

Gustavo Dudamel conducts Mahler's Seventh Symphony

Thursday, April 15, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Gustavo Dudamel, conductor

approximately 80 minutes

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

Symphony No. 7 in E minor

80 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

Mahler wrote his Seventh Symphony from the inside out. In the summer of 1904, at his lakeside villa at Maiernigg in Carinthia, he was finishing the Sixth, the darkest of his symphonies. In the same weeks he also wrote two slow, mysterious movements that he called *Nachtmusik* (night music), with no idea yet of what would surround them.

The following summer he returned to Maiernigg and found he could not go on. By his own account, the block lifted only when he was being rowed across the lake to his villa: with the first strokes of the oars, the rhythm and character of the introduction to the first movement came to him. He later claimed that the three remaining movements, the first, third and fifth, were then written in four weeks, though scholars think it took somewhat longer. The result is a symphony in five movements, laid out symmetrically: two large outer movements, the two night pieces inside them, and a shadowy scherzo at the centre.

Mahler finished the orchestration in 1906 but waited two more years to perform the work. He conducted the premiere himself on 19 September 1908 in Prague, at a festival marking the sixtieth year of Emperor Franz Joseph's reign.

The Seventh remains one of the least familiar of Mahler's symphonies. It has no programme and tells no obvious story, and the brassy C major finale, coming after so much darkness, has puzzled listeners from the start. Arnold Schoenberg, who heard the symphony in 1909, was among the first to admire it. He wrote to Mahler praising the new direction it took, and singled out the second *Nachtmusik* in a lecture a year after Mahler's death. The nickname "Song of the Night" is sometimes attached to the work.

Gustavo Dudamel, who conducts these performances, has called the symphony "cosmic" and a "book of life". "There is simply everything here," he says in the Berliner Philharmoniker's introduction to the concert: "a funeral march, sarcasm, grandeur, chaos, beauty."

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Langsam, Allegro risoluto. Over a dragging, dotted rhythm in the low strings, the stroke of the oars, a tenor horn plays the opening call. It is an instrument rarely seen in a symphony orchestra, and its hollow, penetrating tone colours the whole introduction. The fast main section drives hard in E minor. Its second theme, a long, yearning violin melody, later opens out into the stillest passage of the movement, a hushed chorale that swells to a luminous climax.

II. Nachtmusik I. Two horns call to each other, one answering like an echo, and a night march begins, with woodwind birdcalls and cowbells heard from offstage. Mahler is said to have

thought of Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, which he had seen in Amsterdam. Major and minor keep changing places, so that the march never quite settles into cheerfulness or gloom.

III. Scherzo. The marking is *Schattenhaft*, shadowy. Timpani and low strings trade single notes, scurrying strings fill in a haze, and a waltz twice tries to get going and falls apart. This is the centre of the symphony, and its strangest music.

IV. Nachtmusik II. Marked *Andante amoroso*, this is a serenade for a much smaller orchestra, with a guitar and a mandolin strumming among the strings. A solo violin sets the tone with a tender little refrain. Alma Mahler connected the movement with the poetry of Eichendorff and its murmuring springs.

V. Rondo-Finale. A volley of timpani throws the doors open on daylight. The main theme, in blazing C major, nods to the festive music of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, and it keeps coming back between abrupt changes of scene, in what has been heard both as celebration and as parody. Near the end the main theme of the first movement returns in the brass, bells and cowbells join in, and the symphony finishes in a blaze of noise.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Mahler**

Jens Malte Fischer, Yale University Press 2013

The fullest single-volume life of Mahler in English, with a chapter on each symphony; its account of the summers at Maiernigg explains how the Seventh came to be written around its two night pieces.

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

Norman Lebrecht, Anchor 2011

A personal, readable argument for why Mahler speaks to modern listeners, with a guide to each symphony and its recordings, the awkward Seventh included.

DEEPER **Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies**

Constantin Floros, Amadeus Press 2003

Floros goes through each Mahler symphony movement by movement, drawing on the composer's own remarks; his chapter on the Seventh is a sober guide to its sources and its much-argued finale.

SOURCES

1. Gustavo Dudamel conducts Mahler's Seventh Symphony, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/57141/>
2. Symphony No. 7 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_(Mahler))
3. Mahler: Symphony No. 7, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/mahler-symphony-no-7>
4. Symphony No. 7 in E minor, "Song of the Night", LA Phil. <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/4044/symphony-no-7-in-e-minor-song-of-the-night>
5. Gustav Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300194111>
6. Why Mahler?: How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781400096572>
7. Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781574670257>



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