

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Gustav Mahler

Born July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia.

Died May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 9 in D Major

Mahler began his ninth symphony in the spring of 1909 and on April 1, 1910, he told the conductor Bruno Walter that the score was complete. Walter conducted the first performance with the Vienna Philharmonic on June 26, 1912. The score calls for 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, and strings. Performance time is approximately eighty-one minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Mahler's Ninth Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on April 6 and 7, 1950, with George Szell conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on November 30, December 1, 2, and 5, 1995, with Pierre Boulez conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on August 11, 1979, with Lawrence Foster conducting, and most recently on June 28, 1991, with James Levine conducting.

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 that 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 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* (The song of the earth) 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 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 rondo-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.

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