

ON A BALLET BY SIR
KENNETH MACMILLAN

—*Houston Ballet, September 2011*

It's Mahler's masterpiece, *Song of the Earth*,
transformed into ballet. The soul of dance
does not respond, alas. Is there a dearth
of music suitable for feet? Mere chance,

as at a raffle, might provide a page
that's better fitted for Terpsichore.
Try Liszt, Chopin, Albéniz, even Cage.
What's more, this work's a clashing potpourri,

comprising ancient Chinese poems, wrought
in German, sung (two voices, quite drowned out
by cymbals, tam-tam, drum, bass horns—all fraught
with powers of cacophony). Aesthetic doubt

persists: strange choreography, worse style.
Thus "Von der Schönheit" is an ugly scene,
with awkward poses. One can't reconcile
intention with such form. What does it mean?

Nor shall I mention scenery and dress.
That Death should play a role in this, I grant.
Its herald should dance well, though; happiness,
while fleeting, shine. Here, nothing else but scant

display of dancers' skill, stiff movements, grim
impressions, scowls. "Warum? Warum?" Indeed!
Expecting noble gestures and a hymn
to life, we've got contortions.—I concede

great art may spring from disappointment, grief,
but not the dismal swamp. It's all a waste.
The ending brings a palpable relief.
Thus modernism's spirit is disgraced.