

Minnesota Orchestra

Osmo Vänskä, conductor

Thursday, March 17, 2022, 11 am	Orchestra Hall
Friday, March 18, 2022, 8 pm	Orchestra Hall
Saturday, March 19, 2022, 8 pm	Orchestra Hall

*These concerts are dedicated in loving memory to **Judy Dayton**,
who believed passionately in the beauty and power of music.*

Gustav Mahler

Symphony No. 9 in D major

Andante comodo

Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Ländlers

Rondo – Burleske: Allegro assai – Sehr trotzig

Adagio: Sehr langsam und nach zurückhaltend

ca. 87'





Osmo Vänskä, conductor

Profile appears on page 10.

Vänskä on Mahler and recordings

Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra are nearing the completion of their final recording project together: a cycle of Mahler's ten symphonies. So far, the Orchestra has recorded seven of them for the BIS Records label, and this spring it will add two more, the Eighth and Ninth. Vänskä, who will reunite with the Orchestra in a future season to cap the project with the Third Symphony, answered a few questions on Mahler and recordings.

What was it about Mahler's symphonies that inspired you to take on this project?

Mahler was not only an incredible composer, but also a conductor, and I have always loved and admired his music. After recording Beethoven and Sibelius with the Orchestra, the team at BIS and I thought it would be both fun and challenging to tackle recording the ten Mahler symphonies. His music is incredibly difficult to play, and I think the level of the Orchestra has really grown throughout the process of learning and recording them.

Why is it important to you that the Orchestra continue to make recordings?

As the music director, it is my job to find projects which will improve the level of playing and our reputation, both locally and abroad. Recordings make the orchestra more accessible to those who can't travel to Minnesota or see us on tour, so it allows the listeners to experience our music-making from the comfort of their own homes. Even more importantly, with every recording we have made I have seen the level of the Orchestra grow. The act of listening in such minute detail, trying to get everything "perfect," is such an educational and transformational process for an ensemble.

How important have donors been to the process?

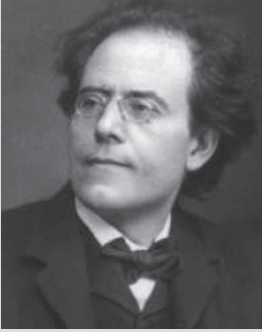
Without the support of our generous donors, we would not have a world-class orchestra right here at home in Minneapolis. We have done many successful domestic and international tours, but it really is the recordings which will leave a lasting legacy for this organization. The donors are such an integral part of everything we have been able to accomplish over the years—I really can't thank them enough for their support.

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one-minute note

Mahler: Symphony No. 9

Mahler's Ninth Symphony, written in the twilight of the composer's life, expresses serenity in the face of inevitable death. Its structure is unusual: two large outer movements, both slow and poignant, frame a pair of inner movements that are faster and somewhat sardonic. The work begins with a long crescendo over a murmuring rhythm some assume to represent Mahler's own arrhythmic heartbeat. A set of swaggering, rustic and sensuous folk dances comprise the second movement, and the third races off in a defiant and brilliant *Burlesque*. The final movement climbs from the dark, murky depths to an extreme emotional height and then ends with a peaceful fade to nothingness. Mahler completed the score in 1909, but died two years later without ever hearing this heavenly symphony performed.



Gustav Mahler

Born: July 7, 1860,
Kalischt, Bohemia

Died: May 18, 1911,
Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 9 in D major

Premiered: June 26, 1912

In 1907 Gustav Mahler seemed blessed by fortune. He had been director of the Vienna Opera for ten years, he was a composer whose music had passionate admirers, and he was the happily married father of two small girls. Yet within the space of a few weeks, that world shattered around him. After a decade of brilliant success—and vicious infighting—Mahler resigned as director of the Opera. On a family vacation in June, his 4-year-old daughter Maria developed scarlet fever and died after two horrifying weeks. His wife Alma collapsed, and the doctor brought in to care for her had a look at Mahler and made a deadly discovery: the composer had a heart lesion that would almost certainly prove fatal.

Suddenly Mahler had lost his entire world: his position, a child and his own health. His doctors counseled rest to conserve his strength, but Mahler ignored their advice, taking over the Metropolitan Opera in New York and later the New York Philharmonic.

“fondness for this earth”

In the summer of 1909, Mahler took his wife and daughter Anna to the small town of Toblach in a mountain valley high in the Tyrol. His wife reported that he could be morose, consumed by thoughts of death: “We were afraid of everything now. He was always stopping on a walk to feel his pulse and he often asked me to listen to his heart and see whether the beat was clear or rapid or calm....His steps and pulse-beats were numbered and his life a torment. Every excursion, every attempt at distraction was a failure.”

Yet at the same time Mahler could feel a savage pleasure in being alive. To a friend he wrote: “I feel marvelous here! To be able to sit working by the open window, and breathing the air, the trees and flowers all the time—this is a delight I have never known till now....I feel myself getting better every minute.”

It was under these conditions, working in a small cottage in the woods, that Mahler began his Ninth Symphony in the summer of

1909; he completed the score the following April 1 in New York City. But he did not live to hear a note of this music. Mahler died of heart failure in May 1911, more than a year before his disciple Bruno Walter led the first performance.

the music: “the most heavenly thing”

andante comodo. The structure of the Ninth Symphony is unusual: two large outer movements, both slow and expressive, frame two shorter inner movements, both faster and somewhat sardonic in tone. The opening *Andante comodo* (“Moving at a comfortable tempo”) is one of Mahler’s finest movements. The young composer Alban Berg wrote to his wife:

“Once again I have played through the score of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony: the first movement is the most heavenly thing Mahler ever wrote. It is the expression of an exceptional fondness for this earth, the longing to live in peace on it, to enjoy nature to its depth—before death comes.

“For it comes irresistibly. The whole movement is permeated by premonitions of death. Again and again it crops up...most potently of course in the colossal passage where this premonition becomes certainty, where in the midst of...almost painful joy in life, death itself is announced *mit höchster Gewalt* [with the utmost violence].”

This 30-minute movement takes the listener on a shattering journey, ranging from the nostalgic and bittersweet (at one point in the manuscript Mahler scrawled “O vanished days of youth! O scattered love!”) to moments of cataclysm punctuated by violence and funeral marches. Mahler’s method is masterly: very quietly he presents almost all his thematic material in the first few moments. The stumbling, murmuring rhythm at the very beginning, some have surmised, is the sound of Mahler’s own arrhythmic heartbeat. The calmly-singing main theme, announced by the second violins, contains the thematic cell of the symphony—the interval of the falling major second, which Mahler borrowed from Beethoven’s *Les Adieux* Sonata, Opus 81a. That falling two-note pattern repeats throughout this movement. The music seems to say again and again “Leb wohl! Leb wohl!”: “Farewell! Farewell!”

Structurally, the movement is a long crescendo. It passes through three climaxes, each of increasing power, and the last is the “colossal passage” Berg refers to: from exultant heights, the music plunges downward and explodes “with the utmost violence.” Out of the stunned aftermath a dark funeral march grows to a climax, then subsides as a flute solo sings gently (Mahler marks the part *Schwebend*, floating). After all its agony, this movement ends in radiant calm.

im tempo eines gemächlichen ländlers. The mood changes sharply in the second movement, which is a sequence of dances. Mahler requests “the tempo of a comfortable ländler,” but then specifies that it should be “somewhat clumsy and rather rough.” Once again, he presents his material in the first few bars: a little clarinet tune gives way to the swaggering ländler from the second violins. But the clarinet tune will dominate this movement, returning in many forms—quickly it becomes a robust waltz, and just as quickly it is transformed into a wild rustic dance, full of the sound of banging pans and blatting winds. The interval of the falling second, so important in the opening movement, returns here as this movement pitches between unbridled energy and languorous sensuality; it winks out on the same thematic fragments heard in its first moments.

rondo-burleske: allegro assai-sehr trotzig. The third movement is a blistering rondo. Mahler makes its character clear by calling it a *Burlesque* and marking the score *Very fast. Very defiant.* The trumpet’s three-note opening call rings throughout, and the music offers some of the thorniest (and most brilliant) counterpoint Mahler ever wrote. Along the way come episodes of haunting beauty, many based on the figure of a slow turn, and it is characteristic that these melodies are then savaged: what had been beautiful is suddenly smeared and made ugly and cast aside. The music resumes its frantic opening pace and races to the powerful close, where the opening three-note figure hammers the movement into silence.

adagio: sehr langsam und nach zurückhaltend. The Ninth Symphony concludes with a long *Adagio* that is a counterpart to the opening movement, both structurally and emotionally. After a soaring two-measure introduction, strings sing a hymn-like main theme that Mahler marks *molto espressivo*. But the wonder is that this glowing melody is simply a transformation of the jaunty little clarinet tune that had opened the second movement; now, far from its roots, it sings with radiant calm. Soon Mahler takes up the turn-figure that had appeared in so many forms in the third movement, and here, at a very slow tempo, that figure yields unimaginable riches: what had been sardonic a few moments before now burns with a rapt beauty.

The true second subject of this movement feels lugubrious, dark, threatening: violins sound a quiet high A, and four octaves below, cellos and contrabassoon make a sinister climb out of the murky depths. It is as if death has intruded into this world one more time. Over a long span that alternates interludes of great delicacy (some evocative of the atmosphere of *Das Lied von der Erde*) with moments of cataclysm, Mahler builds to a great climax, and the music falls away to conclude in peace.

If the symphonic process is one of building large structures from small bits, Mahler reverses that over the final pages of the Ninth Symphony. This long movement gradually breaks down into component bits, and these in turn dissolve into nothingness as this music seems to move outside time.

The last page of the score (only 27 measures) takes nearly four minutes to traverse, and Mahler marks the final measure *ersterbend* (dying away). In the words of Bruno Walter, “with the conclusion, the clouds dissolve in the blue of Heaven.”

Instrumentation: 4 flutes, piccolo, 4 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, E-flat clarinet, 4 bassoons (1 doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, 3 large bells in A, B and F-sharp, cymbals, bass drum, snare drum, glockenspiel, tam-tam, triangle, 2 harps and strings

Program note by **Eric Bromberger.**

The performance of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony is sponsored by **Ellie Crosby and The Longview Foundation.**

coda

The Minnesota Orchestra’s first performance of **Gustav Mahler’s Ninth Symphony** came more than 70 years after the ensemble’s founding, on October 30, 1974, at Orchestra Hall, with Stanislaw Skrowaczewski conducting—part of a historic month that included the grand opening of Orchestra Hall.

The Orchestra is now in the late stages of its project to record all ten Mahler symphonies under the direction of Osmo Vänskä for BIS Records, with seven symphonies put to disc so far. Later this month it will record the Ninth Symphony in a series of sessions, and in June 2022 it will perform and record the Eighth Symphony. Vänskä and the Orchestra will reunite to record the Third Symphony in a future season to complete the cycle. The most recent release in the Mahler series was the Tenth Symphony, which was honored with the 2021 Recording of the Year Award by Australia’s *Limelight* magazine and was listed as one the “best classical releases of 2021” by the U.K.’s *Guardian* newspaper.