

Mahler's Ninth, with the Orchestra That First Played It

Thursday, February 18, 2027 · 19:30 · Wiener Konzerthaus

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conductor

approximately 85 minutes

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

Symphony No. 9 in D major

85 minutes

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

The Ninth is the last symphony Gustav Mahler finished, and he never heard it. He had been wary of the number. After his Eighth he wrote a symphony for two voices and orchestra and called it *Das Lied von der Erde* rather than give it a number, mindful that Beethoven, Schubert and Bruckner had not got beyond nine. Only then did he begin a Ninth in name.

The background was the year 1907, in which his elder daughter Maria died at the age of four, a heart condition was diagnosed, and he gave up the directorship of the Vienna Court Opera. From then on he spent his winters conducting in New York and his summers composing at Toblach in South Tyrol (now Dobbiaco in Italy). Sketches for the symphony may go back to the summer of 1908, but the bulk of it was written at Toblach in the summer of 1909, quickly and in a state of high concentration. He wrote to the conductor Bruno Walter that the work said something he had had on the tip of his tongue for a long time. He took the draft to New York, wrote out the fair copy there over the winter, and told Walter on 1 April 1910 that it was done.

Mahler died in Vienna in May 1911. Walter conducted the first performance on 26 June 1912 in Vienna, with the Vienna Philharmonic.

Because of that sequence of events the Ninth has usually been heard as a farewell, and the music gives the idea plenty of support. It is worth remembering, though, that when Mahler wrote it he was not yet fifty, his illness was not yet thought fatal, and he was busy with plans. He went on to draft a Tenth. What can be said is that the tone is more private than in any of his earlier symphonies, and that the form is his own. There are four movements and no voices, but the outer movements are both slow and very long, and the two in the middle are fast, bitter dances. The symphony begins in D major and ends a semitone lower, in D flat.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement, *Andante comodo*, assembles itself out of fragments. Cellos and a horn exchange a halting rhythm, the harp adds a four-note figure, and then the second violins begin a melody built on a falling step of two notes. Mahler associated that falling second with the word farewell, and it runs through the whole movement. Calm, songlike paragraphs alternate with darker ones that swell to violent climaxes and collapse. At the greatest of them the trombones and tuba hammer out the opening rhythm at full force, and a funeral march follows, marked to be played like a heavy procession. Near the end the texture thins to a few solo instruments, flute and others calling like birds, and the movement dissolves.

The second movement is a *Ländler*, the country cousin of the waltz, and Mahler asks for it to be somewhat clumsy and very coarse. It starts out good-humoured. Faster waltz music keeps breaking in, the dances are set against each other, and by the end the *Ländler* has been pulled apart.

The third movement is called Rondo-Burleske and marked “very defiant”. It is the most aggressive music in the symphony, a display of tangled fugal writing driven at speed. In the middle the noise clears for a calmer episode, whose melody the finale will take up and turn into an elegy. Then the opening music returns.

The finale, an Adagio, opens with the strings alone in a broad, hymn-like melody that keeps circling around a small turning figure. The music rises to several full-hearted climaxes and each time falls back. In the last pages the music breaks into fragments, a few notes spread over a very long time, and the final bar is marked to die away.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Mahler**

Jens Malte Fischer, Yale University Press 2013

The fullest single-volume life in English, with a clear chapter on the Ninth and on the summers at Toblach in which it was written.

ACCESSIBLE **Mahler: A Biography**

Jonathan Carr, Overlook Press 1998

A short, level-headed biography that is sceptical of the legend of a dying composer writing his own farewell, which is the question the Ninth always raises.

DEEPER **Gustav Mahler: A New Life Cut Short (1907-1911)**

Henry-Louis de La Grange, Oxford University Press 2008

The last volume of La Grange’s biography covers Mahler’s New York years, the composition of the Ninth and its first performance after his death.

SOURCES

1. Concert in the Wiener Konzerthaus, 18 February 2027, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-the-wiener-konzerthaus/10916/>
2. Concert in Munich, 23 February 2027, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-munich/10961/>
3. Vienna Philharmonic: Mahler, Gasteig München. <https://www.gasteig.de/en/events/vienna-philharmonic/>
4. Concert in New York, 26 February 2027, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-new-york/10962/>
5. Yannick will conduct Mahler’s complete symphonies cycle in 2026-2027, Yannick Nézet-Séguin. <https://yannicknezetseguin.com/en/news/detail/yannick-will-conduct-mahler-s-complete-symphonies-cycle-in-2026-2027/>
6. Symphony No. 9 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._9_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._9_(Mahler))
7. Programme Note: Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 9, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/gustav-mahler-symphony-no-9/>
8. Mahler: Symphony No. 9 D major for orchestra, Universal Edition. <https://www.universaledition.com/symphony-no.-9-for-orchestra-mahler-gustav-ue34712>

9. 9. Sinfonie (Mahler), Wikipedia (German). [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/9._Sinfonie_\(Mahler\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/9._Sinfonie_(Mahler))
10. Gustav Mahler, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Mahler
11. Gustav Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300194111>
12. Mahler: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780879518028>
13. Gustav Mahler: A New Life Cut Short (1907-1911), Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780198163879>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2027-02-18-nezet-seguin>

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