

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Rattle Conducts Mahler's Third Symphony

Sunday, April 18, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican

Sir Simon Rattle, conductor · Beth Taylor, mezzo-soprano · London Symphony Chorus, choir · Tiffin Boys' Choir, choir

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

Mahler's Third is the longest symphony he wrote, and the longest that orchestras play with any regularity: six movements, around an hour and forty minutes, with a mezzo-soprano, a women's chorus and a boys' choir who sing for barely a quarter of an hour between them. He sketched ideas for it from 1893 and did the main work in the summers of 1895 and 1896 at Steinbach am Attersee, in the Austrian lake district where he spent his holidays. The rest of the year belonged to the opera house in Hamburg, where he was chief conductor.

He described what he was attempting to his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner. It was hardly right to call the piece a symphony, he told her, since it kept to none of the usual forms; but to him the word meant building a world with every technical means available. The world in question was the whole of nature, arranged as a ladder. While he was composing he gave each movement a title: 'Pan Awakes, Summer Marches In' for the first, then 'What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me', 'What the Animals in the Forest Tell Me', 'What Man Tells Me', 'What the Angels Tell Me' and 'What Love Tells Me'. He toyed with calling the whole thing 'Pan', enjoying the fact that the word names a Greek god and also means 'all'. A seventh movement, 'What the Child Tells Me', was planned as the conclusion: the song 'Das himmlische Leben' ('The Heavenly Life'), written in 1892. In the end he held it back, and it became the finale of the Fourth Symphony instead. Traces of it remain in the Third's fifth movement.

As with his earlier symphonies, Mahler shared these titles with friends and then withdrew them, wary of listeners following a story instead of the music. They are still the best short guide to a piece whose movements differ so much from one another: an enormous march, a minuet, a scherzo with a distant posthorn, a setting of Nietzsche, a carol-like chorus and a long slow finale without words.

Single movements were played first. Arthur Nikisch gave the second movement in Berlin in November 1896, and Felix Weingartner conducted three movements there the following March. The complete symphony had to wait until 9 June 1902, when Mahler conducted it at a music festival in Krefeld, on the Rhine. It was one of the greatest successes he had as a composer in his lifetime, and the final Adagio made the deepest impression.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement. Eight horns in unison open the symphony with a striding tune that many listeners find close to the big theme in the finale of Brahms's First. What follows takes more than half an hour, as long as the next four movements together. Two kinds of music alternate. One is heavy and slow, with growling brass, drum strokes and long recitatives for solo trombone: inert nature, in Mahler's scheme, before life stirs. The other is a march that starts far off in the woodwind and comes nearer each time, picking up piccolos, side drums and brass-band swagger until summer arrives in a riot. Near the end of the

central section, snare drums placed offstage rattle on their own before the eight horns bring back the opening. Mahler asks for a long pause when the movement is over.

Second movement. A minuet led off by the oboe, light and graceful, with quicker episodes that blow through it like gusts across a field.

Third movement. The scherzo is built on one of Mahler's own early songs, 'Ablösung im Sommer', about the cuckoo's death and the nightingale who takes over the singing. Twice the bustle stops and a posthorn, played from offstage, sings a slow and distant melody over hushed strings. Near the end something like panic breaks out before the music gathers itself and gallops to the close.

Fourth movement. The mezzo-soprano sings the 'Midnight Song' from Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*: 'O Mensch! Gib Acht!' ('O Man! Take heed!'). The orchestra barely moves, rocking between two notes, and the oboe keeps sliding upward in a cry like a night bird's.

Fifth movement. It follows without a break, and the mood flips. The boys imitate bells ('Bimm, bamm') while the women sing a poem from the folk collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, 'Es sungen drei Engel' ('Three angels were singing'), about Peter's sins being forgiven. The soloist joins in as the penitent.

Sixth movement. Again there is no pause. The strings begin a broad, quiet melody in D major, and for some twenty-five minutes Mahler lets it grow, with interruptions that recall the anguish of the first movement. After the last of these a flute and piccolo are left almost alone; then the brass take up the theme as a soft chorale and the whole orchestra builds to an ending of repeated D major chords, with two timpanists pounding in step.

Tonight's artists

Beth Taylor *mezzo-soprano*

Beth Taylor has the symphony's one solo part: Nietzsche's 'Midnight Song' in the fourth movement, and a few lines as the penitent among the angels in the fifth. These are Sir Simon Rattle's last concerts of the LSO's 2026/27 season at the Barbican, given on 18 and 20 April with no interval. On 24 April the orchestra, Rattle and Taylor take the symphony to the Wiener Konzerthaus, where the women of the Wiener Singakademie and the Wiener Sängerknaben sing the choral parts.

London Symphony Chorus *choir*

Only the women of the London Symphony Chorus are needed, and only for the fifth movement, where they sing the Wunderhorn poem 'Es sungen drei Engel' against the boys' bell sounds.

The London Symphony Chorus was founded in 1966 as the chorus of the London Symphony Orchestra. Now an independent, self-governing choir, it keeps a close association with the LSO, performing and recording the great choral-orchestral repertoire with the orchestra at the Barbican and elsewhere, and also working with other orchestras.

Tiffin Boys' Choir *choir*

Mahler gives the boys the sound of bells, a repeated 'Bimm, bamm' above the women's voices in the fifth movement; the two London performances are sung by the Tiffin Boys' Choir.

The Tiffin Boys' Choir is the choir of Tiffin School, a boys' grammar school in Kingston upon Thames in south-west London. Founded in 1957, it appears with the London orchestras and at the Royal Opera House, the Royal Festival Hall and the Barbican whenever a score calls for boys' voices.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Mahler**

Jens Malte Fischer, Yale University Press 2013

A long but very readable modern life of Mahler, with a chapter on each symphony; the pages on the Steinbach summers show how the Third grew out of his daily walks and reading.

ACCESSIBLE **Mahler: A Biography**

Jonathan Carr, Overlook Press 1998

A short, brisk biography for anyone who wants the man behind the Third without eight hundred pages: the Hamburg conductor who composed only in his summer holidays.

DEEPER **Mahler: Symphony No. 3**

Peter Franklin, Cambridge University Press 1991

A Cambridge Music Handbook on this symphony alone, covering its programmes, the Nietzsche and Wunderhorn texts and the music movement by movement.

SOURCES

1. Mahler Symphony No 3: Sir Simon Rattle, 18 April 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/mahler-symphony-no-3-18-apr-27/>
2. Mahler Symphony No 3: Sir Simon Rattle, 20 April 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/mahler-symphony-no-3-20-apr-27/>
3. London Symphony Orchestra / Taylor / Rattle, 24 April 2027, Wiener Konzerthaus. <https://konzerthaus.at/en/program-and-tickets/london-symphony-orchestra-taylor-rattle/63753>
4. 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/>
5. Symphony No. 3 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_(Mahler))
6. Mahler: Symphony No. 3 (programme note), Hollywood Bowl / LA Phil. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/7328/movements-1-6-from-symphony-no-3>
7. Gustav Mahler, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Mahler
8. 3. Sinfonie (Mahler), Wikipedia (de). [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/3._Sinfonie_\(Mahler\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/3._Sinfonie_(Mahler))
9. Tiffin School, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiffin_School
10. Tiffin Choirs, Tiffin Choirs. <https://www.tiffinboyschoir.com/>
11. Gustav Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300194111>
12. Mahler: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780879518028>
13. Mahler: Symphony No. 3, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521379472>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-04-18-rattle>

Version 1, 7 October 2026