

## **PROGRAM NOTES**

### **APRIL 8/9, 2017**

#### **Symphony No. 7 in E Minor**

Gustav Mahler

Born July 7, 1860 in Kalischt, Bohemia [Czechoslovakia]

Died May 18, 1911 in Vienna, Austria

First performances by the Wichita Symphony

During his lifetime, Gustav Mahler was known primarily as a conductor. For the most part, he failed to find a warm reception for his original compositions. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, audiences hearing Mahler's symphonies did not understand his cosmic vision, which strained and heaved at conventional expectations. He had to wait three years for a performance of his Symphony No. 7, in spite of his fame as a conductor. It is a thorny, ambiguous work fraught with the uncertain interpretive territory that comes from complex psychological layers.

Mahler's first inspiration was rarely his final one. Although he composed the Seventh Symphony in 1904 and 1905, it underwent several sets of revisions before the premiere in Prague in September 1908. He was a stringent critic of his own work, and strove to achieve maximum and compression in his revisions. Many of his changes affected instrumentation. The symphony's extensive instrumental resources are employed sparingly. Throughout the score, clarity is of utmost importance. Consequently, the Seventh is arguably the most refined of Mahler's symphonies.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, Mahler's conception of tonality was already straining traditional harmony. The Seventh Symphony feels on the edge: exploratory and harmonically daring, without totally abandoning a comfortable homing point for our ears. Mahler uses cowbells to bring to mind the bucolic placidity of summer in the country. Later, in the fourth movement, he introduces the urbane, seductive sound of the mandolin, lending sophistication and artifice that belie the simplicity implied earlier.

Sometimes the Seventh Symphony is called "The Song of the Night." Images of the night suffuse this work, encompassing a wide range of nocturnal metaphors: death, romance, childhood fear of the dark, sultry mystery. This is nothing if not a symphony of variety and contradiction.

The work begins with another unlikely comer to the ranks of the symphony: tenor horn (also called baritone horn in English), a brass instrument usually associated with military bands. Nowhere else in all Mahler's music does he use tenor horn. In the Seventh, he assigns it the noble first theme of his introduction, lending a romantic flavor to the entire work that blossoms most fully in the second movement. The horn's darker color serves a twofold purpose: lending a peculiar, haunting and slightly rougher quality to the opening slow introduction, as well as heralding a prominent role for the entire expanded brass section that holds for the entire work. A quartet of French horns plays a major part in delivering Mahler's ideas.

The first movement seems to be a paean to the mysterious allure and unfathomable nature of the night. Here is a night with full moon and a breathtaking constellation of stars, accompanied by rippling arpeggiation in the harp. Later in the opening movement, night is rent by the threat of a violent storm. Many of the characteristics of Mahler's music are present in this massive opening movement: martial rhythms, rapid and abrupt changes of key, superimposed

intervals (particularly fourths) that stretch the boundaries of tonality to their limits, and brilliant roles for the brasses.

The second and fourth movements are subtitled *Nachtmusik I* and *II*. The German term, which means "night music," is probably more frequently associated with Mahler's younger Hungarian contemporary Béla Bartók, whose "night-music" passages evoke scurrying, magical sounds of the worlds of nature and fantasy. In their own way, Mahler's two *Nachtmusik* movements are precursor to Bartók's: in one instance (second movement, marked *Allegro moderato; Andante*) suffused with ghostly phantoms; in the other (fourth movement, *Andante amoroso*) exploring the romantic, suggestive aspects of the night, enhanced by the piquant color of guitar and mandolin. Both instruments, of course, have strong associations with amorous serenades.

Mahler calls for harp again in the second *Nachtmusik*, setting it temporarily in relief against the backdrop of a chamber orchestra; he thus employs three plucked string timbres to adorn his nocturnal rainbow. The horn also returns with a melody that seems to embody the longings and desire of a lover. Collectively, these enchanting touches make up one of Mahler's most successful individual movements, and add strong support to his well-deserved reputation as a orchestration genius.

The two *Nachtmusik* movements are separated by a Scherzo marked *Schattenhaft*, [shadowy]. The eminent British Mahler specialist Deryck Cooke thought of it as being in Mahler's 'horror' vein:

A whirling, ghostly dance on muted strings, pervaded with spasmodic rhythms on timpani and bass strings, alternates with a savagely distorted 'popular' waltz tune; the latter anticipates the scherzo of [Mahler's Ninth Symphony], especially when sneered out viciously by fortissimo trombones.

Listening to this eerie scherzo is a bit like looking through an old photo album, with many of the orchestral players as the subject of individual photographs. No one picture retains our senses for an extended period of time, but each one has its own riveting appeal for a short while, until we are diverted by another's ploy for the shifting spotlight. Even though Mahler did not label the scherzo as a third *Nachtmusik*, the movement is clearly bound to its neighbors by context, spirit, and musical inspiration. Taken together, these three inner movements are among Mahler's most fascinating musical explorations. They add to the massive impact of the Seventh Symphony.

Mahler's finale takes a bow to Viennese symphonic tradition. The rondo was the favored closing movement form of Haydn and Mozart. This one is festive and brassy, replete with celebratory fanfares. Allusions to the march tune of the opening movement further emphasize the symmetrical arch form of the symphony. Mahler uses the finale to make a decisive and affirming statement that overrides any mystery or uncertainty implied during the earlier movements. Through his glorious music he shows us, as the 18<sup>th</sup>-century English lexicographer and essayist Samuel Johnson observed in *The History of Rasselas*, that

When the clouds of sorrow gather over us, we see nothing beyond them, nor can imagine how they will be dispelled; yet a new day succeeded to the night, and sorrow is never without a dawn of ease.