

Prelude

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MASTERWORKS #9:

MAHLER 5 MAY 31 - JUNE 2, 2019

Mahler's fascination with music lifted him out of a life of poverty and domestic violence to become one of the most important composers and conductors the world has ever known.

For Mahler, who believed that great symphonies conveyed every conceivable emotion, music was the most important thing in the world.ⁱ Perhaps his deep connection to music was an emotional response to an early childhood filled with poverty, domestic violence and the constant challenge to negotiate the world as an outsider.

One of 14 children, Gustav Mahler was born July 7, 1860 in the Bohemian village of Kalischt, to an impoverished family of Moravian Jews.ⁱⁱ Gustav's father, who ran a



Gustav Mahler

bakery and distillery, was physically abusive to the children and Mahler's mother, Marie.ⁱⁱⁱ Marie had suffered with a limp from birth as well as a heart condition, and her overbearing husband viewed her as little more than a slave.^{iv} Soon after Gustav's birth, the family moved to the nearby German town of Jihlava.^v As part of a German-speaking Austrian minority, Gustav was an outsider among the indigenous Czech population, and as a Jew, he was ostracized even further.^{vi} Years later, Mahler wryly observed, "I am condemned to homelessness thrice over: as a Bohemian among Austrians, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world."^{vii}

Mahler's home life was a struggle. His father, a brutish self-educated man, resented his delicate wife, who was born into a cultured family with social superiority.^{viii} Gustav understandably forged a strong connection with his mother. Not only did he inherit her weak heart, but he even manifested a slight limp in imitation of his mother's disability.^{ix} Years later, during a psychoanalysis session with Sigmund Freud in

1910, a deeply traumatized Mahler, who was seeking help in his marriage, recalled painful episodes from his childhood, including an instance in which he ran screaming from the house.^x

Mahler sought refuge in music and by age four, was able to reproduce, on both accordion and piano, the Czech folk tunes he heard in the villages.^{xi} Legend has it that three-year-old Gustav was so entranced by a military band that he followed the soldiers for a distance until someone noticed the tiny child wandering along and escorted him home.^{xii} Gustav's fixation on music prompted his Jewish mother to convince the local priest to allow her son to sing with the Catholic children's choir.^{xiii} He began composing his own music and, by the age of 15, he was accepted as a student at the Vienna Conservatory, where he won piano and competition prizes.^{xiv} Upon graduation, when he failed to win the Beethoven Prize for composition, he turned to conducting to earn a living, while continuing to compose during summer vacations.^{xv}

Thin and wiry, Mahler wore horn-rimmed glasses that slid off his nose the moment he began waving his arms. His movements appeared frantic, and a critic once remarked he looked like a cat having convulsions.^{xvi} But Mahler was an intimidating presence to the musicians. He criticized performers for minor mistakes and terrorized musicians to the point that they were fearful of lifting their instruments.^{xvii} As a conductor, Mahler's intense focus was legendary. In 1889, while conducting the opening night of Lohengrin in Budapest, the prompter's box caught fire.^{xviii} Mahler, oblivious, continued to conduct as flames lit up



Gustav Mahler



the stage. He halted while the fire department extinguished the blaze, then he immediately picked up where he'd left off.^{xix}



Alma Mahler

At 37, Mahler became the artistic director of the Vienna Court Opera, but the appointment came with a condition: no Jews were allowed.^{xx} Mahler, who was never observant, converted to Catholicism in advance

of the appointment.^{xxi} When Gustav arrived in Vienna he attended a party, and there met a dazzling, charming, intelligent and artistic 22-year-old Alma Schindler.^{xxii} Forty-two-year-old Gustav married a pregnant Alma in 1902. She was 19 years his junior, and their relationship was notoriously tempestuous. The grouchy, workaholic Mahler, whose overbearing manner resembled his father's, demanded that his career come first, to the point of forcing Alma to give up her own musical aspirations, insisting there would be only one composer in the family.^{xxiii}

Alma, accustomed to a glittering social life, must have found her marriage to Gustav unbearably restrictive. For 10 months of the year, while Gustav worked, Alma was expected to meet her husband each evening, on foot, regardless of whether



Alma Mahler and Children

she was pregnant, ill or exhausted.^{xxiv} In the summer of 1910, while Gustav went to his mountain retreat on the Italian/Austrian border to compose, Alma traveled to a luxurious spa, and began a passionate affair with a fellow guest, 27-year-old Walter Gropius, an aspiring architect.^{xxv} Mahler learned of her affair when he intercepted a letter from Gropius, but Alma refused to apologize and instead, she raged that Gustav was impotent and inadequate in bed.^{xxvi} Mahler was plunged into despair, wept all night outside her locked door and filled their home with roses, and based on the advice of Sigmund Freud, promised to publish her songs^{xxvii} and encouraged her to return to composing.^{xxviii} Gustav referred to this crisis point in his marriage as the "three hammer blows": Alma's affair coincided with the death

of their five-year-old daughter, and the discovery of his heart defect.^{xxix} Finally, Alma appeared to relent, and, in October of 1910, when Mahler was appointed Music Director of the Metropolitan Opera,^{xxx} she sailed for New York with Gustav.^{xxxi} (Mahler had no idea of Alma's secret meeting with Gropius the day before their departure,^{xxxii} and Alma later married Walter Gropius in 1915.)^{xxxiii}

In February of 1911, Mahler was stricken with endocarditis, a bacterial infection of the heart valves.^{xxxiv} Antibiotic treatment was not yet available. The Mahlers traveled to Paris for an experimental treatment, but there was no hope of recovery. He asked to return to Vienna and died there six weeks later.^{xxxv} His last words, according to Alma, were "Mozart – Mozart!"^{xxxvi}

The "curse of the Ninth Symphony" is a composer's superstition, believing death follows the 9th Symphony. Mahler took it so seriously that he called his ninth Symphony *Das Lied von der Erde* instead of numbering it and called his next symphony the 9th. But he never lived to see either performed, dying just six weeks short of his 51st birthday on May 18, 1911.

Join us!

Please join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for **Mahler 5, May 31 - June 2, 2019** and, before you listen for the famous Adagietto in Mahler's 5th Symphony, enjoy Beethoven's magnificent Triple Concerto for piano, violin and cello.



WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC WILL SOUND?

Try HSO'S Listening Guide, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!

Beethoven's Triple Concerto is performed by Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, and Daniel Barenboim, conducting the Berlin Philharmonic from the piano:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flQuXUpUC04>

The Adagietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony is performed by the Chicago Symphony, conducted by Daniel Barenboim:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWPACef2_eY

Claudio Abbado conducts the Lucerne Festival Orchestra in Mahler's Fifth Symphony:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOvXhyldUko>

Curious to learn more?

If we've got you hooked on Mahler, and you are curious to hear some of the most beautiful passages from each of his symphonies, here's your chance:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIfWo2DoFyo>

On Mahler's 155th Birthday, WQXR offered a fascinating look at Mahler's life:

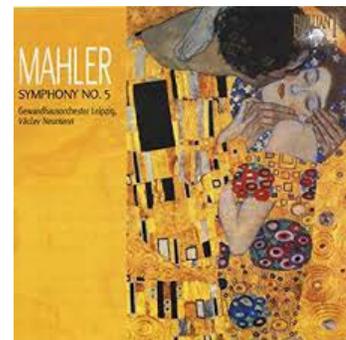
<https://www.wqxr.org/story/box-and-hammer-story-mahlers-6th-his-155th-birthday/>

And Mahler's music has been featured in countless movies:

<https://www.wqxr.org/story/where-have-i-heard-mahlers-music-screen/>

To hear Alma's music:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0uh-MPPiDg>



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Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program? Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.

Beethoven's Triple Concerto is a near masterpiece not often heard live, but the work has long attracted great performers, and none are greater than the stellar lineup of Oistrakh, Rostropovich and Richter, with the great Beethoven conductor Herbert von Karajan, with his Berlin Philharmonic to provide the ultimate in orchestral support, a classic recording by any definition (EMI/WARNER).

Gustav Mahler's sublime Symphony No. 5 has become one of this composer's most popular works, and the challenges it poses to conductors and orchestras are myriad in terms of complexity and achieving the long line. Many great recordings abound, but the prize goes to Leonard Bernstein and the Vienna Philharmonic (DG), an interpretation brimming with drama, anguish and excitement.



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