

# In Times of Strife: The New York Philharmonic Responds, from George Washington to 9/11 (1799–2002)

Barbara Haws, University of Oxford and Gabryel Smith, New York Philharmonic<sup>1</sup>

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The New York Philharmonic has a long history of memorializing tragic events that affect especially its home city. The role of the music performed at these times serves varied purposes; providing solace or strength; expressing anger or dismay at injustice or loss; forging a path towards reconciliation or understanding. It is at these times that the orchestra is closest to its community, creating a platform through music for New Yorkers to come together. Interestingly, the music selected to evoke such deep emotions has changed over time both in the choices of standard repertoire and through the commissioning of new works.

New York's first Philharmonic Society was formed in 1799 with its inaugural performance at the funeral of George Washington, founding President of the United States. It is unknown what music was performed that day, but the orchestra's presence established a precedent for large public gatherings at times of national sorrow.

When Abraham Lincoln's funeral train stopped in New York on April 24, 1865, tens of thousands of New Yorkers flocked to City Hall to pay homage to the assassinated President as he laid in state; five days later the New York Philharmonic opened its concert with the funeral march from Symphony No. 3, *Eroica* – Beethoven's celebration of a great hero. Although previously scheduled to perform Beethoven's Ninth, the musicians determined that the jubilant "Ode to Joy" would not be appropriate, and so chose to omit the fourth movement. *Dwight's Journal of Music* criticized the decision to shorten the symphony: "Instead of giving us this great monument of human genius in its completeness, [...] the [Orchestra cut] off Beethoven's sublime idea at the very point where it reaches its culmination."<sup>2</sup> In 1898, commemorating the death of beloved conductor Anton Seidl, the Philharmonic musicians still felt that the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth was inappropriate for mourning. As in 1865 only the first three movements were performed, followed by "Siegfried's Death" from *Götterdämmerung* in a nod to Seidl's championship of Wagner's music in New York. The latest debate came on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, when the Ninth was again considered but rejected because the orchestra members thought the choral movement was not appropriate for the occasion. This time, instead of truncating the work, Mahler's Second Symphony, *Resurrection* was performed.

The death of President Theodore Roosevelt in 1919 marks the first time that an American composer was performed for such a memorial. Philharmonic musicians and the audience stood for seven minutes while the Orchestra played the "Dirge" from Edward MacDowell's Suite No. 2, *Indian*. James G. Huneker *The New York Times* critic noted "the sentiment of regret expressed was unmistakable".<sup>3</sup> Reflecting the nation's patriotic enthusiasm for American music, MacDowell's "Dirge," nearly forgotten today, was often performed during World War I and over subsequent years in memoriam of soldiers and orchestra personnel.

<sup>1</sup> Authors' email addresses: [barbara.haws@music.ox.ac.uk](mailto:barbara.haws@music.ox.ac.uk), [smithg@nyphil.org](mailto:smithg@nyphil.org).

<sup>2</sup> LANCELOT 1865: 29.

<sup>3</sup> HUNEKER 1919: 21.

### **Mahler Becomes the Music of Mourning**

News of President John F. Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963 reached the New York Philharmonic during an afternoon subscription concert led by George Szell. In the midst of the concert, the news was announced from the stage and the remainder of the program was cancelled. The remaining concerts that weekend opened with the funeral march from Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, *Eroica*, performed without applause.

Two days later, Leonard Bernstein conducted Mahler's Symphony No. 2, *Resurrection*, in a televised tribute to President Kennedy. Not only was it the first time the complete symphony was televised but performing Mahler for an event of shared national sorrow was unprecedented. Mahler's music was not yet canonic and largely unknown to the broader public. And yet, with this performance and the ubiquitous nature of television, Mahler, for Americans who had never attended a symphonic concert, became identified as the composer of national mourning. At the United Jewish Appeal Benefit the next day, Bernstein, who personally felt the loss of the President, explained the unusual decision to program Mahler rather than the expected *Eroica* or a requiem. "We played the Mahler symphony not only in terms of resurrection for the soul of one we love, but also for the resurrection of hope in all of us who mourn him. [...] This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devoutly than ever before."<sup>4</sup>

Following the tribute to JFK, Mahler symphonies became part of the standard repertoire for national mourning. Bernstein led the Philharmonic in the *Adagietto* from Mahler's Symphony No. 5 at Robert Kennedy's funeral in St. Patrick's Cathedral on June 8, 1968 and Pierre Boulez conducted the same movement in recognition of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's death in 1969. And for the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as noted previously, the day was memorialized with Mahler's *Resurrection* Symphony, conducted by Alan Gilbert.

### **New Wartime Compositions: to Document and Inspire**

In the weeks following Pearl Harbor in 1941, the conductor Andre Kostelanetz approached American composers Jerome Kern, Virgil Thompson and Aaron Copland, commissioning musical portraits of great Americans.

These portraits were intended to provide inspiration and provoke patriotism in Americans as the United States entered the war. Kern wrote a Suite based on Mark Twain and Thompson wrote waltzes based on New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. Copland's response, the most famous of the three pieces, was *A Lincoln Portrait*, featuring spoken text from Abraham Lincoln's speeches set over orchestral music.

During World War II, the League of Composers invited seventeen well-known composers to write short pieces commemorating the war. Premiering these pieces which were broadcast nationwide over the radio, the Philharmonic Music Director, Artur Rodzinski, explained the importance of commissions in a time of crisis: they will "serve as a strong and moving reminder to our country that the preservation and furtherance of our cultural resources is a duty and a privilege of the first importance in times as critical as our own. [They] will create a living musical record of various aspects of this war and its accompanying social manifestations [and] will continue to encourage and stimulate composers resident in America, who are given all too rarely an opportunity to be heard".<sup>5</sup> Performed during the 1943–44 and 1944–45 seasons, the works largely centered on the theme of memorial. Among them: Bohuslav Martinů's *Memorial to Lidice* dedicated to the victims of that devastated Czech town; Darius Milhaud's

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4 BERNSTEIN 1982: 216–218.

5 BAGAR 1943.

*Cortège funèbre*, Bernard Herrmann's *For the Fallen* and William Grant Still's *In Memoriam: The Colored Soldiers Who Died for Democracy*, all dedicated to the lost lives of allied soldiers.

With his Philharmonic commission in 1946, Igor Stravinsky recognized how his *Symphony in Three Movements* may embody the world's crisis. Completed within days of the Japanese surrender in August, 1945, Stravinsky – though denying any overt programmatic meaning – admitted that “during the process of creation in this our arduous time of sharp and shifting events, of despair and hope, or continual torments, or tensions and, at last, cessation and relief, it may be that all those repercussions have left traces in this Symphony”.<sup>6</sup>

## 9/11

Nine days after the attack on New York's World Trade Center, the Philharmonic replaced its Gala Opening Night event with a Memorial Concert, featuring a performance of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* in memory of the victims of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

The concert was televised nationally, and Beverly Sills, Lincoln Center chairman, introduced the program, summing up the significance of music within the community:

This is a time of extraordinary solemnity. Our city, our country is in a state of mourning. We are grieving for lives lost in an unspeakable, unimaginable tragedy. We are also mourning a different kind of loss, one more difficult to describe. An atmosphere of optimism and confidence, a distinctively American mood, has been shattered by the horror of last week's events. Things are not the same. At this moment, music is important in ways that transcend the idea of entertainment or diversion or simple pleasure. Music feeds the soul of a city that desperately needs to be nourished. At a time when each of us struggles to make sense of the incomprehensible, coming together to share in the experience of music is a way of affirming everything of value in our community. Tonight's performance is a victory of sheer determination over daunting obstacles. But this performance of the Brahms Requiem isn't simply a concert and it is not merely a memorial and a tribute, or a thank you to those who have done so much for others. It is a statement that there will be no victory to those who attack our spirit. It is an emphatic affirmation of who we are as people and as a family. Nothing could say it with more eloquence, more heart, and more defiance than music.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning in October, Philharmonic musicians formed chamber groups to play free lunchtime concerts for the people living and working in lower Manhattan which resembled a devastated war zone. At the time, Philharmonic President Zarin Mehta explained that these concerts are “to help bolster the spirits of the people who live and work around Lower Manhattan”.<sup>8</sup>

Four months after the 9/11 tragedy, the Philharmonic approached American composer John Adams about writing a piece for the first anniversary – only half a year away. Although the time frame was remarkably short for a commission of such magnitude, Adams felt that he needed to write the piece in order to work through his own emotional response. In February, Adams visited ground zero and compiled his text from missing-persons posters and memorials posted in the vicinity of the ruins of the World Trade Center. By late spring, Adams met with leaders of the victims' groups to discuss the work, which was premiered on September 19, 2002. With *On the Transmigration of Souls*, Adams identifies the individual's need for grieving within the collective experience of a concert. In his program notes he wrote that he had created a “memory space” [...] where you can go and be alone with your thoughts and emotions”.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, the New York Philharmonic's response to Covid-19 must be mentioned, acknowledging that its full impact must be addressed at a later date. The orchestra has presented multiple memorial programs despite the unique challenge of 18 months of cancelled performances and the inability to gather in person. Voices of individual musicians shared on social media platforms played a large role

6 STRAVINSKY 1946: [3].

7 PBS 20.09.2001.

8 SANDLA 2002: 7.

9 ADAMS 2002: 23.

in ways they haven't before. Mahler – including a rebroadcast of Bernstein's 1963 *Resurrection* – was a central theme, and the first virtual performance made by Philharmonic musicians since concerts ceased in March, 2020, was a capture of Elgar's "Nimrod" from the *Enigma Variations*, dedicated to New York City and the strength and resiliency of its people.

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