

SYMPHONY NO. 7 / *Gustav Mahler*

b. Kaliště, Bohemia / July 7, 1860 – May 18, 1911)

Gustav Mahler's music is performed frequently by major symphony orchestras, and his symphonies are exhaustively recorded. Some even say Mahler has grown in popularity to the point where he is presently the most popular composer, but that wasn't the case during his lifetime. Mahler's "day job" was conducting, and he was known in Europe as one of the best. His busy schedule forced him to defer his time for composition to summers. The creation of ***Symphony No. 7*** took place during summer interludes over three years, 1904-1906, but it would be two eventful years before Mahler would hear the fruits of his labor.

Mahler's main responsibility was to lead the Vienna State Opera, and this was becoming stressful and exhausting. After leading 645 operatic performances over ten years, he resigned from his appointment in Vienna in 1907 and signed a contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York City to begin in 1908. In the summer of 1908, Mahler returned to an Austrian retreat where he composed his ***Song of the Earth*** – that was actually his ninth symphonic work, but Mahler was hesitant to call it his ninth symphony due to a superstition based on famous composers dying after completing their ninth! His alarm was genuine, though, in that he had recently learned he had an incurable heart defect.

Symphony No. 7 had its premiere at a festival in Prague on September 19, 1908, performed by the Czech Philharmonic and conducted by the composer. This expansive work has all the trappings an audience would expect to hear in a symphony by Gustav Mahler. Extreme contrast, large orchestral forces, unpredictability, high woodwind trills, raspy sounds in the low instruments, auxiliary percussion, a harp or two, yearning love songs, tragic laments, multiple melodies at nearly every moment, and march-like themes that sound like a processional or a parade, depending on the tempo. A listener could stay well-engaged with the music simply by creating a mental checklist and noting when each of these traits is noticed!

Mahler built an elegant architecture of symmetry in the unfolding of the movements that delivers a pacing that seems to make the work more palatable. The central movement is the shortest and is surrounded by slightly longer movements that Mahler labels as *Nachtmusik* (Night Music). Those are surrounded by the longer and more robust first and last movements.

Movement 1 commences with a slow introduction that features a solo that's originally scored for an infrequently heard low brass instrument called tenor horn, but here will be played on euphonium. This solo introduces an important musical gesture, a descending minor key motive in a rhythm that can be described as long-short-long. When the tempo

quickens, there's yet another descending minor theme. These motives continue, but then they lose momentum, leading to a contrasting section in major that features a gorgeous and expressive melody that spirals and sweeps upwards.

With two strongly contrasting themes established, some scholars claim this movement follows the structure of sonata form. If you want to believe this advice and use the sonata roadmap, then good luck to you – we are only a quarter of the way through the movement, on a path with many twists, turns, and diversions. I align with a view expressed by writer David B. Greene who, after analyzing a few of Mahler's symphonies, stated, "Because they are as innovative musically as they are compelling emotionally, I have found that analogies with traditional forms (such as sonata-allegro, scherzo and rondo) are often more misleading than helpful."

There is much dazzling music in movement 1, and Mahler remarkably keeps our modern minds interested by surprising us every step of the way. Listen for some heavenly music, at a slower tempo, announced by rising trumpet calls (including a melody that will cause many listeners to recall the original Star Trek theme!).

To identify *Movement 2*, Mahler used the word *Nachtmusik* (Night Music), a descriptor that might lead many listeners to try and imagine the composer's intent. Mahler did not give *Symphony No. 7* the nickname "Song of the Night", nor did he provide any programmatic suggestions to guide our imaginations. Instead, the composer leaves it up to every individual listener to derive meaning from the sound world of his unique music.

As in movement one, the music commences with a brass instrument solo, this time a french horn playing an amiable melody alone. The melody rises, outlining a C major chord, but in its descent, we hear a note associated with minor mode, the lowered sixth note of the scale, A-flat. Right away, another french horn plays the same melodic contour and changes one note to create an ascending c minor arpeggio. This is one small example of how Mahler shifted freely between major and minor mode in this symphony, blurring a parameter of the music that is usually clearly defined. A somewhat chaotic passage follows that reinforces minor mode, but then a strolling tempo emerges, and we hear the A-flat used in a different way, leading upward to A-natural to contribute to the sound of major mode.

The modes continue to shift until there's a transition to a parade-like march section that is most definitely in major mode. When the solo brass instruments return, repeating the music we heard at the opening, they are joined by the rare sound of distant cowbells! Another major-minor stroll leads to a new and mysterious passage with colorful wind timbres. As this interlude builds, you can catch the fleeting sound of a momentary clash of the major third of a chord and the minor third of the chord sounding together. If you miss this musical event in the concert, then you can find it near the mid-point of any

recording of this movement. The second half of *Nachtmusik* is ever-changing with new sections and familiar passages transformed.

Movement 3 is a Scherzo, typically a part of Romantic Era symphonies since Beethoven. This one has an instruction to create a “shadowy” mood. Scholars have written about the frightening nature of this movement, but all of us hearing this music today are accustomed to film music much more effective at inducing terror. The orchestration was novel a century ago, and it is still interesting, but now the sounds are familiar. The debate between minor and major continues, and there’s plenty of brightness to counter whatever fears the shadows may induce. In fact, movements 3 and 4 provide some relief from the continuous change dominating the other movements.

Movement 4 is the second time Mahler uses the unusual *Nachtmusik* designation, this time with the equally unusual tempo marking of *Andante Amoroso*. It is the simplest movement of the work, with only slight diversions from a steady tempo and volume, and a rhythmic figure that permeates nearly every measure that goes long-long-longer. Added to the orchestration are guitar and mandolin, timbres that are rarely heard at symphony concerts. With yearning melodies, fretted instruments, steadiness, and the suggestion of an ‘amorous’ tempo, it’s easy to imagine a serenader and a serenade-ee exchanging glances in fading evening light.

After the delicate ending of the fourth movement, the opening of *Movement 5* is a wake-up call, with the timpani leading the orchestra to set up a trumpet fanfare that recurs occasionally. The music energetically builds to a climax, and in an instant, everything is swept away, leaving quiet woodwinds. We quickly learn that such sudden changes are the norm, and Mahler demands that we accept change throughout the rest of the work. Tempo, volume, motives, and moods cannot be counted on to last even for a minute. At just the right time, in true Mahler fashion, the composer decides this voyage is over and provides a conclusion that is decisive and uplifting!

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