

Symphony No. 1 in D major

Gustav Mahler

Gustav Mahler was a famous conductor by the time he embarked on his First Symphony, having worked his way up through a quick succession of directorships with musical organizations in Ljubljana, Olomouc, Kassel, Prague, Leipzig, and Budapest. He arrived in Budapest in October 1888, assuming the directorship of the prestigious Royal Hungarian Opera, and it was in that city that he unveiled his Symphony No. 1. The premiere, in late 1889, came on the heels of personal tragedies: the death of Mahler's father in February and of both his younger sister, Leopoldine, and his mother in the autumn. This left the composer with the stress of serving as head of his remaining family while balancing the substantial musical and political challenges of his professional life.

One wishes that the unveiling of his symphony could have come as a triumphant exclamation point, bringing such a difficult phase to an end. Unfortunately, the premiere was entirely unsuccessful and the politics of Budapest continued to wear Mahler down until he finally submitted his resignation (in March 1891) and moved to Hamburg. He would later say that the disastrous reception of his First Symphony prevented his being accepted as a composer for the rest of his career — probably an overstatement, but containing a grain of truth nonetheless. “My friends

bashfully avoided me afterward,” Mahler told his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner. “Nobody dared talk to me about the performance and my work, and I went around like a sick person or an outcast.”

The work played on that occasion in 1889 was rather different from the Symphony No. 1 as it is normally heard today. It was not even presented as a symphony; instead, the program identified it as a five-movement “Symphonic Poem in Two Sections,” and it included, as its second section, an *Andante* Mahler referred to as *Blumine* (*Bouquet of Flowers*). In a newspaper article that ran the day before the premiere Mahler laid out a descriptive program for the piece in which the five movements were said to depict spring, happy daydreams, a wedding procession, a funeral march to accompany the burial of a poet's illusions, and an advance toward spiritual victory.

Stung by the vehemence with which much of the audience rejected the work, Mahler set his score aside for three years. In 1893 he undertook severe revisions, particularly in matters of orchestration. “On the whole,”

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 1884, drawing substantially on melodies written some years earlier; most of the composition took place in February–March 1888, with revisions continuing until 1906

World premiere: November 20, 1889, Mahler conducting the Budapest Philharmonic, in Budapest, Hungary

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 16, 1909, the composer conducting; this was the work's U.S. premiere

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: April 17, 2009, Jaap van Zweden, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 52 minutes

Mahler wrote to Richard Strauss the following May, "everything has become more slender and transparent." He knew this from concert hall experience, since he had conducted the new "Hamburg version" on October 27, 1893, with considerably more

success than Budapest had allowed. Strauss slated it for a music festival he was programming and arranged for Mahler to travel to Weimar to conduct the new symphony in June 1894. This time the reception was sharply divided. Mahler wrote to a friend:

What's in a Name?

One frequently hears Mahler's *Symphony No. 1* referred to as the *Titan* Symphony, almost always incorrectly. Mahler did attach that subtitle to the version that he introduced in Hamburg in 1893, but conflicting opinions reign over the significance of this designation. Some claim that it reflected his admiration for a novel of that name by the Romantic author Jean Paul, while others insist that Mahler was in search of a title that might predispose the Hamburg audience toward the piece's grander elements. Natalie Bauer-Lechner reported that Mahler did not intend for his symphony to be connected in this way with Jean Paul, much though he admired that writer. "What he had in mind," she wrote, "was simply a strong, heroic person, living and suffering, struggling with and succumbing to destiny, for which the true higher resolution is not given until the Second [Symphony]."

Mahler would attach different titles and descriptions to the work's movements as it underwent further emendation, but when the piece was published, in 1898, the composer excised them all, as well as the subtitle *Titan*. Unless we are specifically referring to the "Hamburg" version (which perforce includes the usually unplayed *Blumine* movement), we would do well to avoid referring to this as the *Titan* Symphony.



Programme

• SCHUBERT. Symphony in B minor (unfinished)

• BEETHOVEN. Overture "Coriolan"

• MAHLER. Symphony No. 1, in D major

As the first composer to be principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic (1909-11), Gustav Mahler conducted the U.S. premiere of his own First Symphony at Carnegie Hall.

The Philharmonic Society
of New York

1909.. SIXTY-EIGHTH SEASON ...1910

Gustav Mahler . . . Conductor

DECEMBER 16, AT 8:15 P. M.
DECEMBER 17, AT 2:30 P. M.

Third Thursday Evening and
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FIRST SERIES AT CARNEGIE HALL

My symphony was received with furious opposition by some and with wholehearted approval by others. The opinions clashed in an amusing way, in the streets and in the salons.

Mahler kept on revising. He attached further programmatic descriptions to the movements and then discarded them. When the piece was published, in 1898, the composer left only the words “Like the Sound of Nature” at the head of the score. He also eliminated the *Blumine* movement – so effectively that it remained unpublished for seven decades. In the end, all of Mahler’s travail concerning the symphony’s program can be read as a reflection of the aesthetic gulf that separated proponents of “program music” and “absolute

music” at that time. Mahler seems to have hoped to gain the sympathies of the “program” faction while in his heart he was himself an “absolutist.” Try though he might to justify his music by attaching extra-musical description to it, Mahler fails to convince us that his symphony’s content is really motivated by anything other than itself.

Instrumentation: four flutes (three doubling piccolo), four oboes (one doubling English horn), four clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet, two doubling E-flat clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), seven horns, five trumpets, four trombones, bass tuba, timpani (two players), bass drum, cymbals, triangle, harp, and strings.

Listen for ... a Familiar Tune

Mahler’s *First Symphony* is full of quotations, sometimes from his own prior compositions (especially from his *Songs of a Wayfarer* of 1884), sometimes from other sources. What were audiences to make of Mahler’s use of the innocent children’s tune “Frère Jacques” or, as it is known by German speakers, “Brüder Martin” – transposed to the minor mode and set in the orchestra’s deepest register, as a double-bass solo – as the basis for his spooky, slow third movement?

Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen.

Solo bass
mit Dämpfer



Here we find Mahler, early in his career as a symphonist, already reveling in the brilliant details of orchestration that make his work unique, harnessing unanticipated combinations of instruments to play the repetitions of the tune. Here, too, is Mahler as collage-composer, introducing in quick succession – sometimes even superimposing – music of widely divergent character, as when a klezmer band (or a Hungarian *czardas* ensemble, some say) wanders within earshot of the supposed funeral procession; or when, at the outset of the central section, the macabre “Frère Jacques” march yields to the most tender music imaginable (a reminiscence of the song “Die zwei blauen Augen,” from *Songs of a Wayfarer*), which is itself quickly clouded by ominous harmonies.