

# Program Notes for Mahler's Symphony No. 3

## Oct. 23-25

### Symphony No. 3 in D minor GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911)

*Composed in 1895-1896.*

*Premiered on June 6, 1902 in Krefeld, conducted by the composer.*

On March 29, 1891, at the age of 37, Gustav Mahler arrived in Hamburg to become chief conductor of that city's opera, a post he had earned by rising through a series of successively more important appointments in Cassel, Prague, Leipzig and Budapest which showed him to be one of the greatest interpretative musicians of his time. Despite his brilliance on the podium, then matched only by Bülow, Toscanini, Nikisch, Strauss and Weingartner, Mahler's deepest ambition was to compose, to embody in tone the complexity, profundity and humanity of the world around him. Indeed, composition was for him an almost insatiable need. "I don't choose what to compose," he often said. "It chooses me." In his perceptive study of the man and his music, Kurt Blaukopf suggested that Mahler was possessed by some higher power that drove him to creative work: "Mahler himself did not compose — something in him composed." The enormous pressure of his conducting and administrative duties (he sometimes led six performances a week!) prevented Mahler from composing during the winter, so this activity was relegated to the summer months, when the opera houses were closed. June, July and August were therefore not a time of relaxation for him but rather one of intense, often exhausting, creative work, a need which he could not meet with just the traditional *Kapellmeister* genres of song and piano pieces and chamber scores, but one that could only be satisfied by the grand, public form of the symphony. "If I want to go down into posterity," he confided to the critic Max Graf, "I have to write large works during my short holiday."

Mahler's favored place for his summertime retreats from the madding cities was among the hills and lakes of Austria's Salzkammergut. In 1893 he found a villa on Lake Atter, thirty miles east of Salzburg, whose main attraction was a tiny, isolated cottage on the shore that provided him with the seclusion he demanded when composing, and he engaged the compound for several seasons. (He insisted on absolute quiet when he composed: the local children were bribed by Mahler's sister and guests with toys and candy to play in silence; singing fieldhands were constantly admonished, and eventually told that the eccentric musician had lost his presence of mind and might be aroused to terrible acts by even the slightest disturbance; overly noisy chickens and livestock were bought and roasted for supper.) Mahler furnished his composing hut sparsely with a table, wooden chairs, a sofa and a piano shipped from Vienna; the infrequent visitors he allowed into this sanctum complained that they were showered with beetles when the door was thrown open.

Bruno Walter, the young assistant conductor at Hamburg who became one of Mahler's most ardent champions and greatest interpreters, wrote that the composer "spent his mornings in work [at the cottage], undisturbed by the noises of the house. He went there at six in the morning, at seven his breakfast was silently placed before him, and only when he opened the door at noon would he return to normal life. Later he might walk about the meadow, or rush uphill and go for longer walks." When Mahler took up this daily regimen following his arrival at Steinbach on June 5, 1895, he had already formulated a plan for the successor to the "Resurrection" Symphony, whose partial performance just three months earlier in Berlin under his direction marked the first wide public recognition of his compositional genius. The new work was to be a grand, musical evocation of the forces and creations of Nature with, he wrote to his friend Friedrich Löhr, "the emphasis on my personal life (in the form of 'what things tell me.')" At the beginning of the summer, the piece was called "The Happy Life, a Midsummer Night's Dream (not after Shakespeare)"; by August it had become "The Joyful Science" [after the title of the book by Nietzsche], A Summer Morning's Dream." There were originally to be seven movements divided into two parts. The first part, which Mahler called an "introduction" though it eventually grew to a length of forty minutes, was titled "The Awakening of Pan; Summer marches in (procession of Bacchus)." Comprising the second part of the Symphony were a

succession of shorter movements: "What the flowers of the meadow tell me"; "What the animals in the forest tell me"; "What the night tells me"; "What the angels tell me"; "What love tells me"; and "Life in Heaven". Incorporated into this giant musical panorama were settings of poems by Nietzsche and from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* for contralto soloist and choruses of women and children.

Work progressed quickly on the Symphony. By the end of June, 1895, Mahler had drafted all of the seven movements except for the first one, and he confided to friends that together they comprised what was "probably the ripest and most individual work I have yet composed." During July he put aside composing for a few days in order to visit with the ailing Brahms at his summer haunt in nearby Bad Ischl. When Mahler took up work on his sketches again, he grew apprehensive about the immense scale that the work was assuming in its temporal duration, orchestral requirements and vast canvas of musical styles, and he started referring to it, only half jokingly, as his "monster." "My calling it a symphony is really inaccurate, for it doesn't keep to the traditional form in any way," he told Natalie Bauer-Lechner, the summer house guest of the Mahlers who kept a detailed chronicle during her stay. "But to me 'symphony' means constructing a world with all the technical means at one's disposal. The eternally new and changing content determines its own form." This statement is really the essence of Mahler's musical philosophy — to embody an entire universe of feeling and experience in tones. He returned to the idea in a letter about the Third Symphony to his close friend, the Wagnerian soprano, Anna Bahr-Mildenburg: "Imagine a work of such scope that the whole world actually is reflected in it — one becomes, so to speak, only an instrument upon which the universe plays.... My Symphony will be something that the world has never heard before! In this score, all nature speaks and tells such deep secrets as one may intuit in a dream! I tell you, at certain places in the score, a quite uncanny feeling takes possession of me, and I feel as if I had not created this myself. If only I can complete the thing as I envisage it." Composition on the second through seventh movements was largely finished by the time he left Steinbach in August; their orchestration and thoughts about the music that would precede them occupied him during the following winter.

Mahler returned to Steinbach in June 1896, impatient to resume work on the Symphony. He had been making notes and sketches for the first movement for several months, but discovered to his horror when he arrived that he had left them in his office in Hamburg. Bauer-Lechner reported that he was like a caged tiger, growling and pacing, until they were delivered a week later. The first movement grew quickly thereafter. Sometime before it was completed, he told Bauer-Lechner, "It has almost ceased to be music; it is hardly anything but sounds of nature. 'Summer marches in' will be the prelude.... Naturally enough, it doesn't come off without a struggle with the opponent, Winter; but Winter is easily defeated, and Summer, with his strength and superior power, soon gains undisputed mastery." Mahler also decided during the summer of 1896 to remove the final, vocal movement, "Life in Heaven," from the Symphony. This lovely music was not wasted, however, since it became the seed from which grew the Fourth Symphony, where it was used as the finale.

The Third Symphony was completed in short score on August 6th. The first person to hear it was Bruno Walter (Mahler was absolutely secretive about the musical content, if not the underlying philosophy or program, of his works in progress), when the composer played it for him in the cottage at Steinbach. "Familiar as I had become with the spiritual atmosphere of the Symphony," Walter wrote in his book on the composer, "it was a shattering and undreamed-of experience to hear him perform it on the piano. I felt as if I were recognizing him for the first time. His whole being seemed to breathe a mysterious affinity with the forces of nature. Had he been only a 'nature lover' in the ordinary sense of the word, his music, I thought, might have turned out more 'civilized.' But what I had always felt subconsciously — his Dionysian saturation with nature — was voiced now as a primitive musical sound from the very depths of his soul. Here I seemed to see him in the round: the oppressive weight placed on him by the stark majesty of the rocky summits, love for the tender flower, a sense of the shyness and drollery, and the untamable ferocity, within the primeval depths of the animal world, and finally the intuitive yearning of the human spirit to penetrate beyond the bounds of earthly transience. I carried this music with me when we parted, and it was a long time before its disturbing presence could pass into secure possession." To which Philip Barford, in his study of Mahler's symphonies, added, "In the background of his mind there seems always to be the ladder up

which humanity can climb to heaven."

Mahler completed the orchestration of the Third Symphony during the winter of 1896-97, but was unable to arrange for its full performance, so he reluctantly allowed Felix Weingartner to extract the second, third and sixth movements from the complete work and conduct them in Berlin during March 1897. They were received with only small enthusiasm. When Mahler finally performed the work complete, however, on June 6, 1902 at the *Tonkünstlerfest* of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein in the city of Krefeld, on the west bank of the Rhine north of Cologne, the composer's sister, Justine, reported that it "made an enormous sensation, especially among the musicians." Though Mahler was always impatient about the number of performances given to his music, this Symphony was heard and appreciated on numerous occasions during his lifetime. He was particularly gratified by one performance of it that he conducted with the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra in 1903. "The tumult of applause," he wrote, "was almost daunting. Everyone said nothing like it could be remembered. I have beaten Strauss, who is all the rage here, by miles." A year later, after the Symphony was first given in Vienna (Mahler astutely never allowed the world premieres of his music to occur in Vienna while he was director of the Opera there), the composer received a letter from the 30-year-old Arnold Schoenberg, who was still immersed in the hyper-romanticism that had yielded *Gurrelieder* and *Pelleas und Melisande*. Schoenberg ended the letter with his reaction to the Third Symphony: "I saw your very soul naked, stark naked.... I felt your Symphony. I shared in the battling for illusion; I suffered the pangs of disillusionment; I saw the forces of good and evil wrestling with each other; I saw a man in torment struggling towards inward harmony.... Forgive me, I cannot feel by halves."

For the new work's first performance, Mahler allowed the title and movement descriptions that he had devised for its composition to be printed in the program notes. After the premiere, however, he grew distrustful of mere words to frame the sense of his music, and he withdrew the sobriquets. "Those titles I originally intended for non-musicians as a point of reference and a guide to the thought, or rather, mood-content of individual movements, of movement to movement and to the whole," he wrote. "That I did not succeed, as indeed one never can succeed, in this intent, and only opened the way to misinterpretations of the worst kind, soon became clear to me.... I now have given up for good any further commenting, analyzing, or providing any listener's aid whatever! These titles will certainly tell you something *after* you have become acquainted with the score. From them, you can gain some suggestion of how I imagined the constantly increasing articulation of feeling, from the brooding, elementary forces of nature, to the tender creations of the human heart, which in turn reach out beyond themselves, pointing the way to God." Despite his misgivings, however, his literary program is essential for understanding the ethic and progression of this magnificent Symphony, the longest such work in the repertory. Indeed, the philosophical program existed before the music was begun, and was the germ from which it grew.

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Of Mahler's Third Symphony, Deryck Cooke wrote, "The idea behind the work was a conception of existence in its totality. The vast first movement was to represent the summoning of Nature out of non-existence by the god Pan, symbolized by the emergence of summer out of winter; and after this, the five shorter movements were to represent the 'stages of being' (as Mahler expressed it in a letter), from vegetable and animal life, through mankind and the angels, to the love of God."

Cooke called the opening movement ("Pan awakes; Summer marches in"), which solely occupies Part I of the Symphony, "the most original and flabbergasting thing Mahler ever conceived." Though there are some vestigial connections with traditional formal types, this movement is better understood philosophically, as the musical evocation of powerful forces, than analytically. A long introduction, blown into being by an awesome opening blast from massed horns, is filled with what Mahler called "nature sounds." There follows the struggle between dark Winter, with its sinister march theme, and life-giving Summer, first portrayed by a dancing strain cheerfully displayed by the winds. Other themes arise on both sides and are drawn into the conflict, but Summer prevails. This is music, in the mold of Beethoven, that is uplifting and fructifying, another evidence of Mahler's underlying belief in the resiliency of good and its ultimate triumph over evil. "A

pessimist does not think and feel like this," noted Guido Adler.

After calling up gargantuan cosmic forces in the opening movement, Mahler turned in the Symphony's second part to evoking Nature's (and God's) bounties, or, more accurately, his musico/emotional responses to them. Mahler called the second movement ("What the flowers of the meadow tell me") a "minuet," though it is really more a country dance than a recreation of Mozartian elegance. In its deliberate naïvete, it provides a startling contrast to the overwhelming music that precedes it, a quality Mahler employed throughout his works to heighten their drama and intensify their expression. (Mahler requested a pause of a few minutes between the first and second movements.) Near the end of his life, Mahler met with Sigmund Freud, and they uncovered a childhood experience from which this technique of juxtaposing very different musical styles may have grown. "His father, apparently a brutal person, treated his wife very badly," recorded Freud. "When Mahler was young there was an especially painful scene between his parents. It became quite unbearable for the boy, who rushed away from the house. At that moment, however, a hurdy-gurdy in the street was grinding out the popular Viennese air, *Ach, Du Lieber Augustin*. In Mahler's opinion the conjunction of high tragedy and light amusement was from then on inextricably fixed in his mind, and the one mood inevitably brought on the other." When the piece was still new, Mahler told Natalie Bauer-Lechner, "Yet but for that marriage, neither I nor my Third Symphony would exist — I find that quite remarkable."

The third movement ("What the animals in the woods tell me") is a reworking of a song with a cheeky text from *Das Knaben Wunderhorn, Ablösung im Sommer* ("Changing of the Summer Guard"), that Mahler composed around 1890. Woven into the movement are episodes for solo posthorn, the traditional instrument used to announce the arrival of the mail coach and therefore associated with distant places and sentimental longing. The passages here entrusted to the posthorn are some of the most nostalgic and sweetly dreamy found in any of Mahler's symphonies.

The last three movements are played without pause. The fourth movement ("What the night tells me") is a setting for contralto of the so-called "Drunken Song" from Friedrich Nietzsche's novel *Also sprach Zarathustra*. (Richard Strauss' tone poem on *Zarathustra* was completed in the same month as the Third Symphony — August 1896.) "The movement is one of the stillest things in all music," wrote Deryck Cooke, "with its cry of a night-bird (oboe glissando) and its long-held contralto notes backed by thirds on trombones echoed by piccolos."

Choruses of boys' and women's voices sing in the following movement ("What the angels tell me") of a heavenly vision whose words Mahler borrowed from the *Wunderhorn* poems. This wondrous music of bells and brightness is briefly clouded in its central section by the thoughts of a repentant sinner, sung by the contralto. Phrases from this music were recalled in the Fourth Symphony.

Mahler called the last movement both "What love tells me" and "What God tells me," and chose to end the Symphony not with the traditional, fast closing music, but rather with an instrumental *Adagio* of deep feeling and stirring optimism. "For Mahler, all quick music ... represented the flux of the world and human life," assessed Burnett James, "while slow music, by contrast, enshrined the permanent, the eternal, the higher force." Of this great finale, Bruno Walter wrote, "In the last movement, words are stilled — for what language can utter heavenly love more powerfully and forcefully than music itself? The *Adagio*, with its broad, solemn melodic line, is, as a whole — and despite passages of burning pain — eloquent of comfort and grace. It is a single sound of heartfelt and exalted feelings, in which the whole giant structure finds its culmination."

"What is best in music," Mahler once said, "is not to be found in the notes."