

Gustav Mahler. His enduring legacy is that of a titan in the music world: a figure whose life and works depict vastness, grandeur, turmoil, and liberation. His symphonies require extended forces to perform and demand great emotional investment from both musicians and audience members. In much the same way as his fellow composers depicted their personal struggles in music, the moods and even atmospheres of Mahler's symphonies became darker as they progressed. This steady descent is orchestrated not only through the tonality and sonority of the symphonies, but also in their form. New compositional styles and schools of musical thought were also large external forces that affected Mahler's music, and are heavily exhibited in his later works. While this clear progression exists in symphonies 1 through the unfinished number 10, there is an outlier of sorts: Symphony Number 7.

Early in his career, composition was something Mahler was able to do in between conducting engagements; but as he became well established and accepted full time posts, it was relegated to his time off, so to speak, which later became his ritual during summer months. In the late 1880s and into the 1890s, distractions in the form of personal loss and difficulty plagued the young conductor during his tenure as music director of the Royal Opera House in Budapest. In 1889, Mahler's father, sister, and mother died, after which he moved his four younger siblings to Vienna, and he suffered with several health problems, including migraines. It was after this difficult year that his First Symphony premiered, and was met with a tepid reaction at best. These negative reactions distressed Mahler greatly, especially those stating he was following the same path as many conductors before him, and was not really a composer.

Due to the political climate in Hungary, and the resurgence of a conservative nationalistic party, Mahler found a way to be released from his position by accepting a chief conductorship at the Stadttheater in Hamburg. With critics and colleagues lauding Mahler for his conducting—though not necessarily the singers, who referred to him as somewhat of a tyrant—his reputation and demands increased, leaving little time for composition. In 1893, Mahler found a solution to the lack of time he could dedicate to writing music: escaping city life. With the acquisition of a place in Steinbach, on the banks of Lake Attersee in northern Austria, Mahler relegated himself to a hut on the water where he would become somewhat of a recluse and devote his "time off" during the summers to composing.

Mahler's own works were rarely performed until 1895, when his Symphony No. 2, *Resurrection*, premiered, under his baton. Two years prior, he re-worked his seemingly ill-fated *Symphony No. 1*, and gave it the subtitle *Titan*. At the same concert, he also premiered some of the *Wunderhorn* songs. It was the second symphony, however, that legitimized Mahler as a composer and offered him the acclaim he so intently desired. It is somewhat ironic, and perhaps appropriately disheartening, that Mahler felt he never truly surpassed his second symphony and thought of it as his greatest work.

As tensions in Hamburg grew, mainly due to the lack of ticket sales and possibly his own reworking of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Mahler was released from his position as chief conductor in 1895. Undeterred, his sights were, as they had been for quite some time, set on the position of music director at the then Vienna Hofoper (today the Staatsoper; the Vienna State Opera). After abandoning his Jewish heritage and converting to Catholicism, which many viewed as a political maneuver, Mahler was appointed to the position he desired in 1897, and would remain the Hofoper's Music Director for ten years. He was also installed as the conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic during his time at the opera. While both positions are, even until today, highly prestigious, Mahler's time in Vienna was fraught with difficulty and setbacks in his professional life. These difficulties are often attributed the anti-semitic culture of Vienna's ruling class.

Midway through his tenure in Vienna, Mahler met his wife, Alma Schindler in 1901. She was less than thrilled at the proposition of even meeting him, due to the rumors of his scandalous encounters with young women who aspired to sing opera, but agree to do so anyway. After a brief courtship, they were married in March of 1902, and their first daughter was born in November of that year. Both of their families frowned upon the union, citing his Jewish heritage and her overly flirtatious nature. Mahler also lost friends due to the marriage, as many of those close to him did not regard Alma Schindler as being well suited to be his wife. Perhaps Mahler's compositional practices only furthered tensions between the couple, as did his stifling of her own composing and musical endeavors.

Following the tradition of secluding himself in a composition hut during the summer months, Mahler relocated his summer residence to Maiernigg, in Carinthia, where he composed many of his great works. In the summer of 1904, Mahler completed Symphony No. 6, and began No. 7, writing the two *Nachtmusik* movements. He returned to the work the following summer, after escaping to the Dolomites due to severe writer's block, as he was prone to experience. After suffering for two weeks, and expecting the summer to be completely wasted, Mahler found relief on his return to Maiernigg when the boat's oars hit the water. This is what broke him free from his compositional stasis and gave rise to the symphony's themes, or at the very least rhythmic structures. He wrote to his wife stating that he was able to finish the first, third, and fifth movements in a mere four weeks. This edition was revised when he orchestrated it in 1906, but underwent several other drastic changes after his elder daughter died from scarlet fever, and immediately after he was informed of an incurable heart condition that would require a reduced amount of physical activity to reduce cardiac stress. 1905 would prove to be the final time Mahler and his family visited the home in Maiernigg, leaving behind the composition hut that had become such an integral part of Mahler's musical output.

Often referred to as the "ugly duckling" of Mahler symphonies, No. 7 was, if nothing else, inventive and very much ahead of its time for 1905. It marks the ending of (German) Romanticism, and embraces the new and revolutionary schools of musical thought in terms of harmonic structure, instrumentation, tonality, and methods of playing that would become known as "extended technique." It is also the only symphony to which Mahler did not assign a program. (Mahler often conceived programs for his works and they were published with the music, or he revoked the narratives at the time of, or after publication.) Assigning titles to the movements, however, does conjure specific imagery, and instead of a larger programmatic work, the symphony becomes, in a sense, an amalgamation of five pictographic elements, each creating specific micro-atmospheres that either directly or indirectly reflect parts of Mahler's life.

Three years after its completion, the Seventh Symphony premiered in 1908, in Prague. In 1907, Mahler left his conducting positions in Vienna, as tensions and antisemitism grew. It seemed the entire musical community in the Austrian capital turned against Mahler, which led him to abandon his appointments there and travel to the United States, where he held a conducting position at the Metropolitan Opera for the 1908-1909 season, and then became music director of the New York Philharmonic from 1909 to his death in 1911.

The Seventh Symphony reflects more than the personal and professional angst Mahler endured during his Viennese years. Its forward-thinking structures and instrumentation were met with confusion, and many found the work to be incoherent. The modernist composers of the early twentieth century, such as Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern, highly approved of the work, as they understood it and found in it great musical value. It would not be until many years after Mahler's death that scholars found merit in the symphony, and referred to it as anything more than controversial.

Mahler described the work as three night pieces, with the finale as bright day, and the first movement the foundation on which the others are built. Assigning names to movements was something he avoided, so as not to affect the interpretation of or conjure pre-conceived notions of the program. His titles of "nachtmusik" lead one to picture darkness or even serenity. While the terms nachtmusik (night music) and standchen (serenade) were able to be used interchangeably in nineteenth-century rhetoric, they do evoke different images, and the depiction of night fits with the overall scope of the symphony. The second movement, which depicts a militia marching, was likened by Mahler himself to Rembrandt's 1642 painting *The Night Watch*, or *Militia Company of District II under the command of Captain Frans Banning Cocq*. It also contains references to his previous symphonies, and a nod to Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*.

The third movement resonates in more of a contemporary idea of night music. Viewed as spooky or grim, the grotesque figures associated with night and horror stories might be more readily conjured here. It is also in this movement that we bear witness to Mahler's disdain for Vienna and the troubles society caused him, as it is seen as mocking the Viennese waltz. In complete contrast, the fourth movement's use of guitar and mandolin evoke an image of a serenade by moonlight, where a young minstrel courts his love as she looks down from her balcony, or at the very least a love song between two lovers sung at night. It is perhaps this movement that is best associated with the idea one might have of night music. Though the mood varies, its calmness and serenity are most closely associated with nineteenth century Romanticism's portrayal of night.

The final movement perhaps summarizes and encapsulates the idea of night music the most acutely. Broad daylight, as Mahler described it, brings an end to the darkness, and we bear witness to the transition from night to daybreak. The entire work also follows a form familiar to Mahler's other symphonies in that it is a response to its predecessor. It dispels the gloom and personal angst of Symphony No. 6. (The same relational program is found in the first two symphonies, as the funeral march of Symphony No. 2 is seen as the procession bearing the hero (the Titan) of Symphony No. 1 to his grave.) Furthermore, Symphony No. 7 follows the trajectory from tragedy to triumph found within the works themselves and the entire body of Mahler's symphonies when viewed as a single entity or extended thematic work.