

The Long Farewell

Thursday, April 16, 2026 · 19:30 · Wiener Konzerthaus

Sir Simon Rattle, conductor

approximately 85 minutes

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

85 minutes

Symphony No. 9 in D major

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 Ninth Symphony is the last he lived to complete, and almost everything about it has come to be read in the shadow of that fact. He composed most of it in the summer of 1909 at the family's retreat at Toblach in the Dolomites, working in the small hut he kept for composition, and finished the fair copy in New York the following spring. By then his life had been overturned. In the space of a single dreadful summer in 1907 he had lost his elder daughter Maria to scarlet fever and diphtheria, resigned his exhausting post as director of the Vienna Court Opera, and been told by his doctors that his heart was failing.

He left for the New World and a punishing new career conducting in New York, but he carried that triple wound with him, and it pours into the Ninth.

The symphony has long been heard as a sustained meditation on leave-taking: a farewell not only to a person or a place but to life itself. Mahler had reason to feel the shadow. He was superstitiously aware that Beethoven, Schubert, and Bruckner had each died after a ninth symphony, and he had tried to cheat the so-called ‘curse of the Ninth’ by refusing to number his preceding orchestral song-symphony, calling it ‘Das Lied von der Erde’ instead. The Ninth that followed could not be evaded. He did not live to hear it: he died in May 1911, and the premiere was given on 26 June 1912 in Vienna by his disciple Bruno Walter, with the Wiener Philharmoniker.

What makes the Ninth so haunting is not merely its biography but its musical language, which stands on a threshold. The harmony strains repeatedly toward dissolution; tonal centres waver and collapse; the orchestration thins, again and again, to a handful of solo lines, as though the great Mahlerian apparatus were being dismantled before our ears. Alban Berg called the first movement the most glorious thing Mahler ever wrote, and heard in it an extraordinary love of the earth. Later listeners, Leonard Bernstein foremost among them, heard in its fractures a premonition of the century to come: Bernstein spoke of three deaths foretold, Mahler’s own, the death of tonality and the death of a whole culture.

The symphony’s design is itself a farewell to convention. Its four movements form a great arch that inverts the usual symphonic shape: it begins and ends with slow movements, framing two faster, more violent ones at the centre. The opening Andante is built from a halting, syncopated figure that several listeners have likened (Bernstein among them) to Mahler’s own irregular heartbeat: the very rhythm of mortality. The two middle movements turn caustic and worldly: a heavy, ironic Ländler that distorts the rustic dance of Mahler’s Austrian boyhood, and a ferocious Rondo-Burleske of contrapuntal fury, music of almost manic energy that seems to fend off the encroaching darkness with sheer noise and motion. And then comes the great Adagio finale, one of the most profound slow movements in the orchestral repertoire, a long, hymn-like outpouring for the strings that gathers all the symphony’s grief into a single sustained song.

Its ending is unlike any other. After the climaxes have spent themselves, the music does not conclude so much as evaporate. The texture grows ever sparer, the phrases ever shorter and further apart, un-

til the symphony fades into silence on a few held string notes, marked by Mahler to die away to nothing. In the manuscript of the first movement he wrote the words 'Leb' wohl' (farewell), and in the finale's closing pages he quotes his own Kindertotenlieder, the songs on the deaths of children. It is among the most quietly devastating endings in all music: not a final cadence but a slow letting-go, the sound of life itself receding beyond hearing.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement (*Andante comodo*) opens in fragments: a soft, hesitant heartbeat figure in cellos, horn, and harp, out of which the main theme emerges in the second violins as a sighing, falling phrase. Notice how the whole movement is built from this tension between a tender, resigned lyricism and sudden eruptions of panic and protest; the music repeatedly gathers toward catastrophic climaxes, then sinks back exhausted. Listen for the moments where the texture splinters into bare solo lines, and for the passage where a muted trumpet sounds a quiet funeral fanfare over the wreckage, the great Mahlerian orchestra reduced to a few voices speaking in the dark.

The second movement is a *Ländler*, the slow Austrian peasant waltz Mahler loved, but heard here as if through a distorting glass. It begins clumsy and good-humoured, then accelerates and sours: the dance grows coarse, then frantic, then ghostly, three different tempi colliding as nostalgia curdles into mockery. Pay attention to the deliberate heaviness of the rhythm, the way a folk idiom of Mahler's boyhood is made to stagger and grimace.

The third movement, the *Rondo-Burleske*, is the symphony's hard, brilliant core: a whirlwind of dense, aggressive counterpoint that Mahler inscribed, with bitter irony, 'to my brothers in Apollo'. It is music of furious motion and savage wit, racing forward with an almost mechanical drive. But listen for the extraordinary interruption at its centre, where the storm suddenly parts and a serene, yearning melody floats up in the trumpet and strings, a vision of the very tune that will become the heart of the finale, glimpsed for a moment before the burlesque sweeps back and hurtles to its slashing close.

The finale (*Adagio*) answers all that fury with stillness. It opens with a great descending phrase for the full strings, broad and hymnlike, and unfolds as a vast, slow song that keeps reaching

toward consolation. Follow how the music alternates between this warm, full-throated string writing and passages of bleak, halting fragmentation. As it nears the end, the orchestra falls away almost entirely; the long lines break into short, widely spaced phrases, the dynamic sinks toward inaudibility, and the symphony dissolves rather than concludes, held string notes thinning into silence (Mahler marks the last one ‘ersterbend’, dying away), the last and most gradual of all Mahler’s farewells.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Mahler**

Jens Malte Fischer, Yale University Press 2013

A full and readable single-volume life of Mahler, strong on the Vienna and New York years in which the Ninth Symphony was written.

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis**

Stuart Feder, Yale University Press 2004

A psychiatrist and musician reads Mahler’s final years, the crises of 1907 and 1910, that lie behind the Ninth Symphony.

DEEPER **Gustav Mahler: A New Life Cut Short (1907-1911)**

Henry-Louis de La Grange, Oxford University Press 2008

The final volume of La Grange’s monumental biography, covering the years of the Ninth Symphony in great detail.

SOURCES

1. Concert in the Wiener Konzerthaus, 16 April 2026, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-the-wiener-konzerthaus/10755/>
2. Simon Rattle, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Rattle
3. Symphony No. 9 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._9_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._9_(Mahler))
4. 9. Sinfonie (Mahler), Wikipedia (de). [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/9._Sinfonie_\(Mahler\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/9._Sinfonie_(Mahler))
5. Gustav Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300194111>
6. Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300103403>
7. Gustav Mahler: A New Life Cut Short (1907-1911), Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780198163879>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-04-16-rattle>

Version 3, 30 September 2026