

LAWO  
CLASSICS



# POING

Almost Classic

THOMMESSEN/MAHLER/BUENE

## ALMOST CLASSIC

*'The symphony must be like the world;  
it must embrace everything.'*

Mahler almost certainly never said this: the aphorism was reported for the first time by a Finnish writer almost thirty years after the meeting with Sibelius at which it was allegedly uttered, in the autumn of 1907. He certainly should have, though. The statement would not have been quoted so often (try a Google search) had it not corresponded with how we might feel about Mahler's symphonies and how we might wish the composer's own view to have been. His symphonic music has a wide, deep consciousness. What it hears, absorbs and transmutes could indeed be construed as everything.

First, though, there are visions—re-visions—of another Late Romantic in Olav Anton Thommessen's Four Tchaikovsky Sketches, composed for POING in 2019. Thommessen takes some of his basic material another way—or three other ways, in the first three movements, all of which are obsessed with the urgent on-ward-rippling 9/8 rhythm that Tchaikovsky made such a feature of his 'symphonic ballad' *The Voyevoda* (1890–91), as an image of hurry, obsession, anxiety.

The first piece, let loose by a shotgun effect (Bartók pizzicato on the double bass), then comes to a theme that appears late in *The Voyevoda*, before the final reprise-crisis, but that here conveys a sense of 'once upon a time'. A little over half way through, the saxophone

introduces the fateful theme that arrives early in the same Tchaikovsky score. In the second movement, the 9/8 idea is early on the scene, but the effort now is to keep it at bay, in favour of more lyrical themes from the Tchaikovsky, including the 'once upon a time' motif. This effort, increasingly strained, of course breaks down. The rush is back in the third movement, in a more playful spirit. It burbles down into the bass on the accordion, making room for the sax to introduce a melody from the trio of Tchaikovsky's Scherzo-fantaisie, Op. 72 No. 10, a piece possibly associated with the symphony in E flat the composer sketched in 1892 and directly abandoned. After three movements drawing on music Tchaikovsky was writing during his personally and creatively turbulent final years (with the rolling rhythm from *The Voyevoda* easily understood as a marker of that turbulence), Thommessen reflects in his finale on an earlier and very different work of the composer's, his *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom* (1878). A melody from this becomes a lullaby, and leaves us with a memorial.

Arriving now at Mahler, his 'everything', in this recording of the scherzo from his Sixth Symphony, would have to include the vernacular Jewish music of dance and celebration: klezmer. By the time Mahler was born, in 1860, the clarinet, senior cousin to the saxophone, was a regular lead instrument in klezmer ensembles, playing with strings, a flute and perhaps a brass instrument or two. The accordion seems to have come later. Since Mahler grew up the son of an innkeeper in Iglau (now Jihlava, in the Czech Republic), which had a Jewish population of over a thousand in 1867, klezmer must have been familiar to him

in his childhood. And if we look at the score of this movement, we see that POING have not imposed an alien colouring on the music but rather brought out what was already there: a driving dance rhythm, nostalgia for olden times (in the trio sections that alternate with the main music), woodwind prominence, oom-pah-pah accompaniment, and a non-standard, identifiably Jewish tonality—all characteristics of klezmer.

Also, in rescoring the music for three musicians, the POING players not only give it a new voice—or rather amplify an element in its original one—but also restore an old practice by which orchestral music was disseminated beyond the reach of concert halls. Before the first recording of this symphony was released, in 1952, many people would have come to the work by way of the piano duet version made by Alexander Zemlinsky, which was published in 1906, the year of the symphony's première. Such great reductions in scale (Mahler's score would imply an orchestra of close on a hundred) allow the performers to be more intimate but also edge their proximity with a vulnerability that in this recording has a particular poignancy.

In Eivind Buene's *Mahler Mixtape*, which he completed in 2020, Mahler's music is again rescored for the POING instrumentation, which again has the effect of returning it to where Mahler might well have found it: not in klezmer, this time, but in Central European folk music, which was played in the mid-nineteenth century by similar sorts of bands. To add to the folk effect, Buene asks that the five songs he chooses 'be sung with an untrained, every-day-kind of voice', and further

suggests the players could well sing them, as the POING musicians do here. (Buene dedicates the songs 'to my friends in POING', with whom he has worked almost from when the group was founded, in 1999.)

The sequence begins with versions of settings Mahler made between 1901 and 1904 of four poems by Friedrich Rückert: two from *Kindertotenlieder* and two others. First comes one from the former cycle, 'Oft denk' ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen!', whose remake as 'A Beautiful Day', has serious, even devastating, consequences. The words Buene sets, in English, require considerable rewriting of the vocal line, and his choice of an untrained voice brings to the number the poignancy of vulnerability. The singer is an ordinary man, and can appear to be singing for himself about the loss of a child. Also, the high baritone range almost guarantees a crack in the voice that will have its own expressive power. Then the song is shorn of its ending, to come to rest on a dominant chord, awaiting fulfilment and perhaps consolation.

Instead of that we hear, from a different distance, a separate Rückert setting, 'Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen' (I am lost to the world), remade as 'Welt'. Here Buene widens the range of transformation considerably, fusing Mahler's music into a sequence of chords on the accordion, magically joined by the voices of the accordion and bass players, while the sax player has an improvised cadenza (as he does also in the next number). A few phrases from the original song are salvaged before the music is again lost in the clouds.

Returning to *Kindertotenlieder*, 'Crazy Weather' abbreviates the introduction to 'In diesem Wetter' and, by its rescoring, intensifies the march rhythm.

At this point we zoom back from hard experience to relative innocence for 'Blue Eyes', a relatively straightforward adaptation of 'Die zwei blauen Augen', the last of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Travelling Lad) that Mahler wrote to his own words in 1885–6, when he was in his mid-twenties.

The glimpse of former times is firmly closed by the finale: 'The Dead of Night', from another of the uncollected Rückert songs, 'Um Mitternacht'. This again is abbreviated, very much, and melodically altered in parts, while the singer, proceeding without the protection of vocal training, is again exposed, out on his own.

Starting out in a folk-music tradition of which we have no documentation in sound, strongly stamped, of course, by Mahler's acts of composition, these songs touch down in the world of cabaret (which he may have experienced) and thus of Kurt Weill (whose music came too late for him) to arrive in a time when all these things are historical. They thus become available to what Buene calls 'telescopic listening'. There is no single moment to which this music attaches itself—and the same is true of Thommessen's revisitings of Tchaikovsky or POING's startling reconsideration of a Mahler symphonic movement. There are multiple pasts here, and all of them are, as we listen, happening now.

– Paul Griffiths



*This unusual Norwegian trio is doing interesting work off the beaten track. The unusual begins with the instrumentation ... and display considerable technical depth and breadth, as well as strong ensemble identity.*

(Julian Cowley, The Wire)

**POING** started playing together in 1999 and have since been one of the leading ensembles for contemporary music in Scandinavia. They have played in clubs and concert halls in most European countries, the US as well as in China and Japan. Constantly expanding their repertoire, they have played more than 150 first performances and worked closely with composers such as Maja S.K. Ratkje, Bent Sørensen, Terry Riley, Rolf Wallin, Natasha Barrett, Richard Barrett, Michael Finnissy, Volker Heyn and Helmut Oehring.

Their unique flexibility results in many untraditional commissions that go beyond the usual interpretation, interaction, and dissemination of contemporary music. For their work with contemporary music, POING were in 2009 awarded “Performer of the Year” by the Norwegian Society of Composers.

Previous releases by POING includes the CDs *Giants of Jazz* (2003), *Planet POING* (2006) and *Sur POING* (2015), plus the releases *Wach auf!* (2011) and *Kapital & Moral* (2016) in collaboration with Maja S.K. Ratkje.

The trio collaborates regularly with musicians from around the world, with backgrounds in different styles – from folk and traditional, via popular music to experimental expressions. Among others, POING have collaborated with Swedish, Swiss, Nepali, Brazilian, American, Azerbaijani, Mongolian, Egyptian, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Iranian, Mauritanian, Ivorian, Tanzanian, Irish, Faroese, Icelandic, Finnish, Peruvian, Brazilian, Baltic, Sami, Russian and Spanish musicians.

**POING are:**

**Frode Hattli**

accordion / vocals on tracks 6, 7, and 8

**Håkon Thelin**

double bass / vocals on tracks 7, 8, and 9

**Rolf-Erik Nystrøm**

alto saxophone / vocals on tracks 7 and 10

**OLAV ANTON THOMMESSEN (\*1946)**

**Four Tchaikovsky Sketches (2019–2021)**

Based on themes from Op. 78, Op. 72 No.10, Op. 41

1. I 03:35
2. II 05:14
3. III 05:20
4. IV 07:16

**GUSTAV MAHLER (1860–1911)**

**from Symphony No. 6**

Arr. for saxophone, accordion and double bass: POING

5. III. Scherzo, Wuchtig 14:37

**EIVIND BUENE (\*1973)**

**Mahler Mixtape (2020)**

for voice, saxophone, accordion and bass  
*to my friends in POING*

6. I. A Beautiful Day 02:53
7. II. Welt 03:28
8. III. Crazy Weather 05:49
9. IV. Blue Eyes 03:21
10. V. The Dead of Night 03:07

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