

The chord that binds- how Mahler's 10th is a heart-breaking tale of love and loss.

Powerful, painful, and profound, Mahler's 10th symphony epitomizes this composer's life-long suffering. An existence filled with grievances and unexpected sadness is illustrated through his music.

Leading on from his 9th symphony, Mahler's 10th transcribes his life's hardships through five unfinished sections of song.

There is something so troubling about the chords that haunt the pages of the manuscript's facsimile. It is as though in his last year of life, Mahler was drowning in a deep despair. His only solace found in annotating his anguish to create layers of chords and musical movements.

But how had Mahler become so grief-stricken?

In 1907, three years prior to Mahler's first work on his 10th symphony, his daughter sadly passed away from scarlet fever. Mahler and his wife, Alma, were left distraught. The death of their child hung heavy between them. It was said Mahler turned inwards, throwing himself at his work while Alma desperately looked for comfort.

Tangled in his own sadness, Mahler did not provide his wife with the consolation she needed. Instead, she searched for it elsewhere. Alma started an affair with Walter Gropius, a German architect.

In 1910, Mahler found out about his wife's affair. Forlorn and furious, Mahler demanded Alma choose one man to love unconditionally. She once more chose Mahler but the damage to their relationship had already been done.

The time at which Mahler discovered Alma's affair coincided with his writing of the 10th symphony. The visceral nature of Mahler's textured movements can be seen to reflect this turbulent period of his life.

Mahler begins his 10th symphony with an adagio movement in B minor (linking to his 9th symphony that famously ends with an adagio movement). As the music builds, the tonality becomes increasingly unpredictable, ascending further and further into harrowing tension.

This uncertainty seems reflective of Mahler's state of mind. It is telling perhaps of his loss of control over his emotions and his grip on his happiness slowly slipping away.

The suspense continues through both the Chorale and the Devil Dance theme until it reaches the climax. A nine-note unforgettable shrieking chord completely comparable to a human scream.

This scream-like chord occurs twice in Mahler's 10th. But what was the reason for it?

Was it caused by the stab of pain from his wife's betrayal? His sorrow at his daughter's death? Or was it, as many have conspired, a prophecy predicting the destruction of tonality in 20th century music?

Whatever the reason, there seems no break from the anguish Mahler creates with his nine-note chord. The music simultaneously repels the audience and draws them in to the universe Mahler fashions from his movements.

Bittersweet relief is finally provided after the second scream is performed. The reappearance of the Chorale theme permits tonality to return. There is a slowing down as the music becomes much calmer and less clawing.

Here, the truth of Mahler's devotion to his wife is shown. On the final pages of the manuscript, a declaration of his boundless love sits beside the remaining bars. His

annotations read 'To live for you! To die for you!' and under the closing bar, 'Almachi', Mahler's nickname for his wife.

Throughout writing the 10th symphony, Mahler battled a heart condition that eventually took his life in 1911. As a result, his symphony remained unfinished, though many have tried to complete it since.

Mahler's story is heartbreakingly sad, from the death his daughter and the breakup of his marriage, to his own fatal health condition. His life's experiences seemed to have poured forth from his soul and transferred themselves into chords.

That is the power of Mahler's 10th symphony. In creating a piece of music dripping in love, loss, and sorrow, he writes his own eulogy. A song unfinished. A life half done.

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