Thoughts on Mahler

My deep love, respect, and connection with Gustav Mahler, the man, his spirit, and his music come via two of my most important mentors: Walter Ducloux and Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein's resurrection of Mahler's music in the 20th century, both in Vienna and New York, initiated the worldwide love we all now share of Mahler's music. Ducloux, like Bernstein, was personal friends with Bruno Walter, Mahler's dear friend. So this means that with three handshakes I have a personal connection with this great composer, hence, his music.

Mahler bemoaned that he was "thrice homeless." "I am thrice homeless, as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world." Even as a composer, he had one foot firmly planted in the traditions set by German and Austrian romantic composers Wagner, Bruckner, and others. On the other hand, he was a composer living in the 20th century, living among the likes of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. He and his music straddled these two very different musical worlds.

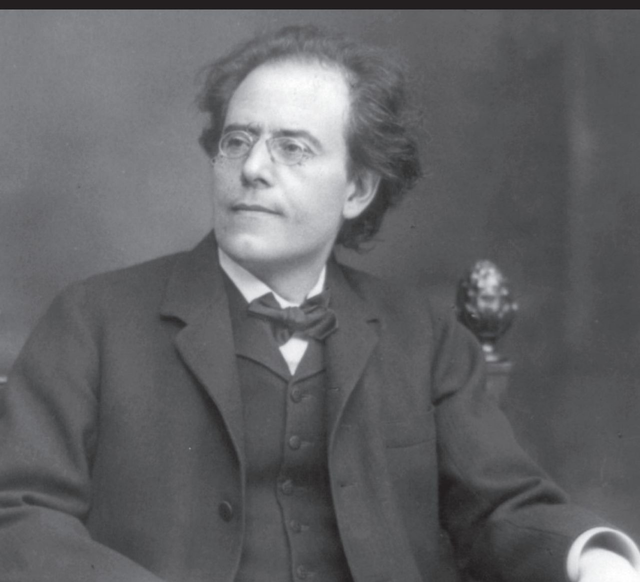
No music reflects this chasm better than Mahler's grand Ninth Symphony. It is the ultimate "good-bye." A farewell to all those musical traditions born of Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, even Bach, and an omen of things to come. It was composed at a time when Mahler's life was filled with sadness, disappointment, and tragedy. His young daughter, Maria, died as an infant. He lost his post as Music Director of the Vienna State Opera. His wife Alma was having an affair, and he was diagnosed with a serious heart condition. All of this unfolds in his final completed symphony: love, tragedy, loss, passion, struggle, strife, realization, reflection, resignation, acceptance, and ultimately, peace.

It's impossible to talk about this incredible musical voyage in a few words. I would prefer to offer you a single word which becomes important to me when conducting this symphony. **The first movement is all about "realization."** Mahler knew that his life would be shortened and that he was suffering deeply from all the ills that he had recently experienced. **The second movement seems that Mahler is "reflecting"** on the sounds and musical delights of his early years. The "Ländler-like" lilt, the sounds and musical spirit of peasants, and the bucolic, pastoral flow of gentle melodies. **Movement Three is one of "rejoicing."** Titled Burleske, it is a musical parody mixing Baroque counterpoint with the dissonance and struggle which had entered his life. The humor of this music turns manic, even violent, definitely forcefully defiant. **The Final and ultimate movement is clearly a "resignation."** The "realization" of the first movement has now become an impending journey that Mahler would rather not traverse. From the first note to the last, one feels with each step the reluctance and struggle of this voyage. Oh, the pain it is causing our dear Mahler seems unbearable. The silences in their austere relationship with faint sounds are paralyzing. Each one step closer to submission, letting go, and finally peace.

Come, take this important musical voyage with us. It is a climb well worth it. The reward will be untold. Joining together will bring us closer to Mahler, to one another, and to music. We'll commune in the realm of the eternal.

Carl St.Clair
Music Director
William J. Gillespie Music Director Chair

Pacific Symphony
CARL ST.CLAIR MUSIC DIRECTOR



2022-23 Hal & Jeanette Segerstrom Family Foundation Classical Series

MAHLER 9

Preview Talk with Alan Chapman @ 7 p.m.
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Friday, Jan. 13 @ 8 p.m.
Saturday, Jan. 14 @ 8 p.m.

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Performance at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts
Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall

PROGRAM

MAHLER **Symphony No. 9 in D Major**

I. *Andante comodo*
II. *Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Ländlers*
III. *Rondo - Burleske*
IV. *Adagio*

PROGRAM NOTES

Gustav Mahler

Symphony No. 9

Born: July 7, 1860, Bohemia (present-day Czech Republic)
Died: May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria
Composed: 1908-1909
Premiered: June 26, 1912, with the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Bruno Walter
Most recent Pacific Symphony performance: November 19, 2011, in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, Carl St.Clair conducting
Instrumentation: five flutes including piccolo, four oboes including English horn, five clarinets including bass clarinet and e-flat clarinet, four bassoons including contrabassoon, four French horns, three trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, and strings
Estimated duration: Approx. 81 minutes

Today, we know Mahler primarily as a symphonist—some would say the pre-eminent symphonist since Beethoven. But during his lifetime, the acceptance that Mahler's symphonies won from critics and the public was mostly grudging, barely hinting at the appreciation that these masterworks would receive later. His cycles of art songs placed him within the lineage of the foremost German-language art-song composers, but

somehow did not vouchsafe his standing as a composer of greatness. As a conductor, on the other hand, Mahler quickly established himself as a giant of his day, with a reputation that made him perhaps the first modern celebrity-conductor. As a conductor of opera, he was a penetrating musical analyst with a tremendous sense of theater. All of these factors helped shape his approach to the symphony, which he reserved for his biggest ideas about music and the search for meaning in life. Often described as monumental, Mahler's symphonies offer the listener an experience that is not only transcendently beautiful, but that also reflects Mahler's deepest ideas about life itself. Leave your day-to-day concerns behind as you listen: once the music begins, you are in the realm of the eternal.

Born in 1860 in Bohemia, Mahler was one of the composers who toiled in the shadow of Beethoven, who had redefined the possibilities of symphonic form with his Choral Symphony, the Ninth. In 1888, when Mahler composed most of his Symphony No. 1, other composers were still incorporating the familiar, decorative conventions of the late Romantic era in their symphonies— Dvořák, Saint-Saëns, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky, to name a few. Though Brahms was also haunted by the specter of Beethoven, he worked as an apprentice might with a master's tools and traditions. It was Mahler who faced the challenge of revolutionizing the form as Beethoven did, and who used it to express the fullness of meaning he found in the biggest metaphysical questions and the deepest personal experiences we face as human beings.

Musicologists marvel that the 29-year-old Mahler expected nothing but success when his First Symphony premiered in Budapest on November 20, 1889. Instead, it was greeted with scattered boos and halfhearted applause. "Naively, I imagined it would be child's play for performers and listeners, and would have such immediate appeal that I should be able to live on the profits and go on composing," he told his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner. By contrast, Brahms, who was in his 40s and a successful composer by the time he completed his first symphony, was tormented by anxiety over its introduction.

Mahler was 48 when he began work on his ninth symphony. After completing his eighth—which, with its large chorus, became known as "The Symphony of a Thousand"—the number nine loomed large in his creative path. He evaded it by disguising his next major work as a song cycle and titling it *Das Lied von der Erde* even though it is symphonic in spirit and structure. But what would come after that? His Symphony No. 9 in D major, composed between 1908-09. Though it was the last he completed, seemingly in fulfillment of the "curse of the ninth," it was actually his tenth symphonic work. And by the time of his death in 1911, he had completed enough work on a Symphony No. 10 to serve as the basis for modern performing editions. Perhaps, in the 21st century, we can best hear his Symphony No. 9 as a valediction without the curse of the ninth interfering in the background.

Music historians and Mahler's biographers tend to view 1907, the year before he began work on the Ninth, as signaling the final chapter of Mahler's life. It was full of portentous and even tragic events for the composer, beginning with his resignation from the Vienna Court Opera. Though we know him for his symphonies and his conducting, Mahler proved his talents as a man of the theater at the Vienna Court Opera, and his abilities in this area—and his love of opera, especially Beethoven's *Fidelio*—showed themselves in his symphonies. His separation from the Opera put an end to a tenure of dazzling distinction that encompassed both musical and dramatic direction, but was marred by anti-Semitism against him and his protégé, Bruno Walter. But four months later, in July, he and his wife Alma endured a far more painful separation: the death of their four-year-old daughter, Maria, after a brief and nightmarishly intense siege of diphtheria and scarlet fever. Still overwhelmed by sudden grief, just days after Maria's funeral, Mahler—a man of vibrant physical activity—learned of the heart condition that would be the main cause of his own death four years later. Thus, his artistic speculations on life and death became far more immediate than ever before.

In his Ninth Symphony, many listeners believe they hear the lessons of loss and transcendence borne of Mahler's experiences in 1907. The template for the symphony encompasses four movements for the first time since his Sixth, which he completed in 1905; but his inclusion of the traditional four movements rather than five or six hardly signaled a backward glance or an abridgment of scope. The symphony is expansive and, as always with Mahler, infinitely patient in facing the eternal. It is lingering and contemplative in its development.

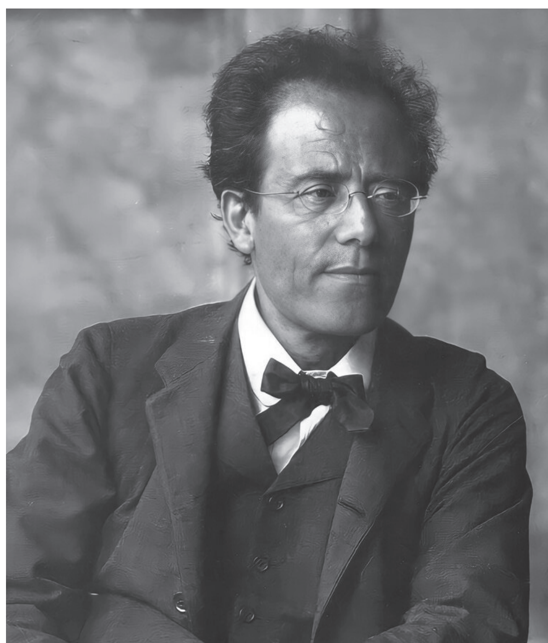
Relating Mahler's inspiration for the symphony's first movement to Wagner's correspondence with Mathilde Wesendonck, the late musicologist Michael Steinberg—writing for the Boston Symphony and San Francisco Symphony—calls this movement "surely Mahler's greatest achievement in symphonic composition." He cites Wagner's description of "the art of transition," which Wagner described as the basis of his art. Steinberg calls the Ninth's first movement "the high point of Mahler's own practice in the deep and subtle art of transition, of organic expansion, of continuous variation." Every note explores the boundary between life and death, connecting life's continual endings and separations to our ultimate separation from life. We

hear this throughout the movement—from the hushed sound of the cellos as it opens, to the muted, trailing coda that ends in enervated silence. Comprising about a third of the symphony, this movement forms an arch that seems to frame a full lifetime's eventfulness. Interestingly, Leonard Bernstein—a lover and influential interpreter of Mahler's music—heard in this movement's hesitant cellos the beating of Mahler's own failing heart. Whether or not we agree as we listen, Bernstein's observation reminds us of Mahler's lifelong struggle to bring the depths of inner experience into the light of art.

Another constant in Mahler's music is the contrast and the resulting tension between Parnassian contemplation, as in the first movement, and earthbound sensuality, exemplified in the second movement by earthy country dances called Ländlers. Like Mozart and Beethoven, Mahler loved these dances. Though he sometimes described them in disparaging terms, they were touchstones of fond recollections of the street music of his childhood. Here, as elsewhere in his symphonies, they create a tension between the vulgar and the sublime—each necessary to give meaning and context to the other. And in this movement, as in the first, the absorbing sensuality of Mahler's music seems to devolve and withdraw like an ebbing tide, or like the sound of carnival music dying away.

In the third movement, we are suddenly engulfed. An emphatically stated sense of tension takes hold, all the more powerful for its contrast with the gentle close of the second. The movement's almost explosive energy provides a dramatic foil for the fourth movement, the famously poignant adagio. Few passages in music are so transcendently powerful. In the adagio's agonized final journey, we seem to encounter every joy and sorrow of our own lives until, in its gentle resolution, a meaning beyond words is revealed.

Michael Clive is a cultural reporter living in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut. He is program annotator for Pacific Symphony and Louisiana Philharmonic, and editor-in-chief for The Santa Fe Opera.



Is There a "Curse of the Ninth?"

From the midpoint of the 20th century onward, after two world wars, and in an age of jet travel and the atomic energy, this phrase was still familiar but was dismissed as quaint superstition. To Gustav Mahler, who was born only a decade after the midpoint of the 19th century and 33 years after Beethoven's death, it was something more complex. It represented the dreaded possibility of nine symphonies marking the limit of human artistic inquiry, and a signpost toward inevitable death. Though he was probingly intellectual, this idea—half logic, half superstition—dogged him. While all of the symphonists who followed Beethoven composed in his shadow, it was Mahler who most determinedly carried forward the burden of the monumentality of Beethoven's symphonies. But while Beethoven's revelatory Ninth seemed like an ultimate meditation on human freedom and brotherhood, it was not the end of his profound metaphysical speculations; they continued for years as he composed the great string quartets and piano sonatas of his late period. For Mahler, the symphony was the form for the exploration and utterance of great ideas.

History and philosophy notwithstanding, the idea of the "curse of the ninth" is pretty uncomplicated—simply the notion that composers are destined to die before completing a tenth symphony. Arnold Schoenberg, the great modernist and father of the Second Viennese School, asserted that the idea of a ninth-symphony jinx originated with Mahler, whose thoughts never seemed to be far from the meaning of human life, mortality, and the possibility of an afterlife. "It seems that the Ninth is a limit," Schoenberg wrote in an essay on Mahler's art and ideas. "He who wants to go beyond it must pass away. It seems as if something might be imparted to us in the Tenth [that] we ought not yet to know, for which we are not ready. Those who have written a Ninth stood too close to the hereafter."