

## **“The Sweet Fragrance of Life”: Mortality and Rebirth in Mahler’s “Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde”**

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Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* opens with a starkly nihilistic image of human affairs. To the strains of a self-styled “drinking song,” a flushed, sybaritic narrator reminds us that life is short and happiness ephemeral—then urges us to grab a chalice and join the epicurean carnival. Drunkenness, he insists, is the only way to stave off the horrors of Earthly existence. This crassly cynical “drinking song” marks a radical departure from the creative vision of Mahler’s early and middle-period works, as does *Das Lied von der Erde* as a whole. Gone are the vaulting metaphysics and fairy-tale excursions, the Wagnerian heroics and triumphs wrested from catastrophe. In their place are cryptic vignettes on ancient Chinese poems, all of which dwell on the transience of beauty and joy.

In this talk, I’ll explore Mahler’s “Drinking Song of the Sorrows of the Earth” in detail, asking how its musical construction both responds to and amplifies its poetic themes. I begin with a thoroughgoing look at the song’s form, which emerges from rotational or cyclical processes taking place on multiple scales at once and achieving a level of complexity unseen in Mahler’s earlier work. I then take special interest in the song’s third strophe, which pivots away from the prevailing dualism—sensuous gratification versus nonexistence—to contemplate two cyclical images: the infinite regeneration of the natural world, and the countdown clock of human mortality. For it is at this point that the song reaches beyond its own horizon, to link up with the core themes of the work’s epic song-finale, “Der Abschied” and ask whether humankind can find comfort in nature’s eternal rebirth. What we’ll find is that Mahler’s seemingly trivial changes to Hans Bethge’s original poetic texts have far-reaching consequences for both the musical setting itself and the transsymphonic unity of *Das Lied von der Erde* as a whole.