



Mahler's New York

Learning @ Home

MAHLER Symphony No. 3 (1893–96)

For this lesson you'll need:

- Headphones or a speaker
- Space to move

Optional items:

- Something to write on
- Household items, like fabric or a soft toy

Music often makes you want to move, even if it wasn't composed for dancing. In this lesson you will learn about Gustav Mahler's Third Symphony and discover the choreography of John Neumeier. You'll then be challenged to create your own moves to Mahler's Third Symphony. Remember: all [blue text](#) is a hyperlink; click on it for more information.

Who was Gustav Mahler?

Austrian composer [Gustav Mahler](#) (1860–1911) wrote ten symphonies, many songs, and several orchestral cycles for which he is celebrated today. A great deal of his work was inspired by his fascination with and love for the natural world. Mahler said: "A symphony should be like the world; it should contain everything."

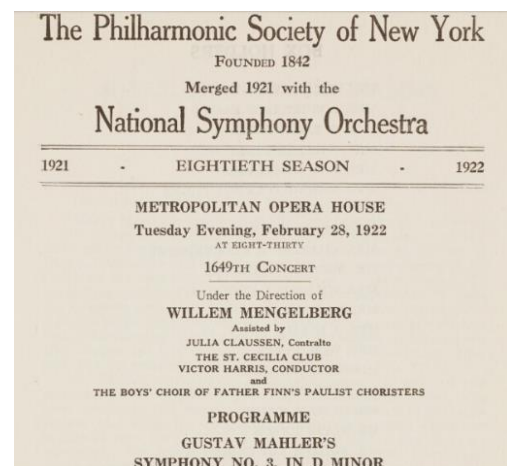
Mahler composed many of his symphonies during summers he spent in a secluded little hut that he had built in the Austrian countryside. There he was able to escape his hectic city life and find the undisturbed quiet he needed to compose. His hut was located at the edge of a meadow, near the shore of a lake because he found it easier to compose when he could hear the water. The view out the window faced the lake and mountains behind it. Mahler followed a regular, and disciplined, routine. He began composing in his hut at 6:30 each morning, and after lunch he'd take a long walk, stopping to jot down ideas in a notebook.

You can find more information about Mahler and his life in [Learning @ Home: MAHLER Symphony No. 1.](#)



Fun facts about Mahler's Symphony No. 3

- 1. Mahler's Third Symphony is the longest symphony in the standard orchestral repertoire.** From beginning to end, it can last about 100 minutes. That's as long as a feature-length movie!
- 2. Mahler took three years to complete it,** from 1893 to 1896.
- 3. The entire symphony is inspired by nature.** It was initially titled *A Summer Morning's Dream* and in early drafts of programs, each of the six [movements](#) was labeled with a theme, as follows:
 1. "Pan Awakens, Summer Marches In" (Bacchus Procession)
 2. "What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me" (Minuet)
 3. "What the Animals in the Forest Tell Me." (Rondo)
 4. "What Humankind Tells Me" (Alto solo)
 5. "What the Angels Tell Me" (Women and boys' choirs with solo alto)
 6. "What Love Tells Me" (Adagio)
- 4. The Third Symphony uses a very large orchestra, plus two choirs: 120 to 140 musicians share the stage. Do you know all of the instruments on this list?** 4 flutes, 4 piccolos, 4 oboes, 1 English horn, 3 clarinets, 1 bass clarinet, 2 E-flat clarinets, 4 bassoons, 1 contrabassoon, 8 horns, 4 trumpets, post horn or flugelhorn, 4 trombones, 1 tuba, 6 timpani, 2 orchestra bells, tambourine, tam-tam, triangle, suspended cymbals, side drum, bass drum with cymbal, 4-6 tuned bells, 2 harps, violins, violas, cellos, basses, alto solo voice, women's choir, and boys' choir
- 5. The boys' choir, women's chorus, and solo voice** only sing in the fifth movement.
- 6. Some musicians and singers perform offstage so they are unseen and sound far away!** The specific offstage instruments are snare drums (in the first movement) and [flugelhorn](#) or [post horn](#) (in the third movement).
- 7. The [post horn](#) solo uses a signal that late 1800s European audiences would recognize as the postal workers' signal for mail delivery.**
- 8. In addition to nature, this symphony incorporates mythology, modern philosophy, and folk tunes from Mahler's youth.** It also responds to the tragic loss of several of his 14 siblings and was written during a time of hostility toward Jewish people like Mahler.
- 9. The New York Philharmonic, conducted by Willem Mengelberg, gave the New York Premiere of this symphony in 1922.** Even though Mahler was the Philharmonic's Music Director, 1909-11, he never got to conduct his Third Symphony in New York.



Shall we dance?

Mahler's music is very visual and descriptive. Although he didn't compose his music for the purpose of dancing, Mahler's compositions have inspired the American [choreographer](#) John Neumeier. Neumeier felt that Mahler's music made him want to move and create visual pictures with human bodies. In 1975 Neumeier and the Hamburg Ballet of Germany presented a nearly two-hour dance performance set to the music of Mahler's Third Symphony. The performance was a great success and the ballet has since been performed all over the world.



[John Neumeier](#)

Visit the link below to see what John Neumeier choreographed:
[Neumeier's ballet set to Gustav Mahler's Third Symphony](#)

Now it's your turn!

Listen to the following excerpts from Mahler's Third Symphony. Can you create moves for them?

The Third Symphony begins with all of the horns playing a powerful [melody](#). Follow the melody of the horns and create moves that match what you hear.

[Excerpt 1](#)

Listen to the same excerpt again. Do you notice when the rest of the orchestra enters? Ask someone with you to perform the part of the orchestra. If you don't have a dance partner, maybe you can use one half of your body to perform the horn part and the other half to move along with the rest of the orchestra. You can even try performing both parts with your hands and pretend to have a conversation.

The next excerpt from the first movement features a famous trombone [solo](#). See if you can follow the solo: it's as if the trombone is telling a story to the rest of the orchestra. How might a ballet dancer move to this solo? What about a K-pop or hip-hop dancer?

[Excerpt 2](#)

Mahler originally called this next excerpt, from the fifth movement, "What the Angels Tell Me." He uses two choirs, one of boys and another of women, to sing a melody that seems to dance and play with the orchestra.

[Excerpt 3](#)

Can you create a dance using only your arms that follows the melody of the choirs? Could you choreograph movements for some items in your home — a piece of fabric, scarf, or soft toy — to follow the melody of the voices and the orchestra?

Moving to music is a great way to experience it, especially when you are listening at home. Below is a link to Mahler's full Third Symphony by the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Pierre Boulez. Like John Neumeier, find melodies or [textures](#) that make you want to move and create your own dances.

[MAHLER](#) [Symphony No. 3](#)

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| Part One | 1. Forcefully. Decisively. |
| Part Two | 2. Tempo di minuetto. Moderately. |
| | 3. Comodo. Scherzando. Unhurriedly. |
| | 4. Very slow. Misterioso. <i>Pianississimo</i> throughout. (“O Mensch! Gib acht!” from Nietzsche’s <i>Also sprach Zarathustra</i>) |
| | 5. Joyous in tempo and jaunty in expression. (“Bimm bamm” — “Es sungen drei Engel,” from <i>Des Knaben Wunderhorn</i>) |
| | 6. Slow. Calm. Deeply felt. |

New York Philharmonic; Pierre Boulez, conductor

Yvonne Minton, mezzo-soprano

Camerata Singers, Boys’ Choir from The Little Church Around the Corner, Trinity

Boys’ Choir, Brooklyn Boys’ Choir

Share with us!

We’d love to see some of the moves Mahler’s Third Symphony inspires you to create. Tag your videos on social media with **#mahlerny** so we can all see it. Or send it to education@nyphil.org.