

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Gustav Mahler

Born July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia.
Died May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 1 in D Major

Mahler did most of the work on his First Symphony in February and March of 1888, incorporating music that had been written much earlier. He revised the score on several occasions. The first performance was given on November 20, 1889, in Budapest, with the composer conducting. The score calls for four flutes and three piccolos, four oboes and english horn, four clarinets, two E-flat clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, seven horns, four trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately fifty-seven minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Mahler's First Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on November 6 and 7, 1914, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on April 5, 6, 7, and 10, 2007, with Gustavo Dudamel conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 19, 1949, with William Steinberg conducting, and most recently on June 24, 2005, with James Conlon conducting.

When Alma Schindler first met Gustav Mahler, whom she later married, she could only remember how much she had disliked his First Symphony. She wasn't alone. The history of this symphony, even into relatively recent times, is one of misunderstanding and rejection. The first performance, in Budapest in 1889, was greeted with indifference, bewilderment, and, in the words of the local critic, "a small, but, for all that, audible element of opposition." Mahler seldom understood the animosity his music aroused. A few years later, after Alma had taken his name and converted to the cause, Mahler wrote to her after conducting the First Symphony: "Sometimes it sent shivers down my spine. Damn it all, where do people keep their ears and their hearts if they can't hear *that!*"

But as Alma knew, people didn't always feel what Mahler felt. For years the First Symphony led an unhappy existence, greeted by chilly receptions whenever it was played and plagued by the composer's continual fussing, both over details and the big picture. No other symphony gave him so much trouble. He couldn't even decide if this music was a symphonic poem, a program symphony, or a symphony plain and simple—or whether it should contain four or five movements. Figuring all that out was not an act of indecisiveness, but of exploration. And by the time Mahler published this music as his Symphony no. 1 some fifteen years after he began it, he had not only discovered for himself what a symphony could be, but he had changed the way we have defined that familiar word ever since.

We begin in Kassel in 1884, with Johanna Richter, a soprano destined for fame not as a singer, but as the inspiration for Mahler's first true masterpiece, the *Songs of a Wayfarer*, and as a stimulus for this symphony. Mahler had gone to Kassel as a conductor, but found the working conditions unsatisfactory. Whatever he missed in his work he gained in life and love. Johanna Richter—or, more precisely, unreturned love—unlocked Mahler's deepest feelings that year and set his course, not as an accomplished conductor, which he surely was, but as a composer of vision and daring. It took the rest of the musical establishment a while to see it that way.

Mahler followed an unorthodox path in getting from Johanna Richter to his First Symphony, but it's one he would choose again and again when writing music, and it's the process as much as the composer himself that gives Mahler's symphonies their unconventional stamp. Henry James once described a novelist as someone on whom nothing is lost. For Mahler, that defined a symphonist. The First Symphony is indebted, in various ways, to Johanna Richter, the *Wayfarer* songs, incidental music Mahler wrote for a production of Joseph Victor von Scheffel's *Der Trompeter von Säckingen*, a familiar children's round, the wife of Carl Maria von Weber's grandson, yodeling, military fanfares, an early nineteenth-century woodcut, café music, the opening of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, bird song at dawn, a love song he wrote in 1880, reveille, the German ländler—and sights, sounds, and feelings we will never know. Since Mahler hadn't written a large, purely orchestral work before, it took him some time to find the right way to bring all his resources together and to make a convincing whole of so many parts. In the meantime, life presented new choices, and love was reawakened by Marion von Weber, the wife of the composer's grandson.

The piece Mahler introduced in Budapest on November 20, 1889, was billed as a "Symphonic Poem in two parts"—with three movements in part 1 and two in part 2. Only the funeral march was labeled to help listeners coming to the music cold. Today it's easy to see that it wasn't the lack of labels or comments, but simply the staggering range and provocative juxtaposition of materials that bothered the first audience. For the next performances, in Hamburg and Weimar (in 1893 and 1894), Mahler drew up a descriptive program, gave titles to the movements, and called the whole piece "*Titan*, a tone poem in symphonic form," after the popular novel by Jean Paul. For Berlin in 1896, Mahler again changed his mind, dropped the titles and the programmatic explanation, omitted the second movement (*Blumine*), and settled on "Symphony in D major, for large orchestra." (The *Blumine* movement, originally part of the incidental music he wrote for a staging of Scheffel's narrative poem *Der Trompeter von Säckingen*, was subsequently lost. In 1959 a score of the movement turned up at a Sotheby's auction; it was performed in 1967 for the first time since Mahler's death.) In Vienna in 1900, a notice in the program indicated that Mahler wanted no explanatory notes of any kind. Why such indecision? In March 1896, at the time of the Berlin performance, Mahler wrote to the critic Max Marschalk about adding the program in the first place:

. . . At the time my friends persuaded me to provide a kind of program for the D major symphony in order to make it easier to understand. Therefore, I had thought up this title and explanatory material after the actual composition. I left them out for this performance, not only because I think they are quite inadequate and do not even characterize the music accurately, but also because I have learned through past experiences how the public has been misled by them.

Still, Mahler's First Symphony wasn't understood. Critics in Frankfurt complained about the program, those in Berlin missed it. (At this same time, Strauss was writing *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and *Ein Heldenleben*, which begged the same questions.) Even though Mahler finally decided to present this symphony as abstract music with no story to tell, he wrestled with the same dilemma again in writing symphonies nos. 2 and 3 and came to slightly different conclusions each time. Mahler's final thoughts on this music were published in 1899 as Symphony no. 1, in four movements, and that's how it's known today.

The first movement begins "like a sound of nature," with fanfares and bird calls sounding from the distance over the gentle hum of the universe, tuned to A-natural and scattered over seven octaves. The method is one learned by every composer since Beethoven, whose Ninth Symphony opens with bits and pieces that gradually become music. It took Mahler a long time to get the opening to sound the way he wanted it; every effect is precisely calculated, with consideration given not only to the most delicate shades of dynamics, but to the placement of the players on and off the stage.

A cuckoo—unlike Beethoven's cuckoo in the *Pastoral* Symphony, it sings the interval of a fourth instead of a third—eventually pushes the sounds of nature into a lovely, rolling melody. That tune, beginning with the cuckoo's descending fourth, comes from the second *Wayfarer* song, "Ging heut' Morgen übers Feld" (I went through the fields this morning), and its proud walking music takes Mahler a long way. Mahler reinvents the song as he goes, reshuffling phrases and motives so that even someone who knows the song finds this music continually fresh.

Next comes a brief scherzo set in motion by the foot-stomping dances and yodeling that Mahler heard and had already put to good use in one of his first songs, "Hans und Grete," in 1880. "Dance around, around!" the song goes. "Let whoever is happy weave in and out! Let whoever has cares find his way home." There is a wistful trio, music Mahler might have heard in a Viennese café, more full of cares than joy, and then the *ländler* resumes.

The third movement used to upset audiences, and even today it's puzzling to those hearing it for the first time. What are we to make of this odd assortment: a sad and distorted version of "Frère Jacques" (Mahler knew it as "Bruder Martin"); a lumbering funeral march; some cheap dance-band music remembered by pairs of oboes and trumpets over the beat of the bass drum; and the ethereal closing pages of the *Wayfarer* songs—heaven and earth all rolled into one? No wonder people didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Mahler's only clue is "The Hunter's Funeral Procession"—a woodcut made earlier in the century by Moritz von Schwind, a friend of Schubert—which he claimed was the inspiration for this music. About the vulgar band music Mahler leaves no doubt: "With parody" he writes at the top of the page, just as the drum and cymbal join in. (A note: At this performance, the famous "Frère Jacques" theme that opens the movement, traditionally given to muted solo double bass, is played by the entire section, muted. This is a rereading of Mahler's intentions, which have long been misunderstood. Although Mahler experimented with this passage for several years in order to get the effect he had in mind, he apparently settled on the idea of having all the double basses play this haunting "solo" in unison, only to discover that this was beyond the capability of most orchestral bass sections. Giving it to the principal player alone was an expedient compromise at the time that has erroneously become a convention. Bernard Haitink is the first conductor of the Chicago Symphony to have the full bass section play this passage.)

The finale begins with a "flash of lightning from a dark cloud," Mahler tells us. "It is simply the cry of a wounded heart." This is music in search of victory, and Mahler retreats from battle several times before he triumphs. The first stop allows us to savor some lovely pastoral music we would recognize if Mahler hadn't ultimately chosen to omit his original second movement, *Blumine*. Later we return to the fields of the first movement, but we're no longer setting off on our journey—we're headed straight for the triumph that Mahler's wayfarer couldn't achieve. This time success is swift and unequivocal, and when the seven horns are asked to play out—"even over the trumpets"—victory is won.

The Chicago Symphony recorded Mahler's First Symphony in 1971 under Carlo Maria Giulini for Angel, in 1981 under Claudio Abbado for Deutsche Grammophon, in 1983 under Sir Georg Solti for London, in 1990 under Klaus Tennstedt for EMI, and in 1998 under Pierre Boulez for Deutsche Grammophon.

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