

Symphony of a Thousand

Saturday, May 9, 2026 · 15:00 · Wiener Konzerthaus

Andris Nelsons, conductor · Jacquelyn Wagner, soprano · Sarah Wegener, soprano · Ying Fang, soprano · Wiebke Lehmkuhl, alto · Tamara Mumford, mezzo-soprano · Benjamin Bruns, tenor · Michael Nagy, baritone · Tareq Nazmi, bass · Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien, chorus · Wiener Sängerknaben (Vienna Boys Choir), chorus

approximately 85 minutes

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

85 minutes

Symphony No. 8 in E-flat 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 Eighth Symphony is the largest, most exultant, and most public utterance of a composer otherwise known for his solitude and his doubt. He wrote the bulk of it in a single, astonishing burst during the summer of 1906 at his composing hut in Maiernigg, on the Wörthersee. By his own much-repeated account, the opening words of the medieval Latin hymn 'Veni creator spiritus' ('Come, creator spirit') seized him almost like a vision, and the music poured out so fast that he could barely keep pace with it. In a much-quoted letter to the con-

ductor Willem Mengelberg he asked him to imagine the universe beginning to ring and resound: no longer human voices, but planets and suns revolving. Where his earlier symphonies had been long, searching journeys through despair toward consolation, the Eighth begins already at the summit and stays there: it is a symphony of pure affirmation.

Its nickname, ‘Symphony of a Thousand’, was not Mahler’s. It was coined by the impresario Emil Gutmann for the marketing of the premiere, and Mahler disliked it, fearing it reduced his work to a circus spectacle. Yet the figure is no exaggeration. The score calls for eight vocal soloists, a large boys’ choir, two big mixed choruses, an enormous orchestra with extra brass placed apart from the main body, organ, and a battery of unusual instruments. At the first performance in Munich on 12 September 1910, Mahler conducted something close to a literal thousand performers before an audience that included Thomas Mann, Richard Strauss, Camille Saint-Saëns, Anton Webern, Arthur Schnitzler, Max Reinhardt and the young Leopold Stokowski. It was the greatest public triumph of his life and, as it turned out, the last premiere he would ever conduct, for he died the following May.

The symphony’s daring lies above all in its design. Mahler discards the traditional four-movement plan entirely and builds the work in two huge parts, joining two texts separated by seven centuries and two languages. Part I sets the complete Latin hymn ‘Veni creator spiritus’, a ninth-century invocation of the Holy Spirit long used in the Christian liturgy. Part II, far longer, sets the closing scene of the second part of Goethe’s ‘Faust’, the ‘Bergschluchten’, or Mountain Gorges, in which the soul of the redeemed Faust is borne aloft through ranks of hermits, angels, and penitent women toward the ‘Eternal Feminine’. The cast of that scene gave Mahler his solo roles, among them the hermits Pater Ecstaticus and Pater Profundus, Doctor Marianus, the penitents Magna Peccatrix and Gretchen (here named Una poenitentium), and the radiant Mater Gloriosa, though the work makes its meaning through the whole assembled body of voices rather than through any single character.

What could possibly bind a Latin Pentecost hymn to a scene from German Romantic drama? Mahler saw in both the same idea: the descent of a creative, sanctifying, loving spirit that lifts humanity beyond itself. The hymn prays for that spirit to come; Goethe’s scene shows it received, as divine love draws the striving soul upward to grace. The plea of Part I is answered by the redemption of Part II. Mahler called

the Eighth his most important work, the one in which his lifelong preoccupations with death, transcendence, and salvation finally resolved into unclouded light. He dedicated it to his wife Alma.

For all its colossal forces, the Eighth is not merely loud. Mahler handles his thousand performers with a chamber musician's care, dissolving the mass into delicate solos and tender, transparent textures as often as he unleashes it in full cry. The work moves between the two extremes of overwhelming radiance and hushed, almost weightless stillness, and reserves its supreme effect for the very end, where it gathers everything it has into a final, blazing benediction.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Part I, the hymn 'Veni creator spiritus', begins with no introduction at all: the organ sounds and the full chorus erupts immediately on the word 'Veni' ('Come!'), a cry of summoning that sets the tone for everything to follow. This is the symphony's most overtly symphonic stretch: Mahler treats the hymn almost like a vast sonata movement, with the choral lines functioning as themes that are stated, developed, combined, and recapitulated. Listen for the great striding subject heard at the start and for how it returns, transformed, to crown the part. A central, quieter passage on the words 'Infirma nostri corporis' ('the weakness of our body') pleads more tenderly, the soloists weaving above the chorus, before the music regathers its force. The part climaxes with a tremendous double fugue and a final 'Gloria', the offstage brass blazing out and the boys' voices ringing on top as the spirit is hailed in triumph.

Part II could hardly be more different. It opens with a long orchestral prelude, dark, hushed and searching, depicting the rocky mountain gorges where holy hermits dwell, all murmuring low strings and bare, suspended harmonies. Out of this stillness the music builds by slow degrees. Listen for the solo voices of the hermits emerging from the landscape, the baritone's ecstatic song and the bass's surging plea, with Doctor Marianus's tenor later soaring above; then for the chorus of angels bearing aloft the immortal part of Faust, and the limpid, high-floating entry of the boys' choir as the younger angels. A radiant orchestral passage announces the appearance of the Mater Gloriosa, and a soprano sings the penitent's prayer of intercession with melting tenderness. Throughout, notice how Mahler keeps thinning his enormous apparatus down to a few solo lines and a

thread of harmony, so that the final ascent feels earned. That ascent is the Chorus Mysticus, ‘Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis’ (‘All that is transient is but a parable’), which begins as the merest whisper, almost inaudible, and grows over several minutes into the most overwhelming sound in all of Mahler. As the words ‘das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan’ (‘the Eternal Feminine draws us upward’) ring out, the offstage brass return and the whole vast assembly blazes into a final E-flat major chord of pure, transfiguring light. Let it carry you; it is meant to.

Tonight’s artists

Sarah Wegener *soprano*

Sarah Wegener is a German-British soprano admired for the warmth and flexibility of a voice equally at home in Handel and Purcell, the Lied repertoire and demanding contemporary scores. She studied voice at the Stuttgart Musikhochschule, won the International Max Reger Song Competition in 2007, and has worked closely with the composer Georg Friedrich Haas, whose opera *Bluthaus* earned her a ‘Singer of the Year’ nomination from Opernwelt. Her singing is prized for its clarity of text and its luminous, finely controlled top, qualities the radiant soprano writing of Mahler’s Eighth rewards.

Ying Fang *soprano*

Ying Fang, born in Ningbo, China, in 1987, is a soprano celebrated for the silvery purity and ease of her lyric voice. She studied at the Shanghai Conservatory and then at the Juilliard School, and has become a principal soprano at the Metropolitan Opera, where her roles include Ilia in Mozart’s *Idomeneo*. In concert she has sung Mahler, Mendelssohn and Orff with orchestras such as the Chicago Symphony. Her bright, floating upper register suits the high, angelic lines Mahler asks of his sopranos in the Eighth.

Wiebke Lehmkuhl *alto*

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'.

Tamara Mumford *mezzo-soprano*

Tamara Mumford is an American mezzo-soprano with a rich, warm tone, whose career spans opera, oratorio and contemporary music. Her secure, generous singing fits naturally into the layered ensemble of soloists that Mahler's Eighth requires.

Michael Nagy *baritone*

Michael Nagy, born in Stuttgart in 1976 and of Hungarian descent, is a baritone equally distinguished on the opera stage and the concert platform. A former ensemble member of the Frankfurt Opera, where he sang Wolfram in *Tannhäuser*, he has appeared at Bayreuth, the Vienna State Opera and with the Berlin Philharmonic, and is an acclaimed interpreter of the German Lied (he won the International Lied Competition in 2004). His firm, finely focused baritone and his command of text make him a sought-after soloist in the great oratorios and symphonies, including the demanding solo writing of Mahler's Eighth.

Tareq Nazmi *bass*

Tareq Nazmi, born in Kuwait in 1983 and raised in Munich, is a bass admired for the depth, evenness and noble line of his voice. He studied at the Munich Musikhochschule, passed through the Bavarian State Opera's opera studio and was a member of its ensemble from 2012 to 2016, and has since appeared at the Salzburg Festival and leading European houses in Mozart, Verdi and Wagner. Equally at home in concert, he brings a sonorous, well-grounded low register to the profound bass solos of Mahler's Eighth.

Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien *chorus*

The large mixed chorus of Vienna's Musikverein here forms the symphony's central choral mass.

Wiener Sängerknaben (Vienna Boys Choir) *chorus*

The historic Vienna Boys Choir supplies the high, ringing children's voices Mahler sets atop the ensemble in both parts.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE The Eighth: Mahler and the World in 1910

Stephen Johnson, University of Chicago Press 2020

Built around the 1910 Munich premiere of the Eighth Symphony, this book follows the work, its composer and the world around it.

ACCESSIBLE Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters

Alma Mahler, University of Washington Press 1968

Alma Mahler's own account of her marriage, vivid if partisan; the Eighth Symphony is dedicated to her.

DEEPER The Cambridge Companion to Mahler

Jeremy Barham (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2007

Specialist essays on Mahler's symphonies and songs, useful for the Eighth's setting of the Veni creator spiritus and the closing scene of Goethe's Faust.

SOURCES

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4. Wiebke Lehmkuhl, Wikipedia (de). https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiebke_Lehmkuhl
5. Michael Nagy, Wikipedia (de). https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Nagy
6. Tareq Nazmi, Wikipedia (de). https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tareq_Nazmi
7. Symphony No. 8 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_(Mahler))
8. 8. Sinfonie (Mahler), Wikipedia (de). [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/8._Sinfonie_\(Mahler\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/8._Sinfonie_(Mahler))
9. The Eighth: Mahler and the World in 1910, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780226740829>
10. Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780295953786>
11. The Cambridge Companion to Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521540339>



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Version 3, 30 September 2026