

Quad City Symphony Orchestra
PROGRAM NOTES
Masterworks IV: Mahler's Ninth Symphony

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GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911)
Symphony No. 9

Instrumentation: Piccolo, 4 flutes, 3 oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 4 bassoons (4th doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (glockenspiel, 3 low-pitched bells, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, bass drum, and snare drum), 2 harps, and strings.

Premiere: June 26, 1912, thirteen months after the composer's death (age 50) by the Vienna Philharmonic, Bruno Walter, conducting.

QCSO Premiere.

MAHLER'S *LEBEWOHL* ("FAREWELL")

The Spring and Summer of 1910 were extraordinarily busy for Austrian composer-conductor Gustav Mahler. The most pressing issue was preparing for the September premiere of his gargantuan Eighth Symphony, the so-called "Symphony of a Thousand". Aside from that premiere, he also needed to begin making plans for the first performances of another already-completed symphonic work, *Das Lied von der Erde* ("The Song of the Earth"). And aside from preparing his own works for premiere, he concluded his first hectic season as music director of the New York Philharmonic and navigated numerous health and family crises. Amid these many concerns, he wrote to fellow conductor Bruno

Walter on April 1 that "the full score of my Ninth is now finished."

Much has been made of the "Curse of the Ninth", the superstition that, after Beethoven, a Ninth symphony will necessarily presage a great composer's death, as it did also for Schubert and Bruckner. It's not entirely clear how seriously Mahler took the curse: he reportedly joked that at least his Ninth was in D major (unlike Beethoven's D minor). Some argue that he attempted to jettison the curse by calling his "actual" ninth symphony *Das Lied von der Erde*, but there is a separate case to be made that *Das Lied* is indeed a symphonic song cycle, not a symphony. In any case, he doubted the curse enough to begin work in earnest on his Tenth Symphony, a work which remained incomplete at the time of his death in May 1911.

One of the reasons why talk of this "curse" is so powerful in Mahler's case is that the Ninth Symphony itself is drenched in the contemplation of death. Mahler's friend and fellow composer Alban Berg, echoing many commentators, called the work's first movement "the most wonderful that Mahler wrote. It is the expression of tremendous love for this earth, the longing to live upon it in peace, to enjoy nature to its greatest depths—before death comes. Then it does come, inexorably."

SUNSET ON A 150-YEAR TRADITION

Death does indeed come inexorably, not only for composers, but for musical traditions as well. Just a few months ago, we heard Joseph Haydn's ebullient Symphony No. 104 on Masterworks II, a work which, if not the exact beginning of the German symphonic tradition, is one of its early masterpieces. As father to the tradition, Haydn provided a formal and expressive framework for the many brilliant German symphonies that followed, including those of Mozart, Schubert, and most profoundly, Beethoven, whose Fifth we will hear on Masterworks V.

The tradition remained strong throughout the nineteenth century in the work of Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms, and Bruckner, but showed some signs of weakening: Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss, the most "progressive" of the late-nineteenth-century German composers, came to regard the symphony as a tired relic, preferring the genres of opera and symphonic poem. But Mahler, who otherwise owed much to Wagner and was friend to Strauss, brought renewed life to the German symphony, making it the heart of his artistic program.

After Mahler, no well-known German composers undertook symphonies on the same scale. Early on, Arnold Schoenberg seemed poised to continue in Mahler's footsteps (his *Gurre-Lieder* is basically Mahler's "Symphony of a Thousand" on steroids), but Schoenberg ended up writing only two chamber symphonies, both on a much smaller scale. Certainly, many great symphonies followed throughout the century, but from composers outside

German and Austria like Shostakovich, Sibelius, and American symphonists like Roy Harris—all, it would seem, indebted to Mahler in some way.

MAHLER IN AMERICA

One of the reasons Mahler's work has resonated so strongly in the United States is that at the time of his death he was in the process of making New York something of a second home. His brilliant and tumultuous decade as music director of the Vienna State Opera came to an unceremonious end in October 1907; by January of 1908 he was guest-conducting at the New York Metropolitan Opera, and by 1909 he had taken the helm of the New York Philharmonic. He had every intention to continue in this post during concert seasons, while continuing his ritual of composing in the summers at his retreat in Toblach, near the Italian-Austrian border. Had he not died prematurely, Mahler might have had a long and distinguished tenure at the Philharmonic and made an even greater impact on the musical life of America.

At the time of his death, Americans knew they had lost a fine musician, but seemed uncertain as to his greatness. His May 19, 1911 obituary in the *New York Times*, for example, extensively praised Mahler's reform of the Vienna Opera, but said little about his short tenure at the Philharmonic. And regarding his music, America's Paper of Record seemed fixated on its grandiosity: "For his symphonic works in general it may be said that he demands not only a huge apparatus, but needs the most extreme length in which to develop and prepare his ideas."

As his music rose in prominence and popularity following his death, a consensus emerged among critics that Mahler's symphonies were kitschy, banal, and too long. "If there is any music that is eminently a routine, reflective, dusty sort of musical art, it is certainly Mahler's five latter symphonies," wrote critic Paul Rosenfeld in 1920. "The musical Desert of Sahara is surely to be found in these unhappy compositions... by their very pretentiousness, their gargantuan dimensions, [they] throw into relief Mahler's essential sterility."

But despite his detractors among American critics, Mahler enjoyed many distinguished defenders, especially among American composers. In 1926, Aaron Copland submitted a letter to the editors of the *New York Times*, decrying the fact that "the music critics of New York City are agreed upon at least one point—Gustav Mahler, as a composer, is hopeless." Copland conceded that Mahler had "at times written music which is bombastic, long-winded, banal." But, he went on, "from the standpoint of orchestration, Mahler is head and shoulders above Strauss, whose orchestral methods have already dated so perceptibly. Mahler orchestrates on big, simple lines, in which each note is of importance. He manages his enormous number of instruments with extraordinary economy, there are no useless doublings." Finally, in defense of Mahler's brilliant use of counterpoint, Copland asserted that "the present-day renewed interest in polyphonic writing cannot fail to reflect glory on Mahler's consummate mastery of that delicate art."

It was Copland's friend Leonard Bernstein, however, who ultimately cemented

Mahler's symphonies in the American concert repertoire. As his successor at the New York Philharmonic, Bernstein frequently performed and recorded Mahler's works, and lauded him as a crucial figure in the history of music. "His destiny," wrote Bernstein in 1967, "was to sum up, package, and lay to ultimate rest the fantastic treasure that was German-Austrian music from Bach to Wagner."

Mahler, Symphony No. 9 Listening Guide

First Movement: *Andante comodo* (approx. 30 minutes)

- ♪ Remember the movement's opening to compare it to the closing: both are unusually quiet and slow, though the movement begins in the low, dark registers and ends in the stratosphere.
- ♪ Throughout the entire movement, listen for the simple, two-note step-down motive: it first appears in the second violins, and thereafter, it's everywhere! Imagine the word "Farewell" being sung each time; Mahler seems to have borrowed this little fragment from the opening of Beethoven's "Adieux" piano sonata, Op. 81a. (The movement's final, single note can even be thought of as the much-delayed end of the quotation.)
- ♪ A unique feature of the opening texture is the murmuring viola gesture (or *tremolando*), which shows up a little in each measure of the opening passage. Use this as a signal throughout the movement for when Mahler is returning to the opening material. At one particularly dark and poignant moment late in the movement, this murmuring figure spreads surreptitiously to the other string sections.

♪ The horn is at the forefront of most of this movement. Notice its split personality: though usually resplendent and lavish, its timbre frequently turns scathing and caustic; the latter sound is effected by the *stopped horn* technique, where a mute or hand is inserted into the bell of the instrument.

♪ Though this movement exhibits an exceptionally wide emotional and dynamic range, no outburst comes from nowhere. When you feel things heating up intensely, ask yourself which instruments are fanning the flames (hint: it's often the brass).

♪ Such overwhelming emotional moments usually coincide with Mahler's most jarring, dissonant chords. If you find yourself taken aback by these very crunchy harmonies, hold on and stay with him! He didn't use these chords simply for shock value, but rather to draw his listeners toward their (long-delayed) resolution.

♪ About two thirds of the way through, listen for what sounds like a ponderous funeral procession (Mahler literally marked the score "Like a Ponderous Funeral Procession"). You'll hear church bells and lots of the "farewell" motive.

♪ With so much sweeping and grandiose orchestration, notice the rare, bracing moment of chamber music just before the movement's close, with tightly interlocking solos in the woodwinds, horns, and violin. Emerging from this is an extended duet between our solo horn protagonist and the solo flute, who ends up with the movement's plaintive last word.

Second Movement: In the tempo of a leisurely *Ländler*

(approx. 15 minutes)

♪ From Haydn onward, most symphonies included a minuet movement, a genteel dance in 3/4 time. Later composers gave the minuet a personal spin, speeding it up into a Scherzo (beginning with Beethoven) or broadening it into a more-cosmopolitan Waltz (as in Tchaikovsky). In Mahler's symphonies, the Minuet became a *Ländler*, a traditional Austrian folk dance related to the minuet. This movement actually includes three competing *Ländlers*.

♪ The first is begun with a quick 5-step run. It is rustic, comedic, and almost grotesque, with brash groups of instruments in unison (all oboes together, all clarinets, etc.).

♪ The second *Ländler* is quicker, more frenetic, and harmonically more meandering. It is perhaps most distinguished by the thundering timpani on beats 2 and 3. For all its excitement, it ends in a kind of stalemate.

♪ The third, in contrast to the other two, is very gentle and pleasant, almost sentimental. Notably, it includes reminiscences of the first movement's farewell motive.

♪ Having established these three different dances, Mahler alternates between them throughout the rest of the movement.

Third Movement: Rondo-Burleske: *Allegro assai*

(approx. 15 minutes)

♪ This movement's unusual title tells us two things. First, its form ("Rondo"), which will by definition include various distinct themes, several of which will return repeatedly (in a sense, Mahler's

second movement is also a rondo). Secondly, the title tells us the movement's character ("Burleske"), meant to be satirical and biting sarcasm.

♪ Amid the various recurrences of the whirling, joking themes, Mahler includes a very strange, nostalgic, almost-Hollywood-style middle section, marked with high string tremolos, a wistful trumpet tune, and sultry harp glissandos.

♪ At the movement's conclusion, the tempo begins accelerating in a way that prior symphonies might have experienced in their Finale. Apparently, this joke has gotten out of control, but the symphony is not over yet.

Fourth Movement: Very slow and reserved

(approx. 30 minutes)

♪ Slow final movements in symphonies are obviously uncommon, the most famous example being Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony. Ever a lover of counterpoint, Mahler disliked Tchaikovsky's work, calling it "hopelessly homophonic" (i.e., without counterpoint).

♪ The work begins with all of the orchestra's violins in unison, and each strictly on its lowest string.

♪ Strings form the core of this entire movement. In some ways the strings' music is hymn-like, but very intense in expression and with abrupt, far-reaching harmonic progressions. It's also achingly slow: there are no bows long enough for this music!

♪ The main key of this movement is D-flat major, which is notable for several reasons. First, most symphonies begin and end in the same key, or at least with the same home note. But this is a symphony billed in D major that ends in D-flat major, a very remote relationship.

But more importantly, D-flat major is generally a subdued key for strings. This is because most of their open strings are not included in the key of D-flat, and it therefore lacks the natural resonance of other keys.

♪ From the opening in the strings, Mahler slowly works in the rest of the orchestra, starting with the incredibly ominous bassoons. Throughout the movement, he favors the darker instruments, especially bassoons, clarinets, horns, and oboes in their lower registers. The flute and piccolo, by contrast, play very little.

♪ Amid his many passages in D-flat major, midway through the movement Mahler ends a long phrase by modulating to G major, a very distant, much more resonant key for strings. Even without perfect pitch, see if you can feel this intense change in color.

♪ Offsetting their otherwise endless passages, the strings rest for a very sparse and mysterious section of woodwind polyphony.

♪ Though the piccolo plays very little in this movement, it does assist the violins at one crucial point. Mahler asks them to leap to extremely high pitches, which can be hard to hear, so he had the top note of each leap doubled by the piccolo, a kind of musical "spell check."

♪ There is certainly nothing triumphant in how Mahler closes this epic piece; on the contrary, he seems to be searching in vain for a way to conclude. "One must bring along one's ears and heart and, not least, surrender willingly to the rhapsodist," Mahler wrote many years prior. "A bit of mystery always remains—even for the creator!"