

Gustav MAHLER
(1860 – 1911)

IV. Adagietto from "Symphony No. 5 in c-sharp minor"

Austrian composer and conductor Gustav Mahler was best known during his lifetime as one of the leading orchestral and operatic conductors of the day. He has since come to be acknowledged as one of the most important late-Romantic composers, although his music was never completely accepted by the musical establishment of Vienna while he was alive. Mahler composed primarily symphonies and songs; however, his approach to the genre often blurred the lines between orchestral Lied (art song), symphony, and symphonic poem.

Mahler wrote his Symphony No. 5 during the summers of 1901 and 1902. He had moved into his own lakeside villa in the southern Austrian province of Carinthia in June of 1901 and was delighted with his new-found status as the owner of a grand villa. According to friends, he could hardly believe how far he had come from his humble beginnings. Additionally, he held the position of Director of the Vienna Court Opera and was the principal conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic, his music was gaining popularity, and he had found the last missing element in his life . . . love . . . in the form of Alma Schindler. However, Mahler had experienced severe health problems in February of 1901 when he suffered a sudden major hemorrhage and his doctor later told him that he had come within an hour of bleeding to death. His recuperation was slow, and Mahler was quite shaken by the experience.

It is not surprising that the music Mahler started writing in summer 1901 was noticeably different from his previous works. A nostalgic element began to creep into his music during this period. The first four symphonies were written during the composer's twenties and thirties. The middle three, including the fifth, were written by a man in his forties. The musical canvas and emotional scope of the fifth symphony are broad. Herbert von Karajan said once that when you hear Mahler's Fifth, "you forget that time has passed. A great performance of the Fifth is a transforming experience."

Mahler designates three distinct sections in his fifth symphony. Part I encompasses the first two movements [Trauermarsch (Funeral March) and *Stürmisch bewegt, mit größter Vehemenz* (Moving stormily, with the greatest vehemence)], a lengthy Scherzo constitutes Part II, and the last two movements (Adagietto and Rondo-Finale) form Part III.

Before the finale, the famous Adagietto ("little Adagio") provides a brief respite for the listener to reflect and relax after the emotional upheaval of the first three movements. Surely the most beautiful music the composer ever set to paper, it serves as perhaps the supreme example of Mahler's mastery of orchestration. Most of the orchestra is idled, but rather than choosing a conventional string ensemble, he adds a single harp to provide an underpinning of motion to the lazily soaring melody. This simple change is pure genius, producing a sonority that has never been matched before or since. Closing the eyes and relaxing in the concert hall, one can easily imagine a peaceful sunset in the mountains the composer loved, bringing a perfect end to the day's solitude and the last true happiness he would know.

The world premiere of the fifth symphony was given on October 18, 1904 in Cologne with Mahler conducting.