

Symphony No. 1 in D major, "Titan"

Gustav Mahler

Born in Kalischt (now Kaliště, Jihlava), Bohemia, July 7, 1860; died in Vienna, May 18, 1911

"Down with program books! They propagate false ideas!" shouted Mahler at a dinner party. "The audience should be left to its own thoughts about the work that is being played. It should not be prejudiced in any manner." Mahler wavered on the issue of providing program notes throughout his life. He supplied no program when his *Symphonic Poem in Two Parts* (as the First Symphony was originally called) was first performed in Budapest on November 20, 1889. Although the orchestra was enthusiastic about the work, public reaction was cold and one critic blamed Mahler for not providing the audience with any programmatic guide.

In January 1893 Mahler revised the score, renamed the work, and added programmatic titles. When he conducted the work for the second time, in October in Hamburg, he provided these titles with limited explanation:

Part I: From the Days of Youth. Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces

1. Spring without End. The introduction represents the awakening of nature at dawn.
2. A Chapter of Flowers.
3. Under Full Sail.

Part II: Commedia Umana [Human Comedy]

4. Stranded! A funeral march in the manner of Callot [sixteenth-century etcher and engraver]. The following is to serve as explanation if necessary. The composer found the external stimulus to this piece from a pictorial parody, *The Hunter's Funeral Procession*, well known to all children in southern Germany. [Scholars believe Mahler was actually thinking of an early nineteenth-century woodcut by Moritz von Schwind, not Callot.] The forest animals accompany the dead hunter's coffin to the grave. The hares carry flags; in front is a band of Gypsy musicians and music-making cats, frogs, crows, and so on, while deer, stags, foxes and other



The Hunter's Funeral Procession, early 19th-century woodcut by Moritz von Schwind

four-footed and feathered denizens of the woods accompany the procession in comic postures. In the present piece the imagined expression is partly ironically gay, partly gloomily brooding. The movement is immediately followed by

5. Dall’Inferno al Paradiso [From Hell to Heaven], the sudden outbreak of a profoundly wounded heart.

By the time the Symphony was published Mahler again felt such a revulsion for programmatic explanations that none appear in the score. Yet as late as 1896 he wrote to Berlin critic and composer Max Marschalk that there was some justification for the title *Titan* and for the program—even though these were attached after the actual composition, were inadequate, and tended to mislead the public.

The subtitle *Titan* was once assumed to refer to a mythological figure, then to the Jean-Paul Richter novel, but Natalie Bauer-Lechner insisted in a 1900 letter and in her *Recollections* that Mahler simply intended it to indicate his general feelings toward the Symphony and to represent his own idea of a hero of the Titan race as he dealt with Fate. Although Mahler later deleted the subtitle just as he had the programmatic explanations, it remained affixed for commercial reasons.

The five items in Mahler’s program refer to movements of the Symphony: “Spring Without End” to the first, “Under Full Sail” to the scherzo, “The Hunter’s Funeral Procession” to the third, and “Dall’Inferno al Paradiso” to the finale. “A Chapter of Flowers” refers to the “Blumine” movement only relatively recently published in 1967 from the original manuscript that Mahler had given to student and life-long friend Jenny Feld Perrin, whose family kept it until 1959. The purchaser, Mrs. James M. Osborn, donated it to the New Haven Symphony Orchestra. Though motivically related to parts of the scherzo and finale, Mahler eliminated this movement during the major 1896 revisions and decided not to include it in the Symphony’s 1898 and 1906 publications, indicating his final thoughts on the matter.

Though the Symphony was composed primarily between 1884 and 1888 (revised in 1893, 1896, and 1898), some of the material originated earlier. Most prominent are quotes from his song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (*Songs of a Wayfarer*), begun in 1883. Probably the earliest material is in the third movement, for which exists a piano duet fragment entitled “Scherzo,” dated 1876 by Mahler scholar Henry-Louis de La Grange.

The first movement begins eerily with a slow introduction on a sustained “A” pedal spanning six octaves, over which can be heard a slow development of the motive employing descending fourths, distant trumpet fanfares, and cuckoo calls (labeled as such in the score). Mahler’s expression of the cuckoo call is unique—it descends in the interval of a fourth; almost all previous composers had their cuckoos descend in thirds. The main subject of the movement is based on the second of the *Wayfarer* songs:

Ging heut' Mor - gen ü - ber's Feld, Tau noch _ auf den Grä - sern hing;

The tune, particularly its descending and rising fourths, provides thematic material for much of the Symphony.

The scherzo, in a peasant-like romping style, has its roots in Austrian folk dance. Its main theme, as in the first movement, germinates from the interval of a fourth. After the ländler-like trio, the scherzo returns in a condensed form.

Mahler's whimsical and slightly deranged funeral march begins with a round devised over a minor-mode version of "Frère Jacques" or the German equivalent "Bruder Martin." A new countersubject to the folk tune is introduced by the oboe and E-flat clarinet; and the music soon slips into episodes reminiscent of Gypsy or Jewish tunes and German street bands. The middle section contains another self-quote, from the last of the *Wayfarer* songs:



Mahler felt this relatively short movement needed the rather extensive description quoted above, whereas he dealt with the monumental finale in one line.

This crowning movement begins with a sudden outburst, and a long musical drama unfolds that could almost exist independently, were it not for thematic references that tie the music to the rest of the Symphony. After the initial F minor episode comes a beautifully lyric passage in D-flat major. The fiery opening is further developed, beginning in G minor, and eventually the first statement of the "triumphal" motive (so-called in the score) is reached through a startling modulation: C major—D major. This climax is a prefatory one; the final denouement occurs after even more development, and is delivered with Mahler's instructions that all the horn players stand.

Now that Mahler's First Symphony has become such a popular and frequently performed work, it is difficult to imagine the jeers, catcalls, and scathing criticisms it provoked in Budapest, Vienna, and Weimar. Although the new symphonic realms that Mahler's inspirations unveiled may not terrify today as they did in his own day, they can still arouse awe and wonderment.

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