

# The History in This Program

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**T**he New York Philharmonic first performed music from Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5 on November 23, 1911, at a memorial concert for the recently deceased composer who had served as the Orchestra's Music Director from 1909 to 1911. The first movement, the *Funeral March*, was paired with selections from Wagner's *Parsifal* and Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, all conducted by Mahler's successor, Josef Stransky.

The complete symphony would not be performed until 1926, when it was led by Mahler's close friend and associate Willem Mengelberg. The Dutch conductor had made his American debut with the Philharmonic in 1905, and had succeeded Stransky in 1921.

Mengelberg had met and befriended Mahler in 1902, while serving as principal conductor of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. Mahler collaborated frequently with the Concertgebouw, conducting multiple performances of his own music, or listening in the wings as Mengelberg conducted. In a 1906 letter sent to his wife, Alma, from Amsterdam, Mahler praised the "capital fellow" who led the thoroughly rehearsed Concertgebouw, writing "There's no one else I could entrust a work of mine to with entire confidence." In fact, it was Mengelberg who led the Philharmonic's first-ever performances of Mahler mainstays like *Das Lied von der Erde*, the Third Symphony, and the Seventh Symphony, in addition to the Fifth.

His advocacy of Mahler works was matched three decades later during Leonard Bernstein's tenure as Music Director. This season, the Philharmonic celebrates the 100th anniversary of the birth of its Laureate Conductor and renowned Mahler interpreter. When he died in 1990, Bernstein was buried in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery with a copy of Mahler's Fifth Symphony.

To bring it full circle, Bernstein was the first person to hand Jaap van Zweden, the Philharmonic's Music Director Designate, a baton — for a Mahler symphony, no less! In 1987 Bernstein took the Royal Concertgebouw on tour. During a rehearsal at the newly renovated Konzerthaus Berlin, Bernstein asked then concertmaster van Zweden to conduct the first movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 1 while he checked the acoustics in the hall. Thus, with one piece, tonight's concert intertwines the legacies of three former Philharmonic Music Directors — Mahler, Mengelberg, and Bernstein — with the future Music Director.

## — The Archives

To learn more, or to browse through Leonard Bernstein's marked score of Mahler's Fifth Symphony, visit the **New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives** at [archives.nyphil.org](http://archives.nyphil.org).



Mahler and Mengelberg in the Netherlands, in 1906

## Symphony No. 5

### Gustav Mahler

Throughout his career, Gustav Mahler balanced the competing demands of his dual vocation as a composer and as a conductor. Responsibilities on the podium and in the administrative office completely occupied him during the concert season, forcing him to relegate his composing to the summer months, when he would live as a near-hermit in the Austrian countryside.

When he wrote his Fifth Symphony, during the summers of 1901 and 1902, he was escaping a Vienna that had become a source of inordinate stress. On April 1, 1901, he was ousted from his position at the Vienna Philharmonic following a three-year tenure in which the normal roller coaster of Viennese musical politics was rendered more intense by the anti-Semitic sentiments that often dogged him. Mahler was hanging on to his other principal position, as director of the Vienna Court Opera, but that job was stressful, too, and his anxiety at work led to frequent medical problems.

Another important event occurred while he was working on this symphony: in November 1901, at a dinner party, he met Alma Schindler, who was just then ending a liaison with her composition teacher, Alexander von Zemlinsky. Gustav and Alma were smitten with one another and they married a few months later, on March 9, 1902, having already set about making their first child, Maria, who arrived on November 2. It would be a complicated and often unhappy marriage, though they stayed together until Mahler's death in 1911.

Fortunately, Mahler could look forward to his composing. His summer getaway was then at Maiernigg, on the south shore of the Wörthersee (known sometimes as Lake Worth to English speakers), a bucolic spot in the Carinthia region of southern Austria. Mahler

was in the process of building a villa on the lake, and the construction would be completed while this symphony was in progress.

At Maiernigg Mahler had also constructed a tiny, sparsely furnished composing hut on the hill behind his villa, and every morning he would meander up along a forest path to work in splendid isolation. This seclusion was mandated: a servant girl, for example, would leave the villa moments after him on a more direct trail so that she could deposit his breakfast at the hut and make her getaway before he arrived.

What Mahler achieved during the summers of 1901 and 1902 marked his return to the purely instrumental symphony. His First Symphony had been strictly orchestral, but the three that followed it expanded the musical forces by using singers, whether as soloists or in chorus or both. Yet if Mahler's Fifth Sym-

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** July 7, 1860, in Kalischt (Kalište), Bohemia, near the town of Humpolec

**Died:** May 18, 1911, in Vienna, Austria

**Work composed:** 1901–02, with revisions following for at least five years

**World premiere:** October 18, 1904, in Cologne, Germany, with the composer conducting the Gürzenich Orchestra

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** December 2, 1926, Willem Mengelberg, conductor; the first movement had been performed at a memorial concert dedicated to Mahler on November 23, 1911, Josef Stran-sky, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** August 2, 2015, in Santa Barbara, California, Alan Gilbert, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 70 minutes

phony is not unusually radical in the forces it requires (extensive though they be), his use of those forces is profoundly imaginative.

On top of that, the symphony's structure is curious indeed. It unrolls over five movements (rather than the classic four of most symphonies), and those movements are grouped into three overriding sections: the first and third sections each comprise two movements, while the *Scherzo* stands in the middle as a section unto itself. From its ominous opening trumpet fanfare through to its majestic conclusion more than an hour later (and a semi-tone higher), the Fifth Symphony traces a panorama of human emotions. Bruno Walter (1876–1962), who would lead the New York Philharmonic from 1947 to 1949, was Mahler's assistant in both Hamburg (1894–96) and Vienna (beginning in 1901). He wrote:

Thus the Fifth Symphony is born, a work of strength and sound self-reliance, its face turned squarely toward life, and its basic mood one of optimism. A mighty funeral march, followed by a violently agitated first movement, a scherzo of considerable dimensions, an adagio, and a rondo-fugue form the movements. Nothing in any of my conversations with Mahler and not a single note point to the influence of extramusical thoughts or emotions upon the composition of the Fifth. It is music, passionate, wild, pathetic, buoyant, solemn, tender, full of all the sentiments of which the human heart is capable, but still "only" music and no metaphysical questioning ... interferes with its purely musical course.

In 1911 Mahler remarked that this work had come to represent "the sum of all the suffering

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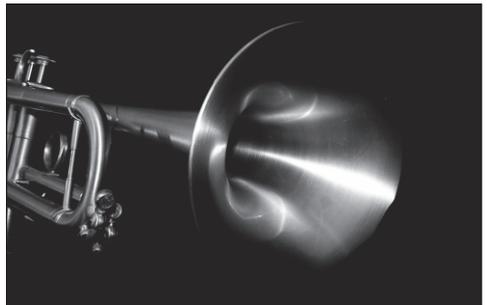
## Listen for ... the Trumpet Connection

In *The Symphony: A Listeners' Guide*, the late Michael Steinberg (who served as New York Philharmonic Program Annotator) points to the trumpet fanfares that appear in Mahler's Symphonies Nos. 4 and 5. In the Fourth, Steinberg notes, the first movement's explosive climax "is quickly stifled, and, across the still-unsettled muttering and ticking of a few instruments, a trumpet calls the orchestra to order with a quietly insistent fanfare."

A variant of that fanfare, at the same pitch, opens the Fifth Symphony. "There is no obvious explanation for this quotation, this link, but to contend that no explanation is needed will not do," he writes. The fanfare "is too arresting, and it is too critically placed in both symphonies." Steinberg quotes the composer Ernst Krenek, who said that the Fifth Symphony was the work, with which Mahler enters "upon the territory of 'new' music of the twentieth century," and he goes on to offer a theory:

Let us speculate. In 1901, at the juncture of completing the Fourth Symphony and beginning the Fifth, Mahler was acutely conscious of taking a new path (as Beethoven had said of himself a hundred years before). Perhaps, as he set out, he wanted to show that the seed for the new was to be found in the old.

— The Editors



I have been compelled to endure at the hands of life.” For us, too, it may convey suffering, but also joy, hope, and numerous other signs of the human condition.

**Instrumentation:** four flutes (all doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English

horn), three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet, another doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons and contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drums, snare drum, triangle, orchestra bells, tam-tam, slapstick, harp, and strings.

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## Listen for ... the *Adagietto*

The *Adagietto* of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony is surely the most famous movement from any of the composer’s symphonies. The conductor (and onetime New York Philharmonic Music Director) Willem Mengelberg claimed that the movement was an encoded love letter from Gustav Mahler to his wife, Alma. In Mengelberg’s personal score of the Fifth he scribbled:



Alma Mahler in 1902

This *Adagietto* was Gustav Mahler’s declaration of love for Alma! Instead of a letter, he sent her this in manuscript form; no other words accompanied it. She understood and wrote to him: He should come!!! (both of them told me this!).

Scored for only strings and harp, the movement stands apart from the rest of the symphony in its basic sound; its character — pensive, soulful, nostalgic, more resigned than mournful — renders it unique and memorable. It has often been extracted for stand-alone performance in concert or as a ballet score. It was used to set the mood in Luchino Visconti’s film *Death in Venice*, and it has been played at funerals or memorial services for many great figures from the worlds of music and politics, such as Serge Koussevitzky, Robert F. Kennedy, and Leonard Bernstein. The material of the *Adagietto* makes a second appearance in the Fifth Symphony, in an entirely different character, in the work’s *Rondo-Finale*.