

BERLINER PHILHARMONIKER

A Universe in Sound: Mahler's Third Symphony

Thursday, May 21, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conductor · Joyce DiDonato, mezzo-soprano · Rundfunkchor Berlin, chorus · Staats- und Domchor Berlin, chorus

approximately 100 minutes

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

Symphony No. 3 in D minor

100 minutes

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 Third Symphony is the longest in the standard orchestral repertoire, typically lasting around 100 minutes, and one of Mahler's most personal statements. He composed it during the summers of 1895 and 1896 at his lakeside hut on the Attersee in Upper Austria, in a burst of staggering ambition. It was meant as a creation story, setting the whole world to music. Its working title was *Pan*, after the Greek god of

nature; Mahler also gave its movements descriptive headings, which changed from draft to draft, linking them to a vast cosmic hierarchy. One version reads:

1. *Pan awakens. Summer marches in.*
2. *What the flowers in the meadow tell me.*
3. *What the animals in the forest tell me.*
4. *What the night tells me.* (Alto solo)
5. *What the morning bells tell me.* (Alto, women's chorus, boys' chorus)
6. *What love tells me.*

Mahler eventually withdrew these titles, before the score was published, fearing they would mislead audiences into hearing literal programme music. The cosmic ascent they outline remains the spiritual architecture of the work. Each movement climbs one rung higher up the great chain of being, from raw nature through plant and animal life to the night, the awakening of conscious religious feeling, and ultimately to divine love itself.

The symphony was finally premiered complete on 9 June 1902 in Krefeld, Germany, with the composer conducting. The Swiss critic William Ritter wrote that the closing Adagio was “perhaps the greatest Adagio written since Beethoven.”

The first movement is gigantic: a half-hour-long evocation of summer “marching in,” opening with a massive call from eight horns in unison and unfolding through chaotic primordial stirrings, brass-band marches, and visions of gods awakening. The second movement is, by deliberate contrast, a delicate minuet, Mahler's vision of meadow flowers swaying in the breeze. The third movement is a sprawling scherzo built around a posthorn solo of unforgettable melancholy, played from offstage.

The fourth movement brings the human voice for the first time. The mezzo-soprano sings Friedrich Nietzsche's “Midnight Song” from *Also sprach Zarathustra*, “*O Mensch! Gib acht!*” (O Man! Take heed!), over a hushed orchestra of great spiritual weight. The fifth movement explodes into joy: women's voices and boys' choir sing of three angels with their famous “*Bimm Bamm*” refrain, music of unforgettable freshness. And then the great finale: a slow, hymn-like Adagio of the most exalted lyricism, building over more than twenty minutes to one of the most overwhelming climaxes in all music. Mahler acknowledged that the love he had in mind was the love of God.

What to listen for tonight: the sheer scale of the opening's massed brass; the sudden tenderness of the second movement after that overwhelming opening; the offstage posthorn in the third movement, evoking distance, memory, longing; the metaphysical hush of the alto's "Mensch" passage in the fourth; the joyful bell-imitations of the fifth; and, above all, the closing Adagio's slow, inexorable journey from quiet faith to overwhelming affirmation. Mahler called it "what love tells me", and few works in the literature mean it so completely.

YANNICK NÉZET-SÉGUIN, CONDUCTOR

Canadian conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, born in Montreal in 1975, is one of the most influential musicians in the world today, holding three of the most prestigious positions in classical music simultaneously: Music Director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Artistic and Music Director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and Artistic Director and Principal Conductor of his hometown Orchestre Métropolitain of Montreal, where in 2019 he signed a contract for life.

Trained at the Quebec Conservatory in piano, conducting, composition, and chamber music, with further studies in choral conducting at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, Nézet-Séguin counts the legendary Italian maestro Carlo Maria Giulini among his most formative mentors. He took up the Philadelphia Orchestra in 2012 and the Metropolitan Opera in 2018, and both contracts now run to 2030. Beyond his core posts, he is a regular guest with the Berliner Philharmoniker, the Vienna Philharmonic, and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. A small curiosity: he began as a pianist, studying the instrument from the age of five, and his spouse, Pierre Tourville, plays viola in the Orchestre Métropolitain.

JOYCE DIDONATO, MEZZO-SOPRANO

American mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, born in Prairie Village, Kansas, in 1969, is among the most beloved singers of her generation. The sixth of seven children in an Irish-American family, she trained at Wichita State University and the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia before launching a career that has taken her to virtually every major opera house in the world: La Scala, Covent Garden, the Vienna State Opera, the Bayerische Staatsoper, and the Metropolitan Opera, where she made her debut as Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro* in the 2005–06 season.

A three-time Grammy Award winner (2012, 2016, 2020) for Best Classical Vocal Solo, DiDonato has built her core operatic repertoire on Handel, Mozart and Rossini; Rosina in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* has been one of her signature roles. She is also known for ambitious themed

concert projects. Her album *In War & Peace* (2016) explored the human cost of conflict through Baroque opera arias; her 2022 project *EDEN* examined humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Tonight's artists

Rundfunkchor Berlin *chorus*

The women of the Rundfunkchor Berlin sing the women's chorus in the fifth movement.

Staats- und Domchor Berlin *chorus*

The boys of the Staats- und Domchor Berlin sing the children's chorus in the fifth movement.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Mahler: A Biography**

Jonathan Carr, Overlook Press 1998

A compact, readable life of Mahler that covers his years at Steinbach am Attersee, where he composed the Third Symphony during the summers of 1895 and 1896.

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Mahler**

Jens Malte Fischer, Yale University Press 2013

A full modern biography, translated from German, that follows Mahler's life and thought, including the ideas about nature and Nietzsche behind the Third Symphony.

DEEPER **Mahler: Symphony No. 3**

Peter Franklin, Cambridge University Press 1991

A Cambridge Music Handbook devoted to the Third Symphony: its composition, the programme titles Mahler later withdrew, and its Nietzsche and Wunderhorn texts.

SOURCES

1. Mahler's Third with Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Joyce DiDonato, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/56431>
2. Mahler's Third with Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Joyce DiDonato, Digital Concert Hall. <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/56431>
3. Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 3 in D minor (programme note by Susanne Stähr), Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/gustav-mahler-symphony-no-3-in-d-minor>
4. Symphony No. 3 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_(Mahler))
5. Mahler: Symphony No. 3 (programme note), Hollywood Bowl / LA Phil. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/7328/movements-1-6-from-symphony-no-3>
6. Gustav Mahler, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Mahler

7. Biography, Yannick Nézet-Séguin (official site). <https://www.yannicknezetseguin.com/en/biography>
 8. Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yannick_N%C3%A9zet-S%C3%A9guin
 9. Joyce DiDonato, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joyce_DiDonato
 10. Mahler: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780879518028>
 11. Gustav Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300194111>
 12. Mahler: Symphony No. 3, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521379472>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-05-21-nezet-seguin>

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