**MAHLER Symphony No. 1** (1884–88; rev. through 1906)
Slow, dragging — Always very relaxed
With powerful movement, but not too quick
Solemn and measured, without dragging — Very simple and modest, like a folksong
With violent movement — Energetic

**For this lesson you’ll need:**
- Headphones
- A pen or pencil
- Something to write on
- Household items or an instrument

Composers make big decisions about how to use **instruments, rhythms, dynamics**, and **layers or textures** when creating their musical stories and expressing their ideas. In this lesson you will learn about Gustav Mahler and his First Symphony. You’ll explore strategies Mahler used to create themes and tell a story without words. Remember wherever you see **blue text** it’s a hyperlink that you can click on for more information.

**First, a bit about Gustav Mahler**
Austrian composer Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) wrote ten symphonies and several orchestral cycles for which he is celebrated today. His symphonies are like journeys that take listeners through his childhood memories, paint pictures of loved ones, and comment on the environment around him. Mahler said: “A symphony should be like the world; it should contain everything.”

Mahler began playing the piano at age four and came to be seen as a child prodigy. By the time he was a teenager, he was composing as a way to express his emotions and interact with the music that was all around him. Mahler took sounds from nature, folk songs, dance tunes and other popular music and incorporated them into his compositions. His practice of using everyday melodies and placing them into his compositions helps
make his music enjoyable by audiences of all ages. It also allows listeners a special window into his life and times, almost like a time-machine. In addition to becoming a composer, Mahler was a successful conductor who for two years lived in New York City, when he was Music Director of the New York Philharmonic from 1909 to 1911.

Mahler’s Symphony No. 1 ... I think I know this!

Mahler’s Symphony No. 1 was premiered in 1889, the same year his father, mother, and sister died, and his professional life as a conductor and composer was turbulent. Unfortunately, his First Symphony was not an instant hit with audiences and critics. It took decades for audiences to understand his sense of irony and his method of storytelling. In this symphony, Mahler referenced many folk tunes, some in a straightforward way, others having changed in mood. A great example of this is in the third movement, which opens with a sad and gloomy double bass solo. You may recognize the melody as the nursery tune Frère Jacques. Yet, rather than being cheerful and fun, here it is has been changed into a funeral march. Mahler found inspiration for it from a woodcut by Moritz von Schwind (right) from a popular book of fairytales, which shows forest animals in a funeral procession for a hunter.

Listen to an excerpt from a New York Philharmonic Young People’s Concert that demonstrates how Mahler transforms the usually happy melody of Frère Jacques into a somber funeral march.
Think like a composer:
Think about a special time in your life. Using only music, what instruments and dynamics would you choose to tell a story about that time? How would you use those instruments if the special time was happy? How would they be different if it was sad? Or a mix of both?

Let’s explore Mahler’s Symphony No. 1
Mahler creates many dramatic effects by highlighting different families of the orchestra. He uses contrasts to achieve his musical storytelling:

- contrasting dynamics (loud music vs. soft music)
- contrasting rhythms and tempos (patterns of notes that are short vs. long, and fast vs. slow)
- contrasting melodies (music that sounds dark or sad / minor key vs. happy or light / major key)

The Symphony No. 1 begins with quietly playing a long high note, soon joined by bird calls made by woodwinds:

Excerpt 1

Much of the first movement is mysterious, like hiking through a forest thick with trees and birds calling to each other — you’re unsure of where you’re going, or what you might see next. Eventually, Mahler breaks the uncertainty of this hike by introducing a cheerful and strong melody that highlights the cello section:

Excerpt 2

The eerie calm at the beginning of the symphony is contrasted with the end of the first movement where Mahler first warns the listener of things to come using the upper strings and woodwinds. He uses the high sounds of the violins and flutes like a siren, and then layers trumpets over the strings to give a warning signal. What do you think is coming next?

Excerpt 3

Finally, Mahler pulls back a branch in this dense forest of birds, trees, and bushes to reveal a bright scene. He creates this contrasting moment by using a loud trumpet fanfare with all other instruments giving support at maximum volume:

Excerpt 4

The end of the first movement of Mahler’s First Symphony is a huge contrast to the third movement, which begins with the double bass solo playing a deep, somber version of Frère Jacques. Even though this is a sad melody, it is one that is easy to sing and remember.

Excerpt 5
In what ways do Mahler’s choices of instruments and dynamics impact how you imagine the story he’s telling? If there were words to this version of Frère Jacques, what do you think they would be?

**Here’s the entire First Symphony**
See if you can recognize the excerpts from the first and third movements you listened to.
**MAHLER — Symphony No. 1**
New York Philharmonic; Lorin Maazel, conductor

**Let’s reflect on our earlier questions:**
Think about a special time in your life. Using only music, what instruments and dynamics would you choose to tell a story about that time? How would you use those instruments if the special time was happy? How would they be different if it was sad? Or a mix of both?

After listening to Mahler’s First Symphony, we now know of some of the ways he used dynamics and instruments to tell a story. Now it’s your turn to think like a composer or a movie-music supervisor.

**Choose an activity and have fun!**
1. Select a historical figure, a moment from your own life, or a book or movie scene. How might you use instruments, dynamics, rhythm, tempo, and melody to compose music that can tell a story without words? If you have an instrument at home give it a try; if not, create a found-sound library, like modern composer Angélica Negrón, with items in your house and compose with them. Try recording your piece with a phone, or writing down what you create if you know how to notate your music.

2. Don’t think composing is for you? Describe what music you would play in the background of a scene from the book, movie, or life of the historical figure you’ve selected. What kind of instruments are in the music you’ve selected? Are the rhythms smooth or choppy? Are the dynamics soft or loud?

3. Listen to the Mahler excerpts above. Create a comic strip to show what is happening in the excerpts.

4. Can you act out the action in the music? Choreograph dance moves for your favorite excerpt. Can you also create dance moves for your family members?

5. Can you take a happy melody and make it sad the way Mahler did with Frère Jacques?