretation - a highly sarcastic rejecting of his Jewish background in the scherzo. Then the sanctum of the Christian faith appears in the form of a chorale in the last movement and eventually grows into something rather menacing."

Jurowski's own background in Soviet Russia was necessarily secular. "The only time we were reminded we were Jewish was when we came up against antisemitism," he says. The family moved to Germany when he was 18 - today he still lives in Berlin with his wife, Patricia, and their two children. His father, Mikhail, and his younger brother, Dmitri, are both conductors as well; his sister, Maria, is a pianist and opera singing coach. "Our family was typical of the Soviet middle-class 'intelligentsia'," he remembers, "and there was very little talk of religious faith."

But another aspect of Judaism remained crucial to him: "We have this collective memory. We are all connected by our common past. My grandmothers, when they didn't want us to understand what was being said, would speak in Yiddish and, of course, their childhood had been in the remains of the Jewish shtetl culture."

He discovered that that culture had found its way into daily Soviet life in some surprising ways, and that this formed a direct connection with Mahler. "Many popular Soviet songs before and during the Second World War were written by Jewish composers," Jurowski says. "They took their Jewish roots into those songs and merged them with Russian elements."

"When I was about 15 I heard Mahler's Fifth Symphony for the first time and in the second movement I was amazed to hear a motif that was almost identical to a Soviet song by a Jewish composer, Matvei Blanter. I couldn't understand how a classical Austrian composer of the late-19th century would have had the same idea as a Soviet song composer of the mid-20th century - and Mahler's symphonies were scarcely performed in the USSR, so Blanter would not have heard it. Slowly I realised that these two composers, like so many others, had the same cultural origin - the Jewish diaspora."

A further influence helped to bring Mahler's Jewish side into sharp focus for Jurowski: the work of the composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein - not only his interpretations of Mahler's music but also his writings and television lecture on the subject.

"When I heard Mahler performed by Bernstein, and later when I read his essays and heard him talking about Mahler's Jewishness, I felt he was reading my mind," Jurowski remembers. "It was really Bernstein who opened people's ears to Mahler's Jewishness. I don't want this to dominate my approach to music in general. But I think for anyone who has been through the Eastern Europe experience of the 20th century, there is a natural access to aspects of Mahler's vocabulary because in some ways we are speaking the same language.

"Mahler connected me with my past. He gave me a sense of identity that I didn't have before. This maybe explains why Mahler has become such a major composer for me and why I waited so long until I permitted myself to start performing this music."

If Jurowski's Mahler performances so far are anything to go by, these next concerts could mark the continuation of a musical relationship that is set to grow into something truly great.

Vladimir Jurowski conducts the LPO in a performance of Mahler's 'Kindertotenlieder' on October 27, and Mahler's reworking of Beethoven's Third Symphony on October 30. Royal Festival Hall, London SE1. Box office: 0844 875 0073