

2024–2025 | 125th Season
Marian Anderson Hall

The Philadelphia Orchestra

Thursday, April 10, at 7:30

Friday, April 11, at 2:00

Sunday, April 13, at 2:00

Yannick Nézet-Séguin Conductor

Mahler Symphony No. 6 in A minor

I. Allegro energico, ma non troppo

II. Scherzo: Wuchtig

III. Andante moderato

IV. Finale: Allegro moderato

This program runs approximately one hour, 20 minutes, and will be performed without an intermission.

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Yannick Nézet-Séguin is now in his 13th season with The Philadelphia Orchestra, serving as music and artistic director. His connection to the ensemble's musicians has been praised by both concertgoers and critics, and he is embraced by the musicians of the Orchestra, audiences, and the community. In addition to expanding the repertoire by embracing an ever-growing and diverse group of today's composers, Yannick and the Orchestra are committed to performing and recording the works of previously overlooked composers.

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Under Yannick's leadership, the Orchestra returned to recording with 14 celebrated releases on the Deutsche Grammophon label, including the GRAMMY® Award-winning *Florence Price Symphonies Nos. 1 & 3*. The Orchestra also reaches thousands of radio listeners with weekly broadcasts on WRTI-FM and SiriusXM. For more information, please visit www.philorch.org.

Music and Artistic Director



London Neudeman

Yannick Nézet-Séguin is currently in his 13th season with The Philadelphia Orchestra, serving as music and artistic director. An inspired leader, Yannick, who holds the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Chair, is both an evolutionary and a revolutionary, developing the mighty “Philadelphia Sound” in new ways. His collaborative style, deeply rooted musical curiosity, and boundless enthusiasm have been heralded by critics and audiences alike. The *New York Times* has called him “phenomenal,” adding that “the ensemble, famous for its glowing strings and homogenous richness, has never sounded better.”

Yannick has established himself as a musical leader of the highest caliber and one of the most thrilling and sought-after talents of his generation. He became the third music director of New York’s Metropolitan Opera in 2018. In addition, he has been artistic director and principal conductor of Montreal’s Orchestre Métropolitain since 2000. In 2017 he became the third-ever honorary member of the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. He served as music director of the Rotterdam Philharmonic from 2008 to 2018 (he is now honorary conductor) and was principal guest conductor of the London Philharmonic from 2008 to 2014. He has made wildly successful appearances with the world’s most revered ensembles and at many of the leading opera houses.

Yannick has shown a deep commitment to expanding the repertoire by embracing an ever-growing and diverse group of today’s composers and by performing the music of under-appreciated composers of the past. In 2018 he signed an exclusive recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon. Under his leadership The Philadelphia Orchestra returned to recording with 14 releases on that label, including *Florence Price Symphonies Nos. 1 & 3*, which won a GRAMMY® Award for Best Orchestral Performance in 2022.

A native of Montreal, Yannick studied piano, conducting, composition, and chamber music at Montreal’s Conservatory of Music and continued his studies with renowned conductors, most notably Carlo Maria Giulini; he also studied choral conducting with Joseph Flummerfelt at Westminster Choir College. Among Yannick’s honors are an appointment as Companion of the Order of Canada; Companion to the Order of Arts and Letters of Quebec; an Officer of the Order of Quebec; an Officer of the Order of Montreal; an Officier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres; *Musical America*’s 2016 Artist of the Year; ECHO KLASSIK’s 2014 Conductor of the Year; a Royal Philharmonic Society Award; Canada’s National Arts Centre Award; the Prix Denise-Pelletier; the Oskar Morawetz Award; and honorary doctorates from the University of Quebec, the Curtis Institute of Music, Westminster Choir College of Rider University, McGill University, the University of Montreal, the University of Pennsylvania, Laval University, and Drexel University.

To read Yannick’s full bio, please visit philorch.org/conductor.

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Gustav Mahler conducted his Sixth Symphony just three times and on the final occasion it carried the title “Tragic.” Composed during one of the happiest periods of his life—recently married, newly a father, and at the height of his professional career—the massive Symphony seems fatefully to anticipate traumas that would unfold in Mahler’s life not long afterward.

At least that is what his widow later explained. Alma Schindler Mahler, herself a composer, recounted stories about autobiographical elements in the Sixth Symphony, which culminates with “blows of fate” sounded by a hammer in the final movement. The meanings this Symphony may have held for Mahler can never be determined, but its passion, integrity, and innovations remain extraordinarily powerful for performers and audiences alike more than a century after its composition.

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The Music

Symphony No. 6

Gustav Mahler

Born in Kalischt (Kaliště), Bohemia, July 7, 1860

Died in Vienna, May 18, 1911



The Sixth Symphony is widely viewed as one of Gustav Mahler's most personal and darkest creations. There is, admittedly, a good deal of competition in this regard among his compositions and what we know (or think we know) about his music is often based on accounts by others rather than on what Mahler said himself or indicated in sketches and manuscripts. He wrote this Symphony during the summers of 1903 and 1904, by which time he had decisively moved away from explicit extra-musical programs that would guide

audiences. In his first four symphonies Mahler had called upon material from his own earlier songs or had actually incorporated songs and choruses within them. Between 1901 and 1905, however, he produced a trilogy of purely instrumental works that mark his ostensible retreat from programs explicit and vocal components.

Summer Composition Pressing administrative and performance duties forced Mahler to do most of his composing during summers. In June 1901 he moved to a new house on the Wörthersee—the idyllic mountain resort where Brahms had loved to vacation—and started work on his Fifth Symphony. It had been a harrowing winter, marked by a near fatal medical emergency in February and by his resignation as principal conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic soon thereafter. (He remained as director of the Court Opera, arguably the most powerful musical position in Europe.)

Mahler composed some of his Fifth Symphony that summer, as well as magnificent songs, and upon his return to Vienna for the new season, he met, and four months later married, the beautiful Alma Schindler, also a composer, who at 22 was nearly half his age. By the time he could finish the work the following summer they were expecting their first child, Maria. The Sixth Symphony followed over the course of the next two summers, written amid the same inspiring natural surroundings and as the couple saw the birth in June 1904 of their second child, Anna. In what would later seem to Alma to be tempting fate, Mahler completed his haunting *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs of Dead Children) that summer as well. He continued working on the orchestration of the Sixth Symphony during the winter and dated the manuscript May 1, 1905.

The apparent change in Mahler's compositional strategies in his middle symphonies therefore coincided with crucial developments in his personal life. At age 41 he was starting his own family—another kind of bid for immortality, as the psychoanalyst Stuart Feder

observed. The range of emotions in the Fifth Symphony, beginning with the opening funeral march, to the “love song” of the famous Adagietto, to the blazing triumph of the last movement, may give some indication of his hopes. The Sixth charts a decidedly different course.

First Hearings of a “Tragic” Symphony Mahler premiered the Sixth Symphony in May 1906 at the Essen Festival of Contemporary Music. The critical response there and in Berlin (where Oskar Fried conducted it in October) was largely negative, as it was when Mahler presented it in Munich in November 1906, notwithstanding enthusiasm from many audience members. Mahler remarked, “I gave up reading the reviews after one critic. ... These little people are always the same. Now all at once they like my first five symphonies. The Sixth must just wait until my Seventh appears.”

Mahler revised the Sixth several times, beginning after preliminary reading rehearsals in April with the Vienna Philharmonic before the Essen premiere. The changes—principally a lightening of the orchestration at various points, the alteration of tempo indications, and the elimination of the third hammer blow in the final movement—were incorporated into the second edition of the published score.

Mahler performed his Sixth just three times. The printed program for the last performance in Vienna carried the title “Tragic.” (It was not so named in the manuscript, at the premiere, or in the published editions released during his lifetime.) Title or not, colleagues and critics alike remarked on its mood. “It reeks of the bitter cup of human life,” wrote the conductor Bruno Walter, a close colleague of Mahler’s. “In contrast with the Fifth, the Sixth says ‘No,’ above all in its last movement, where something resembling the inexorable strife of ‘all against all’ is translated into music. ‘Existence is a burden; death is desirable and life hateful’ might be its motto.”

What Alma Tells Us Much of what we know (or think we know) about the Sixth Symphony comes from Mahler’s long-lived widow. (Mahler died in 1911, Alma in 1964.) While Mahler had sought to suppress explanations as to its meanings, her stories helped to construct a “program.” She relates in her memoirs: “Not one of his works came so directly from his heart as this one. We both wept that day [when he finished writing it]. The music and what it foretold touched us so deeply. The Sixth is the most completely personal of his works and a prophetic one also. ... In the Sixth he anticipated his own life in music.”

Many commentators have mused about how Mahler’s music anticipates the future. What is usually meant is the future of music, the path, for example, pursued by such ardent younger admirers as Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton von Webern. Leonard Bernstein went further when he argued that Mahler foresaw the future in broader cultural and historical ways, foretelling the cataclysms of the 20th century. Alma was the one who cast the Sixth as specifically prophetic of Mahler’s own life, turning it into a “fate symphony” in the tradition of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and others. There is even a musical fate motto (a major triad changing one note to shift to minor) combined with a distinctive fate rhythm. But unlike the heroic affirmations with which earlier fate symphonies conclude, Mahler’s Sixth ends in defeat. The final movement, according to Alma, traces the hero’s decline with

three mighty hammer blows: “In the last movement he described himself and his downfall or, as he later said, that of his hero—It is the hero on whom fall three blows of fate, the last of which fells him as a tree is felled.”

Mahler had hoped to keep ideas about the Symphony abstract. The published score offers a telling comment in this regard with respect to the marvelous effect of using cowbells in three of the four movements. He indicates that they “must be treated very discreetly—in realistic imitation of the higher and lower bells of a grazing herd, sounding from afar, sometimes combined, sometimes singly,” and then tellingly adds: “It must be expressly stated that this technical remark allows no programmatic interpretation.”

There are reasons, moreover, for some skepticism concerning Alma’s interpretation of the Symphony. For one thing, Mahler apparently originally planned five hammer blows in the last movement, then reduced them to three, which he ultimately cut back to two. Moreover, there is often little or no connection between the kind of music that a composer writes and the external circumstances in his or her life at the time. Cheerful music is written in sad times, as well as the reverse, which would seem to be the case in this instance with Mahler. He composed the Sixth at the height of his professional fame and personal happiness. Newly married, Alma was pregnant when he began the Symphony and his second daughter had been born by the time it was finished. It was only a few years later that this joyous world was indeed shattered by devastating professional and personal blows: leaving the Vienna Court Opera in 1907, Maria’s death at age four that summer, and the diagnosis of a dangerous heart condition. As biographer Henry-Louis de La Grange has noted, Alma fails to mention a fourth blow: her love affair with the young architect Walter Gropius, which Mahler learned of and consulted Sigmund Freud about.

Much as we may wish to resist (or at least question) the idea of Mahler as musical prophet, there is a good bit of accuracy to a remark he made in a letter to the critic Richard Specht: “My Sixth will pose puzzles which can only be broached by a generation which has imbibed and digested my first five.” The Symphony indeed took quite some time to appeal to audiences. The American premiere, with the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall, only came in 1947; it was first played by the Philadelphians in 1968. In recent years, however, it has emerged as one of the composer’s most admired and frequently performed pieces.

A Closer Look The Sixth is one of Mahler’s most Classical compositions. As published, it is his only symphony arranged in the “normal” four-movement order, and it is clearly centered in the key of A minor. There are also cyclical elements—musical ideas that appear in different movements and that unify the whole—as Beethoven had done most overtly in his Fifth and Ninth symphonies. Except for the opening movement of the First Symphony, the Sixth is the only one in which Mahler indicates that the exposition should be repeated (about the first four minutes of the work).

The opening movement (**Allegro energico, ma non troppo**) is built from various ideas, beginning, as do many of Mahler’s symphonies, with a march. The fate motto—a loud A-major triad that dies away to a soft A-minor one—is sounded by the trumpets at the same time as the fundamental fate rhythm is pounded out by the timpani. After a chorale-

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like bridge (but one that does not modulate—it has been called a “negative” chorale), there is a passionate theme marked *schwungvoll* (with vigor). According to Alma, this was intended as her theme: “After [Mahler] had drafted the first movement, he came down from the woods to tell me he had tried to express me in a theme. ‘Whether I’ve succeeded, I don’t know; but you’ll have to put up with it.’ This is the great soaring theme of the first movement.” Cowbells, which will return in later movements, evoke an eerie dream world of distance and memory. The movement ends with a passionate affirmation of the “Alma” theme.

For nearly a century there has been debate concerning the order of the middle two movements, about which Mahler changed his mind, perhaps several times. There are musical and interpretative arguments to be made for both orderings, which is probably why Mahler was conflicted about the matter.

The Scherzo (**Wuchtig**) is one of Mahler’s darker dances, a distorted *Ländler*. The trio section, with frequent meter changes, is marked *altväterisch* (grandfatherly or old-fashioned). What Alma tells us about this movement, once again, does not quite align with the facts. Here, she writes, Mahler “represented the unrhythmic games of the two little children, tottering in zigzags over the sand. Ominously, the childish voices became more and more tragic, and at the end died out in a whimper.” The summer he wrote the music, however, only Maria was born. Arnold Schoenberg praised the “curious structure” of the beautiful melody that opens the **Andante moderato**. The movement does not allude to the common thematic material found in the other ones and therefore stands more on its own.

The finale (**Allegro moderato**) is the longest movement and one of Mahler’s most complex. It opens with a fantastic Expressionist outburst, the fate rhythm, and a series of fragmentary themes that take some time to coalesce. When Mahler revised the Symphony, he pared down some of the rich orchestration and, as mentioned, eliminated the third hammer blow. (Mahler was specific about how he wanted them to sound: “short, mighty, but dull in resonance, with a non-metallic character, like the stroke of an ax.”)

Bruno Walter saw the movement as “the mounting tensions and climaxes [that] resemble, in their grim power, the mountainous waves of a sea that will overwhelm and destroy the ship. ... The work ends in hopelessness and the dark night of the soul. *Non placet* is his verdict on this world; the ‘other world’ is not glimpsed for a moment.” Indeed, the fate motifs—the major/minor triad and rhythm—reappear for the terrifying conclusion of this tragic Symphony.

—Christopher H. Gibbs

Christopher H. Gibbs is James H. Ottaway Jr. Professor of Music at Bard College and has been the program annotator for The Philadelphia Orchestra since 2000. He is the author of several books on Schubert and Liszt, and the co-author, with Richard Taruskin, of The Oxford History of Western Music, College Edition.

Mahler composed his Symphony No. 6 from 1903 to 1905.

The first Philadelphia Orchestra performances of the Sixth Symphony were in October 1968, with Claudio Abbado on the podium. Antal Dorati conducted the work in November 1974. Klaus Tennstedt in February

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1990, James Conlon in March 1999, Christoph Eschenbach in November 2005, and Yannick Nézet-Séguin in January 2012. Most recently, Simon Rattle led the piece here in a non-subscription concert in October 2016.

The Philadelphians recorded the Symphony in 2005 with Eschenbach for the Ondine label.

The work is scored for piccolo, four flutes (III and IV doubling piccolo), four oboes (III and IV doubling English horn), English horn, four clarinets (IV doubling E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, four bassoons, contrabassoon, eight horns, six trumpets, four trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cowbells, cymbals, glockenspiel, hammer, orchestra bells, rute, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle, xylophone), two harps, celesta, and strings.

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Musical Terms

GENERAL TERMS

Bridge: A contrasting section that prepares for the return of the original material

Chorale: A hymn tune of the German Protestant Church, or one similar in style. Chorale settings are vocal, instrumental, or both.

Chord: The simultaneous sounding of three or more tones

Chromatic: Relating to tones foreign to a given key (scale) or chord

Coda: A concluding section or passage added in order to confirm the impression of finality

Diatonic: Melody or harmony drawn primarily from the tones of the major or minor scale

Exposition: See sonata form

Harmony: The combination of simultaneously sounded musical notes to produce chords and chord progressions

Ländler: An Austrian folk dance in triple time

Meter: The symmetrical grouping of musical rhythms

Modulate: To pass from one key or mode into another

Mode: Any of certain fixed arrangements of the diatonic tones of an octave, as the major and minor scales of Western music

Octave: The interval between any two notes that are seven diatonic (nonchromatic) scale degrees apart

Scale: The series of tones which form (a) any major or minor key or (b) the chromatic scale of successive semi-tonic steps

Scherzo: Literally “a joke.” Usually the third movement of symphonies and

quartets that was introduced by Beethoven to replace the minuet. The scherzo is followed by a gentler section called a trio, after which the scherzo is repeated. Its characteristics are a rapid tempo, vigorous rhythm, and humorous contrasts. Also an instrumental piece of a light, piquant, humorous character.

Sonata form: The form in which the first movements (and sometimes others) of symphonies are usually cast. The sections are exposition, development, and recapitulation, the last sometimes followed by a coda. The exposition is the introduction of the musical ideas, which are then “developed.” In the recapitulation, the exposition is repeated with modifications.

Tonic: The keynote of a scale

Triad: A three-tone chord composed of a given tone (the “root”) with its third and fifth in ascending order in the scale

Trio: A division set between the first section of a minuet or scherzo and its repetition, and contrasting with it by a more tranquil movement and style

THE SPEED OF MUSIC (Tempo)

Adagietto: A tempo somewhat faster than adagio

Adagio: Leisurely, slow

Allegro: Bright, fast

Andante: Walking speed

Energico: With vigor, powerfully

Moderato: A moderate tempo, neither fast nor slow

Wuchtig: Ponderous, slow, emphatic

TEMPO MODIFIERS

Ma non troppo: But not too much

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