TORONTO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Gustavo Gimeno, Music Director

Mahler's Ninth

Gustavo Gimeno, conductor

Gustav Mahler
Symphony No. 9 in D Major
I. Andante comodo
II. Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Ländlers
III. Rondo-Burleske
IV. Adagio

Program 3

Thursday,
February 19, 2026
7:30pm

Saturday,
February 21, 2026
7:30pm

Sunday,
February 22, 2026
3:00pm

Please note that there will be no intermission.

The February 22 performance is generously supported by Dr. Ronald M. Haynes.

John Sharpe and Toshi Aoyagi generously supported the TSO Music Library's acquisition of Mahler Symphony No. 9, Breitkopf & Härtel Critical Edition.

Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)

Symphony No. 9 in D Major

Composed 1909–1910

87 min

GUSTAV MAHLER WAS AN ARTIST with a faultless work ethic. From the first day of his appointment as the Vienna Court Opera kapellmeister in 1897, he threw himself with boundless energy into every aspect of operatic production. Nothing escaped his scrutiny, and he brought the performances to an unparalleled level. During the season, he arrived at his office punctually at 9:00am, having already spent two hours at home on his own compositions. Then there were rehearsals to direct, and if there was another conductor scheduled to perform that evening, Mahler would attend at least part of the concert. If he were conducting himself, he would not get away from the theatre until late.

Even on his summer "holidays," he was out of bed by 6:30am and at work. Mahler spent the season at his summer house in Maiernigg, which was equipped with a "composer's hut" in the woods. He'd have breakfast brought to him by a silent servant (God help anyone who disturbed his concentration), and not until midday would he reappear for a swim, fresh clothes, and lunch with his family.

But this continual striving for perfection in his composition and in the opera made him insensitive to the feelings and weaknesses of others; human relationships, both domestic and professional, were not his strong points. The 1906/07 season was his last at the Vienna Court Opera as, faced with growing opposition to his musical leadership, Mahler willingly resigned to take a part-time conducting position at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Then the roof fell in. That summer of 1907, there started a chain of events that would alter the last years of Mahler's life. First, his wife, Alma, had to undergo an operation, then his two children came down with scarlet fever, and the older daughter died. Alma's mother travelled to Maiernigg to comfort the Mahlers, and she, too, was struck by illness—a serious heart attack. After treating Alma's mother, the doctor ordered complete rest for Alma herself. Mahler grimly joked that the doctor might as well examine him, too. "You have no cause to be proud of a heart like yours" was the verdict, later confirmed by specialists in Vienna. No longer was he able to walk fast, which he loved to do, or ride his bicycle, or engage in any vigorous activity.

Although only 47 that summer, Mahler began to age physically. His conducting style became less vociferous and more reserved. Emotionally, he underwent a change as well; death, which was always a philosophical fascination for him, was now an imminent reality. He became more tolerant of things that previously would have set him off in a rage, and he was more willing to make concessions in artistic matters—but only to a point, as his later relations with the Met and the New York Philharmonic would illustrate.

The changes in Mahler, both physical and emotional, went on to affect his last two completed works: *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony. The former ends with repetitions of the word "ewig" ("forever") in a song called "The Farewell". Scholar and author Egon Gartenberg called this music "the gesture of a man ceremonially robing himself for the stately ritual of death." Mahler carried this mood forward into the Ninth Symphony, especially in the two outer movements. He began work on both of these

compositions at Toblach, his new summer retreat, in 1908 and 1909, respectively; after the sad events of 1907, Maiernigg was too full of ghosts. He completed the Ninth Symphony in New York City, in March 1910. The première, which took place 13 months after the composer's death, was conducted by his disciple and champion, Bruno Walter.

The symphony opens with the same curiously disembodied atmosphere that closes *Das Lied von der Erde*. Scraps of themes emerge along with a two-note motif, the second note a step below the first. (In *Das Lied*, the closing word, "ewig," is also set to this falling second.) While this short idea goes on to thread its way throughout the first movement, the "Andante comodo" proceeds, adding new motifs in the manner of a slow processional until the mood gently changes, now suggesting a kind of exalted dance—an exaltation of Straussian proportions at its climax. The atmosphere of the movement alternates, ranging from serenity to raging fury. The procession turns into a grotesque funeral march, a monstrous lament. At the end, all subsides into tranquility.

Mahler directs that the second movement be played "Somewhat clumsy and very coarse, in the tempo of a relaxed ländler." The rhythm of this folk dance, the forerunner of the waltz, was a favourite of both Mahler and Bruckner. Here, it turns grotesque—into a *danse macabre*—while the two-note motif from the opening movement reappears, continuing on its travels.

The third movement is a march for the most part, filled with weird and distorted ideas, rich in counterpoint and fugue-like devices. "Sehr trotzig"—Mahler's addition to the traditional Italian tempo marking—calls for a "very defiant" manner of playing. This "defiance" is interrupted toward the end, as the movement becomes elegiac, and foretells of an idea that will dominate the finale. But, before long, fury returns.

At the very outset of the finale, violins play a solemn and deeply felt theme—the one hinted at in the third movement (you'll also hear material recalled from the opening). As the finale unfolds in a "very slow and still restrained" manner, as directed by Mahler's tempo marking, only rarely do we find the grotesqueness of the first two movements. There are a number of large climaxes and, after a splendid one, the music slowly dies away, as if Mahler were reluctant to let go.

—Program note by Godfrey Ridout

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A bust of Gustav Mahler sculpted by Auguste Rodin in 1909, the year the composer began writing his Ninth Symphony.

For a biography of Gustavo Gimeno, please turn to page 8.