MAHLER Symphony No. 5 (1901–02)

For this lesson you’ll need:
- Headphones or a speaker
- Your imagination
- Something to write on (optional)

When you’ve watched a movie, have you ever wondered how the film crew found the perfect location to shoot their scenes? In this lesson, we’ll learn about Gustav Mahler’s Fifth Symphony by exploring what a location scout does, and taking a tour of New York City when Mahler and his wife, Alma, lived there. We’ll challenge you to think like a location scout by matching music to locations. Remember: all blue text is a hyperlink; click on it for more information.

Gustav Mahler and his Fifth Symphony

Today, Austrian composer Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) is best known for the ten symphonies he composed between 1886 and 1911. Writing mostly during summers, while on break from his job as Music Director at the Vienna Staatsoper, Mahler found inspiration all around him. He composed his Fifth Symphony between 1901 and 1902, working in a composing cottage on Lake Wörthersee in Austria. The Fifth Symphony, like many of his other works, refers to folk melodies and popular dance music of his time. He begins the long and emotional composition with a trumpet solo that reminds one of the opening rhythm of Beethoven’s famous Fifth Symphony. Over the next two movements, Mahler’s Fifth Symphony features contrasts between quiet melodies and loud exciting fanfares, giving it a dark and dramatic character. The fourth movement, called the
Adagietto, which features strings and harp only, may be the sweetest music in the symphony. It is thought to be a love letter to Alma.

You can find more information about Mahler and his life in the activity guides on the composer’s First and Third Symphonies at Learning @ Home.

Alma Mahler around 1902, the year Gustav Mahler completed his Symphony No. 5

Location, location, location

The country location where Mahler composed his Fifth Symphony was important in giving him the freedom to think and compose. Even when he lived in New York City, 1908–11, he still found it useful to return to the Austrian countryside to compose. Location can be important for composers and other creators, such as movie directors. The person who finds the locations where a movie will be filmed is called a location scout. In this job you must be aware of many things: the movie’s plot, the characters, and how the characters may fit in a location. Location scouts often need to research the places they are seeking, so they have to understand the location both as we see it today and also to understand its history. Being a location scout is an exciting job, especially for someone who enjoys travel, research, and thinking creatively about the places they visit.

Thinking like a location scout

If you were a location scout for a movie about Mahler’s life in New York City, what locations would you chose to represent his music? In this activity you will be asked to do the following:

1. Explore five excerpts from Mahler’s Fifth Symphony
2. Visit the New York Philharmonic’s online exhibit, Mahler in New York, to see some places that Mahler visited when he and his wife, Alma, lived in New York
3. Match Mahler’s music to locations he visited and explain why you thought the excerpt represented that location

Exploring excerpts from Mahler’s Fifth Symphony

After revising the work several times, Mahler decided to open the first movement with a solo trumpet playing a rhythm that seems to quote Beethoven. Follow the trumpet through the entire excerpt. What is the “personality” of this excerpt?

Excerpt 1

The second movement features the entire cello section performing a melody that may inspire you to create a slow and sad dance. Even though this melody may be melancholy, do you think it sounds strong and hopeful, or defeated?

Excerpt 2
In this section of the third movement, Mahler has the string section play **pizzicato** (plucking the strings). He creates a dialogue between the woodwinds playing **staccato** (separated notes) and the strings responding with bouncing pizzicato melodies.

**Excerpt 3**

In the fourth movement, called Adagietto, Mahler created a lush soundscape using only the orchestra’s string section, including the harp. It is believed that this movement is Mahler’s declaration of love for his wife, Alma. This movement also serves as a very calm introduction to the wild fifth movement. What is the **character** of Excerpt 4? Is it peaceful and calm, or **agitato** and hurried?

**Excerpt 4**

In the **score** to the fifth and final movement of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony, he instructs the orchestra to play Allegro giocoso, Frisch (which translates from Italian and German to mean “Happy, playful. Fresh”). To create this lively, playful scene, Mahler uses all the instruments of the orchestra, who play loudly together. The result is very exciting.

**Excerpt 5**

**Now, match an excerpt to each location in the pictures below**

After you assign locations to each excerpt, explain why you’ve made your choice. Be sure to read about why this location was important to Mahler in this [online exhibition](#). You can also take a virtual walking tour: [Walking Mahler’s New York](#).

**Carnegie Hall**

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<th>Circle one:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excerpt 1</td>
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<td>Excerpt 4</td>
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<td>Excerpt 5</td>
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Why did you choose this excerpt?

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Central Park

Circle one:
Excerpt 1
Excerpt 2
Excerpt 3
Excerpt 4
Excerpt 5

Why did you choose this excerpt?
New York Waterfront

Why did you choose this excerpt?

Plaza Hotel

Circle one:
Excerpt 1
Excerpt 2
Excerpt 3
Excerpt 4
Excerpt 5
Why did you choose this excerpt?

Share with us!
We’d love to see how you matched excerpts of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony to locations around New York City. Take a picture of your work and send it to education@nyphil.org.

If you want to listen to the entire Symphony No. 5, follow this link to a recording by the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Zubin Mehta.

**MAHLER Symphony No. 5**

PART I  Funeral March: With measured step. Strict. Like a cortège.
         Stormily, with greatest vehemence

PART II  Scherzo: Vigorously, not too fast

PART III Adagietto: Very slow
         Rondo-Finale: Allegro giocoso

New York Philharmonic; Zubin Mehta, conductor