

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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

Symphony No. 3 in D minor

100 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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