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Rotational Form, Thematic Interplay, and Narrative Trajectory in the Scherzo Movement from
Mahler's *Resurrection* Symphony

Submitted to Dr. Susan McClary

MUHI 495

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

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Submitted October 4th, 2021

Rotational Form, Thematic Interplay, and Narrative Trajectory in the Scherzo Movement from
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The scherzo movement (*In ruhig fließender Bewegung*) of Mahler's Second Symphony (*Resurrection*) presents a variety of analytical challenges that continually puzzle theorists and musicologists alike. How does Mahler vary formal structures, and how do these variations contribute and/or influence the narrative of the work? While a common tendency is to force the symphonic movements of the late German-Romantic composers into sonata form, the approach of rotational form tends to fit better into Mahler's own compositional language and large-scale structures. Particularly in the *Resurrection*, the large swathe of musical topics, motives, and programmatic depictions inherently rely on the cyclical presentations of different theme groups and orchestral timbres to depict Mahler's narrative of one's spiritual journey. In this paper, rotational form is used as a medium to understand the minuet and trio elements of this movement, the cyclical presentation and interruption of sections, and the form's influence on the narrative trajectory of the movement.

The movement's primary musical ideas stem from the setting of "*Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt*" from the *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* songs. The text reflects the sermons of St. Anthony of Padua preaching to fish and marine life, none of which listen intently to the sermon and continue about with their evil ways after the sermon ends. Mahler excluded the text and voice in the symphonic scherzo, and instead opted for programmatic movement titles in the first three public performances. The third movement represented "*life as meaningless affinity*"¹, depicting the "*return to the confusion of life... this ever moving, never-resting, incomprehensible*

¹ As found in Mahler's programmatic notes from the initial performance in Dresden.

bustle of existence becomes horrible to you."² In utilizing the music from *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt*, Mahler creates "a certain sweet-sour humor"³ in juxtaposing the klezmer topics and mocking tone of the song, with the glimpses of hope that interrupt the song's original form. The topic of klezmer music began gaining traction in Classical music as early as Mozart (with his incorporation of the Turkish Janissary band instruments); however, the topic of klezmer music in this movement is not as an expression of Mahler's own Jewish background, but paints a uniquely mocking timbre and dance-like environment. The movement's continual *perpetuum mobile* lines drive the music, as the musical topics and theme groups lead the listener through the dullness of life to glimmers of hope, and constantly crash back into the Mahlerian despair that controls and dictates the symphonic narrative.

Late-Romantic symphonic works are often viewed as needing to fit into the clear-cut formal structures of their predecessors, almost always looking back onto the Beethovenian model. However, the late Romantics often chose to manipulate the forms to create their own narratives - Mahler is certainly no exception. Many of Mahler's symphonic movements are often categorized as complex variations of sonata form, although a rotational approach in form often better suits the musical structure and narrative. Rotational form, coined by Warren Darcy and James Hepokoski in *Elements of Sonata Theory*, is considered an overriding structural principle,

² Ron Nadel, "Program Notes - Symphony No. 2 'Resurrection,'" Colorado MahlerFest (Kenneth Woods, Artistic Director, 2012), <https://mahlerfest.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Symphony-No-2-Program-notes-from-2012.pdf>.

³ Richard Freed, "Symphony No. 2 in C Minor ('Resurrection')," Symphony No. 2 in C minor (Resurrection) (Kennedy Center, 2008), https://web.archive.org/web/20081019023943/http://www.kennedy-center.org/calendar/?fuseaction=composition&composition_id=2484.

used to understand the cyclical presentation and repetition of theme groups/motives in a rotational process, even within traditional formal constructions⁴. Similarly, Dr. Susan McClary argues that Mahler’s music is organized as a series of “musical blocks” that are rotated and cycled through to achieve a variety of musical goals and/or temporal discontinuity⁵. This scherzo movement serves as a prime example of Mahler’s modification of the traditional scherzo’s form (minuet and trio) through rotational manipulation to achieve a musical depiction of potentially meaningless, folly-nature of life.

Measures	Section	Tonal Region
mm. 1-101	A	cm
mm. 102-147	B	FM
mm. 148-210	A	cm
mm. 211-346	C	DM, EM
mm. 347-405	A	cm
mm. 406-439	B	FM
mm. 440-543	C	CM
mm. 544-560	A	CM/cm [C]

Table 1 - Formal structure of the scherzo movement as delineated by theme groups.

The scherzo’s fundamental structure of a minuet and trio (often with their own nested ternary forms) pervade a majority of symphonic works through the late Romantic era, and

⁴ Hepokoski, James A., and Warren Darcy. *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁵ Susan McClary, “Mahler's First Symphony ‘Titan,’” *Mahler's First Symphony "Titan"* (August 30, 2021).

maintain their hold on compositions of the modern day. The *Resurrection* Symphony's scherzo includes its own minuet and trio structures, but through the rotational process, Mahler varies the expected presentations of these larger theme groups/motives into a uniquely stylized form (see Table 1).

Other theorists have presented similar divisions of thematic materials and key areas, in attempts to organize these sections into highly altered sonata structures or five-part forms⁶. However, these larger blocks are constructed with interpolated material from other sections, and serve as mediums to refer back to a previous section, foreshadow the materials to come, or completely dishelvel the momentum of a section. As later explored, themes are often connected by rhythmic cells and contour to previously presented material, but take on an individual function and role from section to section. The themes create the dialogue that sculpt the minuet and trio statements of the movement, and alter the traditional scherzo form with repeated iterations through rotations (see Table 2).

Measures	Formal Structure
mm. 1-210	Minuet 1
mm. 211-346	Trio 1
mm. 347-439	Minuet 2
mm. 440-543	Trio 2
mm. 544-560	Minuet 3 (Closing)

Table 2. Form chart with numbered and labeled Minuet and Trio structures.

⁶ Lóránt Péteri, "Form, Meaning and Genre in the Scherzo of Mahler's Second Symphony," *Studia Musicologica* 50, no. 3-4 (January 2009): pp. 221-299, <https://doi.org/10.1556/smus.50.2009.3-4.2>.

Table 2 reflects the formal structures created through motivic interplay and orchestration. Mahler breaks away from his previous structural framework for scherzi⁷ by quite literally interrupting the minuets with the trio material, and rotating through the theme groups with little to no cadential division.

To begin understanding the thematic content for the entire movement, one must look at the primary themes introduced in the first A section (see Figure 1). As mentioned prior, the material is pulled directly from *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt*, maintaining the same key (C minor) and general instrumentation, with some minor (but notable) rearrangement of the presentations.



Figure 1. Themes 1-4 (T₁₋₄) from the scherzo.

T₁ and T₂ function as antecedent and consequent themes with their respective key areas, often serving as tonic-dominant key functions. They work together to maintain the *perpetuum mobile* texture that pervades a majority of the movement, and often create an orchestral dialogue between instrument groups. Both themes experience fragmentation to fulfill transitional needs, and often undergo highly chromatic sequencing to move between passages and key areas.

⁷ The scherzo of Mahler's first symphony (*Titan*) features a standard minuet and trio form, that is clearly separated in harmony, mood, and thematic materials. The transitions between the minuet blocks and the trio rely on a horn call, sounding after the final cadence between each passage.

Additionally, an important orchestral element of the A theme group is the *ruthe*'s (rute) distinct sonority and timbre. This dry, percussion instrument's history dates back to Turkish Janissary bands, and not only introduces the topic of klezmer, but creates a sonic reference point for the eventual returns of the minuet material.

The image shows a page of a musical score for an orchestra, measures 11 through 17. The tempo is marked "Sehr gemächlich Nicht eilen". The score includes parts for English Horn, Clarinets in Bb (1, 2, 3), Bassoons (1, 2), Contrabassoon, Ruthe (wood block), Trombones (1, 2), Cymbals, Snare Drum, Violins (1, 2), Viola, Cello, and Bass. The Ruthe part is marked "auf Holz geschlagen". The Cymbals part is marked "mit Schwammschlägel". Dynamics include "molto cresc.", "cresc.", "p", "f", and "pizz.". The score is in 3/4 time and features a mix of woodwinds, strings, and percussion.

Figure 2. Mm. 11-17 of the scherzo.

T₃ originates from the vocal line of *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredig*, and is not presented until m. 67 in the piccolo. T₄, presented in m. 75, is notable for its sicilienne rhythm, a fundamental cell that will shape later themes.

The B section is approached with a descending chromatic scale (an important transitional tool that delineates a transition within this movement) in mm.97-102, leading directly into F major. T_2 is transfigured into this key, seamlessly continuing the churning movement of the scherzo, as T_5 and T_6 are presented (as similar antecedent and consequent motives to T_1 and T_2) in mm. 112-119.



Figure 3. T_{5-6} from the scherzo movement.

The key area of F major serves as a larger plagal escape from C minor, and allows for Mahler's to transform T_1 without sounding like a false or cheap sense of hope⁸. The key and thematic interplay allow for the narrative to shift to a positive glimpse of hope above the ever-continual churn of life's fleet and potentially meaningless nature. This idea is especially emphasized in mm. 139-147, as Mahler presents the two B themes before quickly shifting us back to the A material with a rapid shift back to C minor .

The second A section is short lived, lasting only from mm. 148-210, with transitional material spanning the last third of this section as the principle themes (T_{1-4}) reappear and continue the previously established texture and melodic interplay. There is much less lingering in C minor, and Mahler even shifts to C major as a transitional tool in m. 189. This relative-major shift refers back to previous symphonic models, with a set of canonic entrances as an extension

⁸ Often in Mahler's writing, particularly the first movement of this symphony, any major iterations of a theme present the dichotomy of false and true hope. Within the narrative of the symphony, the continual dialogue between life and death is littered with these falsely hopefully major iterations of minor themes, that are subsequently shattered with a Mahlerian derailment of harmonic moment.

of the motivic development. The motivic material here is a cross between T₂ and T₃, showcasing the versatility of these two themes (see Figure 4). This contrapuntal writing begins at a *piano* dynamic, and the brief tonicization of F major creates the sonic expectation that this fugal passage will continue to grow and perhaps introduce other themes in this texture. However, this transition directly leads into the trio section, with an unprepared modulation and sudden aural shift that shatters the expectations of the listener. The end of this second A marks the ending of the first minuet rotation (Minuet 1), notably without a strong final cadence in C minor.

The first trio rotation (Trio 1) begins in m. 211, with a huge textural shift in the orchestration. The extreme and unprepared change to *fortissimo*, theme group C, direct modulation to D major, and new tempo check all of the boxes for contrasting material, thus conceiving the beginning of the trio section⁹. The brass fanfare breaks through the contrapuntal strings with a new theme (T₇), after the brass functioned as strictly accompanimental during the minuet (see Fig. X). The strings and brass engage in a dialogue of melodic fragmentation, and at m. 234, the oboe introduces theme T₈, which foreshadows the iconic trumpet solos of the movement (in rhythm, contour, and dynamic drop from *ff* to *p* across the orchestra). This oboe theme smoothly glides into a passage similar to the transitional counterpoint prior to the trio's entrance (mm.189-210), as the strings and woodwinds tag-team with canonic statements of a modified T₂, only to be interrupted again by the brass fanfare (see Figure 5).

⁹ Within the canon of minuet/trio pairings for scherzo movements, the trio is delineated by clear contrasting material, such as a new theme, key area, or dance form. In the German symphonic tradition, the trio is often a slower waltz that is sandwiched between a livelier dance form. In Mahler's *Titan*, the Ländler frames the outer minuet, while the inner trio is a much more relaxed waltz.



Figure 5. Theme group C from the Trio 1 of the scherzo movement.

A unique element of the trio itself is Mahler's stylized rotation of themes within the trio. Rather than restating the theme in a rearranged fashion, or within the same key area, the T_7 statement at m. 256 shatters the previously established key of D major by moving directly to E major, and again immediately switching dynamic level. This quickly succumbs to a more lyrical statement of the T_7 theme in a trumpet solo with harp accompaniment, beginning at m. 271. The passage escapes into a tranquil, lush and static (tonic pedal in lower strings) environment, with subdued dynamics in contrast to the previously bombastic brass. The expressive markings "*Sehr getragen und gesangvoll.*" (very worn and songlike) are reflective of the nostalgic aura created by the passage, as Mahler presents the previously explosive T_7 theme in a much more delicate, *cantabile* manner. The instrumentation and harmonic stability are especially notable, as these sonic changes will become the retrospective focal points in Mahler's rotational scheme¹⁰. The phrase repeats with a denser presence in the winds in m. 287 (another thematic rotation), followed by the final iteration of the T_7 theme at m. 307, closing Trio 1.

A purely transitional passage begins at m. 327, as the bassi and bassoons enter with the hybrid motive from $T_{2,3}$ in a certain shift to C major. Above these lower voices, Mahler briefly sequences through two statements of T_8 , before returning to the staple transitional marker of the

¹⁰ In creating these rotational schemes, the retrospective aural connections are vital to making the work function as a cohesive whole. Mahler's exploration of sonic environments are thus crucial structural elements in not only this symphony, but all of his works.

movement, a descending chromatic scale (m. 346). This transitional swiftly leads into the return of the theme group A materials, and thus beginning the rotation of Minuet 2 (again, without a firm cadence in either the end of Trio 1 or this transition).

The primary themes of the movement return with their original orchestration (especially notable with the return of the *ruthe*, a key aural reference to the minuet's return) and key area of C minor at m. 347 (Minuet 2). The minuet is truncated, with significantly less dialogue between the instruments, and a quicker return to T_{3-4} . Mahler utilizes the same transitional material to move to the B themes and F major (another instance of the chromatic scale as a transitional tool.) The B theme group follows a similar narrative to the A theme group, with a highly truncated presentation and less development of the motives. However, Mahler further modifies the minuet structure by avoiding another iteration of the A themes (as structured in Minuet 1), and instead opts for the trio materials, interrupting the B theme group. This sudden entrance shatters the expectation of another A group rotation (that would typically lead to the final cadence of a minuet/trio pairing in a scherzo), as Mahler's trajectory shifts back to the hopeful and energetic brass fanfare.

Trio 2 begins at m. 440 in C major, with a dense return of the brass-heavy T_7 and a pedal 6/4 chord (as opposed to the previous statements in root position). Beginning in m. 446, this theme is fragmented into a measure-long cell with an ascending tetrachord. This fragmentation develops and grows into a frustrated and urgent dialogue between the orchestra and the brass (*Unmerklich drängend*). This cyclical repetition is escaped with an omnibus progression (mm. 456-463) as the outer voices move in contrary motion, leading to the most destructive climax of the work. While Mahler is particularly picky with his placements of strong cadential arrivals, he

again focuses on the more destructive approach, as in this instance. The incredibly dense and loud orchestration is paired with a B fully diminished chord over a C pedal-point, ruining the expected trajectory of another fanfare presentation of T₇ and instead, reminding the listener of the folly nature of life. This tormented wall of sound lasts from mm. 463-471, followed by a descending A-flat major scale. At m. 480, the low strings enter with the minuet's restless sixteenth notes in C major, while the woodwinds and strings vascillate between Mahler's uniquely voiced/spaced tonic-plagal harmonies, a reference to his First Symphony¹¹. Although thematic material from the minuet returns, it serves as an almost subconscious textural element that quickly fades into the background of this trio section, as the trumpet's return marks a much more interesting focal point for the listener and reference to Trio 1.

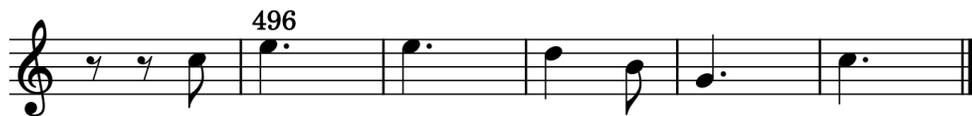


Figure 6. The nostalgic trumpet call from mm. 496-500.

At m. 496, the solo trumpet line presents what is often considered a new, unreferenced theme. However, this theme (see Figure 6) shares similar motivic elements to the first trumpet solo in Trio 1 - the ascending leap, followed by a loose dotted rhythm. Given the trio thematic materials spiraling out of control prior to this passage, this nostalgic trumpet call is one last glimpse of hope. It is constructed from the same harmonic and rhythmic cells from the Trio 1 solo, but modified through rhythmic augmentation and variance in the contour's direction.

¹¹ Mahler's *Titan* frequently utilizes a plagal motion of I-IV over a tonic pedal, particularly in the first and fourth movements. The stagnant harmonic motion suspends the passage of time, typically with minimal thematic activity occurring in coincidence with this progress. Mahler's usage of register also contributes to the suspension of time, as several octaves often separate the highest and lowest voices creating this plagal motion.

Despite the varied statement, this trumpet call's context within the trio materials allows for the listener to remember the first trumpet solo from Trio 1, with the subdued orchestration allowing the trumpet to sing through. Its function within the form is as another rotational reference to Trio 1 (although varied in thematic content), and its return points to the aural expectation to cycle through this sonic region back into the minuet. These elements give the trumpet solo a highly nostalgic aura, especially after the barrelling climax from measures before, and connects the listener back to the hopeful fanfare from Trio 1.

The nostalgic trumpet solo is stated twice, with the accompaniment maintaining a large cadential 6/4 harmony in the lower voices, while the upper voices vascillate between C major triads and German diminished third harmonies. The harps' glissando in mm. 518-520 in E flat major leads the listener into the final transitional passage of the movement, with the instrument's sonority referring to the lush, warmth of Trio 1, but instead functioning as a vessel to move into the coming motivic interplay. In mm. 520-527, Mahler presents an almost bitonal iteration of the T₂ cell between the lower strings, with the celli and bassi ascend through a C major tetra while the violas ascend through an E flat major tetrachord. This fragment continues to sequence through the instruments, as well as fragments from the A theme group, leading into the crucial transition of the chromatic scale in m. 543.

The final section of the movement, Minuet 3, begins in m. 544, with the A theme group materials stated in their original orchestration (notably, the *ruthe*'s memorable timbre). Unlike previous minuet sections, the instrumental dialogue largely remains within C minor (no emphasis on the dominant), and the momentum again succumbs to a descending chromatic scale in mm. 572-573. At this point, the final arrival to C is achieved (again, without a strong cadence), and

movement's function is to portray life as meaningless activity, and the writing makes it clear that life's expectations can be ruined and shattered with little to no warning or effort. The themes interact and interrupt each other in a way that truly bring the nature of life's daily motions into question, and create a sense of perpetual doubt, even amidst the glimpses of hope and blissful nostalgia. Rotational modifications allow for Mahler to sculpt this narrative with the traditional forms in remembrance, as a stepping stone through the larger journey that exists within *Resurrection*.

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