Thursday, November 21, 2013, at 8:00
Friday, November 22, 2013, at 1:30
Saturday, November 23, 2013, at 8:00
Sunday, November 24, 2013, at 3:00

**Michael Tilson Thomas** Conductor

**Stravinsky**

*Elegy for J.F.K.*

- **Kelley O’Connor** Mezzo-soprano
- John Bruce Yeh, clarinet
- Gregory Smith, clarinet
- J. Lawrie Bloom, clarinet

First Chicago Symphony Orchestra performances

**Mahler**

Symphony No. 9 in D Major

*Andante comodo*

In the tempo of a moderate landler
Rondo-Burleske: Allegro. Very defiantly
Adagio. Very slow and reserved

There will be no intermission.
November 22, 1963. Igor Stravinsky was checking into his hotel in Catania, on the Ionian coast of Sicily, at ten o’clock in the evening when he heard the news that President Kennedy had died: “Il presidente Kennedy è morto, assassinato!”

In Chicago, members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra were on their way to play the 2 P.M. matinee concert when the news broke. One player, emerging from the State Street subway, noticed a crowd hovering around a TV in the window of a Palmer House storefront. At a time when news traveled much more slowly than it does today, many members of the Orchestra Hall audience were shocked when an announcement was made from the stage at the start of the afternoon concert—merely ninety minutes after the president had been shot. There were gasps of disbelief, even screams. The concert went on as scheduled, with the last-minute addition of the second movement from Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony—the great, majestic funeral march—placed at the top of the program.

Stravinsky sat by the radio in his hotel room most of the night. The next day, when he left the hotel, he found black-bordered photographs of the late president plastered all over the Italian city, and flags flying at half-mast. After a day of sightseeing—climbing a wobbly ladder in Siracusa for a close-up of Caravaggio’s Death of Santa Lucia—he sat in his room and composed a cablegram to Mrs. Kennedy to express his grief.

On Monday, November 25, the Chicago Symphony played a memorial concert in Orchestra Hall under the Orchestra’s new music director, Jean Martinon, that was broadcast live on WGN-TV. Chicago theaters were all dark that night; Lyric Opera canceled its performance of Don Pasquale. Ironically, the CSO’s regular concerts later that week had been designated as the official memorial for Fritz Reiner, the Orchestra’s previous music director, who had died on November 15. Program books had already been printed. Now, a new cover, bordered in black, was quickly produced and the programs on November 28 and 29—Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms coupled with Mozart’s Requiem—instead became the Orchestra’s memorial to John F. Kennedy.

By January, Stravinsky began to worry that “the events of November were being too quickly forgotten.” He wrote to his old friend, W. H. Auden, asking for a “very quiet little lyric” that he could set to music. Stravinsky envisioned something simple, intimate, and personal—in contrast to the “albatrosses of ‘epic’ poetry and symphonic sentiment” he feared would soon follow.

Igor Stravinsky
Born June 18, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia.
Died April 6, 1971, New York City.

Elegy for J.F.K.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPOSED</th>
<th>FIRST PERFORMANCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>April 6, 1964, Los Angeles, California</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES</th>
<th>APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These are the first Chicago Symphony Orchestra performances.</td>
<td>2 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTRUMENTATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voice and three clarinets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stravinsky had met John Kennedy in January 1962, at a dinner given in his honor at the White House. Igor and his wife Vera were greeted at the front porch by the president and his wife Jackie, and escorted into the White House. Leonard Bernstein and Chicago businessman Marshall Field were among the dinner guests. Late in the evening, the president offered a formal toast, mentioning that Mrs. Kennedy had once written an essay about Sergei Diaghilev, whose Ballet Russes had staged Stravinsky’s early ballet classics, and joking about the “rocks and tomatoes” that were showered on Stravinsky at the premiere of The Rite of Spring. Later still, when table talk turned to politics, Vera was relieved her husband never asked, as she feared he might, to have his taxes reduced. (The Stravinskys had settled in Los Angeles.) After cognac and cigars, Kennedy asked the composer how he felt. “Quite drunk, thank you, Mr. President,” was the composer’s response. At the evening’s end, the Kennedys accompanied the Stravinskys to the door, disarming them with the ease and charm of their conversation while they waited together for the chauffeur. “Nice kids,” Stravinsky said to his wife in the car home.

In March, Auden delivered a short poem in four stanzas (each one a haiku, seventeen syllables in length), with what Stravinsky described as a “movable verse, repeatable anywhere as a refrain”—“When a just man dies, / Lamentation and praise, / Sorrow and joy, are one”—which he decided to place both at the beginning and the end of his little piece. Stravinsky set the text straightaway as a single line for medium voice before he composed a note of the accompaniment for three clarinets. The little score is a marvel of late-Stravinskian economy and beauty—a taut thirty-seven spare measures, with a thirty-eighth measure of silence pointedly written in at the end.

For a more detailed account of the events in Chicago on and around November 22, 1963, please visit the Rosenthal Archives’s blog at csoarchives.wordpress.com. Written by CSO archivist Frank Villella, the blog includes frequent posts about the Orchestra’s history, events at Orchestra Hall, and materials in the Archives’s collection.
ELEGY FOR J. F. K.
(November 22nd, 1963)

Why then, why there,
Why thus, we cry, did he die?
The heavens are silent.

What he was, he was:
What he is fated to become
Depends on us.

Remembering his death,
How we choose to live
Will decide its meaning.

When a just man dies,
Lamentation and praise,
Sorrow and joy, are one.

—W.H. Auden
Gustav Mahler
Born July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia.
Died May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 9 in D Major

Because this symphony is Mahler’s last completed work, and because he died tragically of heart disease at the age of fifty shortly after finishing it, leaving behind his beautiful wife Alma and young daughter Anna, it’s often considered both his farewell and his most deeply personal score. Bruno Walter, who conducted the premiere thirteen months after Mahler’s death, said that he recognized the composer’s own gait in the limping rhythm of the march at the climax of the first movement. Decades later, Leonard Bernstein suggested that the symphony’s opening—with its hesitant, faltering rhythm in the cellos—was Mahler’s erratic heartbeat.

Few composers’ works invite autobiographical interpretation as readily as Mahler’s. This is a particular distinction—and also a curse—of music as expressive as Mahler’s Ninth Symphony. Certainly Mahler’s own personal turmoil and spiritual uncertainty at the time he wrote this symphony account for its searching, fearlessly introspective nature, and he didn’t discourage others from reading it this way. “In it something is said that I have had on the tip of my tongue for some time,” he wrote to Walter in 1909.

In 1907, two years before he began this symphony, Mahler’s world had been turned upside down. On March 17, he resigned as artistic director of the Vienna Court Opera after ten years at the job, capitulating to friction with the administration and rising anti-Semitism in the press. (His career didn’t falter, however: in June, he signed a contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where he would make his debut conducting Tristan and Isolde on New Year’s Day 1908.) On July 5, after Mahler had taken his family to Maiernigg (where he could write in peace) for the summer, his four-year-old daughter Maria died of scarlet fever. A few days later, the family physician diagnosed the heart disease that would kill the composer himself in less than four years.

Mahler refused to return to Maiernigg the next summer, so his wife Alma found them a house in Toblach, in the Dolomites—a big farmhouse with eleven rooms, two verandas, and two bathrooms, “admittedly somewhat primitive, but in a splendid situation,” as she put it, referring to its sweeping mountain view. There, over the course of the next three summers, Mahler completed his last works—Das Lied von der Erde and the Ninth Symphony—and began the tenth symphony which was left unfinished when his heart finally gave out.

Mahler’s Ninth Symphony is neither his ninth (that most fateful of symphonic numbers) nor his final symphony. He had gone out of his way to

COMPOSED
1909–April 1, 1910

FIRST PERFORMANCE
June 26, 1912, Vienna. Bruno Walter conducting

FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES
April 6 & 7, 1950, Orchestra Hall.
George Szell conducting

MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES
June 2, 3, 4 & 5, 2011, Orchestra Hall.
Bernard Haitink conducting

INSTRUMENTATION
four flutes and piccolo, four oboes and english horn, three clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, four bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, triangle, glockenspiel, chimes, two harps, strings

APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME
87 minutes

CSO RECORDINGS
Deutsche Grammophon
London
Deutsche Grammophon
sidestep the issue of writing nine symphonies, knowing that neither Beethoven nor Bruckner got farther than that, by calling Das Lied von der Erde (which followed his Eighth Symphony) “a symphony for contralto, tenor, and orchestra,” without giving it a number. And only a few days after completing his next symphony, which he openly—and perhaps defiantly—called his Ninth, Mahler plunged into a tenth, as if to make certain he had fooled the gods of superstition. But they, of course, had the last laugh.

All three of these works—the last of his eleven symphonic creations—were written while Mahler was obsessed with the idea of death, and in various ways they all reveal how deeply he was shaken by its immediacy. But Mahler didn’t give in without a fight—even though his doctors tried to restrict his diet and warned him to cut out the swimming, cycling, and hiking he so enjoyed. His last four years, packed with conducting engagements, intense spurts of composition, and personal affairs (a meeting with Sibelius in 1907; posing for Rodin in 1909; and a single, dreaded, often-postponed session with Freud in 1910) hardly reflect the routine of an invalid.

While Mahler was sketching his Ninth Symphony in 1909, he wrote to Alma:

The “works” of this person or that . . . are the ephemeral and mortal part of him; but what a man makes of himself—what he becomes through the untiring effort to live and to be—is permanent. . . . What we leave behind us is only the husk, the shell. The Meistersinger, the Ninth, Faust—all of them are only the discarded husk!

Unlike Wagner, Beethoven, or Goethe, Mahler couldn’t trust that what he left behind would ever be understood or valued. He died without knowing the kind of acceptance and admiration that even Beethoven often enjoyed. Although the Eighth Symphony was warmly received at its premiere in September 1910 (shortly after Mahler completed the Ninth), it was his only real triumph as a composer during his lifetime; nothing else in his public career suggested that he would be remembered (except, perhaps, as a conductor), and that his Ninth would one day be accepted into the company of those by Beethoven and Bruckner.

When Alban Berg—another composer whose life also would be tragically cut short—played through the score of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony, he wrote to his wife Helene:

The first movement is the most glorious he ever wrote. It expresses love of this earth, for Nature; the longing to live on it in peace, to enjoy it completely, to the very heart of one’s being, before death comes, as irresistibly it does.

The Ninth Symphony is the fourth of Mahler’s essays in “conventional” four-movement form, but it breaks with tradition at once: it’s the first important symphony since Haydn to begin with a slow movement. (Several, including Mahler’s own third, have slow finales.) But this is a new kind of slow movement, one that in its urgency, power, complexity of material, and dramatic scheme—nearly all its characteristics except its tempo—behaves like a symphonic first movement. (It also includes much music that isn’t slow—allegro appears atop several passages, but the predominant speed remains andante comodo—comfortable, easy.)

“The whole movement,” Berg wrote, “is based on a premonition of death which constantly recurs. . . . That is why the tenderest passages are followed by tremendous climaxes like new eruptions of a volcano.” In fact, the entire movement appears to be organized around these recurring crescendos—each, until the final one, larger and more disruptive than the last. (The devastating, penultimate climax is marked “Mit höchster Gewalt”—with the greatest force.) In this music, Mahler retells his own private nightmare—with
its successive waves of ominous premonitions—in purely musical terms.

It’s simple enough to tell what was on Mahler’s mind when he wrote this movement—the main theme resembles the motto of Beethoven’s *Farewell* piano sonata; at one point, he sneers at a waltz by Johann Strauss, Jr. called *Enjoy Life*—but the personal details have nothing to do with the force of the music. (The late Lewis Thomas, in his best-selling book of essays, *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler’s Ninth Symphony*, wasn’t reminded of Mahler’s concerns; instead, he saw the end of humanity and envisioned a world in which thermonuclear bombs have begun to explode.)

In the following scherzo, Mahler draws on both the minuet and its historical forerunner, the ländler, to coin a kind of music that’s far more complex, worldly, and pointed than either. Deryck Cooke mentions that this movement sounds simple and cheerful when played on the piano, and that the hollowness and bitter, ironic flavor originate in its fantastical scoring. (The ending, with brief, whispered asides for various winds, a solo viola, and finally the piccolo, is a marvel of brilliant color.) There are two episodes (they would be called trios in a more conventional context) in different tempos—the first a vulgar sounding waltz; the second slow, gentle, almost sentimental.

The third movement is another new kind of character piece; Mahler calls it a rondò-burleske and wants it played “very defiantly.” From the opening measures, which present several concise motives in a flash, this is dense, concentrated, tightly organized, and richly orchestrated music. Mahler inscribed the manuscript “to my brothers in Apollo,” and he addresses the leader of the muses with a virtuosic, elaborate, and almost savage display of counterpoint. Near the end is one magnificent passage of sudden serenity—particularly stunning in this context—crowned by a noble trumpet melody (itself a transformation of one of the movement’s more raucous tunes).

The slow finale, a grave and spacious adagio to balance the opening Andante, is a great hymn, begun by the full string choir. The writing is austere and extraordinarily beautiful; at one point a shining violin theme floats over a countermelody, very low in the basses, with nothing but octaves of silence between. Eventually a broad chorale for the full orchestra unfolds, swells, and then recedes into a passage of pastoral calm and great clarity over a strumming harp before rising to a final climax.

The end is as much about silence, stillness, and waiting as about the notes themselves. The first violins sing a phrase from the *Kindertotenlieder*, the songs of grief on children’s deaths that Mahler, to his eventual horror, wrote shortly before the death of his own daughter Maria. In the last two dozen measures, very slow and *ppp*—one of the emptiest and most moving pages ever written—the music gradually, peacefully, and resolutely slips away.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.