

Symphony No. 9

Gustav Mahler

Throughout his career Gustav Mahler balanced the competing demands of his dual vocation as a composer and conductor. Responsibilities on the podium and in the administrative office completely occupied him during the concert season, thereby forcing him to relegate his composing to the summer months, which he would spend as a near-hermit at some idyllic spot in the countryside.

Mahler wrote his Ninth Symphony mostly during the summer of 1909 at Alt-Schluderbach near Toblach, an Italian community in South Tyrol, on the border with Austria in the Dolomite Alps. He had constructed a composition studio set at the edge of a spruce forest, not far from the home that he and his wife, Alma, rented; a fence topped with barbed wire ensured that nobody would interrupt him while he worked, which he did beginning at six o'clock every morning. Gustav and Alma had already spent the summer of 1908 there, where he recharged himself after an extended visit to conduct various works at The Metropolitan Opera in New York. He was back in New York for the 1908

season, conducting the New York Symphony as well as at The Met; near the end of the season he also led the New York Philharmonic, which he had agreed to take over as Music Director beginning in the fall of 1909. The composition of the Ninth Symphony therefore coincided with the beginning of his New York Philharmonic years, which were regrettably brief,

ending after only two seasons, with his death in May 1911 in Vienna.

On April 1, 1910, Mahler wrote to his amanuensis, the conductor Bruno Walter, to report that he had completed his Ninth Symphony. "In it," he declared, "something is said that I have had on the tip of my tongue for some time; perhaps (as a whole) it comes closest to the 4th. (But it is completely different.)" Indeed, this heartrending revelation of Mahler's soul is "completely different" from the often dreamlike expanses of his fairy-tale Fourth (which preceded the Ninth by a decade). Nevertheless, the two do share a sense of conveying something about the transience of life — perhaps somewhat fancifully in the Fourth, certainly with unrestrained emotion and sentiment in the Ninth.

Mahler was pushing himself to his limit through his overbooked calendar of conducting commitments, not to mention the physical and intellectual drain of his composing, and he was doing so against doctors' orders. The year 1907 had been a cruel one for Mahler: in addition to his break from the musical life of Vienna, where he had been based for years, he had lost his eldest daughter to scarlet fever; then, that summer, he had

In Short

Born: July 7, 1860, in Kalischt (Kalište), Bohemia, near the town of Humpolec

Died: May 18, 1911, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: sketches begun in summer 1908, mostly composed late spring 1909 through April 1, 1910

World premiere: June 26, 1912, by the Vienna Philharmonic, Bruno Walter, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 20, 1945, Bruno Walter, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: June 13, 2008, Lorin Maazel, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 79 minutes

learned that he was suffering from heart disease (a valvular defect) that, while not likely to prove immediately fatal, was potentially dangerous and could well shorten his life. An outdoor enthusiast, he was forced to curtail his physical activities drastically.

Against such a background, the composition of a ninth symphony also held other troubling prospects. Beethoven, Schubert, Bruckner, and Dvořák had all brought their symphonic cycles to completion with their Ninth Symphonies. To Mahler, whose mind-set had recently developed a superstitious streak, the very idea of a ninth symphony summoned up thoughts of mortality. On the other hand, pretty much everything summoned up thoughts of his own mortality, but he was not yet ready to give in to fate. When he completed his Ninth Symphony he was still three months short of his 50th birthday, and upon finishing it he promptly plunged into the composition of yet another symphony.

Sadly, Mahler's Tenth would remain an incomplete torso, leaving his Ninth to stand as

a poignant swan song. The idea of this work as a sort of leave-taking seems reinforced by its musical content; its principal theme is derived from Beethoven's *Farewell (Les Adieux)* Piano Sonata, and the symphony – particularly its opening and concluding movements, both of which are slow – is filled with intimations of yearning, nostalgia, regret, despair, isolation, resignation, and even personal solace.

Instrumentation: four flutes and piccolo, three oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets and E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, four bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani (two pairs), cymbals, snare drum, bass drum, tam-tam, triangle, orchestra bells, low-pitched chimes, two harps, and strings. Mahler's autograph uses a single harp, but Bruno Walter divided the part between two instruments, an arrangement that is used in these performances.

The End of an Era



Mahler's Ninth Symphony not only brings to a conclusion his completed orchestral oeuvre, but it also represents a final achievement in the mainstream symphonic tradition that had been developing for more than a century and a half. Bruno Walter wrote of "the prophetic significance" of the work:

Here Mahler stands once more upon the mysterious threshold beyond which lies a new unexplored province of the realm of music. Mahler's "quotation" themes appear as ghostly symbols, reduced to bare outlines; the texture is thinned out, much as in some passages of the latest Beethoven; the independent melodic lines are projected bluntly against a vast empty horizon and clash with each other in harsh, portentous friction. This is not only Mahler's last symphony: the symphonic form as such is torn apart after having been tried to the limit.

Gustav Mahler (left) and Bruno Walter