

## Symphony No. 7

### 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 season, forcing him to relegate his composing to the summer months, which he would spend as a near-hermit in the Austrian countryside. He wrote his Seventh Symphony during the summers of 1904 and 1905 — the two *Nachtmusik* movements in the former year, the other three in the latter — and he was at that time escaping a Vienna that had become a source of considerable stress. He was hanging on to his position as Director of the Vienna Court Opera, infamous then as now as a hotbed of musico-political intrigue, but his anxiety at work, as well as the travel demands of his guest-conducting engagements elsewhere, led to frequent medical problems.

Fortunately, Mahler could look forward to his composing. His summer getaway was then at Maiernigg, a bump on the map on the south shore of the Wörthersee, a bucolic spot in the region of Carinthia in southern Austria. There, Mahler had constructed a tiny, sparsely furnished composing hut on the hill behind his villa, and every morning he would meander up along a forest path to work in splendid isolation. The seclusion was not left to chance: a servant-girl, for example, would leave the villa moments after him on a more direct trail so she could deposit his breakfast at the hut and make her getaway before he arrived. In a letter that he penned in 1910 to his wife, Alma, he recalled how the notes had at first eluded him five years earlier:

I had intended to complete the Seventh [Symphony], for which both *Andantes* were done. For two weeks I tortured myself to the

point of melancholy, as you must remember, until I ran off to the Dolomites! There the same circus, and finally I gave up and went home, convinced that the summer would be wasted. You did not meet me in Krumpendorf because I had not announced my arrival. I stepped into the boat to be rowed over. At the first stroke of the oars, I hit upon the theme (or rather the rhythm and the style) of the Seventh Symphony during the summers of 1904 and 1905 — the two *Nachtmusik*, the introduction to the first movement, and within four weeks the first, third, and fifth movements were completely finished! Do you remember that?

What Mahler achieved during those two summers continued the path of purely instrumental symphonies that had occupied him in his Fifth (1901–02, a panorama of human

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### In Short

**Born:** July 7, 1860, in Kalischt (Kaliště), Bohemia (today the Czech Republic), near the town of Humpolec

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

**Work composed:** the summers of 1904 and 1905, in Maiernigg, Austria, with revisions continuing even after the premiere

**World premiere:** September 19, 1908, in Prague, with the composer conducting the Czech Philharmonic

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** March 8, 1923, Willem Mengelberg, conductor; this marked the New York Premiere

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** June 23, 2007, Lorin Maazel, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 86 minutes

emotions) and Sixth (1903–04, a deeply tragic work whose composition overlapped somewhat with his work on the Seventh). His new symphony, it turned out, would prove to be a far more optimistic work than its immediate predecessor; the Seventh essentially traces a path from darkness into light — or, as Mahler described it succinctly to his admirer William Ritter, a Swiss man-about-the-arts: “Three night pieces; the finale bright day. As foundation for the whole, the first movement.”

Although Mahler wavered from time to time, he was generally averse to attaching titles to individual movements of his symphonies or to revealing literary or pictorial programs that may have inspired them. Nonetheless, the title *Nachtmusik* (*Night Music*) is overtly attached to the second and fourth movements and, as Mahler’s comment to Ritter reveals, also informs the third movement. In fact, it seems central to the work’s conception and expression that this symphony has sometimes been called

(without the composer’s blessing) the “Song of the Night.” This emphasis on nocturnal nature-music connects Mahler’s Seventh to the older tradition of Romanticism. As the Mahler acolyte and conductor Bruno Walter (who would serve as the New York Philharmonic’s Music Advisor from 1947 to 1949) explained:

In the three middle movements of the Seventh, meaningfully and humanly revealing, we hear music embodying a Romanticism that we thought had been overcome.

**Instrumentation:** four flutes (one doubling piccolo) and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, three clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, tenor horn, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, triangle, orchestra bells, tambourine, cymbals, rute, cowbells, tam-tam, low pitched bells, two harps, mandolin, guitar, and strings.

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## Preparing the Premiere

Some two dozen rehearsals of Mahler’s Seventh Symphony were scheduled with the Czech Philharmonic prior to its premiere. Mahler’s friend, William Ritter, provided a vivid account of the preparations, which were published in 1961 as a posthumous memoir in the *Revue musicale Suisse*.

The rehearsals were very chaotic. The festival hall was also a banqueting hall, where waiters were laying the tables while on the stage the Master and orchestra gave of their utmost. ... On Wednesday, September 15, when Madame Mahler arrived from Vienna and the orchestra had



Mahler in 1906

worked excessively on the first movement, Mahler suddenly realized that neither his wife nor I had heard a single note of the finale. Brusquely, he declared: “Right, the Finale ... uninterrupted, all right? For the very first time!” ... And there for the first time we heard the immortal sunrise of that glorious finale, opening with a frenetic clash of timpani reminiscent of the first bars of *Die Meistersinger*. Fired by the presence of the woman he idolized for her beauty and ... Viennese gracefulness, the Master threw himself about like a madman, seated, standing, dancing, leaping like a jack-in-the-box, in all directions at once, conducting to the right, to the left, in front, behind ... But what enthusiasm! Such delirium! And how we were carried away! And, indomitably Czech though they were in their response to a German conductor, the orchestra was conquered, swept off its feet.”