

Symphony No. 4

GUSTAV MAHLER

Born

July 7, 1860, in Kalischt (Kaliště), Bohemia, near the town of Humpolec

Died

May 18, 1911, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed

June 1899–April 1901, drawing in the finale on the composer's song "Das himmlische Leben," penned in 1892; with revisions following through early 1911

World premiere

November 25, 1901, in Munich, by the composer conducting the Kaim Orchestra and soprano Margarete Michalek; the song "Das himmlische Leben" had been premiered on October 27, 1893, in Hamburg

New York Philharmonic premiere

November 6, 1904, Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928 to form today's New York Philharmonic)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance

March 9, 1999, Gisèle Ben-Dor, conductor, Amanda Roocroft, soprano

Estimated duration

ca. 58 minutes

occupied him during concert season, forcing him to relegate his composing to the summer months, which he would spend as a near hermit in the Austrian countryside.

When Mahler came to write his Fourth Symphony, principally during the summers of 1899 and 1900, he was escaping a Vienna that was becoming a source of inordinate stress. On April 1, 1901, he would be ousted from his position as Director of 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. He was hanging on to his other principal position, as Director of the Vienna Court Opera; however, that job was stressful, too, and Mahler's anxiety at work led to frequent medical problems.

He spent the summer of 1899 at Bad Aussee in the Salzkammergut, and during his last ten days there he began to map out his Fourth Symphony. In August he filed his sketches away and did not return to them until the following summer, this time at a new location. His getaway was now the villa he was building at Maiernigg, a bump on the map on the south shore of the Wörthersee (known sometimes as Lake Worth to English speakers, to the extent that English speakers know it at all), a bucolic spot in the region of Carinthia in southern Austria.

At Maiernigg Mahler had constructed a tiny, sparsely furnished composing cottage on the hill behind his villa; every morning he would meander up along a forest path to work there in splendid seclusion. When he returned to his composing that summer he discovered, as he reported to his amanuensis, Natalie Bauer-Lechner, that his work had progressed to

Throughout his career Gustav Mahler balanced the competing demands of his dual vocation as a composer and conductor. Responsibilities on the podium and in the administrative office completely

a much more advanced stage than it had reached in Aussee without my having given it a moment's real attention in the meantime... That my second self should have worked on the symphony throughout the ten months of winter sleep (with all the frightful nightmares of the theater business) is unbelievable!

By August 5 the Fourth Symphony was effectively completed, although Mahler continued to revise it through the following April – and, indeed, to tweak it further

following performances that he conducted, through to his last one, with this New York Philharmonic, four months before he died.

Mahler had a head start with this symphony. In 1892 he had written a song – first to a piano accompaniment, a few weeks later in an orchestral version – titled “Das himmlische Leben” (“The Heavenly Life”) on a text drawn from the purported folk anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. That collection furnished texts for quite a few of his independent songs as well as for movements of his Second and Third Symphonies. Mahler

Listen for ...

Examining Mahler's symphonies often reveals **connections** between them. Knowing that for a time he had intended to employ the song “Das himmlische Leben” (“The Heavenly Life”) as the finale for his Third Symphony, we should not be astonished to hear that orchestral song reflected in that vast composition. The tune is carefully woven into the fabric of the Fourth Symphony, too, most obviously through the recurrence of the sleighbell motif that begins the symphony as punctuation between verses in the finale. (Of course, it had existed in the song-finale first, and Mahler “lifted” what he had already written for the beginning of his eventual symphony.)

The Fourth Symphony also reaches out to Mahler's other symphonies in other ways. For example, in a passage two-thirds of the way through the first movement we find the trumpets engaging in some ominous sounding fanfares:

Bedächtigt. Nicht eilen

Mahlerians will inevitably hear this as foreshadowing the opening bars of the Fifth Symphony, which the composer began before the Fourth had been premiered. In the Fifth a very similar fanfare is again assigned to the trumpet, in the same key, C-sharp minor:

In gemessenem Schritt. Streng. Wie ein Kondukt.

As many devoted Mahlerians have already realized, richness is gained by considering all of his symphonies as a whole: references emerge, recede, and are transformed even as one work cedes to the next. In this regard we might view Mahler's nine symphonies as a sort of musical predecessor to the similarly imposing literary cycle of the early 20th century, Marcel Proust's seven-novel sequence known as *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*), begun during Mahler's lifetime and published in stages between 1913 and 1927.

contemplated using his setting of “Das himmlische Leben” to conclude his Third Symphony but he discarded the idea — a wise choice since that work was already quite long and probably too massive for such a pared-down ending.

Instead, the song became the point of departure for his new symphony. In his Fourth Symphony, Mahler worked backwards to some degree; knowing how it would conclude, he crafted the first three movements to prepare for that song-finale, which he once referred to as “the top of the Symphony’s pyramidal structure.”

Surely this ending succeeds far better here than it would have in the Third Symphony, capping as it does an extensive, incident-laden first movement, a wry scherzo (Mahler indicated that he intended it as a sort of *danse macabre*), and a supernal *Adagio* (which Mahler ranked as his finest slow movement, although his oeuvre offers several worthy competitors). Everything reaches its destination in one of Mahler’s simplest songs. Moreover, that song is intoned by a soprano who, Mahler insisted (in a note he inserted in the first edition of the score), should render her four verses

From a Friend and Colleague

Bruno Walter, who would follow in Mahler’s footsteps as the New York Philharmonic’s music director from 1947 to 1949, had been Mahler’s assistant in both Hamburg (1894–96) and Vienna (beginning in 1901). Given his connection to Mahler, his observations on the Fourth Symphony take on special resonance:

Dream-like and unreal, indeed, is the atmosphere of the work — a mysterious smile and a strange humor cover the solemnity which so clearly had been manifested in the Third. In the fairy tale of the Fourth everything is floating and unburdened which, in his former works, had been mighty and pathetic — the mellow voice of an angel confirms what, in the Second and Third, a prophet had foreseen and pronounced in loud accents. The blissful feeling of exaltation and freedom from the world communicates itself to the character of the music — but, in contrast to the Third, from afar, as it were. ...

The first movement and “The Heavenly Life” are dominated by a droll humor which is in strange contrast to the beatific mood forming the keynote of the work. The scherzo is a sort of uncanny fairy-tale episode. Its demonic violin solo and the graceful trio form an interesting counterpart to the other sections of the symphony without abandoning the character of lightness and mystery. Referring to the profound quiet and clear beauty of the *andante* [sic], Mahler said to me that they were caused by his vision of one of the church sepulchers showing the recumbent stone image of the deceased with the arms crossed in eternal sleep. The poem whose setting to music forms the last movement depicts in words the atmosphere out of which the music of the Fourth grew. The childlike joys which it portrays are symbolic of heavenly bliss, and only when, at the very end, music is proclaimed the sublimest of joys is the humorous character gently changed into one of exalted solemnity.



Gustav Mahler (left) and Bruno Walter in 1908 in Prague, at the premiere of Mahler’s Seventh Symphony

“with childlike, cheerful expression; entirely without parody!”

Instrumentation: four flutes (two doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling E-flat

clarinet, another doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, timpani, bass drum, triangle, sleigh bells, orchestra bells, cymbals, tam-tam, harp, and strings; also, in the finale, a solo soprano singer.

The Song’s Symbolism

“Das himmlische Leben” from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* – which Mahler set first as an independent song and then in his Fourth Symphony – evokes a series of Christian symbols. Some are commonly recognized even today: there are few who do not remember that Peter was a fisherman, for example, and some know that Cecilia is the patron saint of music. However, there are references that may well elude today’s audience: it helps to know that St. Luke’s symbol is a winged ox, and that St.

Martha, the sister of Lazarus, is the patron saint of those serving the needy. The following passage from Donald Attwater’s *Penguin Dictionary of Saints* helps explain the reference to St. Ursula and her legend of the 11,000 virgins:

Ursula, to avoid an unwanted marriage, departed with her company from the island of Britain, where her father was a king; on their way back from a visit to Rome, they were slaughtered by Huns at Cologne on account of their Christian faith. During the twelfth century this pious romance was preposterously elaborated through the mistakes of imaginative visionaries; a public burial-ground uncovered at Cologne was taken to be the grave of the martyrs, false relics came into circulation and forged epitaphs of non-existent persons were produced. The earliest reference [to] St. Ursula ... speaks of her ten companions: how these eleven came to be multiplied by a thousand is a matter of speculation.

— The Editors



A Flemish depiction of St. Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins, from the illuminated book Hours of the Holy Spirit and Prayers



Raphael’s *The Ecstasy of St. Cecilia* (1514)



Alan Potter’s 1980 glass mosaic depiction of St. Luke as the Winged Ox from his series, *Evangelists*, at St. Matthew’s Church, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, Scotland

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

“Das himmlische Leben” (“The Heavenly Life”), from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*

*Wir genießen die himmlischen Freuden,
Drum thun wir das Irdische meiden.
Kein weltlich Getümmel
Hört man nicht im Himmel!
Lebt Alles in sanftester Ruh'!
Wir führen ein englisches Leben!
Sind dennoch ganz lustig daneben!
Wir tanzen und springen,
Wir hüpfen und singen!
Sankt Peter im Himmel sieht zu!*

*Johannes das Lämmlein auslasset,
Der Metzger Herodes drauf passet!
Wir führen ein geduldig's,
Unschuldig's, geduldig's,
Ein liebliches Lämmlein zu Tod!
Sanct Lucas den Ochsen thät schlachten
Ohn' einig's Bedenken und Achten,
Der Wein kost kein Heller
Im himmlischen Keller,
Die Englein, die backen das Brot.*

*Gut' Kräuter von allerhand Arten,
Die wachsen im himmlischen Garten!
Gut' Spargel, Fisolen,
Und was wir nur wollen!
Ganze Schüsseln voll sind uns bereit!
Gut' Äpfel, gut' Birn' und gut' Trauben!
Die Gärtner, die Alles erlauben!
Willst Rehbock, willst Hasen,
Auf offener Straßen
Sie laufen herbei!*

*Sollt' ein Fasttag etwa kommen,
Alle Fische gleich mit Freuden angeschwommen!
Dort läuft schon Sanct Peter
Mit Netz und mit Köder
Zum himmlischen Weiher hinein.
Sanct Martha die Köchin muß sein.*

*Kein Musik ist ja nicht auf Erden,
Die uns'rer verglichen kann werden.
Elftausend Jungfrauen
Zu tanzen sich trauen!
Sanct Ursula selbst dazu lacht!
Cäcilia mit ihren Verwandten
Sind treffliche Hofmusikanten!
Die englischen Stimmen
Ermuntern die Sinnen,
Daß alles für Freuden erwacht.*

We enjoy the pleasures of Heaven
And therefore avoid earthly ones.
No worldly tumult
Is to be heard in Heaven!
All live in gentlest peace!
We lead angelic lives!
Thus we have a merry time of it.
We dance and we leap,
We skip and we sing!
St. Peter in Heaven looks on.

John lets his little lamb out,
And Herod the Butcher lies in wait for it.
We lead a patient,
Innocent, patient,
Dear little lamb to its death!
St. Luke slaughters the ox
Without a thought or concern.
Wine doesn't cost a penny
In Heaven's cellar;
The angels bake the bread.

Good greens of all sorts
Grow in Heaven's garden!
Good asparagus, string beans,
And whatever we want!
Full bowls are set out for us!
Good apples, good pears, and good grapes!
The gardeners allow everything!
If you want venison or hare,
You'll find them running
On the public streets!

Should a fast-day arrive,
All the fish come swimming with joy!
There goes St. Peter, running
With his net and his bait
To the heavenly pond.
St. Martha shall be the cook!

There is no music on earth
That can compare to ours.
Eleven thousand virgins
Dare to dance!
Even St. Ursula herself has to laugh!
Cecilia and her kin
Make excellent court musicians!
The angelic voices
Gladden our senses
So that everything awakens for joy.