

Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No. 5* (1901-1902)

Abstract

The composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) was born into a German-speaking Jewish family in Bohemia (modern-day Czechia), which was then part of Austria-Hungary. During his lifetime, he made a name for himself primarily as a conductor and opera director, especially during his time at the Vienna Court Opera. Most of his structurally complex and innovative compositions, mainly symphonies and songs, were not universally well-received at the time, but are now considered among the most important works of late Romanticism. The fierce criticism frequently levelled at his work and his person by the contemporary press often had antisemitic undertones. After initially obtaining his first permanent position as chief conductor at the Hamburg Opera in 1891, Mahler's career took him to Vienna in 1897, where, at the age of only 36, he became director of the Vienna Court Opera, a highly prestigious position in the city that played such a central role in Western musical history. However, Mahler's high artistic standards, difficult personality, and innovative programmatic ideas eventually led to discord and Mahler's departure in 1907. By then, he was in demand as a conductor in both Europe and the United States, and in 1908 he accepted a position at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. A year later, he became principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic Society, whose orchestra had been expanded and improved by wealthy patrons of the arts especially for Mahler. Under Mahler's baton, the orchestra, now called the New York Philharmonic, became world-famous, and his works remain extremely popular with American audiences to this day. Mahler, who suffered from frequent health problems, died of heart disease in Vienna in 1911 at the age of 50.

Mahler's Fifth Symphony, which he composed in 1901/02 and later revised several times, is probably his best known, especially since Italian director Luchino Visconti used its *adagietto* for his famous film adaptation of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice*. Here you can hear the first movement of his 5th symphony, which is modeled on a funeral march. Today it is one of the most frequently performed symphonies in the classical repertoire. When it was first performed, however, Mahler himself wrote pessimistically about the work: "The Fifth is a cursed work. Nobody understands it" [*Die Fünfte ist ein verfluchtes Werk. Niemand kapiert sie.*] The premiere conducted by Mahler took place in 1904 in Cologne, where the orchestra was known for championing contemporary composers. Contemporary audiences were indeed confused by its unconventional structure and emotional force, and the symphony was not a critical success for Mahler.

Source

Source: Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No. 5*, 1901-1902. Performed by Symphonie-Orchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, conductor: Rafael Kubelik, Deutsche Grammophon, 1971.

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