

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

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## Symphony No. 6 in A minor

### Gustav Mahler

Throughout his career Gustav Mahler balanced the competing demands of his dual vocation as a composer and conductor. Responsibilities on the podium and in the administrative office completely occupied him during the concert seasons, forcing him to relegate his composing to the summer months. When he wrote his Sixth Symphony, during the summers of 1903 and 1904, he was persevering as director of the Vienna Court Opera. He held that post with mounting stress and frustration until December 1907, after which he moved the center of his professional activities to New York — first conducting at The Metropolitan Opera and from 1909 to 1911 as Music Director of the New York Philharmonic.

Fortunately, he had his composing to look forward to. His summer getaway was by that time at Maiernigg, a bump on the road on the south shore of the Wörthersee, a bucolic spot in the region of Carinthia in southern Austria. In 1901 he had moved into a villa he built on the lake, and the next summer he brought his new bride there for his first summer as a married man. He had met Alma Schindler at a dinner party in November 1901. She was just then concluding a fling with her composition teacher, Alexander von Zemlinsky. Gustav and Alma were smitten with one another and they married a few months later, on March 9, 1902, having already set about making their first baby, Maria, who arrived on November 2. A second daughter would arrive during the summer of 1904. It would be a complicated and often unhappy marriage, although they stayed together until Mahler's death, in 1911. As newlyweds, the Mahlers already had problems, but these two

titanic personalities persevered; she provided some sort of stability that he found useful, while he satisfied her need to be allied with a man of genius.

At Maiernigg, Mahler had constructed a small, sparsely furnished composing cottage on the hill behind his villa, and every morning he would meander up along a forest path to work in splendid seclusion. The privacy was absolutely mandated: a servant girl, for example, would leave the villa moments after him on a more direct trail so she could deposit his warm breakfast at the hut and depart before he arrived. He typically spent some five hours composing there every morning, devoting the

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### In Short

**Born:** July 7, 1860, in Kalischt (Kaliště), Bohemia

**Died:** May 18, 1911, in Vienna, Austria

**Work composed:** the summers of 1903–04, with orchestration completed May 1, 1905; revised 1906, with alterations to orchestration continuing for several years thereafter

**World premiere:** May 27, 1906, in Essen, with the composer conducting (this followed a “reading rehearsal” by the Vienna Philharmonic in March 1906); the revised edition was introduced in Leipzig later that year.

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** December 11, 1947, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor, in its US Premiere

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** February 16, 2016, Semyon Bychkov, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 85 minutes

afternoons to hiking, swimming, sunbathing, and other outdoor pursuits.

This was the idyllic world where Mahler's Sixth Symphony came into being, and we may hear a certain measure of loveliness in the score. But that is not the overriding sentiment of this work. On the contrary, this is Mahler's tragic symphony — quite liter-

ally, since he appended the subtitle *Tragic* to the work at its premiere. (He would later withdraw the subtitle, but it re-emerged on the printed program the final time he conducted this symphony, lending authority and credibility to its widespread use in modern parlance.) Tragedy surfaces often in Mahler's symphonies, but the composer

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## Listen for . . . the “Alma” Theme

Alma Mahler left an account of the Sixth Symphony as it was being created (published, in English translation, in the volume *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*):



Alma Mahler, ca. 1904

The summer [of 1904] was beautiful, serene, and happy. Before the holidays came to an end he played me the completed Sixth Symphony. . . . Once more we walked arm in arm up to his [composing] house in the woods, where nothing could disturb us. These occasions were always very solemn ones.

After he had drafted the first movement he came down from the woods to tell me he had tried to express me in a theme. “Whether I’ve succeeded, I don’t know; but you’ll have to put up with it.”

This is the great soaring theme of the first movement of the Sixth Symphony. In the third movement he represented the arrhythmic games of the two little children, tottering in zigzags over the sand. Ominously, the childish voices became more and more tragic, and at the end died out in a whimper. In the last movement he described himself and his downfall or, as he later said, that of his hero: “It is the hero, on whom fall three blows of fate, the last of which fells him as a tree is felled.” Those were his words.

Not one of his works came so directly from his inmost heart as this. We both wept that day. The music and what it foretold touched us deeply.

The theme Alma signaled as her musical portrait is the second subject of the first movement, marked *Schwungvoll* (Stirring) and introduced by flutes and violins. Detective work by the Mahler scholar (and former La Scala director) Quirino Principe revealed that this tune echoes almost note for note an aria in the opera *Der Trompeter von Säckingen* (*The Trumpeter of Säckingen*), a work long-forgotten today (and different from the incidental music Mahler himself wrote for a series of *tableaux vivants* on the same subject). But it was very likely known to Mahler, as that opera had been composed by Emil Kaiser, his immediate predecessor as conductor at the theater in Olmütz (Olomouc), Moravia, not long before Mahler took over that position in 1883. Alma may not have been aware of the connection, or of the fact that the words of that aria read: “God keep you, it would have been too lovely; God keep you, it was not meant to be.”

## The New York Philharmonic Connection

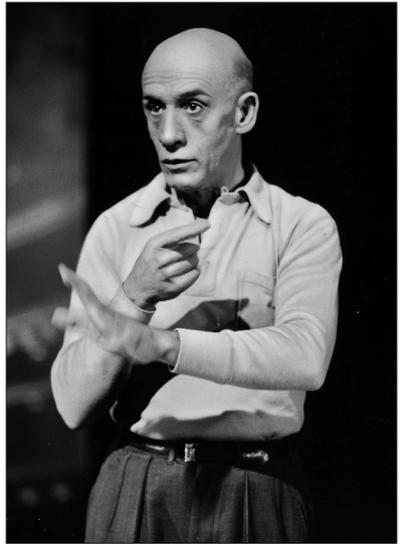
Mahler's Sixth Symphony traveled a more tortured path from composition to publication to American premiere than any other of his works. It was the last Mahler composition to be introduced in the United States, when Dimitri Mitropoulos led the New York Philharmonic in its US Premiere on December 11, 1947.

Mitropoulos first expressed interest in conducting the symphony in February 1947, ten months before he was scheduled to appear as a guest conductor. The orchestral parts were extremely difficult to locate, especially so soon after the end of World War II, and exactly how the Philharmonic obtained them is still somewhat of a mystery. The holdings of publisher C.F. Kahnt in Leipzig had been heavily damaged by wartime bombing, and access to Mahler's music was still recovering from a ban the Nazis had imposed in 1933. From February to May 1947, the Philharmonic searched in vain for the parts, contacting multiple publishers, with no luck. But in September the parts miraculously appeared, probably obtained through England.

The performance was confirmed, but Philharmonic management began to worry about its reception. What would the critics and audiences think of Mahler's most enigmatic symphony? Although Mitropoulos insisted that the concert would be an "event from which we have nothing to fear and from which to expect no less than the highest gratitude of all the musical artistic world of the United States," the Philharmonic was not convinced. Mahler's Sixth Symphony was paired with George Gershwin's crowd-pleasing Concerto in F, with pianist Oscar Levant as soloist.

Mahler's Sixth Symphony sparked a wide variety of reactions in the press, but Mitropoulos was generally lauded for bringing it to the country's attention. At the premiere, John Ball, Jr., of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, observed that "his conception was a mighty and far-seeing one, the performance was a triumph for him on the podium." Philharmonic musicians vividly remembered Mitropoulos's passion and commitment to Mahler's Sixth. James Chambers, Principal Horn from 1946 to 1969, later recalled:

The work had a lightning-bolt impact on the Orchestra — and on the audience as well. There was a remarkable conformity in style between composer and conductor. ... Mitropoulos's proclivity for making a musical point by overstatement fitted rather neatly into Mahler's frequent and abrupt changes of mood, dynamics, tempo, and so on. Mitropoulos, on the podium, might almost have represented the embodiment of Mahler's spirit.



*Dimitri Mitropoulos in rehearsal*

— The Archives

To view Dimitri Mitropoulos's score of Mahler's Sixth Symphony, visit the New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives at [archives.nyphil.org](https://archives.nyphil.org).

nearly always uses it as a springboard to triumphant victory (as in his First, Second, Fifth, Seventh, and Eighth Symphonies) or to ecstatic transcendence (in his Third, Fourth, and Ninth). In the resolutely minor-key Sixth, tragedy persists as the dominant expression to the bitter end.

And it is the bitterest of ends, a musical depiction of utter catastrophe, of humanity rendered powerless and insignificant, overwhelmed by forces that seem born of a dimension apart. Many of Mahler's symphonies could be described as cosmic, but in the Sixth one encounters a cosmos that holds out no hope for mankind. The famous hammer blows near this symphony's conclusion are among the most shocking and

despondent sounds in the entire orchestral repertoire. The composer initially described each as a "short, powerful but dull-sounding stroke of a non-metallic character," and later added "like the stroke of an axe."

**Instrumentation:** five flutes (three doubling piccolo), four oboes (one doubling English horn) plus English horn, three clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, four bassoons and contrabassoon, eight horns, six trumpets, four trombones), tuba, timpani, bass drum, tubular bells, snare drum, tambourine, triangle, cymbals, orchestra bells, cowbells, low bells, rute (birch brush), hammer, xylophone, two harps, two celestas, and strings.

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## Structural Questions



Mahler in Vienna, 1906

Modern conductors have to exercise their judgment in deciding the order in which the middle movements of Mahler's Sixth Symphony will be played. The composer waffled a good deal on this question. His original autograph score, which resides in the collection of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, shows that he initially placed the *Scherzo* before the *Andante*, and this order was carried through to the first printing of the piece, before the symphony was premiered. But while rehearsing for the premiere Mahler changed his mind, such that at its first performance the *Andante* preceded the *Scherzo*. Mahler seemed content with that; he used the revised order when he conducted the work on two ensuing occasions and he had the second edition of the score altered to reflect his change of mind.

Numerous accounts (which, unfortunately, are not without problems) suggest that Mahler later came to believe that his initial idea was better after all, and when the International Gustav Mahler Society arrived at the Sixth Symphony in its edition of the complete works, the editor chose to revert to the original structure, with the *Scherzo* second and the *Andante* third. That is the order Music Director Jaap van Zweden follows in these performances.