SYMPHONY NO. 1 IN D MAJOR
COMPOSED FROM 1884–1888

GUSTAV MAHLER
BORN IN KALISCHT (KALIŠTĚ), BOHEMIA, JULY 7, 1860
DIED IN VIENNA, MAY 18, 1911

When Mozart wrote his First Symphony, at the tender age of eight, he was probably not much concerned with his place in music history. For the Romantics, however, the symphony was the proving ground of greatness. Expectations were intense, which led some composers, like Brahms and Bruckner, to delay for many years the public presentation of a symphony. Others tried to reinvent the genre, writing not a traditional Symphony No. 1, but rather a symphonic poem or some other kind of large orchestral work, often with an extramusical program based on literature, history, or nature.

Mahler began confronting this challenge in his 20s. There are stories of early “student” symphonies now lost or destroyed, and he tried his hand at chamber music, song, a large cantata (Das Klagende Lied), theater music, and opera (an arrangement and completion of Weber’s Die Drei Pintos) before writing what would become his First Symphony. Most of the work was composed in the space of six weeks during the spring of 1888; Mahler remarked that it “virtually gushed like a mountain stream.” By the time that work was premiered as we know it today, in Berlin in March 1896, Mahler was 35 years old and already a celebrated conductor.

FROM SYMPHONIC POEM TO SYMPHONY
The Symphony went through various incarnations. In November 1889, Mahler premiered his “Symphonic Poem in Two Parts” in Budapest, where he served at the time as director of the Royal Hungarian Opera. The five-movement composition appears to have been greeted with bewilderment and hostility. Mahler set about revising the work, now calling it Titan, “A Tone Poem in the Form of a Symphony.” (The title probably alludes to the once-famous novel by Jean Paul Richter.) It was still five movements in two parts, but each movement now had a specific title. Mahler also provided some programmatic explanations, generally quite minimal except for the innovative fourth movement, a “funeral march” that had most puzzled the first listeners. The program for Mahler’s “Popular Concert” on October 27, 1893, in Hamburg included the following:

“TITAN” A Tone Poem in the Form of a Symphony

Part I. From the Days of Youth: Flower-, Fruit-, and Thorn-pieces
1. “Spring without End” (Introduction and Allegro comodo).
The introduction presents the awakening of nature from a long winter’s sleep.
2. “Blumine” (Andante)
3. “Under Full Sail” (Scherzo).

Part II. Commedia humana
4. “Stranded!” (A Funeral March “in the manner of Callot”).
The following may serve as an explanation: The external stimulus for this piece of music came to the composer from the satirical picture, known to all Austrian children, “The Hunter’s Funeral Procession,” from an old book of children’s fairy tales: The beasts of the forest accompany the dead woodman’s coffin to the grave, with hares carrying a small banner, with a band of Bohemian musicians in front, and the procession escorted by music-making cats, toads, crows, etc., with stags, deer, foxes, and other four-legged and feathered creatures of the forest in comic postures. At this point the piece is conceived as the expression of a mood now ironically merry, now weirdly brooking, which is then suddenly followed by:

5. “Dall’ Inferno [al Paradiso]” (Allegro furioso)
The sudden outburst of the despair of a deeply wounded heart.

Mahler conducted this five-movement Titan two times, in Hamburg in 1893 and in Weimar the following year. In 1896, however, he decided to drop the second movement, a lilting andante he had originally written as part of the incidental music to accompany Joseph Viktor von Scheffel’s poem Der Trompeter von Säkkingen (The Trumpeter from Säkkingen). The work was now simply called Symphony in D major. “Blumine” was gone (it sometimes appears as a separate piece on concerts), as were the two-part format and all the titles and other extramusical clues given above. By this time Mahler was increasingly moving away from wanting to divulge what was behind his works.

THE VIENNESE RESPONSE
Opinion was divided in 1900 when Mahler conducted the First Symphony in Vienna’s Musikverein with his own orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic. Theodor Helm reported that the work “was truly a bone of contention for the public as well as for the critics. This is not to say that the piece wasn’t superficially a success: A large majority of the audience applauded, and Mahler was repeatedly called out. But there were also startled faces all around, and some hissing was heard. When leaving the concert hall, on the stairs and in the coatroom, one couldn’t have heard more contradictory comments about the new work.” For many, apparently, the issue was Mahler’s suppression of all background information about the work. Helm stated that Mahler was “not well served by this veil of mystery … it was cruel of the composer to deprive his unprepared Philharmonic audience of not only the program book but also any technical guide to this labyrinth of sound.”

The most powerful critic of the day, Eduard Hanslick, champion of Brahms and absolute music, foe of Wagner and all things programmatic, called himself a “sincere admirer” of Mahler the conductor, the one who had accomplished such great feats with the Vienna Court Opera and Philharmonic Orchestra. Although Hanslick did not wish to rush to judgment about this “strange symphony,” he felt he had the responsibility to tell his readers that the work was for him that “kind of music that is not music.” He was placed in the awkward position of wanting to know more about what was behind the work:
Mahler’s symphony would hardly have pleased us more with a program than without. But we cannot remain indifferent to knowing what an ingenious man like Mahler had in mind with each of these movements and how he would have explained the puzzling coherence. Thus we lack a guide to show the correct path in the darkness. What does it mean when a cataclysmic finale suddenly breaks forth, or when a funeral march on the old student canon “Frère Jacques” is interrupted by a section entitled “parody”? To be sure, the music itself would have neither gained nor lost anything with a program; still, the composer’s intentions would have become clearer and the work therefore more comprehensible. Without such aid, we had to be satisfied with some witty details and stunningly brilliant orchestral technique.

Many listeners were baffled by Mahler’s ingenious juxtapositions of irony and sublimity, of parody and exultation, as well as by his merging of the genres of song and symphony within the work. One of the younger critics, Max Graf, perceived that this was the start of something new in music history and believed that only a new “generation can feel the work’s great emotional rapture, pleasure in intensely colored sound, and ecstasy of passion; only they can enjoy its parody and distortion of sacred emotion. I myself am far too close to this generation not to empathize with the work as if it were my own. Yet I can almost understand that an older generation finds it alien.” And indeed the next generation of composers, Zemlinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, and others came to worship Mahler the man and his music. Less than a dozen years later, when Mahler died in 1911 at age 50, Schoenberg would proclaim in his memorial address: “Gustav Mahler was a saint.”

A CLOSER LOOK
Mahler marked the mysterious and extraordinary introduction to the first movement Wie ein Naturlaut—“Like a sound from nature.” The music seems to grow organically from the interval of a falling fourth. (As critics noted, this sound of a cuckoo is “unnatural.” Mahler did not use the interval of the minor third that Beethoven had in his “Pastoral” Symphony.) The two notes are in fact the opening of the main theme, derived from one of Mahler’s own songs, “Ging heut’ Morgens über’s Feld” (This morning I went out o’er the fields), the second in his cycle Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen (Songs of a Wayfarer). The scherzo movement (Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell, moving along powerfully, but not too quickly) is a Ländler, an Austrian folk-dance that was to become one of Mahler’s favorites. Once again he uses an earlier song, “Hans und Grethe,” to provide melodic material.

The third movement (Feierlich und gemessen, solemnly and measured), is the one that Mahler felt most needed explanation. It opens with a solo double bass playing in a high register a minor-key version of the popular song “Bruder Martin” (Brother Martin, better known in its French version as “Frère Jacques”). With the air of a funeral march (as found in so many of Mahler’s symphonies), it is first presented as a round but interrupted by what sounds like spirited dance music in a Klezmer style. Another contrast comes in the middle of the movement when Mahler uses the fourth Wayfarer song, “Die zwei blauen Augen” (The two blue eyes). The finale (Stürmisch bewegt, stormily agitated) moves from fiery defiance to reconciliation, from Hell to Paradise as the original title had it. Natalie Bauer-
Lechner, a friend and confidant of Mahler’s, informed a Viennese critic that in the end the hero of the work becomes the master of his fate: “Only when he has triumphed over death, and when all the glorious memories of youth have returned with themes from the first movement, does he get the upper hand: and there is a great victorious chorale!”

—Christopher H. Gibbs