

What the World Tells Me

Friday, May 1, 2026 · 15:30 · Musikverein

Andris Nelsons, conductor · Wiebke Lehmkuhl, alto · Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien, chorus · Wiener Sängerknaben (Vienna Boys Choir), chorus

approximately 100 minutes

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

100 minutes

Symphony No. 3 in D 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 Third is the longest symphony in the standard repertoire (roughly a hundred minutes of music, six movements spread across two parts), and it is also the most all-embracing thing he ever wrote. He composed the bulk of it in the summers of 1895 and 1896, finishing it at the end of July 1896, at his lakeside composing hut in Steinbach am Attersee, fitting the work around the punishing conducting schedule that paid his bills. To his friend the conductor Bruno Walter, who arrived at the lake and looked up at the mountains, Mahler is

said to have replied: ‘You don’t need to look; I have already composed all this.’ The remark catches the symphony’s ambition exactly. This is music that means to contain a whole world.

That ambition was, for a time, explicit. As he worked, Mahler sketched out a programme: a ladder of being that rises from inert nature up through the living kingdoms to the divine. The movements carried titles, and the titles told a story. In one of his late drafts the scheme ran: ‘Pan awakes; Summer marches in’; ‘What the flowers in the meadow tell me’; ‘What the animals in the forest tell me’; ‘What humankind tells me’; ‘What the angels tell me’; and finally ‘What love tells me’. Each rung climbs higher up the chain of creation, from the brute matter of the opening to the all-reconciling love of the close. Mahler shared this programme with friends, argued about it in letters, and then, characteristically, dropped the titles before publication, fearing that listeners would treat the titles as a set of pictures to be matched to the notes rather than letting the music speak. The headings survive in his correspondence and sketches, and they remain the best single key to the work, provided one holds them lightly. They are a scaffold the composer climbed and then kicked away.

The scale required forces to match. Beyond a very large orchestra, with eight horns, an offstage posthorn, prominent brass and a battery of percussion including tuned bells, the Third calls for an alto soloist, a women’s chorus and a boys’ choir, all of whom sit silent until the symphony’s fourth and fifth movements. The vocal texts are themselves a study in Mahler’s reach: the fourth movement sets the ‘Midnight Song’ from Friedrich Nietzsche’s ‘Also sprach Zarathustra’, while the fifth turns to a poem from ‘Des Knaben Wunderhorn’, the folk-poetry anthology that was Mahler’s lifelong well. Philosophy and folk song, Nietzsche and the nursery, stand side by side: exactly the collision of high and humble that defines his art.

Mahler divided the symphony into two unequal parts. Part I is the enormous opening movement alone, a half-hour span that begins in primordial stasis and culminates in a riotous summer march, nature heaving itself into life. Part II gathers the remaining five movements, the slow ascent from flowers and animals through humankind and the angels to the final, wordless Adagio, in which love has the last word. The structure is a deliberate asymmetry: a vast, churning first panel, balanced against a five-fold progression toward serenity.

The premiere of the complete symphony waited until 9 June 1902, in Krefeld, with Mahler conducting at a festival of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein; individual movements had been heard earlier, to mixed reception, but the full work’s first performance was a

genuine triumph, one of the few unambiguous successes of his lifetime as a composer; one critic called the finale perhaps the greatest Adagio written since Beethoven. Mahler had reason to be satisfied: he had set out to build a world in sound, complete from stone to spirit, and on that June evening the world held together.

What makes the Third endure is not its length or its apparatus but the conviction behind both. Mahler famously held that a symphony should be like the world and embrace everything, and the Third is the most literal enactment of that creed. It moves from the deafening to the barely audible, from a Dionysian street parade to the hush of a single sustained string chord, and it asks the listener to hear, in that span, an image of existence itself climbing toward meaning.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Part I. The first movement (marked ‘Kräftig. Entschieden’: strong, decisive) opens with eight horns in unison blaring a craggy, almost barbaric theme: this is ‘Pan awakes’, nature still asleep, vast and inert. What follows is a colossal struggle between deathly stillness (funereal trombone recitatives, drooping wind lines, music that seems stuck in the mud of pre-creation) and the irresistible upward surge of life. Listen for the way the march keeps trying to be born and falling back, until at last ‘Summer marches in’: a swaggering, brass-led parade, vulgar and exhilarating, that finally breaks the inertia and storms to a triumphant close. It is the longest and most chaotic single movement Mahler wrote, and it is meant to overwhelm.

Part II. The second movement, ‘What the flowers in the meadow tell me’, is a graceful minuet: delicate, swaying, scored with chamber-music lightness. After the giant first movement it is a deliberate exhalation: innocent, pretty, occasionally ruffled by a quicker breeze, but always returning to its gentle poise. The third, ‘What the animals in the forest tell me’, is a scherzo built from one of Mahler’s own Wunderhorn songs, ‘Ablösung im Sommer’, about the death of a cuckoo. Its great surprise arrives at the centre: a solo posthorn, played offstage, sounds a nostalgic, faraway melody, a vision of distance and longing suspended above the scampering forest music, before the animals’ bustle resumes and the movement ends with a sudden, almost violent jolt.

The fourth movement, 'What humankind tells me', is the symphony's still centre and its turn from nature to consciousness. Out of near silence the alto soloist intones Nietzsche's 'Midnight Song', 'O Mensch! Gib Acht!' (O Man! Take heed!), a slow, dark meditation on the depth of the world's woe and the deeper longing for eternity. Listen for the oboe's strange upward cry, like a sound of nature, bending against the voice, and for how little the orchestra does: this is music pared to a whisper.

Without a break, the fifth movement, 'What the angels tell me', breaks the spell. A women's chorus and a boys' choir enter with 'Es sungen drei Engel', three angels singing a bright Wunderhorn song of sin and forgiveness, while the boys imitate pealing bells with an insistent 'bimm-bamm'. After the abyss of the fourth movement, this is sudden daylight: quick, naive, consoling.

Then comes the great finale, 'What love tells me': a slow Adagio for strings alone at first, one of the most sublime movements in all Mahler. A long, hymn-like melody unfolds with infinite patience, gathering the whole orchestra into it by degrees, suffering several climactic surges and recoveries before rising, at the very end, to a blazing affirmation crowned by timpani and brass. After a hundred minutes climbing from stone to spirit, this is the answer: not argument but radiance, love speaking last and longest. Let it arrive slowly; it is built to.

Tonight's artists

Wiebke Lehmkuhl *alto*

In the fourth movement the symphony stops and listens. Out of near-silence the alto sings Nietzsche's 'Midnight Song' from 'Also sprach Zarathustra', 'O Mensch! Gib Acht!' (O Man! Take heed!), its lines weighing the world's deep woe against a longing for joy that 'wants deep, deep eternity'. The part asks not for power but for stillness and a true contralto darkness: a single grave voice, suspended over the barest orchestra, speaking for all of humankind at the symphony's metaphysical centre.

Wiebke Lehmkuhl is a German contralto admired for the depth, evenness and dark beauty of her low register, a true alto in an age when the voice type has grown rare. Born in Oldenburg in 1983, she studied in Hamburg with Ulla Groenewold and Hanna Schwarz, joined the ensemble of the Zurich Opera in 2008, and went on to sing Erda in Das Rheingold, to appear at the Salzburg Easter Festival and, from 2016, at Bayreuth. She has since become a sought-after concert artist, particularly in the great alto parts of the Austro-German repertoire, from Bach's Christmas Oratorio and Mozart's Requiem to Beethoven's Ninth and Mahler. Her singing is prized for its steadiness and gravity rather than display, qualities that make her an ideal voice for the hushed metaphysics of Mahler's 'Midnight Song'.

Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien *chorus*

The women's voices of the Musikverein's own resident chorus carry the angels' song 'Es sungen drei Engel' in the fifth movement.

Wiener Sängerknaben (Vienna Boys Choir) *chorus*

The Vienna Boys Choir supplies the 'bimm-bamm' bell-tones of the angels in the fifth movement.

FURTHER READING

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

Norman Lebrecht, Anchor 2011

A personal, argumentative introduction to Mahler and his symphonies, a good way into a work as vast as the Third.

ACCESSIBLE **Mahler: His Life, Work and World**

Kurt Blaukopf, Herta Blaukopf, Thames & Hudson 2000

An illustrated life of Mahler drawing on letters and contemporary documents, a good companion to the years in which he composed the Third Symphony.

DEEPER **Mahler: Symphony No. 3**

Peter Franklin, Cambridge University Press 1991

A short scholarly handbook devoted to the Third Symphony: its genesis, its programme and its movement-by-movement design.

SOURCES

1. 5th Soirée, 1 May 2026, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/5th-soiree/10731/>
2. 5. Soirée, 1. Mai 2026, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/de/konzerte/5th-soiree/10731/>
3. Wiebke Lehmkuhl, Wikipedia (de). https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiebke_Lehmkuhl
4. Symphony No. 3 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_(Mahler))
5. 3. Sinfonie (Mahler), Wikipedia (de). [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/3._Sinfonie_\(Mahler\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/3._Sinfonie_(Mahler))
6. Why Mahler?: How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781400096572>
7. Mahler: His Life, Work and World, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780500281970>
8. Mahler: Symphony No. 3, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521379472>



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