

Mäkelä Conducts Verklärte Nacht and Mahler's Seventh

Sunday, April 11, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican
Klaus Mäkelä, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	SCHOENBERG 1874–1951 <i>Verklärte Nacht, Op. 4 (version for string orchestra)</i>	27'
2	MAHLER 1860–1911 <i>Symphony No. 7 in E minor</i>	80'
TOTAL MUSIC		107'

Arnold Schoenberg

1874–1951

Verklärte Nacht, Op. 4 (version for string orchestra)

27 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) was born in Vienna and was largely self-made as a composer, with Alexander Zemlinsky, later his brother-in-law, as his mentor. His early works, such as *Verklärte Nacht* and the huge *Gurre-Lieder*, grow out of the late Romantic language of Brahms and Wagner. In the years before the First World War he gave up traditional tonality in works including *Pierrot lunaire*, and by 1923 he had arrived at the twelve-tone method, a way of organising all twelve notes of the chromatic scale that shaped a great deal of later twentieth-century music. He was also a teacher of great influence, and Alban Berg and Anton Webern were among his pupils. From the mid 1920s he directed a master class in composition at the Academy of Arts in Berlin. When the Nazis forced him out in 1933 he formally returned to the Jewish faith in Paris and emigrated to the United States. He settled in Los Angeles, became a professor at the University of California there in 1936 and an American citizen in 1941, and lived in the city until his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Verklärte Nacht (‘Transfigured Night’) is the piece by which most concertgoers first meet Schoenberg, and it comes from before any of the things he is famous for. He wrote it in 1899, aged 25, as a string sextet, by most accounts in about three weeks. Atonality was nearly a decade away and the twelve-note method more than two. The lan-

guage is the late Romantic one he had grown up with, and its two parents are easy to hear: Wagner, above all *Tristan und Isolde*, in the restless harmony and the recurring motifs, and Brahms in the way every theme is worked, varied and combined with the others.

What was new was the idea of writing a symphonic poem for chamber forces. The subject is a poem by Richard Dehmel from the collection *Weib und Welt* ('Woman and World', 1896), a book that had its author prosecuted for obscenity and blasphemy. Two people walk through a bare, cold wood by moonlight. The woman confesses that she is carrying a child conceived with a man she did not love, before she met the one beside her. They walk on. Then the man answers: the warmth between them will transfigure the child, and it will be his. They embrace and walk on through what the poem's last line calls the high, bright night.

The sextet was first played in Vienna on 18 March 1902 by the Rosé Quartet with two extra players, one of them the cellist and composer Franz Schmidt. The audience was restless and some of it hostile; Schoenberg later recalled that the evening ended in a riot and in actual fights. Part of the offence was the poem, and part was the harmony, which wanders a long way from its home key of D minor. A Viennese concert society had already turned the score down, reportedly because of a single chord that the textbooks did not recognise. Dehmel himself heard the piece and wrote to the composer that he had meant to follow the motifs of his text in the music but soon forgot to, he was so enthralled.

Schoenberg later arranged the sextet for full string orchestra, and that is the form in which it is most often heard and the one played in this concert. It makes a pointed opening for this programme: Mahler's Seventh, after the interval, was a symphony that Schoenberg and his circle revered.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The music runs for nearly half an hour without a break and follows the five stanzas of the poem: the walk, the woman's confession, the walk again, the man's reply, and the walk transfigured.

It begins with the walk: a slow, heavy tread on a repeated low D with a falling line above it, cold and dark. The confession is the longest and most turbulent part. Listen for the agitated, sighing figures that pile up as the woman speaks, and for the solo violin and viola that emerge from the body of strings, a reminder of

the piece's chamber origins. Her section ends in something close to collapse, and the walking music returns, louder and more desolate than before.

Then comes the turn on which the whole piece depends. After a pause the cellos begin a warm, broad melody in D major: the man's answer. From this point the harmony settles, the textures lighten, and themes that sounded anguished in the first half come back transformed. Muted strings, harmonics and rippling arpeggios stand for the shimmering night the man describes.

In the closing pages the opening tread returns one last time, now in the major and high up, over glittering figuration, and the music fades out on a long D major chord.

Gustav Mahler

80 minutes

1860–1911

Symphony No. 7 in E minor

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's Seventh was written back to front. In the summer of 1904, at his lakeside villa at Maiernigg on the Wörthersee in Carinthia, he finished the Sixth Symphony and, alongside it, sketched two slow-ish character pieces that he called *Nachtmusik*, night music. They be-

came the second and fourth movements of a symphony that did not yet have a beginning. When he came back the following summer to supply one, nothing would come. He went walking in the Dolomites to shake the block loose and returned without an idea. Then, as he told the story later, he got into the boat to be rowed across the lake, and at the first stroke of the oars the rhythm and character of the opening came to him. He claimed to have written the first, third and fifth movements in four weeks; scholars think six or seven more likely. The score is dated 15 August 1905.

It waited three years for a performance, and by then Mahler's life had changed. In 1907 he resigned from the Vienna Court Opera, his elder daughter died, and he was told he had a heart condition. He conducted the premiere on 19 September 1908 in Prague, with the Czech Philharmonic, at an exhibition marking sixty years of Emperor Franz Joseph's reign, and gave the symphony again in Munich and the Netherlands in the months that followed.

The Seventh has been the least played of his symphonies, and the usual reason given is the finale: after four movements of darkness and half-light, a blazing C major rondo that some hear as triumphant and others as hollow or ironic. The nickname 'Song of the Night' is not Mahler's. He gave no programme and no titles beyond the two *Nachtmusiken*, though he compared the first of them to Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. The simplest way to hear the whole is as a journey from dusk to full daylight.

It has always had admirers among composers. Schoenberg first heard it in 1909 and wrote to Mahler that he now counted him among the classics, 'but as one who to me is still a pioneer'. Nearly forty years later, in American exile, he took the trouble to answer a New York critic who had dismissed the piece.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement. Over a slow, lurching rhythm in the strings (the oar strokes), a tenor horn sings out a dark, angular melody. It is a band instrument, rarely seen in an orchestra, and Mahler uses it only here. The introduction speeds up into a fierce march in E minor led by the horns. In the middle of the movement everything stops for a vision: high violins, harp glissandos and soft trumpet fanfares, as though a window had opened. The march returns and ends in a hard, bright E major.

Second movement (*Nachtmusik I*). Two horns call to each other, the second muted to sound far away. Bird calls in the woodwind grow into a clatter, and then a march sets off,

swinging between major and minor every few beats. Listen for cowbells in the distance and for the violins tapping the strings with the wood of the bow.

Third movement. Mahler marks the scherzo ‘shadowy’. Timpani and plucked basses trade single notes, and out of them spins a ghostly waltz that keeps tripping, shrieking and falling apart. The trio offers a few bars of plain rustic melody before the shadows close in again.

Fourth movement (Nachtmusik II). A serenade, marked *Andante amoroso*. A solo violin leans into the opening phrase, and a guitar and a mandolin join the orchestra, which has lost its trumpets, trombones and tuba. The horn has the main tune. It is the gentlest music in the symphony, though the harmony clouds over more than once.

Fifth movement. Timpani hammer out a solo and the brass answer with a fanfare in C major. The refrain keeps returning between episodes that change speed and character without warning: a mincing, old-fashioned dance, rowdy rustic tunes, passages that sound like Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger*. Near the end the march theme from the first movement breaks in, first in the minor and then turned to the major, and bells and cowbells ring through the closing pages.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Mahler**

Jens Malte Fischer, Yale University Press 2013

The fullest modern life of Mahler in one volume, with a clear chapter on the Seventh and on the Maiernigg summers in which it was written.

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

Ross’s opening chapters are set in exactly this world: Mahler and Strauss at the height of their fame, and the young Schoenberg about to step past *Verklärte Nacht* into atonality.

DEEPER **Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies**

Constantin Floros, Amadeus Press 2003

Floros goes through every Mahler symphony movement by movement, with the sketches, letters and remarks behind each; his chapter on the Seventh is one of the most useful guides to a puzzling score.

SOURCES

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2. Press Release: The LSO announces its 2026/27 season, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/press-release-the-lso-announces-its-2026-27-season/>
3. Verklärte Nacht, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verkl%C3%A4rte_Nacht
4. Schoenberg: Verklärte Nacht Op. 4 for string sextet (programme note by Nigel Simeone), Music in the Round. <https://musicintheround.co.uk/programmes/schoenberg-arnold-verklarte-nacht-op-4-for-string-sextet/>
5. Program Notes: Poetry in Motion, Episode 2 (by Scott Foglesong), California Symphony. <https://www.californiasymphony.org/?p=5623>
6. Symphony No. 7 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_(Mahler))
7. Mahler: Symphony No. 7, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/mahler-symphony-no-7>
8. 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>
9. Gustav Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300194111>
10. The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312427719>
11. Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781574670257>



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