Of all of Gustav Mahler’s symphonies, the First is far and away the most performed by the New York Philharmonic. Since the Orchestra gave its U.S. Premiere in 1909, with the composer conducting, the work has appeared on Philharmonic programs almost 200 times.

Mahler had begun his tenure as the Philharmonic’s new Music Director only the month before the American premiere. He was the first major composer to take its helm, and the Philharmonic, in turn, was the first and only symphony orchestra over which Mahler would preside. This was a radical change from his years leading the Vienna Court Opera, as it meant that he was now responsible for programming and conducting music in 45 concerts over 23 consecutive weeks. During his two seasons as Music Director Mahler prepared almost 200 different works, more than 75 of them new to him. He increased the Orchestra’s size to 92 players, despite union hiring limitations, creating the largest Philharmonic ensemble to date. His 1909–10 salary was a whopping $25,000.

The U.S. Premiere of the First Symphony would also be the last time the composer would conduct his work. New York Press critic Max Smith published a positive review, describing it as “an agreeable surprise” and praising its accessibility to the common listener, whom “some of Mahler’s other symphonies … had mystified and puzzled.” However, Henry Krebhiel of the New-York Daily Tribune described a different audience, claiming that the symphony was received “with what might be described as courteous applause, much dubious shaking of heads and no small amount of grumblings.”

No matter the early reaction, the work has become a favorite of Philharmonic audiences, conducted by every subsequent Philharmonic Music Director except for Arturo Toscanini and, inexplicably, Pierre Boulez. The score Mahler brought with him to New York was left behind in the Orchestra’s library; pages stamped with “Gustav Mahler – Wien” reveal a composer still working through some changes and, at the same time, marking the directions to give to his new musicians as he stood on the podium.

— The Archives

To view the entire score of Mahler’s Symphony No. 1 used by the composer himself, visit the New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives at archives.nyphil.org.
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 at the last of these 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. Its premiere, in late 1889, came on the heels of personal tragedies that had marred the preceding months: 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,” he 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 had by then moved to Hamburg — he subjected the symphony to severe revisions, particularly in matters of orchestration. “On the whole,” Mahler wrote to Richard Strauss the following May, “everything has become more

**Symphony No. 1 in D major**

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**IN SHORT**

**Born:** July 7, 1860, in Kalischt (Kaliště), Bohemia, near the town of Humpolec  
**Died:** May 18, 1911, in Vienna, Austria  
**Work composed:** February–March 1888, drawing on melodies and sketches dating back to 1884, revisions continued until as late as 1906  
**World premiere:** November 20, 1889, in Budapest, by the Budapest Philharmonic, with the composer conducting  
**New York Philharmonic premiere:** December 16, 1909, with the composer conducting; the performance marked the U.S. Premiere  
**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** September 30, 2014, Alan Gilbert, conductor  
**Estimated duration:** ca. 53 minutes
In the Conductor’s Words

No composer of the 19th century has furnished conductors with such specific instructions as Gustav Mahler. Why is that? Mainly because he was an excellent conductor himself, and, moreover, because he wanted not only the score to measure up to the precise artistic standards, but especially the actual performances. But are there possibly things he did not write down?

We marvel at how much of the novel, unheard, and revolutionary Mahler introduces in his very first symphony. No other composer before him did that, not even Beethoven. Think of the development of the first movement, which is not really written in the sonata form, and of the double bass solo and the vulgar music of the third movement, which is designed as a parody. Mahler hailed from a little village in Bohemia and received his musical education and conditioning in Vienna, the multi-cultural capital of the multi-ethnic monarchy. In this environment he dwelt and worked, and so he obviously integrated specific features of both these cultures, the Bohemian and the Viennese, into his music. When I occupied myself with Austrian folk music (my father, whose family came from the Bohemian region, allowed me to learn the zither), I could find many elements of “Mahlerian” spirit therein. Later, when as a viola player in the Vienna Philharmonic, I was able to perform the wonderful Viennese music, my relationship with Mahler deepened.

So it should not be a surprise that you, dear audience, will notice an interpretation with an emphasis not only on the Viennese-Bohemian, but also on the outrageous element, which is performed in a slightly sharper fashion. The second movement, in particular, is not a normal waltz or Ländler for me. Like Mengelberg wrote into his score (and this is something he supposedly got from Mahler personally), this is a raunchy peasants’ dance. In my point of view the traditional Viennese-Bohemian way of making music, with its flexible tempo modifications, and the typical rhythm of the Viennese waltz, with the early second beat, play a special role here. For Mahler there was no necessity to note the way of playing in the score, as the musicians of his time automatically knew what was required. (This might actually be one of the reasons why many of those musicians who also performed in the numerous brass bands and salon orchestras disapproved of his works. In their eyes the “holy” genre of the symphony, in the spirit of Beethoven, was dishonored, so to speak.)

On this note, I hope you will enjoy listening to our performance.

— Manfred Honeck

Silhouette of Mahler’s conducting style, by Otto Böhler, ca. 1900
slender and transparent.” He knew this not just from his inner ear but from concert-hall experience as well, 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 he arranged for Mahler to travel to Weimar to conduct it in June 1894. This time the reception was sharply divided. Mahler wrote to a friend:

My symphony was received with furious opposition by some and with whole-hearted 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 an extra-musical description to it, Mahler fails to convince us that 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 and two doubling E-flat clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), seven horns, five trumpets, four trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, harp, and strings.

**What’s in a Name?**

It is common to hear Mahler’s Symphony No. 1 referred to as the Titan Symphony, almost always incorrectly. Mahler did attach that subtitle to the version he introduced in Hamburg in 1893. Conflicting opinions clash 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 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 referring to a specific performance of the “Hamburg” version (which includes the usually unplayed Blumine movement), one would do well to avoid referring to this as the Titan Symphony.