

ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

Mäkelä's Mahler Seventh

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

Klaus Mäkelä, conductor

approximately 80 minutes

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

Symphony No. 7 in E minor

80 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-10-28-makela>

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