

**“Why We Sing”:
David Mahler’s Piano Music**

“Why We Sing” might seem like a strange title for an essay about a recorded collection of solo piano pieces. Though a few of the pieces on this recording include singing, I’ve used this title because the notion of singing together, metaphorically and musically, is central to David Mahler’s work. I’ve borrowed the title from a Valentine’s Day gift to his wife, Julie Hanify, in the form of a round—one of over four-dozen (at the time of this writing) such pieces. Mahler’s rounds set to music quirky and poetic texts, simply for the joy of working them out in the process of composition, and for the added joy of sharing them with others as the little songs are brought to life.¹

Why We Sing

for Julie
you always remind me

David Mahler
Valentine's Day, 2009



Ev' - ry voice is a
stone, man - y voic - es a wall, —
— that en - com - pass - es all —
— with - in a com - mon space, —
— a ho - ly place.

A round for many voices, easily entering at the measure, or every other, or every third measure, but also try the half measure, measure and a half, etc.

¹ The scores of these rounds can be found here:

http://digitalmusics.dartmouth.edu/~larry/scores/other_peoples_scores/rounds/index.html. (Mahler’s “Some Thoughts on Writing Rounds” can also be found on that page.) Some of Mahler’s other scores, most of which are available through Frog Peak Music, can be found here:

http://digitalmusics.dartmouth.edu/~larry/scores/other_peoples_scores/david_mahler/index.html.

David Mahler was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, in 1944. When he was a year old his family moved to a suburb of Chicago, where he grew up. He earned a B.A. degree in secondary music education from Concordia College in Illinois in 1967, and then taught school for several years in Portland, Oregon. Around this time he gradually came into contact with contemporary American music, including recordings of Pauline Oliveros's *I of IV* and Morton Subotnick's *Silver Apples of the Moon*, copies of *Source* magazine at the library of the school where he taught, and several of John Cage's early books, including *Silence* (1961). These new sounds and ideas inspired him to find out more about living American composers and what was possible beyond arranging and re-creating older music. After returning to school at the pedagogically radical, recently opened California Institute of the Arts, and going through a process of self-discovery as a composer—with the help of encouraging teachers and role models like Harold Budd, Morton Subotnick, Richard Teitelbaum, and James Tenney—Mahler earned an M.F.A. in composition from CalArts in 1972. He then settled in Seattle for several decades; now he makes his home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In addition to his musical interests, Mahler is a baseball fanatic, and an extraordinary cook. A card-carrying member of what some historians and composers have in the past referred to as “the American experimental tradition,” he might be simply characterized today as part of a generous and open tradition of composers who still answer their own phones.

Mahler is an original and prolific composer, but also an active pianist, singer, arranger, choir and vocal workshop director, church musician, writer, and educator. His musical tastes reflect a deeply American sensibility.² He is fascinated by the sentimental ballads of Stephen Foster, the syncopated rags of Joseph Lamb, the sonic experiments of Charles Ives and his father George, and the pioneering tape music of Richard Maxfield. Many of his compositions directly address and honor these influences: *Maxfield's Reel* (1983); *Three George Ives Instructional Pieces* (2008); *Three Pieces After Charles Ives* (1990); *Fanfare for Jim Tenney* (2006), etc., or additional pieces dedicated to many composers and friends, including works for Morton Feldman and Stuart Dempster, for example.³ Known for his eclecticism both in his influences and in the types of pieces he creates, Mahler has written solo instrumental works, tape music, live electronic music, theater works, public installations, works for SATB chorus, for Gamelan Pacifica and the Downtown Ensemble, pieces for indeterminate ensembles, and even a piece for nine automated toy pianos (*For My Daughter, Who Loves to Travel* [2004]). He is considered an important innovator in tape music by those “in-the-know,” and has composed two of the most hauntingly beautiful pieces of classical minimalism (*La Ciudad de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles* [1980]; and *Only Music Can Save Me Now* [1978], included on this disk).

The unusual trajectory of Mahler's career makes him something of an anomaly in today's “new music” scene. Instead of working in the academic institutions where many American composers seek employment, Mahler has based nearly all of his work within urban and neighborhood communities. In many cases, in fact, he has also created musical communities himself: he founded and directed a public access electronic music studio in Seattle; served as a Listener-in-Residence for the community of La Mott, Pennsylvania; organized a neighborhood program for commissioning and performing new works for voice; created a permanent public collection of bells representing the thirty-nine counties of the state of Washington (and other public art); and founded special focus ensembles, including The Bright Street Red Sox and the Volunteer Park Conservatory Orchestra. He works with children's choruses, ensembles of amateurs, and holds house concerts in his own home. On a recent snowy Sunday in Pittsburgh, he hosted a sing-along session for children aged two-and-a-half to five, titled “Toe Tapping Songs for Children and Parents.” His music is social, situational, utilitarian, and fun. Few composers have ever reached out so deliberately, and so democratically, to their fellow human beings with such relentless creativity and

² An affectionate expression of Mahler's American sensibility can be found in Larry Polansky, “David Mahler's Place,” preface to the liner notes for David Mahler, *The Voice of the Poet*, Artifact (1997).

³ For a description of *Maxfield's Reel*, see Beal, “Nature Is the Best Dictator—Twentieth-Century American Violin Music,” liner notes for *Works for Violin by George Antheil, Johanna Beyer, Henry Cowell, Ruth Crawford, Charles Dodge, David Mahler, Larry Polansky, Stefan Wolpe*; Miwako Abe, violin; Michael Kieran Harvey, piano; New World Records 80641-2 (2006).

joy of spirit. In this way, through both his modesty and his engagement, Mahler seems to best exemplify the words of his friend the composer Larry Polansky, who wrote about “being a composer in America,” in 1988:

Composers must recognize what they are offered, and use it for evolution, not destruction. Our work should always have as its goal our own self-transformation, not self-glorification. A community of mind is at hand, and we should not back away.⁴

Several of Mahler’s early works were made available during the 1970s and 1980s through printing in several independent composer-established publications, in particular, Peter Garland’s *Soundings* and Michael Byron’s *Pieces* anthologies. Some of these pieces, with titles like *Compline*, *Wind Circle*, *Wind Hymn*, *Early Winters*, *Illinois Sleep*, and *Soundfields and Crystalbells*, all written between 1973 and 1976, are typical of their time. Many of them contain no musical notation or just fragments thereof, but provide written instructions for deliberate musical activities; some are repetitive yet indeterminate process pieces that leave some decisions up to the performer; they often have open or flexible instrumentation; they explore fundamental elements of music-making like breath and pulse; they even invite the musicians to share beer and whiskey during the performance of some of the pieces! A set of seven tiny songs was also published during this time. The second of them simply carried the text: “Two to make music.”



Another piece, a drone-laden canon of dynamic swells for five trumpets titled *Winter Man* was dedicated to his friend (and trumpeter) Michael Byron.

Mahler’s do-it-yourself creativity seems to burst forth in almost every possible media. This is best seen in a set of broadside-like, colorful, one-page works he copied and distributed as a collection called *Fancies* in 1988. This collection includes musical compositions, writings, drawings, puns, maps, and a statement about the establishment of a “national sound registry,” paid for by the “Dave Mahler for President Committee.” A year later, he created another collection of writings and reflections, similarly playful, historical, and informative, titled *A Celebration of Audio Tape*. Eleven years prior, in 1978, Mahler had self-published a limited-edition, 145-book print run, at the independent Wind-Up Press in Seattle. This book included fifteen word pieces—“most to be spoken out loud, with care for the rhythms, in an appropriate form, with however many people, with movement or not, and with occasional musical embellishments,” as Mahler described at the start—collectively titled *I Didn’t Want to Talk*.⁵

⁴ Larry Polansky, “Being a Composer in America,” *Perspectives of New Music* 26/1 (winter 1988): 214.

⁵ The title of the collection is taken from one of the word pieces included in the book, the full text of which is “I didn’t want to talk, I wanted to make love.”

But Mahler's music does want to talk. Two of his pieces in particular explore uses of the voice in unusual and intriguing ways, and show the range of his imagination. The first, titled simply *Time Piece* (first published in the *Portland Review*, in 1982), consists of a single sheet of paper with a typed text about music and time. Any number of people start to read the text out loud, in unison, and then pause for a number of seconds indicated by a number in parentheses. At the first number, the unison begins to pull apart, since no single person in the group will measure the seconds internally in the same way. The text is a clever, self-referential description of what the reader is actually doing at the moment of doing it, and the result is a fascinating vocal polyphony that increases and decreases in tempo and density depending on the frequency and length of the "rests." The piece ends with each speaker counting fifty seconds between the first and last name of John Cage, thus effectively inserting a mini-version of his famous "silent piece" (4'33") into the end of Mahler's *Time Piece*. Another composition that makes use of spoken text in a particular way is titled *Two Voices*, which Mahler wrote in the mid-1990s for a performance on a live radio program for which he was the staff writer. After some revision, the piece became a quartet for two unison speakers and two unison melody instruments. The two lines of music negotiate a stream of syncopated rhythmic figures. The text, which is quite humorous, explains that the speaker was born with two voices: "That's right, I said two unison voices." The challenge for the performers is to execute the rhythms as accurately as possible, so as to maintain the quality of unison. Needless to say, this is difficult, yet poses interesting questions about ensemble playing and our differing perceptions of time.

Singing, often with Julie Hanify but also with friends, neighbors, children, and anyone who is willing and able, is also central to Mahler's creative life. In addition to the fifty rounds he has written on subjects both personal and global, he has composed and arranged a wide variety of songs, two CDs of which have been recorded by himself, Hanify, and guitarist Larry Polansky (who shares, among other things, Mahler's passion for writing and singing rounds). The rounds themselves provide a vehicle through which Mahler can explore both simple, direct musical ideas as well as intricate and complex ones, and they also provide an outlet for his insatiable and often dry sense of humor. A master of puns, his titles, texts, and instructions revel in word play: his Thanksgiving-themed song titled "You'll Never Hear A Soybean Cry," for example, is to be played in a "tempo de tempeh." Polansky, one of the few—if not only—writers to take Mahler's music seriously, celebrates this intelligence and diversity of expression in his friend's work:

David's music is transparent, communicative, sophisticated, profound, friendly. In all of its manifestations—with Northwest fiddle musicians, kids, the Volunteer Park Conservatory Orchestra, his "art song" duo, or the tape recorder pieces—the love of musical materials and activities erupts into making pieces. Like a good ballgame, a David Mahler piece is always tangible, funny, and sad.⁶

The seven works on this CD span a period of thirty-five years, from 1971 to 2006, and represent many of the qualities Polansky lists. However, it is probably safe to say that the pieces included here primarily reveal the more serious and lyrical side of the David Mahler musical coin. And though three of the pieces include voice (in two cases Mahler alone, and in the other, Mahler, Hanify, and pianist Nurit Tilles singing in three-part harmony), this collection also focuses on Mahler's ongoing exploration of his own instrument: the piano.

The first piece on this recording, titled *An alder. A catfish.*, was composed in 2006 and dedicated to the trombonist and composer Stuart Dempster, a Seattle resident since 1968 and long-time friend of Mahler. The title, as indicated in the score, is taken from a quotation by the poet Richard Hugo: "An alder. A catfish. These are my favorite nicknames for masters of survival." The piece works like a set of variations in the key of B-flat major, over a left-hand pattern of open fourths, fifths and sixths, which dance along in alternating meters of 6/8 and 7/8. About two-thirds of the way through, the listener is pleasantly surprised by the sudden appearance of the

⁶ Polansky, "David Mahler's Place," *The Voice of the Poet*, Artifact (1997).

composer's own strong and clear baritone voice, doubling the simple diatonic melody without words for just a few measures (in the score, this melodic part is intended as "trombone, voice, or other"). This vocal line is repeated, like an echo, right before the end of the piece. The piano plays a strange coda: a loud, accented B-flat major/minor seventh chord, from which all but one of the seven notes are gradually subtracted—released by the fingers—one by one until just the central B-flat remains. This is repeated four times, and is very effective in focusing the ear on the sonorous resonance of the piano, if not slightly odd, after the bouncy, pastoral nature of the rest of the piece.

As this CD's opener, *An alder. A catfish.* elegantly introduces one of Mahler's major strengths as a composer: deep musical ideas presented clearly and directly, and with skill and imagination.

After Morton Feldman (1987–88) shows a different side of Mahler's character, one still focused on the beauty of his instrument, but one in dialogue with a respected elder of the classical American postwar avant-garde. Composer Morton Feldman passed away of pancreatic cancer in September 1987 at the age of sixty-one, and Mahler's title seems to allude not only to a composition for which "after" means "in the style of," but also means "in a post-Feldman world." In this sense the piece is both a memorializing work and also a piece that imitates, in its first half, Feldman's sparse, pointillistic, atonal, free-sounding piano pieces of the 1950s. Seemingly isolated gestures—chords, single pitches, very high and very low sonorities—float in a metrically free landscape of surrounding silence.

The second half consists of a more steadily repetitive section, with each bar introducing a tremolo and arpeggio pattern that should be repeated many times, shaped by a crescendo and then decrescendo that gives the impression that the pattern is approaching the listener and then receding into the distance.

This section might be a reference to Feldman’s works after the mid-1970s, which focused almost exclusively on repeated motives and gestures, and were frequently accompanied by musically self-referential titles like *Why Patterns?*, *Patterns in a Chromatic Field*, *Crippled Symmetry*, and *Triadic Memories*. The end of *After Morton Feldman*, in particular, achieves a similar effect, through the pianist’s spontaneous choosing of how to combine and repeat a third section of short motives.

A whimsical piece of advice by Samuel Clemens—“ It’s good sportsmanship to not pick up lost golf balls while they are still rolling”—adorns the score of the next piece on this recording, called *Deep Water* (1984). The score also includes the following from Clemens:

The old life has swept before me like a panorama; the old days have trooped by in their old glory again; the old faces have looked out of the mists of the past; old footsteps have sounded in my listening ears; old hands have clasped mine, and songs I loved ages and ages ago have come wailing down the centuries.

The choice of this sentiment, perhaps more than any other on this record, reflects Mahler’s love for the literature, inflection, sentimentality, and nostalgia of nineteenth-century America. And though primarily a piano solo, *Deep Water*, like *An alder. A catfish.*, includes a solo voice, briefly, in the middle of the piece. Again, the composer himself sings: “Sailing down the river of dreams, sounding mem’ry’s depths—deep water!” (This original text is by Mahler, not Clemens.) The piece is close in spirit to the world of Charles Ives in both its connection to nineteenth-century America and in its inclusion of a brief sung poem. Like several of the other pieces on this recording, part of the score provides measure-long patterns to be repeated an undetermined amount of times by the pianist (Mahler simply instructs: “Play each repeated section an ample number of times”). The gently plodding series of chords and single pitches hovers in the middle range of the piano, emphasizing the transparent beauty of the instrument. After an unexpectedly sudden increase in volume and energy, the voice enters with its long-toned melody, accompanied by an old-fashioned sounding arpeggio figure in the piano. The voice disappears, and the piano returns to material similar to the opening, though it remains for much of the time in the more forceful expression, reiterating a bell-like pattern, for a long time.



Like the others, this brief piece travels through a wide range of emotional landscapes, both subtle and exuberant.

The central composition on this recording is the virtuosic, twelve-part *Day Creek Piano Works and The Teams Are Waiting in the Field* (1995).⁷ Again, it shows the composer carefully considering the vast possibilities of the piano. Mahler has written a clear description of the premise of the piece, and includes it in his score:

The composer/farmer explores the possibilities of the piano keyboard in a series of eight fanciful pieces—pieces based on “trying things out.” At the same time the composer faces the knowledge that the real work at hand, namely “tending the crops,” will not allow him the pleasures of totally forgetting himself in his instrument.

The harvest chorale, “The Teams are Waiting . . .” is interpolated in the eight sections of *Day Creek Piano Works* four times, one for each verse of the chorale. The chorale may be sung, one verse per interpolation, by the pianist, an “offstage voice,” the audience, or any combination thereof. Or the chorale may simply be played on the piano each time. Other instruments may be added to the chorale, too.

The eight sections of *Day Creek Piano Works* are as follows:

Title	Notes Used	Times Occurring
I. Sonorous Clang	88	1
II. Crossing Patterns	44	2
>chorale		
III. Sustained Progress	22	4
IV. Three Against Two	11	8
>chorale		
V. Cascades	8	11
VI. Always Birds	4	22
>chorale		
VII. Proximate Sounds	2	44
>chorale		
VIII. Distant Sounds	1	88

⁷ Mahler provided this information in the program for Nurit Tilles’s performance of these pieces at the Tenri Cultural Institute in New York City on 15 November 2009: The text of “The Teams Are Waiting in the Field” was written by John Mason Neale in 1843; the melody for the song is titled “Chevy Chase” and is dated from around the time of Queen Elizabeth.

In this recording, the chorales are sung in three-part harmony (Mahler's arrangement) by Hanify, Tilles, and Mahler. Except for the first piano piece, which uses each of the instrument's eighty-eight keys just once, each of the pieces focuses on one type of gesture, and has artificially restricted pitch collections and repetitions of those associated with each, as is made clear by Mahler's chart. Most of these patterns systematically explore the whole range of the keyboard, from its deepest valleys to its highest peaks, and many require great velocity, strength, and endurance. Examples of these gestures are shown below:

$\text{♩} = 108$
 Dry, clangorous
ff
 Pedal as necessary.

Fast poco a poco decrescendo
fff poco a poco decrescendo
ave.

Not strict
 $\text{♩} = \text{about } 60$
 connected
 sempre *Bve*
 sempre *mp*
 sempre *Bve*

$\text{♩} = \text{about } 72$
 R.H. on top of L.H. unless otherwise indicated.

Relentless!
♩ = about 46

over

f

15ve

PPP throughout,
at the threshold of audibility

15ve

8ve

5ve

f

mp

f

p

mf

8ve

10ve

f

p

mf

Begin immediately on last chord of chorale.

♩ feely, unmeasured ♩ = about 40, but very expansive.

Sustain pedal held down throughout

ppp

mf

8ve

15ve

The pieces present further challenges for the pianist. These sonic effects include: starting very fast but pacing a very steady deceleration and subsequent reacceleration as the hands move across the range of the keyboard (II); simulating an “organ style” through a particular form of phrasing (III); requiring “a constantly shifting field of percussive interest” through varied dynamic control between the rapidly repeating hands (IV); “relentless!” (V); substituting the sound of a human whistle for any of the notated piano figures (VI); a series of two-note chords, one note in each hand, each hand playing a slightly or dramatically different dynamic level (VII); and a rising and falling wave of single-note tremolos, each starting very quiet and growing quickly to fortissimo (VIII). The eighth piece ends the set in a series of very quiet high notes, dying away on the highest C of the piano.

It is typical of Mahler to prefer working in practical ways for specific situations, and, in fact, *Day Creek* is also such a work. It was commissioned privately by Steve Mitchell, a composer himself, who had begun and almost single-handedly built his own farm in Sedro Woolley, Washington, a few years before the commission. The cause for the piece was the arrival of the family’s piano on the farm. The first performance took place at that celebratory event, with a local pianist playing the solo, and the crowd singing the chorale. Mahler describes these events in his own words:

On a few fertile acres in Day Creek, Washington, composer/agriculturalist Stephen Mitchell created a produce farm. Once the farm was functional, Steve sent for the family piano from Virginia. On a Sunday afternoon in late September, 1995, friends gathered in Steve's hand-built house to listen to Roger Nelson play piano music by Cage, Cowell, and a piece Steve had commissioned for the occasion, “Day Creek Piano Works and The Teams are Waiting in the Field.” This concert, in celebration of the passing of the equinox and the arrival of the piano, concluded with a generous meal of fruits and vegetables from Steve's harvest.⁸

The earliest work on this recording, *A Rose Blooming for Charles Ives* (1971; revised 1976), shows the young composer paying homage to one of his most enduring musical heroes. For the first eight measures of the piece, the left hand and the right hand are playing in two different keys and time signatures. They move synchronously toward the middle, then apart again. The main melody, presented bitonally for most of the piece (the right hand in E-flat major, the left in C major, then switching hands when the bitonal section is repeated at the end), is taken from a fifteenth-century German Christmas carol called “Es ist ein Ros’ Entsprungen” (“a rose has bloomed”), which was harmonized, in its most enduring incarnation, by Michael Praetorius in the early 1600s. The use of a well-known, preexisting tune as the source of a composition, as well as the bitonal setting of the harmony, provides a direct musical connection to Mahler’s dedicatee.

The title of the penultimate piece on the recording, *Frank Sinatra in Buffalo* (1987–88), is typical of Mahler’s proclivity to evoke the memory of famous people in his work: the song *Elvis Is Watching You*, the brass quintet *Ty Cobb*, or the round *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show*, for example. *Frank Sinatra in Buffalo* is a beautiful and unusual piece, moving from solo melodies to jazz-inflected chords to repetitions of series of chords, to an octave doubling of a high melody. The result is icy, melancholy, and improvisatory. Perhaps if Frank Sinatra had been stuck in a nightclub in Buffalo on a snowy evening, this is what he would have coaxed out of the piano.

The finale of this recording is the hypnotically repetitive *Only Music Can Save Me Now* (1978). This work most directly points to Mahler’s affinity for the gestures associated with minimalism: tonality, repetition, steady pulse, a calm surface, or, as Mahler puts it in a description of music by Harold Budd and Brian Eno in 1980: “consonant, evocative, synthetic in the best sense of that word, rhythmically instructive, and (in spite of simplicity of material),

⁸ Mahler, written communication with the author, 10 March 2010.

as unpredictable as a child.”⁹ To paraphrase the painter Frank Stella: what you hear is what you hear (“what you see is what you see,” he remarked about minimalist visual art). The prettiness of the music also aligns Mahler with what has sometimes been referred to as a West Coast sound. In further discussing Budd and Eno’s collaboration, Mahler wrote:

Recently I heard someone speak of this music as a true “West Coast” sound—accessible, pretty, anti-cerebral, and not at all dependent on technical brilliance in the usual sense. That is, certainly, the gesture or outward appearance of this music. The substance, however, goes much deeper. One of the problems that this type of music has to face is that the appearance of the music is so simple that the “sound” is easily imitated (this has been true of many composers who work with well-defined materials: others distill the essence of the work, producing what amounts to slick counterfeit versions). I think that those who speak disparagingly of this “West Coast” sound often concern themselves with how easily imitable it is, as though this were an undesirable quality. That’s like blaming the pig for synthetic bacon.¹⁰

Like a number of Mahler’s pieces, the length of this piece is indeterminate, since the performer is allowed to choose the number of repetitions of patterns usually contained within a single measure. *Only Music Can Save Me Now* is also typical of minimalist structures in that it uses a very small amount of musical material to generate a potentially never-ending form. That material, in this case, is an oscillating and descending pattern.



This pattern continues throughout, without fail, by the left hand. Around it, the right hand doubles, repeats, embellishes, changes the length of the repeated phrases, and generally adds a subtle change of resulting patterns through very simple means. The harmonic pattern is predictable, though the phrasing of each new variation within it is not. The cumulative effect, over time, is that the simple but true constancy of the piece’s foundation is something one can truly depend on: *Only Music Can Save Me Now* is an apt and optimistic way to end this remarkable set of late-twentieth-century piano works.

This CD’s pairing of Mahler’s music with the gifted pianist Nurit Tilles reveals a particularly strong kinship between two independent yet collaborative musicians. In Tilles, Mahler finds a like-minded colleague similarly passionate about American music. They share a love of ragtime, Ives, and minimalism. Further, Tilles’s ongoing series of semi-private concerts, in her teaching space on Broadway in New York City, titled “Sundays at the Studio,” seem, in spirit, well aligned with Mahler’s interest in community music-making, house concerts, and more intimate and social ways of sharing musical experiences. During 2009, Tilles gave performances of these seven piano works both at her studio for an invited audience early in the year, and in a public concert at the Tenri Cultural Institute on 13th Street in November. Soon after, she recorded the whole set, seemingly effortlessly, at the American Academy of Arts and Letters at Broadway and 155th Street. The unflappably calm composer and his wife attended all the sessions and recorded their vocal passages with Tilles. A few other fascinated listeners were allowed to be present, and one in particular, I can report with certainty, was grateful to experience the communal process of this long overdue project.

—Amy C. Beal

Amy C. Beal is Professor of Music at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the author of New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification (University of California Press, 2006), and is currently finishing a second book on the composer Carla Bley.

⁹ David Mahler, “The Plateaux of Mirror (A Review),” *Soundings* 11 (Santa Fe, NM: Soundings Press, 1981): 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The Teams Are Waiting in the Field

Words by J.M. Neale (1818–1866).

Melody of *Chevy Chase* (time of Queen Elizabeth)

Arrangement by David Mahler

1. The teams are waiting in the field,
The plowmen all a row;
As brisk and gay as birds in May,
They make a goodly show.

2. The farmer stands and sees all hands
Turn'd out and ready now;
Yet, ere they start, with all our heart
We'll say, God speed the plow!

3. We plow the field; but He must yield
His sunshine and his rains:
In hope we plow, in hope we sow,
That He may bless our pains.

4. Tis even weight, and furrow straight,
That bears away the bell;
So off! and now God speed the plow,
And send the plowman well!

Composer **David Mahler**, an independent practitioner residing in Pittsburgh, warmed up on late 1950s popular musics and church music before he fell in with Cal Arts colleagues in the early 1970s. From 1974 through 2004 he lived in Seattle, filling his time variously as music director at *and/or*, co-founder/director of New Songs, founder/conductor of the Volunteer Park Conservatory Orchestra, creator of the Washington State Centennial Bell Garden, and leader of an inclusive vocal workshop tagged the Bright Street Red Sox. Along the way Mahler served as Listener-in-Residence for a month in the community of La Mott, Pennsylvania, performed at festivals and concerts in the United States and Canada, led home-singing sessions for children and their parents, and taught piano, voice, and composition privately, a practice he continues today. In Pittsburgh he leads the Beacon Street Red Sox, sister ensemble to his Seattle squad, and sings at house concerts with his wife, Julie Hanify.

Nurit Tilles is a longtime member of Steve Reich & Musicians and a former member of The Mother Mallard Band. She and Edmund Niemann are the duo-pianists known as Double Edge, for whom new pieces have been written by John Cage, David Lang, Meredith Monk, “Blue” Gene Tyranny and Kevin Volans, among others. Works by Stravinsky, Reich, Feldman, Poulenc and Messiaen are a treasured part of their repertoire as well.

Tilles has worked with many other composers including Donald Ashwander, Eve Beglarian, Gerald Busby, Fred Hersch, Laura Kaminsky, Guy Klucevsek, Henry Martin, Kirk Nurock, Paul Paccione and Tom Pierson. As a Lincoln Center Institute Artist she performed Ives’s First Sonata and the Barber Sonata. She is also very partial to Cage’s *Sonatas & Interludes* and the music of Alexandre Tansman. Her forty-year passion for ragtime has taken her to such venues as Town Hall and Grand Central Station. Rudi Blesh produced her recording *Ragtime: Here and Now*. Her own compositions include *Raw Silk* and *The Kitchen Table*. Tilles has recorded for ECM, Nonesuch, CRI, New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, Tzadik, Cuneiform and Jazzology.

Julie Hanify (voice), when not working as a librarian at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, performs with her husband, David Mahler. Hanify’s range of past musical activity includes singing opera chorus, musical theater, and with traditional jazz and swing bands.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Hearing Voices. Tzadik 7064.

I’d Like to Sing with You Tonight. Julie Hanify, voice; Larry Polansky, mandolin, guitar; David Mahler, voice, piano. Frog Peak FP 012.

La Ciudad de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles. On *Cold Blue*. Cold Blue CB 0008.

Maxfield’s Reel. On *Works for Violin by George Antheil, Johanna Beyer, Henry Cowell, Ruth Crawford, Charles Dodge, David Mahler, Larry Polansky, Stefan Wolpe*. Miwako Abe, violin; Michael Kieran Harvey, piano; New World Records 80641-2.

Too Late. Julie Hanify, voice; Larry Polansky, mandolin, guitar; David Mahler, voice, piano. Frog Peak FP 011.

The Voice of the Poet: Works on Tape 1972–1986. Artifact 1019.

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DAVID MAHLER (b. 1944)
ONLY MUSIC CAN SAVE ME NOW

Nurit Tilles, piano

80702-2

1. *An alder. A catfish.* (2006) 4:43
(for Stuart Dempster)
David Mahler, voice

2. *After Morton Feldman* (1987–88) 6:18

3. *Deep Water* (1984) 9:34
David Mahler, voice

Day Creek Piano Works and The Teams Are Waiting in the Field (1995) 37:00
(for Steve Mitchell)

4. I. Sonorous Clang :22
5. II. Crossing Patterns 1:21
6. Chorale :23
7. III. Sustained Progress 4:28
8. IV. Three Against Two 4:55
9. Chorale :25
10. V. Cascades 14:05
11. VI. Always Birds 2:19
12. Chorale :24
13. VII. Proximate Sounds 3:47
14. Chorale :20
15. VIII. Distant Sounds 3:59

Julie Hanify, David Mahler, Nurit Tilles, voices

16. *A Rose Blooming for Charles Ives* (1971, rev. 1976) 1:46

17. *Frank Sinatra in Buffalo* (1987–88) 3:30

18. *Only Music Can Save Me Now* (1978) 15:46

TT: 79:05

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