

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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

Symphony No. 8 in E-flat major

85 minutes

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

conductor 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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-05-09-nelsons>

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