

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

The Long Farewell

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

Sir Simon Rattle, conductor

approximately 85 minutes

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

Symphony No. 9 in D major

85 minutes

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.

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.

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