

**San Juan Symphony**  
**April 6-7, 2019**  
**Program Notes**  
**by Michael Allsen**

Our final concert this season is devoted to two deeply interconnected early works by Gustav Mahler. Baritone Michael Hix joins the orchestra to perform Mahler's passionate *Songs of a Wayfarer*. In his long struggle to complete his first symphony, the composer reworked music from the *Wayfarer* songs as primary themes in two movements. We close with this work—his magnificent *Symphony No. 1*.

**Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)**

**Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen (“Songs of a Wayfarer”)**

For Gustav Mahler, music was often autobiography of the most revealing kind. This is clearly the case with his *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*—a song cycle that sets Mahler's own poetry. The songs were written in Cassel, where Mahler had an appointment as music director of the Royal Theatre from 1883 to 1885. At age 23, he fell deeply in love with Johanna Richter, one of the theater's singers. Their unhappy love affair—it seems that he was much more in love than she—was apparently over by the closing days of 1884, though they were obliged to work together until Mahler finally left Cassel in the summer of 1885. On New Year's Day 1885, he reported their breakup in a heartbroken letter to his friend Fritz Löhner, and noted that “I have written a song cycle, six songs for the time being, all of which are dedicated to her. She does not know they exist. What else can they tell her beside what she already knows? ... The songs are conceived as if a wayfaring craftsman has suffered a heavy fate and now it goes out into the world and wanders aimlessly.”

Though all six of his extravagantly emotional poems for Johanna Richter survive, he set only four of them to music, initially with piano accompaniment. He continued to revise the song cycle over the next decade, completing the orchestral versions heard here by 1893. The premiere in Berlin in 1896 was quite successful, and Mahler published the works in 1897.

Mahler wears his heart on his sleeve in these emotional songs, beginning with *Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht* (“When my sweetheart's wedding day comes”)—the slow, measured chant of a lover whose beloved's wedding-day does not include him. There is a brighter pastoral moment in the middle stanza, as the wayfarer's mood is briefly lifted by a lovely flower and a sweet bird song, but the opening mood descends again in the final section, with almost mocking interjections from the woodwinds. The second song, *Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld* (“As I walked through the field this morning”) is outwardly more upbeat and folksy, a joyful conversation with a chirping bird and blooming wildflowers. But the mood changes abruptly in the last stanza, as the poet realizes he cannot truly share in all of the joy that surrounds him. Mahler's setting of the final words is wistful, underlaid with a foreboding timpani roll, and a short but lovely violin solo.

The darkest and most angry of the songs is *Ich hab' ein glühend Messer* (“I have a red-hot knife”), with the wayfarer forcefully laying out the text above a stormy orchestral background.

The anger subsides but the darkness remains in the second, almost hallucinatory stanza before the opening mood returns for the final, self-pitying section with its images of death. The last song, *Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz* (“The two blue eyes of my sweetheart”) begins with a kind of funeral march, an impression heightened in the heartbroken music of the second stanza. Only at the very end does the wayfarer find a measure of peace—still underlaid with sorrow—while resting under a linden tree.

## **Gustav Mahler** **Symphony No.1 in D Major**

Composing a symphony—particularly a first symphony—is a daunting task for any composer, and it often takes a good deal of time (Brahms’s first was not completed until he was 43). Mahler’s monumental first symphony is no exception: well over twenty years elapsed between his earliest sketches and the published version heard on this program. The earliest bit of sketch material that survives is a draft of the scherzo, possibly written as early as 1876. He began work in earnest in 1883, and by 1888 he had completed the earliest version of the symphony, an immense five-movement work. When he conducted the premiere of the work in Budapest in 1889, it was listed in the program as a *Symphonic Poem in Two Parts*. Four years later, when Mahler conducted the work’s second performance in Hamburg, he revised the score extensively and affixed a new title, *Titan*, after a novel by Jean Paul Richter. While he retained the structure of the original “symphonic poem” design, he gave programmatic titles to each of the movements: Part I: “From the days of youth”: 1. “Endless Spring” / 2. “A collection of flowers” / 3. “Under full sail”; Part II “The Human Comedy”: 4. “Funeral march in the style of Callot” / 5. “From the Inferno to Paradise.”

Over the next six years, Mahler’s conception of the work changed one more time. When he published the score in 1899, it was with considerable revision and without the fanciful titles. As he wrote to the critic Max Marschalk in 1896:

“...at one time, my friends persuaded me to provide a kind of program for the D Major symphony in order to make it easier to understand—therefore I thought up this title [*Titan*] and explanatory material after the actual composition. The reason I have left them out is not only that I find them completely inadequate (and not even accurate), but also that I have learned through past experience how audiences have been misled by them. But that is the way with every program!”

The published score was presented simply as *Symphony No.1 in Four Movements for Large Orchestra*. Mahler had revised the music and dropped the original second movement. (Over the past fifty years, this “flowers” movement has occasionally been revived and included in performances of the *Symphony No. 1*.)

This first symphony was not an immediate critical success, but Mahler himself was satisfied with the work. Writing to his friend and protégé Bruno Walter from New York in 1909, after he had led the New York Philharmonic in a performance of the *Symphony No. 1*, he declared that he was “...really pleased with my youthful effort.” After his death, Mahler’s music lost popularity and it wasn’t until the 1960s that his symphonies began to regain a firm place in the repertoire. The

*Symphony No. 1*, in many ways the most direct and easily grasped of his works, was one of the first of his symphonies to be revived, and it remains one of the most popular.

The opening movement, marked *Langsam* (“slow”) begins in a hazy, undefined mood, with insistent “cuckoo” calls in the woodwinds—this same interval, a descending fourth, will eventually begin the movement’s main theme, and will recur many times during the course of the symphony. Distant brass fanfares and more bird calls from the clarinet lead smoothly into the main theme of this movement. Mahler further identifies the feeling of this movement with the words *schleppend wie ein Naturlaut* (“drawn out, like a sound of nature”), and nothing could be more natural than this lovely melody. The theme is taken from the happiest movement of his *Songs of a Wayfarer*, the song *Ging heut’ morgern übers Feld*, one of the earliest examples of Mahler’s frequent self-quotations. This pastoral song begins with a dialogue between the singer and a cheerful finch, a theme first heard in the low strings and quickly picked up by the entire orchestra. The theme twice builds towards a climax before we return rather suddenly to the hazy mood of the opening. Intensity builds in a leisurely way towards a final development. A return of the trumpet fanfare from the introduction signals the beginning of the coda, which is dominated by the brass and which comes to an abrupt, almost tongue-in-cheek ending.

Mahler marked the scherzo movement *Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht so schnell* (“with strong motion, but not too fast”). With its robust character, it closely resembles the *ländler*, a rustic, triple-meter Austrian dance. Mahler was closely tied to the Austrian music he had heard as a youth, and much of this movement emulates the sounds of dances played by an Austrian military band. In the central section, the *Ländler* gives way to a gentle and whimsical waltz. The *Ländler* returns in an abbreviated form at the end of the movement.

In the published version of the *Symphony No. 1*, Mahler rejected the notion of any programmatic element in the work. However, he did acknowledge that the third movement was inspired in part by a well-known illustration from a children’s book, a picture titled *The Hunter’s Funeral Procession*. Mahler evokes the satirical mood of this picture—forest animals pretending to be sad as they carry the hunter’s coffin—by adopting a minor-key version of the children’s tune *Frere Jacques* as the main theme. After developing this in rather doleful counterpoint, Mahler interrupts the music with a return to the country-band character of the previous movement (with a healthy dose of *klezmer* flavoring!). *Frere Jacques* returns briefly, only to be interrupted again by a long quotation from the despairing final song of Mahler’s “Wayfarer” cycle. The movement ends by combining the band music with the main theme, and dying quietly away.

The final movement follows immediately after the end of third. This is a critical moment in the symphony, as Mahler explained in the 1896 Marschalk letter:

“...[in the third movement], the important thing is the *mood* which is expressed, from which the fourth movement then springs suddenly like lightning from a dark cloud. It is the cry of a deeply wounded heart, preceded by the spooky, ironically brooding oppressiveness of the funeral march.”

Mahler’s “lightning from a dark cloud” explodes with a cymbal crash and a dissonant brass chord. The minor-key main theme is heard first in the brasses, and often takes on a rather

violent, march-like character. The mood changes drastically with lyrical passage for the violins (perhaps the journey from Hell to Heaven described in Mahler's Hamburg program). The violence returns again, only to resolve suddenly into a major key, and dissolve into a reminiscence of the opening of the first movement and a placid interlude. The march-like theme returns once more, mingled with other fragments of other themes, building into a gigantic orchestral crescendo. The exultant coda is dominated once again by the brass, particularly by the score's eight horns. Bruno Walter best summarized the effect of this final movement:

“Here, Mahler unleashes the tempest, a wild eruption, a life-and-death struggle leading to a triumphant conclusion.”

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