

## **Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 3 - A Listener's Guide**

*by Michael Steinberg*

*Part One- Introduction. Forcefully and decisively.*

*Part Two- Tempo di menuetto. Moderately.*

*Comodo. Scherzando. Unhurriedly.*

*Very slow. Mysteriously.*

*Joyous in tempo and jaunty in expression.*

*Slow. Calm. Deeply felt.*

Mahler did the main work on his third Symphony in the summer of 1895, when he composed the last five of its six movements, and then 1896, when he added the first. Two of his songs, *Ablösung im Sommer* (Relief in Summer) and *Das himmlische Levenstein* (Life in Heaven), provided source material for some of the symphony, and they go back to about 1890 and February 1892 respectively. Mahler made final revisions in May 1899. The symphony was introduced piecemeal. Arthur Nikisch conducted the second movement, then presented as *Blumenstück* (Flower Piece), with the Berlin Philharmonic on November 9, 1896. Felix Weingartner gave the second, third, and sixth movements with the Royal Orchestra, Berlin, on March 9, 1897. With Luise Geller-Wolter singing the alto solos, Mahler himself conducted the first complete performance at the Festival of the Allgemeiner deutscher Musikverein at Krefeld on 9 June 1902.

Four flutes (two doubling piccolo), four oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), and two E-flat clarinets, four bassoons (one Dublin contrabassoon), eight horns, four trumpets, post horn, four trombones, bass and contrabass tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, snare drum, triangle tambourine, bass drum with cymbal attached, suspended cymbals, tam-tam, birch brush, two harps, and strings, plus solo contralto, women's choir, and boys' chorus.

“Any ass can hear that,” said Brahms when someone pointed out the resemblance of the big tune in the finale of his First Symphony to the one in Beethoven's Ninth. It is not recorded what Mahler said when someone— and someone must have— remarked on the beginning of his Third Symphony with Brahms First. That, too, any ass can hear, and we know what Mahler thought of such asses— cf. his song about the ass, the cuckoo, and the nightingale, *Lob des hohen Verstandes* (Lofty Intellect Condescends to Praise), composed in June 1896, midway through his work on the Third Symphony.

Mahler was neither forgetful nor a plagiarist, and in the 1930s Donald Tovey asserted the view, then considered heterodox, that “we cannot fall back upon the device of classifying Mahler as one of the conductor-composers who have drifted into composition through an urge to display their vast memories as experienced conductors.” No, just like Brahms's pseudo-quotation of Beethoven, this beginning is allusion and reference both to a particular monument of the symphonic tradition and to be a topos or type of triumphal song. Mahler lived ambivalently in tradition, wanting to be a part of it and, in the words of his biographer Henry-Louis de La Grange, to “insult” it. The Third, the biggest of Mahler's symphonies as well as the most out of the ordinary in proportion and design, is the most massive of his insults.

When Mahler, then near to completing his Eighth Symphony, visited Sibelius in 1907, the two composers argued about the “essence of the symphony,” Mahler rejecting his

colleague's creed of severity, style, and logic by countering with "No, the symphony must be like a world. It must embrace everything." 12 years earlier, while working on his Third, he had remarked that to "call it a symphony is really incorrect since it does not follow the usual form. The term 'symphony'— to me this means creating a world with all the technical means available."

The completion of the Second Symphony in 1894 had given Mahler confidence: he was sure of being in perfect control of his technique. Now, in the summer of 1895, escaped for some months from his duties as principal conductor of the Hamburg Opera, installed his new one-room cabin at Steinbach on the Attersee some 20 miles east of Saulsburg, with his sister Justine and his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner to look after him (this, along with the usual household chores, most crucially meant silencing crows, water birds, children, and whistling farmhands), Mahler set out to make a world to which he gave the overall title *The Happy Life—A Midsummer Night's Dream* (adding "not after Shakespeare, critics and Shakespeare mavens please note").

Before he wrote a single measure, he worked out a scenario in five sections titled *What the Cuckoo Tells Me (scherzo)*, and *What the Child Tells Me*. He changed all that five times as the music began to take shape in his mind during the summer. *The Happy Life* disappeared, to be replaced for a while by the Nietzschean *Gay Science* (first *My Gay Science*). The trees, twilight, and cuckoo were all removed, supplanted by flowers, animals, and morning bells. He added *What the Night Tells Me* and saw that he wanted to begin with the triumphal entry of summer, which would include an element of something Dionysian and even frightening. In less than three weeks he composed what are now the second through fifth movements. He went on to the adagio and, by the time his composing vacation came to an end on 20 August, he had made an outline of the first movement and written to independent songs, *Lied des Verfolgten im Turm* (Song of the Persecuted Man in the Tower) and the magical *Wo*

*die schönen Trompeten blades* (Where the Lovely Trumpets Sound). It was the richest summer of his life.

In June 1896 he was back at Steinbach. Over the winter he had made some progress scoring the new symphony and had complicated his life by an intense, stormy affair with Anna von Mildenburg, A young, superlatively gifted dramatic soprano newly come to Hamburg. He also discovered when he got to Steinbach that he had forgotten to bring the sketches of the first movement, and it was well he was waiting for them that he wrote his little bouquet for critics, *Lob des hohen Verstandes*. In due course the sketches arrived, and as Mahler worked on them, he came to realize that *The Awakening of Pan* and *The Triumphal March of Summer* wanted to be one movement rather than two.

He also saw, to his alarm, but the first movement was growing hugely, that it would be more than half an hour long, and that it was also getting louder and louder. He deleted his finale, which was the *Life in Heaven* song of 1892 and for which he found the perfect place a few years later as the last movement of his Fourth Symphony. That necessitated writing the last pages of the adagio, which has now become the finale, but for all intents and purposes the work was under control by early August.

*Gay Science* was still part of the title at the beginning of the summer, coupled with what had become *A Midsummer Noon's Dream*, but in Mahler's eighth and last scenario, dated 6 August 1896, the superscription is simply *A Midsummer Noon's Dream*, with the following titles given to the individual movements:

First part: Pan Awakes. Summer Comes Marching In (Bacchic Procession).  
Second part: What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me.  
What the Animals in the Forest Tell Me.  
What Humanity Tells Me.

What the Angels Tell Me.  
What Love Tells Me.

At the 1902 premiere, the program page showed no titles at all, only tempo and generic indications (Tempo di Menuetto, Rondo, Alto Solo, and so on). “beginning with Beethoven,” Mahler wrote to the critic Max Kalbeck that year, “there is no modern music without its underlying program. — But no music is worth anything if first you have to tell the listener what experience lies behind and what he supposed to experience in it. And so, yet again, to hell with the program! You just have to bring your ears and heart along and— not least— willingly surrender to the rhapsodist. Some residue of mystery always remains, even for the creator.”

Writing to the conductor Josef Krug-Waldsee around the same time, he elaborated:

Those titles were an attempt on my part to provide non-musicians with something to hold onto and with the sign post for the intellectual, or better the expressive content of the various movements and for the relationship to each other into the hole. That it didn't work (as in fact it could never work) and that it led only to misinterpretations of the most horrendous sort became painfully clear all too quickly. It was the same disaster that had overtaken me on previous and similar occasions, and now I have, once and for all, given up on commenting, analyzing, and all such experiences of whatever sort. Those titles... will surely say something to you after you know the score. You will draw imitations from them about how I imagined the study intensification of feelings, from the indistinct, unyielding, elemental existences (of the forces of nature) to the tender formation of the human heart, which in turn points toward and reaches reach and beyond itself (God).

Please express that in your own words without quoting these extremely inadequate titles. That way you'll have acted in my spirit. I am very grateful that you asked me [about the titles], for how my work is introduced into public life is by no means inconsequential to me and for its future.

Words of program annotator quotes at his peril. But the climate has changed, and today's audience is very much inclined to come to Mahler with that willingness to surrender he had hoped for. When we look at titles in the Third Symphony, even though they were finally rejected, we are looking at a series of attempts to put into few words the world of ideas, emotions, and association that lay behind the musical choices Mahler made as he composed. We too can draw invitations from them and then remove them as a scaffolding we no longer need. That said, let us look at the musical object Mahler left us.

The first movement accounts for roughly one-third of the symphony's length. Starting with magnificent gaiety and brio, it falls at once it's a tragedy: seesawing chords of low horns and bassoons, the drum-beats of a funeral procession, cries and outrage. Mysterious twitterings follow, the suggestion of a distant quick March, and a grandly rhetorical recitative for the trombone. Against all that, Mahler poses a series of quick marches (The realization of the earlier hint of march music) that have tunes you can't believe you haven't known all your life and that used to cause critics to complain of Mahler's "banality." They are elaborated and scored with an astonishing combination of delicacy and exuberance. Their swagger is rewarded by collision with catastrophe, and the whole movement is the conflict of the dark and the bright elements, culminating in the victory of the bright. For all its outsize dimensions, this is as classical a sonata form as Mahler ever designed.

Two other points should be made. One concerns Mahler's fascination, not ignored later in the century, with things happening "out of time." The piccolo player rushing her imitations of the violins' little fanfares is not berserk: she is merely following Mahler's direction to play "without regard for the beat." That is playful, but the same device is turned to dramatic affect when, at the end of the steadily accelerating development, the snare drums cut across the oom-pah of the cellos and bases with a slower march tempo of their own, thus preparing the way for the eight horns to blast the recapitulation into being. The other thing to point out is that several of the themes her near the beginning will be transformed into materials at the last three movements— fascinating especially when you recall that the first movement was written after the others.

In the division of the work Mahler finally adopted, the first movement makes of the entire first section. What follows is, except for the finale, a series of shorter character pieces, beginning with the *Blumenstück*, the first music Mahler composed for this symphony. This is a delicately sentimental minuet, with access, and its contrasting middle section, to slightly sinister sources of energy. It "anticipates" Music not to be heard in the symphony at all, specifically the scurrying runs from the *Life in Heaven* song that was dropped from this design and incorporated into Symphony No. 4. Sometime after he finished this movement, Mahler noted with surprised at the bases play pizzicato throughout. In the last measures, Wagner's *Parsifal* flower-maidens make a ghostly appearance in Mahler's Upper Austrian pastoral landscape.

In the third movement, Mahler draws on his song *Relief in Summer*, whose text tells of waiting for Lady Nightingale to start singing as soon as the cuckoo is through. The marvel here is the landscape with post horn, not just the lovely melody itself, but the way it is presented: the magical transformation of the highly present trumpet into distant post horn, the gradual change of the post horns melody from fanfare to song,

the interlude for flutes, and as Arnold Schoenberg pointed out, he complement “at first with its divided high violins, then, even more beautiful if possible, with the horns.” after the brief return of this idyll and before the snappy coda, Mahler makes a spine-chilling reference to the Last Judgment “Great Summons“ music in the Second Symphony’ finale.

Now low strings rock to and fro, the harps accenting a few of their notes; the seesawing cords from the symphony’s first pages return; a human voice intones the Midsummer Song from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Each of its eleven lines is to be imagined as coming between two of the twelve strokes of midnight. *Pianississimo* throughout, Mahler warns. The harmony is almost as static as the dynamics, being frozen and all but a few measures to a pedal D. The beginning and end, which frame D in its own dominant, A, are exceptions, and so is the setting with the solo violin of “Lust tiefer noch als Herzeleid” (Joy deeper still than heartbreak).

#### Fourth Movement

O Mensch! Gib Acht!

Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?

Ich schlief!

Aud tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht!

Die Welt ist tief!

Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht!

Tief ist ihr Weh!

Lust tiefer noch als Herzeleid!

Weh spricht: Vergeh!

Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit!

Will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!

Oh, man, give heed!

What does deep midnight say?

I slept!

From a deep dream I have waked.

The world is deep,

And deeper than the day had thought!

Deep is its pain!

Joy deeper still than the heartbreak!

Pain speaks: Vanish!

But all joy seeks eternity,

Seeks deep, deep eternity.



*Friedrich Nietzsche*

From here the music continues without a break and, as abruptly as it changed from the scherzo to Nietzsche's midnight, so does it move now from that darkness into a world of bells and angels. The text of the fifth movement, *Es sungen drei Engel* (Three Angels Were Singing), comes from that famous collection of much-edited folk poetry *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy's Magic Horn), though the interjections of "Du sollst ja nicht weinen (But you mustn't weep)" are Mahler's own. A three-part chorus of women's your voice is carries most of the text, with the solo contralto returning to take the role of the sinner. The boys' chorus, confined at first to bell noises, joins later in the exhortation "Liebe nur Gott" (Only love God) and for the final stanza. This movement, too, foreshadows the *Life in Heaven* that will not in fact occur until the Fourth Symphony; the solemnly archaic chords first heard at "Ich hab übertreten die zehen Gebot" (I have trespassed against the Ten Commandants) are associated in the later work with details of the domestic arrangements in that touching depiction of heaven. Mahler loved the sound in atmosphere of these courts and brought them back years later near the end of the Eighth Symphony. If islands are silent in the softly sonorous movement.

Fifth Movement

Es sungen drei Engel einen süssen Gesang,

Three angels were singing a  
sweet song:

Mit Freuden es selig in dem Himmel klang

With joy it resounded blissfully  
in Heaven.

Sie jauchzten fröhlich auch dabei,

At the same time they happily  
shouted with joy

Dass Petrus sei von Süden frei.

That Pete was absolved from sin.

Und als der Herr Jesus zu Tische sass,

For as Lord Jesus sat at table,

Mit seinen zwölf Jüngern das Abendmahl ass:

Eating supper with his twelve

Da sprach der Herr Jesus: Was stehst du denn hier?

Wenn ich dich anseh', so weinst du mir!  
Und sollt' ich nicht weinen, du gütiger Gott?

Du sollst ja nicht weinen!  
Ich hab' übertreten die zehen Gebot.

Ich gehe und weine ja bitterlich.  
Du sollst ja nicht weinen!  
Ach komm und erbarme dich über mich!

Hast du den übertreten die zehen Gebot,  
So fall auf die Kniee und bete zu Gott!

Liebe nur Gott in alle Zeit!  
So wirst du Erlangen die himmlische Freud'.

Die Himmlische Freud' ist eine selige Stadt,  
Die Himmlische Freud', die kein Ende  
mehr hat!

Die Himmlische Freude war Petro bereit't

Durch Jesum und Allen zur Seligkeit.

Apostles

So spoke Lord Jesus: "Why are  
You standing here?

When I look at you, you weep."

"And how should I not weep,  
you kind God!

No, you mustn't weep!

"I have trespassed against the  
Ten Commandments.

I go and weep, and bitterly."

No, you mustn't weep!

"Ah, come and have mercy upon  
me!"

"If you have trespassed against  
the Ten Commandments,  
Then fall on your knees and pray  
to God.

Only love God forever,

And you will attain heavenly  
joy."

Heavenly joy is a blessed city,  
Heavenly joy that has no end.

Heavenly joy was  
prepared for Peter

By Jesus and for the salvation of  
all.

*from Des Knaben Wunderhorn*

The delicate tension between the regions of F (the quick marches in the first movement, and the third and fifth movements) and D (the dirges in the first movement, the Nietzsche song, and, by extension, the minuet, which is in A major) is now and finally resolved in favor of D. Mahler realized that an ending his symphony

with an Adagio he had made a very special decision. “In Adagio movements,” he explained to Natalie Bauer-Lechner, “everything is resolved and quiet. The Ixion wheel of outer appearance is that last for up to a standstill. In fast movements—minuets, allegros, even andantes nowadays— everything is in motion, change, flux. Therefore, I have ended my Second and Third symphonies contrary to custom... with Adagios— the higher form as distinguished from the lower.”

And noble thought, but, not for the only time in Mahler, there is some gap between theory and reality. The Adagio makes its way at last to a short in grand conquest, but during its course— and this is a movement, like the first, on a very large scale— Ixion’s flaming wheel can hardly be conceived of as standing still. In his opening melody, Mahler invites association with the slow movement of Beethoven’s last quartet, Op. 135. Soon, though, the music is caught in “motion, change, flux,” and before the final triumph, it encounters once more the catastrophe that interrupted the first movement. The Adagio’s original title, *What Love Tells Me*, refers to Christian love, *agape*, and Mahler’s draft carries the superscription “Behold my wounds! Let that one soul be lost!” The performance directions, too, speak to the issue of spirituality, for Mahler commands that the immense final bars with their thundering kettledrums— this is decidedly not a movement of which “everything is resolved and quiet”— be played “not with brute force [but] with rich, noble to .” Likewise, the last measure is “not to be cut off sharply”; rather, there should be some softness to the edge between sound and silence at the end of this most riskily comprehensive of Mahler’s words.