

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator

## Symphony No. 3 in D minor

### Gustav Mahler

Gustav Mahler once wrote to a music critic who was trying to understand his Third Symphony:

I find it quite strange that people talking about nature only make mention of flowers, birds, and fresh air. But nobody seems to know Pan, the god Dionysos. Nature is able to show all those phenomena, both pleasant and horrible, and I wanted to put these things in a kind of evolutionary development in my work.

Mahler's Third Symphony is indeed a towering monument to nature, but it is not so entirely reassuring a work as its subject might lead one to expect. Nonetheless, this longest of Mahler's symphonies is one of his most approachable, most relaxed, and least haunted by nightmares and apocalyptic visions.

Because responsibilities on the podium completely occupied him during concert seasons, Mahler largely relegated his composing to the summer months, which he invariably spent as a near hermit at one bucolic site or another in the Austrian

countryside. When he came to write his Third Symphony, during the summers of 1895 and 1896, he was escaping the concert-season rigors connected to his directorship of the orchestra and opera in Hamburg. He had assumed that post in 1891, following a peripatetic career that had already led him through increasingly prestigious music directorships at Bad Hall (his first professional appointment, which he obtained in 1880), Ljubljana, Olomouc, Kassel, Prague, Leipzig, and Budapest.

Mahler's preferred summer retreat at that time was the village of Steinbach on the Attersee. Initially this symphony was to be called *The Happy Life, a Summer Night's Dream* (not after Shakespeare ... reviewer's notes), and each of its six movements was to carry an individual title: "What the Forest Tells Me," "What the Twilight Tells Me," "What

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### In Short

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

**Died:** May 18, 1911, in Vienna

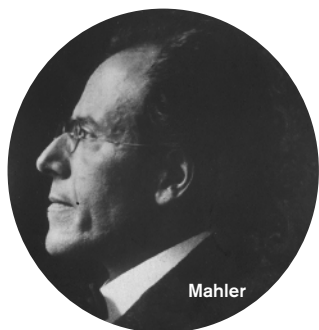
**Work composed:** the summers of 1895 and 1896, at Steinbach am Attersee, in Upper Austria, drawing on material from earlier songs; revised through 1906

**World premiere:** the complete symphony, June 9, 1902, in Krefeld, Germany, with contralto Luise Geller-Wolter, Mahler conducting the orchestra and choruses of the Festival of the Allgemeiner deutscher Musikverein; individual movements had already been performed in 1896 and 1897

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** February 28, 1922, Willem Mengelberg, conductor, Julia Clausson, contralto, with the St. Cecilia Club and the Boys' Choir of Father Finn's Paulist Choristers; this was the work's New York City premiere

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** June 19, 2004, Lorin Maazel, conductor, Anna Larsson, contralto, Women of the Westminster Symphonic Choir, and The American Boychoir

**Estimated duration:** ca. 98 minutes



## Does Music Tell a Story?

In the late 19th century the musical world was swept up in a heated aesthetic controversy about the relative merits of program music and absolute music – blatantly descriptive music versus music written more abstractly, strictly on its own terms. The absolute music camp included Brahms and Bruckner, while the program faction was making great strides through the symphonic poems by the young Richard Strauss.

Mahler was torn, and seemingly tried to straddle the divide. At heart, he doubtless felt more connected to the “absolutists”; on the other hand, program music was proving very popular in the concert hall. In 1902, in a letter to the critic Max Kalbeck, Mahler tried to clarify (or at least justify) his position:

Beginning with Beethoven, there is no modern music without its underlying program. – But no music is worth anything if first you have to tell the listener what experience lies behind it and what he is supposed to experience in it. And so, yet again, to hell with every program! You just have to bring your ears and a heart along and – not least – willingly surrender to the rhapsodist.

In his first two symphonies Mahler basically retrofitted descriptive programs to music he had already composed – essentially purveying his absolute music as program music – but then he balked and deleted the programs entirely. In the case of his Third Symphony, a program was part and parcel of the work all along; however, in the course of composition, as the symphony “found its shape,” Mahler amended his program considerably. In the end, he decided to withhold the program from his listeners.

Love Tells Me,” “What the Flowers of the Meadow Tell Me,” “What the Cuckoo Tells Me,” and “What the Child Tells Me.”

As Mahler worked on the symphony he revised his program and titles considerably. In 1896, just after completing the work, he enumerated the movements’ revised titles in a letter to his friend, the critic Max Marschall:

Part One:

“Pan Awakes. Summer Marches In.  
(Pan’s Procession)”

Part Two:

“What the Flowers of the Meadow  
Tell Me”

“What the Animals of the Forest  
Tell Me”

“What Man Tells Me”

“What the Angels Tell Me”

“What Love Tells Me”

The movements were separated into two uneven parts: the first movement (itself lasting just over a half hour, which is to say, a third of the symphony’s total running time) alone constituting the first part, and the remaining five movements, the second.

That’s how things stood until the piece was finally premiered in 1902, when Mahler suddenly decided to dispense with the programmatic titles along with most of the rather detailed programmatic markings he had previously placed within the course of the movements. Mahler wrote in a letter to the conductor Josef Krug-Waldsee:

Those titles were an attempt on my part to provide non-musicians with something to hold onto and with signposts for the intellectual or, better, the expressive content of the various movements and for their relationship to each other and to the whole. That it didn’t work (as, in fact, it never could work) and that it led only to misinterpreta-

tions of the most horrendous sort became painfully clear all too quickly. ... Those titles ... will surely say something to you *after* you know the score. You will draw intimations from them about how I imagined the steady intensification of feeling, from the indistinct, unyielding, elemental existences (of the forces of nature) to the tender formation of the human heart, which in turn points toward and reaches a region beyond itself (God).

This last comment goes to the heart of the Third Symphony perhaps more than any other, but one has trouble overcoming the lingering

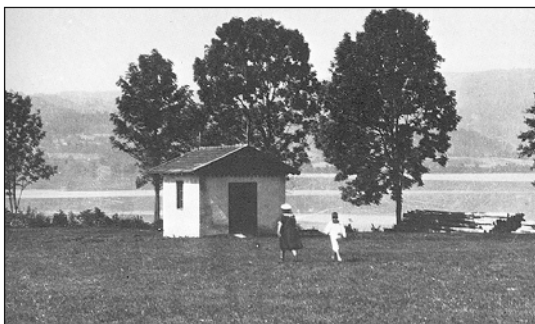
suspicion that the earlier titles in fact have a great deal to do with what this piece is about.

**Instrumentation:** four flutes (all doubling piccolo), four oboes (one doubling English horn), four clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet and one doubling bass clarinet) plus another E-flat clarinet, four bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), eight horns, four trumpets, post horn (offstage), four trombones, tuba, timpani (two players), orchestra bells, snare drum (plus two offstage), triangle, tambourine, bass drum with attached cymbal, suspended cymbals, tam-tam, rute, two harps, and strings, in addition to a mezzo-soprano soloist, women's chorus, and boys' chorus.

## Sources and Inspirations

Mahler wrote his Third Symphony during two summers in the bucolic Upper Austrian village of Steinbach on the Attersee. Many of the movers and shakers of the music industry were passing their summers at Bad Ischl, a dozen miles to the south, but not Mahler, who sought solitude. Apart from a couple of trips to Bad Ischl to visit Brahms, he spent the greater part of his time in Steinbach alone, in a cabin at the end of a field, near the shore of the lake itself.

The furnishings inside his "composing house" included a desk, a couple of chairs, a stove, and a baby grand piano. Mahler entered his composing house at seven in the morning and stayed there until at least mid-afternoon, sometimes on into the evening if his creative juices were really flowing. That Mahler's Third Symphony is to a great extent a reflection of the landscape in which it was created cannot be doubted. When Bruno Walter visited the composer at Steinbach in July 1896, Mahler, seeing the young conductor survey the jaw-dropping scenery, said to him, "You need not stand staring at that; I have already composed it all!"



Top: The Gasthof zum Höllengebirge, where Mahler spent his summers in the years 1893 to 1896

Bottom: Mahler's Schnusputzelhäuschen ("Composing House") at Steinbach am Attersee

# Texts and Translations

## Fourth Movement

O Mensch! Gib acht!  
Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?  
"Ich schlief, ich schlief — ,  
Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht: —  
Die Welt ist tief,  
Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.  
Tief ist ihr Weh — ,  
Lust — tiefer noch als Herzeleid;  
Weh spricht: Vergeh!  
Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit —  
— Will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!"  
— Friedrich Nietzsche

Oh, man, give heed!  
What does deep midnight say?  
I slept! I slept!  
From a deep dream have I awakened.  
The world is deep,  
And deeper than the day had thought!  
Deep is its pain!  
Joy deeper still than heartbreak!  
Pain speaks: Vanish!  
But all joy seeks eternity,  
Seeks deep, deep eternity!

## Fifth Movement

Es sangen drei Engel einen süßen Gesang,  
Mit Freuden es selig im Himmel klang;  
Sie jauchzten fröhlich auch dabei,

Dass Petrus sei von Sünden frei.

Und als der Herr Jesus zu Tische sass,  
Mit seinen zwölf Jüngern das Abendmal ass,  
Da sprach der Herr Jesus: "Was stehst du  
denn hier?  
Wenn ich dich anseh', so weinst du mir!"

"Und sollt' ich nicht weinen, du gütiger Gott!  
[Du sollst ja nicht weinen!]  
Ich hab' übertreten die zehn Gebot.

Ich gehe und weine ja bitterlich,  
[Du sollst ja nicht weinen!]  
Ach, komm und erbarme dich über mich!"

"Hast du denn übertreten die zehn Gebot,

So fall auf die Knie und bete zu Gott.  
Liebe nur Gott in alle Zeit!  
So wirst du erlangen die himmlische Freud'."

Die himmlische Freud' ist eine selige Stadt,  
Die himmlische Freud', die kein Ende mehr hat.  
Die himmlische Freude war Petro bereit't,  
Durch Jesum und Allen zur Seligkeit.

— from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*

Three angels were singing a sweet song:  
With joy it resounded blissfully in Heaven.  
At the same time they happily shouted  
with joy  
That Peter was absolved from sin.

For as Lord Jesus sat at table,  
Eating supper with his twelve apostles,  
So spoke Lord Jesus: "Why are you  
standing here?  
When I look upon you, you weep for me!"

"And how should I not weep, you kind God!  
[No, you mustn't weep!]  
I have trespassed against the Ten  
Commandments.

I go and weep, and bitterly.  
[No, you mustn't weep!]  
Ah, come and have mercy on me!"

"If you have trespassed against the Ten  
Commandments,  
Then fall on your knees and pray to God.  
Only love God forever,  
And you will attain heavenly joy."

Heavenly joy is a blessed city,  
Heavenly joy, that has no end.  
Heavenly joy was prepared for Peter  
By Jesus and for the salvation of all.