

Mäkelä's Mahler Seventh

Wednesday, October 28, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw

Klaus Mäkelä, conductor

approximately 80 minutes

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

80 minutes

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 Symphony is the great enigma of his output: the one his admirers argue about most, and the one that took longest to win a secure place in the repertoire. It is a vast, five-movement nocturnal journey that travels, across roughly eighty minutes, from darkness toward a blazing, almost defiant daylight. Mahler wrote the music quickly, in the summers of 1904 and 1905, at the height of his powers and his fame as director of the Vienna Court Opera. Curiously, he began in the middle: the two movements he called 'Nachtmusik' (Night Music) came first, in 1904, and he later said he then struggled

to find a way into the outer movements until, rowing across a lake one day, the rhythm of the oars unlocked the slow introduction of the first movement.

The symphony has a long-standing nickname, 'Song of the Night' (Lied der Nacht), though it was not Mahler's own. Still, night is unmistakably the work's presiding atmosphere. Two of its five movements are explicitly 'night musics' (one a kind of eerie nocturnal march, the other an intimate serenade complete with guitar and mandolin), and the central scherzo is marked 'Schattenhaft,' shadowy. Around this nocturnal core, the symphony stretches from a brooding, searching first movement to a finale that throws the windows open onto brilliant, clattering C-major sunlight.

That finale has always been the sticking point. After the mystery and ambiguity of the preceding movements, its boisterous, deliberately old-fashioned festivity, full of cowbells, timpani, brass fanfares and echoes of operetta, struck early listeners as incoherent, even vulgar, a let-down after so much subtlety. The premiere, which Mahler conducted himself in Prague on 19 September 1908 with the Czech Philharmonic, left both audience and players baffled, and the Seventh remained for decades his least-loved symphony. Modern audiences and conductors have learned to hear that finale differently: as ironic, exuberant, knowingly excessive, a hard-won (or perhaps deliberately ambiguous) emergence into the light. Today the Seventh is prized precisely for its strangeness: its surreal colours, its abrupt shifts of mood, its refusal to resolve into anything simple. It is Mahler at his most modern and most mysterious.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony unfolds as an arch of five movements, with the two 'Night Musics' framing the central scherzo.

First movement (Langsam, then Allegro risoluto). Listen for the very opening: a dark, halting melody intoned by the tenor horn (a rare instrument, with a baritone-brass sound) over funereal rhythms, one of Mahler's most arresting beginnings. From this murky slow introduction the music gathers into a striding, heroic Allegro, but the mood keeps clouding over; note the radiant, expansive passages where the music seems to glimpse a brighter world before being pulled back into shadow.

Second movement (Nachtmusik I). An uncanny nocturnal march. Listen for the calling horns at the start, the trudging procession, the birdsong and distant cowbells evoking a nocturnal landscape: music both eerie and oddly beautiful.

Third movement (Scherzo, Schattenhaft). ‘Shadowy’ and grotesque: a whirling, waltz-haunted dance full of spectral effects: spooky pizzicatos, snapping rhythms, sardonic woodwind shrieks. This is Mahler’s nightmare-scherzo, sinister and unstable.

Fourth movement (Nachtmusik II). The symphony’s tender heart: an intimate serenade marked ‘amoroso,’ scored with reduced forces and graced by the unmistakable plucked sounds of guitar and mandolin. Listen for its sweet, slightly melancholy lyricism, chamber music dropped into the middle of a giant symphony.

Fifth movement (Rondo-Finale). Daylight floods in: blazing brass, hammering timpani, and a riot of festive, almost garish C-major energy, shot through with fanfares and echoes of operetta and Wagner. Listen for how Mahler piles theme upon theme in deliberate excess, and decide for yourself whether this is triumph, irony, or something stranger. That is the divisive, exhilarating question at the heart of the Seventh.

FURTHER READING

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

Norman Lebrecht, Anchor 2011

A personal, opinionated introduction to Mahler and his symphonies by a critic long devoted to them, the puzzling Seventh included.

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Mahler**

Jens Malte Fischer, Yale University Press 2013

A full modern biography, translated from German, that places the Seventh in Mahler’s Vienna years and follows it to its premiere in Prague in 1908.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Mahler**

Jeremy Barham (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2007

Essays on Mahler’s life, style and symphonies, for listeners who want to dig into the structure and night music of the Seventh.

SOURCES

1. Klaus Mäkelä conducts Mahler, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/calendar/klaus-makela-conducts-mahler-2026-10-28/>
 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. Symphony No. 7, Mahler Foundation. <https://mahlerfoundation.org/mahler/compositions/symphony-no-7/>
 4. Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781400096572>
 5. Gustav Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300194111>
 6. The Cambridge Companion to Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521540339>
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Version 3, 30 September 2026