

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

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.



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-05-01-nelsons>

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