

Symphony No. 9 in D major

GUSTAV MAHLER

B. July 7, 1860, Iglau, Bohemia
D. May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria

First performed at the Vienna Festival by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Bruno Walter on June 26, 1912.

Scored for piccolo, four flutes, four oboes, one doubling the English horn, four clarinets one doubling on E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, four bassoons, one doubling on contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, chimes, cymbals, glockenspiel, large bells, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle, two harps and strings (approx. 87 minutes).

“Gustav Mahler was a saint,” said Arnold Schoenberg at the 1912 memorial address honoring the revered composer and conductor who had died the year before at age 50. In 1911, Schoenberg dedicated his important treatise on harmony, *Harmonielehre*, to the memory of Mahler. One might add another epitaph: prophet. For many, Mahler's music prophesized not only aspects of his own life, but also future developments in music of the twentieth century.

These impressions of Mahler have shaped our understanding of his life and music. Indeed, Mahler's music enjoyed limited success during his own lifetime, and though championed by several prominent composers of the early twentieth century, it was not until the “Mahler Mania” of the 1960s that his compositions garnered popular and critical acclaim, especially in America. Thanks in large part to conductor Leonard Bernstein, who both preached Mahler's prophetic qualities and recorded seminal interpretations of his music, Mahler became one of the most frequently performed symphonic composers. As one scholar puts it, “Bernstein redrew the map with Mahler at dead center, a paradigm shift that has affected our sense of music ever since. Mahler at the center, rather than at the margins, has changed the way every orchestra plans its seasons and the way historians view the 20th century.” Mahler's emerging historical role as a mediator between the Germanic musical tradition and early 20th-century modernism led to his symphonies acquiring canonic status.

Mahler's final compositional trilogy comprised of *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) and the Ninth and Tenth symphonies, explores similar musical and philosophical issues. The connections between these three works and their date of composition have made it all too tempting to view them as pointing toward death a “farewell” trilogy or the final testament of a dying man. Mahler had, after all, suffered serious personal blows in 1907, two years before he composed the Ninth Symphony: his beloved elder daughter, Maria, died at the age of 4; he resigned an untenable position at the Vienna Court Opera; and he was diagnosed with a serious heart condition. By 1910, his marriage to Alma, who would soon begin an affair with Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius, was deteriorating, and within a year Mahler would be dead.

Mahler was also keenly aware of the “curse of the ninth,” a superstition linking the completion of a ninth symphonic work to a composer’s imminent death. In what is most likely a reference to Beethoven and Bruckner, Mahler wrote, “It seems that the Ninth is the limit. He who wants to go beyond it must pass away. It seems as if something might be imparted to us in the Tenth for which we are not yet ready. Those who have written a Ninth have stood too near to the hereafter.” But for Mahler, the expansiveness of *Das Lied von der Erde* effectively made it his ninth symphony. When he did finally begin work on his Tenth Symphony, he concluded, “Now the danger is past.”

Mahler provided few clues concerning the meaning of his late works. Most revealing are comments scribbled on compositional sketches or manuscripts, such as those that appear in connection with the first movement of the Ninth Symphony – “O Youth! Lost! O Love! Vanished!” and in the finale – “O Beauty, O Love, Farewell, Farewell.” Indeed, Mahler’s opinions about divulging “extra-musical” or programmatic insights into his music changed over time. His early symphonies, from the so-called Wunderhorn years, initially carried descriptive titles and detailed programs that Mahler later withdrew while his later symphonies bore no such information. Nonetheless, musicians, critics, and listeners alike have long connected the Ninth Symphony with ideas surrounding death, perhaps in part because of the slow, mournful movement with which the piece ends.

As Leonard Bernstein famously noted, “The Ninth is the ultimate farewell... the closest we have ever come, in any work of art, to experiencing the very act of dying, of giving it all up.”

Quite aside from such notions, Mahler’s Ninth Symphony powerfully reflects the philosophies and aesthetics of the composer and his time through a mature musical language. The first movement is ripe with romantic nostalgia. Rooted in D major, this movement seems to pick up harmonically and thematically where Mahler’s monumental *Das Lied von der Erde* left off. The opening rhythm, presented by cellos and a horn repeatedly intoning the same pitch, returns during crucial structural moments in the movement, including its climax. This rhythm has been likened to the irregular beating of a diseased heart and, thus, to Mahler’s own heart condition. A new theme gradually emerges in the second violins; accumulating momentum through a series of fragments played by strings, harp, clarinets and stopped horns. The organic growth of the themes marks one of Mahler’s greatest compositional achievements. This music is rich with allusions and quotations, not just from Mahler’s own music, but also from other compositions, including Beethoven’s “Les Adieux” (“Farewell”) Sonata for piano.

The second movement, presented in the tempo and character of a relaxed Ländler or Austrian folk dance, begins with a deliberate, jocular theme. Soon, however, it takes on the flavor of a dance of death with angular leaps, unexpected tempo changes and complex textural combinations. The ensuing Rondo-Burleske offers a wide range of moods and ideas, including popular and folk-like musical gestures. Fugal techniques mix with marches and grotesque angry passages with more tender moments. This movement also displays Mahler’s lifelong interest in counterpoint, taking his studies of Bach to new heights.

The final Adagio opens with a hymn-like unison theme in the violin, recalling the lush musical language of both Bruckner and Wagner. The movement gradually

disintegrates, seemingly resisting death and foregoing traditional bombast for reserved acquiescence. Mahler makes one final self-allusion, played by the first violins, to his *Kindertotenlieder*. The music continues to evaporate, dying away until only the performers' breath remains.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra first performed Mahler's Symphony No. 9 on Dec. 24, 1969, with Alexander Gibson conducting. The DSO last performed the piece on May 27, 2000, with Neeme Järvi conducting.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Mahler, Symphony No. 9, Claudio Abbado conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Deutsche Grammophon 471624.

Program note by Michael Mauskopf, doctoral student in historical musicology at the University of Michigan, School of Music, Theatre & Dance.