

## ***Symphony No. 1* (1888)**

Gustav Mahler (1860 – 1911)

The creation of Mahler's first symphony is a story of love, youthful exuberance, misunderstanding, derision, indecision and persistence. This symphony, as well as all his other symphonies, is an epic musical work in the same spirit as the historical literary epics such as those written by Homer, Virgil and Milton. Mahler's autobiographical “hero” moves through his first symphonies, experiencing different aspects of his life in the individual movements and often referencing other events from earlier works. The experiences that are depicted are more emotional than factual and the order is not necessarily chronological. As in most of Mahler's works, an understanding of his life makes the music speak in ways not possible just through hearing the symphony with no background information. One of Mahler's struggles with this symphony was whether or not to provide a program describing the meaning of the music. In the first performances of *Symphony No. 1* he provided detailed programs and called it first a “Symphonic Poem in two parts”, and then “Titan, a tone poem in symphonic form.” *Titan* was the title of a popular novel by Jean Paul, one of Mahler's favorite authors. He ultimately decided to call it “Symphony in D major for large orchestra” and dropped the descriptive program, leaving us to research the meaning behind the music. Mahler's experiences with programs led him to believe that they confused audiences. It was not until the 1950s that audiences began to understand and accept this symphony.

The symphony was written in a burst of creativity in just two months but contains a few melodic ideas that Mahler had written years earlier. Mahler told a friend that it “came gushing out of me like a mountain torrent!” The symphony was a vehicle for describing his life up to this point. He used melodies from *Songs of a Wayfarer* which were written in response to his unrequited love several years earlier for Johanna Richter. He also drew upon his other earlier music, yodeling, a familiar children's round, a 19th-century woodcut, German folk music, military music, bird song and the opening of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*. The symphony was premiered in Budapest the next year, leaving the audience bewildered and indifferent. A local critic commented: “There was a small, but, for all that, audible element of opposition.” When Alma Schindler (who later married Mahler) first met him, all she could think of was how much she disliked his first symphony. A few years later Mahler wrote to his wife after conducting a performance of the symphony: “Sometimes it sent shivers down my spine. Damn it all, where do people keep their ears and their hearts if they can't hear that!” Mahler spent years fussing with and changing this symphony up to its first publication in 1899.

Mahler first thought of the symphony as being in two parts. The first part, *From the Days of Youth*, contained three movements: *Spring Without End*, *Blumine*, and *Under Full Sail*. The second part, *Commedia humana*, contained two movements: *Funeral March in the Manner of Callot* and *Dall'inferno al paradiso*. For the second performance he called the first three movements *Flower*, *Fruit*, and *Thornpieces* (from another novel by Jean Paul), and called the funeral march *Foundered!*. In 1894 Mahler removed the *Blumine* movement, making it a four-movement symphony. This movement, never published during his lifetime, completely

disappeared until 1959. He kept the other titles throughout the 1890s but then suddenly rejected them in 1900 saying that he “disliked and discarded them as anti-artistic and anti-musical.” He then supplied a program similar to the original one from the first performance. At this time, instrumental composers such as his colleague Richard Strauss were supplying detailed, descriptive programs for their music to satisfy the demands of audiences but were, at the same time, unhappy that their music wasn't being judged on its own merits. Critics were no help. Mahler was faulted in Berlin for not including a program for *Symphony No. 1* and he was faulted in Frankfurt for using a program. By the time the second and last edition of the symphony was published in 1906, all of the descriptive titles and programs had been removed for several years.

The third movement of this symphony demonstrates several things that were common to Mahler's music and that made audiences, especially the anti-Jewish Austrians and Germans, unhappy. The movement was inspired by a wood-cut called *The Hunter's Funeral*, a whimsical scene depicting the hunter's casket being carried by the animals he would have hunted. This movement was repeatedly the least favorite of audiences due, in part, to its irreverent funeral march, the juxtaposition of unrelated (to everyone but Mahler) musical ideas, and the use of Jewish-sounding music. Mahler's Jewish family was dominated by a brutal father who often abused his mother. Mahler revealed one childhood memory to Sigmund Freud that helps explain several of the puzzling musical juxtapositions in the third movement. Once, when his father was abusing his mother, young Mahler rushed out of the house and almost crashed into an organ-grinder on the street who was playing *Ach, du lieber Augustin*. This memory of a simple folk song attached to a feeling of childhood terror stuck with Mahler and sometimes is heard in his music when moments of deep tragedy or terror are depicted, resulting in what appears to be totally inappropriate appearances of simple, cheerful, folk-like tunes. The movement begins with *Are You Sleeping, Brother John* in a minor key played by the basses. This is then followed by what sounds like a somber, Jewish folk dance. The dance turns into a happy folk-like tune (bad childhood memory) and then *Are You Sleeping* concludes the first section. We then hear the harp and a beautiful string section that is a quote from his earlier *Songs of a Wayfarer* where the Wayfarer finds rest under the Linden tree, a metaphor for death. Is it any wonder that audiences were confused and challenged when confronted with music that was apparently as messy as life itself?