

# Symphony of a Thousand: Mahler's Eighth

Friday, January 16, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Kirill Petrenko, conductor · Jacquelyn Wagner, soprano · Golda Schultz, soprano · Jasmin Delfs, soprano · Beth Taylor, contralto · Fleur Barron, mezzo-soprano · Benjamin Bruns, tenor · Gihoon Kim, baritone · Le Bu, bass · Rundfunkchor Berlin, chorus · Bachchor Salzburg, chorus · Staats- und Domchor Berlin, chorus

*approximately 85 minutes*

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## Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

85 minutes

### *Symphony No. 8 in E-flat major "Symphony of a Thousand"*

#### THE COMPOSER

Gustav Mahler was born on July 7, 1860, in the Bohemian village of Kaliště (now in the Czech Republic), the second of fourteen children in a Jewish family. Death was a constant presence in his childhood: many of his siblings died in infancy. This early acquaintance with mortality would permeate his music throughout his life.

Mahler's prodigious musical talent emerged early: at four he discovered his grandparents' piano and took to it at once. At fifteen he entered the Vienna Conservatory, and he later turned to conducting to earn his living, reserving composition for summer holidays. His conducting career was meteoric: by 1897, at age thirty-seven, he had become artistic director of the Vienna Court Opera, where his innovative productions and exacting standards made him one of the most celebrated opera conductors of his era.

As a composer, Mahler worked on a monumental scale. His nine completed symphonies (plus an unfinished tenth) and five song cycles represent a titanic achievement, bridging nineteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century modernism. Yet during his lifetime, his conducting reputation far outstripped his recognition as a composer. It was only after his death in 1911, and particularly after 1945, that Mahler's compositions gained the worldwide acclaim they enjoy today.

#### ABOUT THE WORK

The Symphony No. 8 stands alone in Mahler's output, and indeed in the entire symphonic literature. He composed it during the summer of 1906 at Maiernigg on the Wörthersee in Carinthia, working at such speed that the symphony was complete in all its essentials by mid-August. He later described the experience to the critic Richard Specht

in almost mystical terms: "I saw the whole piece immediately before my eyes, and only needed to write it down as though it were being dictated to me."

Mahler thought it the grandest thing he had ever done. "Try to imagine the whole universe beginning to ring and resound," he wrote. "There are no longer human voices, but planets and suns revolving."

The symphony's popular nickname, "Symphony of a Thousand," was invented by the impresario Emil Gutmann for the premiere and refers to the vast forces required: a massive orchestra with expanded brass and woodwind sections, organ, mandolin, harmonium, piano, celesta, bells, two mixed choirs, a children's choir, and eight vocal soloists. Though Mahler disliked the nickname, it captures something of the work's unprecedented ambition.

#### WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

**In Part I:** - The overwhelming organ chord that launches the work, immediately followed by the blazing choral entrance on "Veni, creator spiritus!" - The three-note "Veni" motif (the notes spelling out the rhythm of the words), which permeates the entire symphony - The double fugue that develops with stunning complexity, yet never loses its spiritual ecstasy - The climactic return to E-flat major at "Accende lumen sensibus" (Kindle our senses with light)

**In Part II:** - The mysterious orchestral prelude depicting the mountain landscape, with its ethereal string harmonics and distant brass - The contrasting characters of the anchorites: the brooding Pater Ecstaticus, the meditative Pater Profundus, the serene Pater Seraphicus - The angelic choirs of blessed boys and younger angels bearing Faust's immortal essence - The three penitent women: the Magna Peccatrix (Mary Magdalene), the Mulier Samaritana (the Samaritan woman), and Maria Aegyptiaca (Mary of Egypt) - Doctor Marianus's ecstatic hymn to the Mater Gloriosa - The transcendent moment when the Mater Gloriosa finally sings: a brief passage, achingly short, yet the goal of the entire work - The Chorus Mysticus's closing affirmation: "Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis" (All that is transient is but a symbol), where material from Part I returns, transfigured into a vision of eternity

## STRUCTURE AND TEXTS

The symphony is cast in two parts, a structure unprecedented for a symphony but unified by a single theme: redemption through the power of love.

**Part I: “Veni Creator Spiritus”** sets a ninth-century Latin hymn for Pentecost, traditionally attributed to Hrabanus Maurus. The text invokes the Holy Spirit, the “Creator Spirit”, asking for inspiration, wisdom, and the fire of divine love. Mahler casts this ancient prayer in sonata form, combining the strict architecture of the symphony with the fervor of a sacred choral work. The movement opens with an overwhelming E-flat major chord from the organ, followed immediately by the chorus’s exultant cry: “Veni, creator spiritus!” (Come, Creator Spirit!). This three-note “Veni” motif becomes the germinating cell for the entire symphony.

**Part II: Final Scene from Goethe’s “Faust”** sets the closing scene of Germany’s greatest literary work. After a lifetime of striving, the soul of Faust is rescued from Mephistopheles and carried heavenward by angels. In a mystical landscape of mountain gorges inhabited by anchorites and blessed spirits, Faust’s soul ascends through various stages of purification until it is welcomed into the highest heaven by the Mater Gloriosa (the Virgin Mary) and the “Eternal Feminine” that, in Goethe’s words, “draws us onward.”

Mahler saw the profound connection between the two texts: the Holy Spirit invoked in the medieval hymn is the same force of divine love that, in Goethe’s vision, redeems the erring human soul. Musical themes from Part I return transformed in Part II, binding the two halves into a unified whole.

## THE PREMIERE

The premiere took place on September 12, 1910, in Munich’s newly built Neue Musik-Festhalle, with over a thousand performers. The audience included Thomas Mann, Richard Strauss, Camille Saint-Saëns, Anton Webern, Arthur Schnitzler and Max Reinhardt. It was a triumph beyond anything Mahler had experienced, and the ovation lasted twenty minutes. Thomas Mann afterwards wrote to him, calling him “the man who, as I believe, expresses the art of our time in its profoundest and most sacred form.”

It was the last premiere of one of his own works that Mahler would conduct. Eight months later, at age fifty, he was dead.

## PART I: VENI CREATOR SPIRITUS

**Veni, creator spiritus,** *Come, Creator Spirit,*

**mentes tuorum visita**, *visit the minds of your people,*  
**imple superna gratia** *fill with divine grace*  
**quae tu creasti pectora.** *the hearts which you have created.*  
**Qui diceris Paraclitus**, *You who are called the Paraclete,*  
**altissimi donum Dei**, *gift of the most high God,*  
**fons vivus, ignis, caritas**, *living fountain, fire, love,*  
**et spiritualis unctio.** *and spiritual anointing.*  
**Infirma nostri corporis** *The weakness of our body*  
**virtute firmans perpeti**, *strengthen with lasting power,*  
**accende lumen sensibus**, *kindle light in our senses,*  
**infunde amorem cordibus.** *pour love into our hearts.*  
**Hostem repellas longius** *Drive far away the enemy*  
**pacemque dones protinus;** *and grant us peace;*  
**ductore sic te praevio** *with you as guide going before us,*  
**vitemus omne noxium.** *may we avoid all harm.*  
**Per te sciamus da Patrem** *Through you may we know the Father*  
**noscamus atque Filium;** *and recognize the Son;*  
**teque utriusque Spiritum** *and may we always believe*  
**credamus omni tempore.** *in you, the Spirit of both.*  
**Da gaudiorum praemia**, *Give us the rewards of joy,*  
**da gratiarum munera;** *give us the gifts of grace;*  
**dissolve litis vincula**, *dissolve the bonds of strife,*  
**adstringe pacis foedera.** *strengthen the ties of peace.*  
**Gloria Patri Domino**, *Glory be to God the Father,*  
**Deo sit gloria et Filio**, *and glory to the Son,*  
**cum Spiritu Paraclito**, *with the Paraclete Spirit,*  
**nunc et per omne saeculum.** *now and forever.*  
**Amen.**

PART II: CLOSING SCENE FROM FAUST (SELECTED PASSAGES)

**Chorus Mysticus:**

**Alles Vergängliche** *All that is transient*

**ist nur ein Gleichnis;** *is but a symbol;*

**das Unzulängliche,** *the insufficient*

**hier wird's Ereignis;** *here becomes event;*

**das Unbeschreibliche,** *the indescribable*

**hier ist's getan;** *here is accomplished;*

**das Ewig-Weibliche** *the Eternal Feminine*

**zieht uns hinan.** *draws us onward.*

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## Tonight's artists

### **Golda Schultz** *soprano*

Golda Schultz is a South African soprano. She trained at the Juilliard School in New York and in the opera studio of the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, and then joined that company's ensemble. Her international career took off with Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Salzburg Festival in 2015, followed by Countess Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro* at Glyndebourne and the Vienna State Opera, Vitellia in *La clemenza di Tito* in Salzburg and Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Later roles include Agathe in *Der Freischütz* in Munich, Micaëla in *Carmen* at the Paris Opera and Madame Lidoine in *Dialogues des Carmélites* at Glyndebourne. She is equally active as a concert singer and recitalist.

### **Fleur Barron** *mezzo-soprano*

Fleur Barron is a Singaporean-British mezzo-soprano, born in Northern Ireland to a Singaporean mother and a British father, who grew up in Hong Kong and later New York. She shared the 2025 Grammy for Best Opera Recording for Saariaho's *Adriana Mater* with the San Francisco Symphony under Esa-Pekka Salonen, in which she sang the title role. She has become one of the most sought-after mezzos of her generation, equally at home in opera, concert and recital. She is particularly associated with Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* and *Kindertotenlieder*, which she has performed with conductors including Daniel Harding and Semyon Bychkov, and she is a committed performer of new music, which makes her an ideal interpreter for a world premiere such as this.

**Rundfunkchor Berlin** *chorus*

Gijs Leenaars, chorus master

**Bachchor Salzburg** *chorus*

Michael Schneider, chorus master

**Staats- und Domchor Berlin** *chorus*

Kai-Uwe Jirka & Kelley Sundin-Donig, chorus masters

**FURTHER READING**

**ACCESSIBLE The Eighth: Mahler and the World in 1910**

*Stephen Johnson, University of Chicago Press 2020*

A whole book about the Eighth Symphony and the Munich premiere of September 1910, read against Mahler's personal crisis and the Europe of that year.

**ACCESSIBLE Why Mahler?: How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World**

*Norman Lebrecht, Anchor 2011*

A short, opinionated and readable introduction to Mahler's life and symphonies, a good way in before a work on the scale of the Eighth.

**DEEPER The Cambridge Companion to Mahler**

*Jeremy Barham (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2007*

Essays by Mahler scholars on the symphonies, songs and reception, useful for the Eighth's pairing of the hymn "Veni, creator spiritus" with the closing scene of Goethe's Faust.

**SOURCES**

1. Kirill Petrenko conducts Mahler's Eighth Symphony, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/56386/>
2. Gustav Mahler: Sinfonie Nr. 8 Es-Dur, Rundfunkchor Berlin. <https://www.rundfunkchor-berlin.de/en/concerts/gustav-mahler-sinfonie-nr-8-es-dur-2/>
3. Programme Note: Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 8, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/gustav-mahler-symphony-no-8>
4. Symphony No. 8 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony\\_No.\\_8\\_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_(Mahler))
5. Symphony No. 8, Mahler Foundation. <https://mahlerfoundation.org/mahler/compositions/symphony-no-8/>
6. Gustav Mahler, Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav\\_Mahler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Mahler)
7. The Eighth: Mahler and the World in 1910, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780226740829>
8. Why Mahler?: How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781400096572>
9. The Cambridge Companion to Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521540339>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-01-16-petrenko>

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