DAVID LARKIN

The Outsider's Tale:
Jameson on Mahler's Sixth Symphony

> It's not that the music wants to narrate, but that the composer [Mahler]
> wants to make music in the way that others narrate. (Theodor W. Adorno)[1]

> For this is our fundamental problem here: how to avoid narrativizing this
> music [when] ultimately everything, even the resolutely nonnarrative or
> antinarrative, gets narrativized in the long run. (Fredric Jameson)[2]

Uniquely among the chapter titles of *Allegory and Ideology*, chapter 4 incorporates
a question mark: "Musical: An Allegorical Symphony? Mahler's Sixth." This
tentativeness reflects Jameson's position as self-confessed musical "outsider," one
who observes "the theoretical analysis of an unfamiliar art form."[3] Jameson has in
fact written on music for decades, at least as far back as *Late Marxism* (1990),
which engages seriously with Adorno's writings on musical modernism.[4] Mahler
is even name-checked in his classic 1984 essay "Postmodernism, or The Cultural
Logic of Late Capitalism," where he is listed among those modernists with
"'inimitable' styles" for whom parody was a crucial tool; in Mahler's case, this is
detected in "the fateful, but finally predictable, swoops […] from high orchestral

---

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 62.

[2] Fredric Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns* (London: Verso, 2015), pp. 67-128
(p. 123).

[3] Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019) (eBook version), p. 241.
All subsequent citations are made parenthetically. Jameson's caution in his handling of
musical matters seems separate from the more general "grammar of hesitancy" Franco
Moretti detects in the language of *Allegory and Ideology*, which the latter interprets as "a
way to invite readers to reflect directly […] on the matter in hand; of evoking from within
the written text a *public*, in the strong sense of the word." Franco Moretti, "Always
Allegorize?", *New Left Review* 121 (January-February 2020): 53-64 (p. 61).

[4] Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London:
Verso, 1990), especially part 3 chapter 2, "The Crisis of *Schein*," pp. 165-76.

pathos into village accordeon [sic] sentiment."[5] More recently, in *The Ancients and the Postmoderns* (2015) three whole chapters are devoted to musical topics, among them a lengthy essay entitled "Transcendence and Movie Magic in Mahler" which considers the composer's symphonic oeuvre as a whole. This earlier Mahler essay, acknowledged by one non-specialist reviewer to be "far and away the most significant achievement of the book,"[6] offers a slew of stimulating insights into the nature of Mahler's art, with many of the same ideas revisited in the more narrowly focused 2019 chapter.

Musical tyro Jameson may not be; nonetheless, there are reasons for the abundance of caution he displays. The first is the notoriously slippery relationship music has to linguistic systems of meaning, which makes the identification of a "literal" first level of meaning a seemingly precarious task, never mind the complete four-fold allegorical edifice that is his subject in this volume. This is the first challenge he confronts in his *Allegory and Ideology* Mahler chapter: establishing the connection between music's effects and narrative ones (241). Within the musicological fold, the vogue for hermeneutic practices has ebbed and flowed: after a positivistic turn in the field post-Second World War led to their near eclipse, there has been a big uptick in interpretative readings of musical works since the 1990s, in tandem with the rise of the New Musicology.[7] The programmatic statements of Lawrence Kramer at the outset of his influential 1990 book *Music as Cultural Practice* provide a parallel of sorts to the kinds of readings that Jameson will espouse: "works of music have discursive meanings […] definite enough to support critical interpretations comparable in depth, exactness, and density of connection to interpretations of literary text and cultural practices." He continues: "these meanings are not 'extramusical,' but on the contrary are

---

[5] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 1.146 (July-August 1984): 53-92 (pp. 64-5).

[6] Julian Murphet, review of Fredric Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, *Affirmations: of the modern* 3.1 (Autumn 2015): 133-42 (p. 137).

[7] More recently, there has come a reaction which questions the practice of decoding musical works as if they were texts; symptomatic is Carolyn Abbate's rejection of what she calls the "passionate metaphysics" of musical hermeneutics, whereby music's "effects in the here and now are illicitly relocated to the beyond." Carolyn Abbate, "Music— Drastic or Gnostic?", *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Spring 2004): 505-536 (p. 514).

inextricably bound up with the formal processes and stylistic articulations of musical works."[8]

Jameson attempts to dig down into Mahler's musical processes to ground his own multi-tiered interpretation of the Sixth Symphony, which is worth exploring and contextualising in some detail. Drawing on recent work on musical narrative by Byron Almén and on the Sonata Theory of James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, Jameson carefully builds a picture of how tonality and musical form can support narratological readings. [9] While he mostly eschews musico-theoretical terminology, there is no lack of sophistication in his grasp of the key issues, leavened by a typically Jamesonian panoply of references to non-musical writers and philosophers. As one might expect from a thinker identified with the slogan "Always historicize!", Jameson's understanding of form is resolutely historical. Like Adorno (a frequent point of reference in this chapter), he exhibits a keen appreciation of the way in which tonality and inherited structures like sonata form were used at the start of the twentieth century, when Mahler's Sixth was written, and of the interpretative purchase one can derive from situating Mahler's practices against the backdrop of standard paradigms and historical norms.

Mahler certainly offers particular challenges to those who would try to explicate his symphonies in terms of traditional models. At the level of the entire work, the number of movements varies between two and six, with all the complications this might hold for audiences used to the standard four-movement model. Jameson posits that the traditional symphonic archetype might be interpreted using Northrop Frye's categories "as a tragic or heroic first movement, followed by a slow movement and a scherzo which one might well identify in some way with romance and satire, so as to conclude, as does the 'Eroica,' with a comedy or at least a happy ending" (247). However, it is not just the number of movements that is the stumbling block for this type of reading: Jameson notes that an individual Mahler movement can be wildly heterogeneous, spanning a gamut of genres that

---

[8] Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 1.

[9] Byron Almén [misnamed "Bryan" by Jameson], *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

might have been distributed across discrete movements within a pre-Mahlerian symphony.

In terms of tonality, too, matters are more complicated than before. Focussing here on just one aspect of this complex topic, the practice of beginning and ending a symphony or a symphonic movement in the same key was by the end of the nineteenth century no longer the near-default choice. Historically, the path from minor to parallel major had long been recognised as normative, so long as the tonic was built on the same note. Thus, even in the eighteenth century, a first movement in f# minor might be followed by a finale which concludes in F# major (the trajectory traced by Haydn's Symphony No. 45 "Farewell" [1772]), and this shift of mode was employed to potent effect to create a "through-struggle-to-victory" narrative in early nineteenth-century works like Beethoven's Fifth (1808) and Ninth (1824) Symphonies. But Mahler goes far beyond this. As can be seen from Figure 1, none of his first five symphonies has first and last movements uncomplicatedly "in" the same key. Even in the First Symphony, tonal closure is only achieved after an almighty effort in the finale, where a D-major "breakthrough" displaces the established f minor. The Second ("Resurrection") Symphony closes in Eb major, the relative major of the initial C minor—a connection which is logical and yet unusual. This practice of starting in one key and finishing in another is called "progressive" or "directional" tonality, and was employed intermittently throughout the nineteenth century, but it rarely influenced the overall architecture of the symphony before Mahler. The Third Symphony begins in D minor, and surprisingly does conclude nearly 100 minutes later in D major; I say surprisingly, since, though the vast first movement begins in D minor it finishes in the relative major, F major. The Fourth Symphony, which sets out in a very classical vein, takes an unusual and un-classical turn towards the end of the last movement (a setting of the song "Das himmlische Leben"): G major, long in the ascendent, is abandoned for E major, a tonality only briefly prefigured in an explosive episode towards the end of the third movement. The Fifth Symphony is most complicated of all: c# minor is abandoned after the first movement, and the most important tonality, D major, the key in which the Symphony finishes, is really only secured in the Scherzo third movement, having again been anticipated briefly near the end of the previous movement.

Mahler: Symphony no. 1

Movt. 1	Movt. 2	Movt. 3	Movt. 4
D major	A major	d minor	f min → D maj

Mahler: Symphony no. 2

Movt. 1	Movt. 2	Movt. 3	Movt. 4	Movt. 5
c minor	A major	c minor	Db major	C maj→Eb maj

Mahler: Symphony no. 3

Movt. 1	Movt. 2	Movt. 3	Movt. 4	Movt. 5	Movt. 6
d min → F maj	A major	c min → C maj	D major	F major	D major

Mahler: Symphony no. 4

Movt. 1	Movt. 2	Movt. 3	Movt. 4
G major	c minor	G major	G maj→ E maj

Mahler: Symphony no. 5

Movt. 1	Movt. 2	Movt. 3	Movt. 4	Movt. 5
c# minor	A minor	D major	F major	D major

Figure 1: Mahler's Symphonies 1-5, showing how the governing tonality is deployed

At the level of the individual movement, the question of whether inherited structural paradigms have any relevance to how themes are deployed and developed has been the topic of vigorous debate. Particularly important is the status of sonata form, which for earlier composers was the near-default choice for symphonic first movements (and a common option for slow movements and finales). In his 2015 essay on Mahler, Jameson maintained that "sonata form […] is excluded by so many experts that it is not worth exploring save as that immense formal dilemma opened up by its absence or impossibility." [10] This is a considerable overstatement, but even a more cautious summary from within the musicological fold acknowledges that within Mahler scholarship there has long been "a widespread reluctance […] to bring sonata form into the analytical foreground."[11] However, sonata-based readings received a new lease of life with

[10] Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, p. 122.

[11] Seth Monahan, *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 11.

the appearance of Seth Monahan's *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas*, which makes a convincing revisionist case for the viability of sonata-based analysis. Monahan re-evaluates certain individual movements from among Mahler's symphonies as sonata "deformations," complex and idiosyncratic structures which still can be meaningfully understood as being in dialogue with some principles of sonata form. As this monograph appeared in 2015, the same year as *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, Jameson couldn't have known it before, but it is a major point of reference in his *Allegory and Ideology* chapter. Given that Jameson is more interested in bigger-picture tendencies than granular details, he has taken on board the kernel of Monahan's thesis (i.e. that sonata form is still relevant as an analytical category) without concerning himself overly much with the minutiae of how this might be demonstrated in practice. When more detail is needed—for instance, when Jameson wants to talk about the exact layout of the exposition section of the first movement of the Sixth—he simply reproduces Monahan's diagrammatic analysis.[12] This new position does not even require him to recant his earlier theories as to how Mahler's structures operate; all that is needed is a rebalancing of certain constituent tendencies he had already observed.

At this point, it is worth temporarily stepping away from global analytical matters to examine why Jameson specifically selected the Sixth Symphony for allegorising. On the face of it, the Sixth looks like a somewhat counterintuitive choice. Symphony no. 6 is ostensibly "absolute" music, i.e. a work without a title or other paratext explicitly linking it to the extra-musical, such as Symphonies 1, 2, and 3 possess, at least in their initial versions. Nor does it incorporate vocal music, as do Symphonies 2, 3, 4, 8, and *Das Lied von der Erde*, where the presence of sung text affords another obvious interpretative layer for the would-be allegorist. Instead, Jameson opted for the Sixth *because* it is a "nonallegorical work" which has nonetheless acquired "multiple and incompatible readings" (29). Monahan succinctly lists three of the most common interpretations: the Tragic, the Autobiographical, and the Classical.[13] The soubriquet "Tragic," which aptly describes the sense of collapse felt at the end of the fourth movement, by repute goes back to the composer himself and was used for performances of the work in

---

[12] Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, p. 88; Monahan, *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas*, p. 103.

[13] Monahan, *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas*, pp. 93-4.

his lifetime.[14] The "autobiographical" reading was initiated by Mahler's widow, Alma, who in a later memoir identified the second theme in the first movement as a representation of herself, linked the scherzo movement to the antics of their children, and read the famous hammer-blows in the finale as the crushing interventions of fate which the superstitious composer both feared and anticipated (and which biographers have delighted in relating to a series of later misfortunes which Mahler *did* undergo).[15] The "classical" descriptor refers to the fact that many external aspects of the Sixth seem disconcertingly normal, especially in view of the licence the composer had taken in earlier symphonies with regard to the number and kind of movements, and in terms of the tonal journey the music traces.

Monahan also notes that these three interpretations "remain in a curious state of mutual isolation, with few serious inquiries into their possible synergies or frictions."[16] As such, of course, they are grist to Jameson's mill. The four-part allegory he offers towards the end of his chapter takes up some of these existing readings:

ANAGOGICAL	conflict and modernity as war
MORAL	the couple, the impossibility of marriage
ALLEGORICAL	the end of sonata form and of tonality
LITERAL	music as the tension between temporality and an eternal present

Unlike the patristic fathers who inspired his methodology, Jameson identifies the moral and anagogical levels here before the lower two.[17] The moral level, which

---

[14] Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, trans. Reinhard G. Pauly (Portland: Amadeus, 1993), p. 161.

[15] These matters are discussed in detail in Seth Monahan, "'I have tried to capture you …': Rethinking the 'Alma' Theme from Mahler's Sixth Symphony," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64.1 (April 2011): 119-78, especially pp. 119-120.

[16] Monahan, *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas*, p. 94.

[17] Jameson's diagrams, which as Moretti has noted frequently present the four levels in reverse (i.e. with the fourth level on top), happily coincide in this case with his starting point (Moretti, "Always Allegorize?", p. 54).

is reframed as pertaining to "existential experience, the construction of subjectivity or the psychoanalytic" (24), links handily enough to the autobiographical dimension of the Sixth, in particular the darker side of Mahler's marriage. For the anagogical level, which should offer "an often unconscious or merely implicit […] collective and political narrative" (24), he suggests "pre-World War I tension" (291). This reading rests on some fairly tenuous connections: the symphony was premiered in Essen, in Germany; Essen was the home of Krupp, the famous machine-gun manufacturers; consequently the threatening minor-key marches which are so prominent in the first and last movements are heard as evocations of the militaristic might of Germany.[18]

With these contexts in place, Jameson then retro-fits some of the formal characteristics he has previously analysed into the literal and allegorical levels. As he admits, identifying what the literal level might be in music is a vexed "ontological" question (292). He opts for "the tension between temporality and an eternal present," building on his description of Mahler's music as exhibiting features of an older way of organising music, as well as some incompatible newer tendencies. To explain: by writing symphonies, Mahler is in dialogue with a historical form in which musical ideas make sense based on their relationship to what came before and what will come after. Adorno observed of these earlier pre-Mahlerian symphonies that "the precedence of the whole over the parts is the uncontested priority of becoming over being, in which the whole itself virtually produces the themes and penetrates them dialectically."[19] In this respect Jameson is willing to compare the symphony with the novel, as both "depend very much on this cognitive category of the continuous in time" (90). However, working against this linear, top-down conception of form are various forces which induce the listener to focus on the individual moment *an sich*, for itself, rather than on its place in the organic whole. Most obviously, as Jameson maintained in his earlier essay:

---

[18] Jameson takes this reading from Tony Duggan. See Tony Duggan, "The Mahler Symphonies: A Synoptic Study": http://www.musicweb-international.com/mahler/Mahler6.htm (accessed 29 July 2021).

[19] Adorno, *Mahler*, p. 72.

> Mahler's […] maximalism and his projection of the musical temporality onto the enormous scale we find in his symphonies achieves the "New" in practice by annulling memory and making it impossible to return even in thought to our beginnings (except by consulting the experts and their scores)[.][20]

But the "impossibility" of grasping the whole does not merely arise from a failure of attention on the part of amateurs bemused by the lengthy spans of time concerned; the musical moments themselves absorb attention quite apart from any form-functional roles they might have. Mahler's orchestration has become so complex that "our attention is thereby shifted from continuities to a kind of perpetual present."[21] The most detailed articulation of this point is found elsewhere in *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*:

> And if it should be objected that it is scarcely possible to conceive of some pure present in a temporal art like music, I would respond by describing it in terms of that attention to the timbre and color of the musical event, to the body of its instrumentation and the peculiarity of the sound combinations which is bound to shift the experience of sound away from its movement in time, and far more decisively to the approach of some paradoxical new musical atemporality.[22]

This phenomenon is further discernible in those passages where Mahler turns aside from his prevailing course to luxuriate in a timeless space with no sense of forward motion: a case in point is found in the middle of the first movement of the

---

[20] Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, p. 87.

[21] Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, p. 73. It is worth noting here that Abbate would argue that this condition of being locked in the present is the very essence of music and not particular to Mahler; moments where this sense of a "present tense" is disturbed are rare and may serve as incentives to narrativize. See Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 12, 53.

[22] Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, p. 46.

Sixth, where there is a sudden shift from the dogged march rhythms into a static rural idyll, complete with cowbells.[23]

Much of what Jameson finds in Mahler's music recalls his description of the sense of time in postmodern culture: "the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold, and to organize its past and future into coherent experience."[24] He is aware of this potential similarity, but instinctively rejects it without clarifying why: "I must try myself to avoid giving the impression that in this respect Mahler was a forerunner of this or that postmodern 'presentism'."[25] Of course, with his renewed belief in the viability of some kind of over-arching form, the Jameson of *Allegory and Ideology* has the more reason for distinguishing Mahler's procedures from some kind of proto-postmodern position: the collapse into presentism, or the eternal present, is a force held in check by the teleological drive of a residual but to some extent still operative sonata form.

Adorno, so often the spur to Jameson's thought, points the way to a similar solution. He, too, stresses the difference between Mahler's symphonies and exemplars from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: "Where the dramatic [i.e. Classical] symphony believes it takes hold of an idea with an inexorable rigor derived from the model of discursive logic, the novel-symphony seeks to escape that logic: it craves the open air." In fact, Adorno comes close to anticipating Jameson's "presentist" thesis: "the epic [i.e. Mahlerian] type of symphony enjoys time to the full, abandons itself to it, seeks to make physically measurable time into living duration."[26] But Adorno's listening subject does not (or should not) succumb to a Land-of-the-Lotus-Eaters submersion in the pure

---

[23] In his earlier essay, Jameson reads the cowbells as the means "by which Mahler meant to convey, not the pastoral landscape, but rather the space of another world beyond our own" (Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, p. 75).

[24] Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," p. 71. He concedes early in this essay that "all of the features of postmodernism […] can be detected, full-blown, in this or that preceding modernism" (p. 56).

[25] Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, p. 90.

[26] Adorno, *Mahler*, pp. 72-3.

present; instead one has to retain awareness of the unfolding of the music through time:

> Mahler makes no concessions to the comfort of "easy listening" without remembrance or expectation. […] symphonic integrity was still present enough to protect him from an attitude to form that made concessions to a weakly atomistic mode of listening.[27]

In a similar fashion, Jameson in 2019 now believes that "a counterforce to this tendency to an absolute present [is] that narrative form (or 'sonata form') that is at issue here and that attempts to enlist these masses of sound in an intelligible movement forward toward a conclusion" (270). Sonata form is consequently woven into the second or "allegorical" level of Jameson's reading, although he is somewhat indifferent as to which of the two lower levels this narrative strand should occupy. Indeed, his literal and analogical levels, both concerned with intra-musical processes, could just as plausibly be reversed.[28] By framing his second level negatively ("the end of sonata form and tonality"), Jameson acknowledges his source: "Adorno's reading of a purely formal musical history (in the context of which this particular symphony includes the reflexive undermining and critique of the sonata form it is itself reproducing)" (291).

The increasing precariousness of sonata form and of tonality itself are witnessed in the works of the Austro-German modernist vanguard in the early twentieth century. However, Mahler's Sixth is surprisingly conventional in its outer lineaments, especially when considered against the backdrop of the individualistic solutions Mahler had come up with in his earlier works (see Figure 2). Hence the "classical" descriptor that has been applied to it, and Adorno's verdict that in the Sixth Mahler "dares to undertake a work of the Beethovenian type."[29] It is in the standard four movements, without voices. These movements are of the expected type: the first movement is quick in tempo and in a very clear sonata form; the middle two movements fulfil the expected scherzo and slow movement archetypes (Mahler sanctioned both orderings at different times); and the finale, quick once

---

[27] Adorno, *Mahler*, pp. 73, 64.

[28] I am grateful to Ben Etherington for this observation.

[29] Adorno, *Mahler*, p. 97.

it gets going, is also in dialogue with sonata form. Moreover, the first and last movements are in A (with the last movement finishing in A minor), meaning the work is tonally closed.
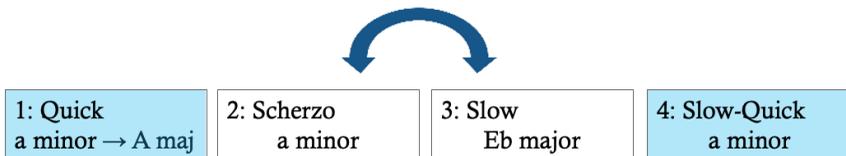

1: Quick	2: Scherzo	3: Slow	4: Slow-Quick
a minor → A maj	a minor	Eb major	a minor

Figure 2: Layout of Mahler, Symphony no. 6 (1906)

Borrowing copiously from Monahan, Jameson acknowledges the obvious sonata-form elements in the first movement. His description of how sonata form works more generally bears out his belief that "the fundamental terminology of technical music analysis itself [is] allegorical in some deeper sense" (98). This is also acknowledged by Hepokoski and Darcy, at present the most influential theorists of sonata form, for whom "a sonata is a linear journey of tonal realization, onto which might be mapped any number of concrete metaphors of human experience."[30] Figure 3 uses a modified and simplified version of their diagram to show the main constituent sections and tonalities of the first movement of the Sixth. As Jameson describes it, a sonata-form exposition pits two entities or subjects against each other, contrasting in terms of key, theme, and "feel." The purpose of the development is then "to stage a rivalry between these two subjects, which can be as *stürmisch* as an agon or as affectionate as a courtship or a seduction." The third section, the recapitulation, cycles through the exposition material again, but with crucial changes, so that things "come to some sort of definitive conclusion: triumph, compromise, an utter rout, an astonishing metamorphosis" (pp. 251-2). Composers may elect to finish with a coda, usually a section which affirms the conclusion already reached, but which can on occasion revise this and bring about a new denouement.

Jameson's descriptions are clearly inadequate as summations of sonata form practices in general: for instance, there are many expositions which do not fit the oppositional model, but simply deploy the same material in different keys; "staged

---

[30] Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, p. 251.

rivalries" are far from standard developmental procedures; and it was comparatively unusual for a recapitulation to conclude in the rhetorically transformative manner Jameson describes. However, his summary does align well with Mahler's procedures in the first movement of the Sixth Symphony.[31] The main expositional themes are clearly delineated: Mahler presents a militaristic first subject (P) in A minor and a blowsier second subject (S, the "Alma" theme) in F major. Both these themes recur in the recapitulation; however, instead of bringing the S theme back in the tonic (A minor or major), as per the conventions of the form, Mahler preserves its sense of tonal "otherness" by restating it in D major. Only in the coda is it finally presented in A major. On the one hand, this (eventually) satisfies our expectations for the second theme to return in A, the key of the first subject; on the other hand, it retains the major modality that was such a part of its identity. If we build the rhetorical character of the ending into our reading, two opposing interpretations are possible, as Jameson elucidates:

> if it is a question of a struggle for mastery here, it is the "feminine" subject (Alma, the second subject) who triumphs in this first movement conclusion. That theme has effectively absorbed the first one into itself, so that it has appropriated all the driving and relentless force of the first "masculine" musical identity. To be sure, one could appeal to the psychological subtleties of dramatic confrontation to argue that on the contrary, this transfer is a defeat for the second subject, who has in effect been remolded into the spirit of the opponent and has been made to assume "his" traits and values." (99)

Were one interested in autobiographical verisimilitude, this second reading would far more closely match the subjugation Mahler demanded from his wife-to-be, as per a 1901 letter in which he notoriously insisted that she give up composition and tend to him: "You […] have only one profession from now on: to make me happy. […] The role of 'composer,' the 'worker's' role, falls to me—yours is that of the loving companion and understanding partner!"[32] It is evidence such as this which

---

[31] I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for emphasising this point.

[32] Quoted in Monahan, "'I have tried to capture you …,'" p. 141.

enables Jameson to move from the intramusical second (allegorical) level to the extramusical interpretation he advances on the third (moral) level.
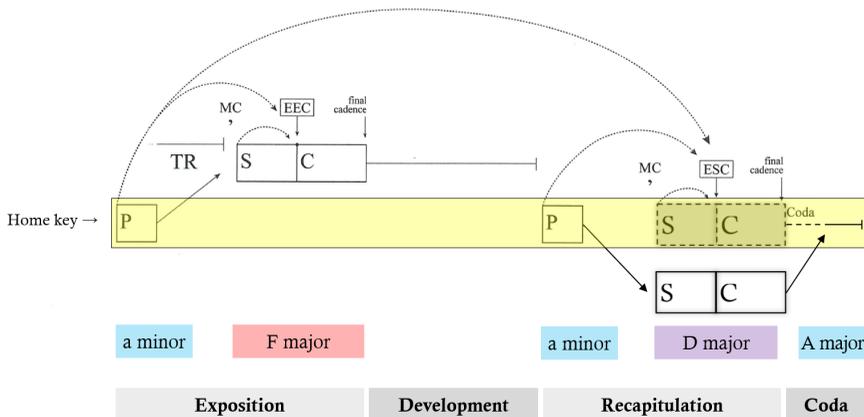
Legend: P = primary theme, TR = transition, S = secondary theme, C = closing zone, MC = medial caesura (rhetorical break before S), EEC/ESC = Essential Expositional/Structural Closure. The dotted boxes in the recapitulation represent the normative presentation of S and C in the tonic (A major or minor), from which Mahler diverges.

Figure 3: Schematic layout of Mahler, Symphony no. 6 (1906), first movement, showing the chief tonal regions[33]

Before leaving the second level, I would like to consider briefly the final movement, which Jameson gives short shrift. As was mentioned earlier, sonata form is again the relevant formal category against which to measure what is going on here, but matters are far more complex than in the first movement. Adorno sees the imposition of form here as a deliberately negative strategy, a departure from procedures in Mahler's earlier novel-symphonies: form represents "[t]he totality that sanctions for its own glory the destruction of the individual, who has no choice but to be destroyed, rules unchallenged.'[34] Inspired by this aperçu, Seth Monahan

---

[33] This figure is based on a simplified version of Hepokoski's and Darcy's "Generic layout of [eighteenth-century] sonata form" diagram (*Elements of Sonata Theory*, p. 17). To this I've added the yellow box, which identifies those sections of the form normally in the home key, and the actual keys Mahler employs.

[34] Adorno, *Mahler*, p. 97.

has analysed the finale in depth, showing how the control exerted by the form extinguishes the themes' aspirations to autonomy in a calculated display of negativity and cynicism.[35] Perhaps the most famous surface manifestations of this destructively controlling impulse are the brutal intrusions of the hammer-blows, which each time interrupt a soaring theme when it is on the point of achieving a satisfying completion.

Given the persistence of sonata form in the first movement, and the critique of this same formal paradigm found in the finale, as well as the relatively uncomplicated presence of A minor/major as a framing tonal centre across the work as a whole, I would suggest that the allegorical level ("the end of sonata form and of tonality") be reframed as "the struggle between thematic independence and formal control," or more simply "the struggle between theme and form." Where Jameson's phrase merely accounts for the historical backdrop to the Sixth, my reformulation brings out more clearly the struggle which the last movement in particular embodies.

To finish with, I would like to suggest some alternatives for the anagogical level, which as we saw above Jameson connected to Germanic militarism. This level ought to concern itself with "a kind of "political unconscious," that is, an often unconscious or merely implicit narrative of History as such, a collective and political narrative always latent in conceptions of our own personal destinies" (24). For instance, the aforementioned struggle between the reifications of sonata form and the autonomy of the themes in the Finale of the Sixth, in which the latter is ultimately subjected to the former, can be scaled up to the notion of how artistic modernism (the individual, the theme) is pressured by the forces of capitalism (society, the structural form), a reading which would surely be congenial to a Marxist critic like Jameson.

Two further readings are possible, both of which can be derived from observations in Jameson's earlier essay. The heterogeneity of the materials Mahler employs throughout his oeuvre (also noted by Adorno), which include lowbrow idioms

---

[35] Seth Monahan, "'Inescapable' Coherence and the Failure of the Novel-Symphony in the Finale of Mahler's Sixth," *19th-Century Music* 31.1 (Summer 2007): 53-95; much of this is reproduced in Monahan, *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas*, pp. 217-61.

such as marches, waltzes, etc., alongside more esoteric materials, can be mapped onto a narrative of the relations between popular and art music in this era:

> If we look at Mahler from the standpoint of the antagonism between high art and mass culture, the fabric of the music becomes allegorical, and we see the music of the everyday […] struggling to emerge from the orchestral density of a high-art symphonic orchestral context […] All of that is the content of the form of symphonic music at the turn of the twentieth century[.][36]

In this case, art music would be in the hegemonic position, with popular music the plucky outsider ultimately undone by the symphonic-concert infrastructure. As Jameson notes, the "completion or not of the musical theme" becomes the decisive factor in this music: "its complete expression […] signals the triumph of the vulgar-popular and the defeat of art. So it must not be allowed to reach that point, to take over the form."[37] This kind of argument could indeed be the basis of a provocative anagogical reading, although I personally am not persuaded that the relationship between popular material and art-music practice is always (or even often) antagonistic in Mahler's oeuvre, *pace* Jameson (and his forebear Adorno).

A third kind of individual-societal allegory might build on the "presentist" tendencies which made up Jameson's literal level. Again, he himself points the way:

> If music, as the temporal art par excellence is one of the fundamental ways in which we construct subjectivity or the individual subject in time, then we have clearly been on the point of suggesting that the Mahlerian present reflects a situation in which human beings are, by virtue of their social and economic constraints, reduced to a kind of diminished life in the present itself (what I have elsewhere called the reduction to the body).[38]

---

[36] Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, p. 98.

[37] Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, p. 99.

[38] Jameson, *The Ancients and the Postmoderns*, p. 124.

A writer whose whole purpose in embracing the quadripartite model of allegoresis was to avoid reductive or bad allegory would surely be open to these and other possible readings of Mahler's Sixth. Thus the value of this chapter is arguably less in the four levels Jameson selects or their exact ordering than in his penetrating analysis of features of Mahler's music and its historical position, and the way he licenses this new type of multi-layered allegorical investigation. Moreover, given how daunting music seems to be even for scholars versed in a variety of other art forms, the fact that Jameson extends his allegorical readings to music is to be welcomed, even if the professional music theorist might cavil at his somewhat reductive depiction of sonata form, or the lack of close analysis. As an envoi, I might finish by quoting the musicologist Paul Henry Lang, who in his review of an anthology of literary engagements with music assembled by the comparably polymathic Jacques Barzun, offered a spirited defence of the benefits of the outsider's perspective: "in spite of all the shortcomings in technical training and information, the sensitive man of letters often divines the truth where the professional musician is helpless with his specialized knowledge."[39]

---

[39] Paul Henry Lang, "Editorial," *The Musical Quarterly* 38.2 (April 1952): 278-84 (p. 283).