

The Juilliard Orchestra performs Mahler's Ninth Symphony in New York City

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A recent performance of Gustav Mahler's Ninth Symphony, his last completed work in that form, highlighted the role of the Juilliard School in New York City's classical music scene. The Juilliard Orchestra, the most advanced of several student orchestras at the elite performing arts conservatory, performed the massive Mahler work in mid-April at Avery Fisher Hall, the home of the New York Philharmonic in Lincoln Center.

Known especially for its music program, Juilliard numbers among its alumni such figures as conductor James Levine, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, pianist Joseph Kalichstein and soprano Renee Fleming, among many others. Its student body numbers about 800.

New Yorkers have the rare opportunity, compared to residents of other parts of the country, of attending literally hundreds of performances at Juilliard every year—symphonic concerts or solo, chamber and vocal recitals—most for free and others very reasonably priced, performed by some of the most accomplished young musicians of today. Along with concerts and recitals at the Manhattan School of Music and the Mannes College, the two other major music schools in New York, this makes for more music than even the most fanatical devotee of live performances can take in.

Of course, these musicians are not paid. In fact, their tuition at Juilliard is many tens of thousands of dollars annually. Another sobering thought is that many of these highly trained orchestral musicians will not find positions at major symphonies around the country. There are simply not enough jobs available, especially given the fragile fiscal state of the classical music world.

Nonetheless, the 15 or more concerts that the Juilliard Orchestra performs annually are cherished and well attended. They include occasional concerts at Carnegie and Avery Fisher Halls, the two most famous concert venues in the city. The Juilliard students are often led by prominent conductors. This performance of Mahler's Ninth was conducted by Alan Gilbert, music director of the New York Philharmonic.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Gustav Mahler's

death and last year was the 150th year of his birth. Few centenary observances were held, though Mahler's famous symphonic works, as well as his equally famous song cycles like *The Youth's Magic Horn* and *Songs of a Wayfarer*, can frequently be found on concert programs year round.

Mahler's Ninth Symphony occupies a special place in his body of work. Although he was only 49 when he composed it, in apparent good health and quite active, he had been diagnosed with a heart ailment several years earlier, and there is an elegiac quality to the work. The musical quotation of a major theme from Beethoven's famous "Les Adieux" ("Farewell") Piano Sonata, is surely not accidental.

The Ninth Symphony, the famous symphonic song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) and the uncompleted Tenth Symphony, were all composed in the last three years of Mahler's life. This coincided with his years at New York's Metropolitan Opera and later the Philharmonic Orchestra.

In 1907, after a productive but turbulent decade as conductor of both the Vienna Philharmonic and the Opera, Mahler shifted his conducting career to the United States. First he signed a contract with the opera. After a year at the Metropolitan, he went back to orchestral conducting, at New York Philharmonic. For the rest of his life, he divided his time between New York and Austria, where he did most of his composing.

All of Mahler's symphonies are massive, even by the standards of typical late romantic works by Bruckner and others. The Ninth is among the longest, at nearly 90 minutes in a typical performance. The first movement alone lasts nearly half an hour. The symphony, while in the traditional four movements, is untraditional in most other respects. The outer two movements are slow, unlike in the works of all the major symphony composers before Mahler.

Bruno Walter, the German-born conductor who was one of Mahler's most devoted pupils, later said that the Ninth Symphony represented a break with the nineteenth century symphonic tradition. Certainly, the composer gave voice to the social, intellectual and cultural upheavals of the first

decade of the twentieth century. These trends in turn were bound up with the economic and political storm clouds gathering in Europe, and in Vienna in particular. Three years after Mahler's death, Europe was plunged into the First World War, and a few years later the Austro-Hungarian Empire was gone forever.

One cannot say that the symphonic tradition ended with Mahler — not with the seven symphonies of Prokofiev and the 15 of Shostakovich, all written well after Mahler's death, not to mention the works of Vaughan Williams, Stravinsky and others. But Mahler's Ninth certainly takes leave of the nineteenth century; the works of Prokofiev and Shostakovich (with the exception of Prokofiev's First "Classical" Symphony) are unmistakably of the post-World War I epoch.

The first movement of the Ninth Symphony has all of the conflicts and contradictions characteristic of Mahler, in dynamics, mood and tone color. Lovely evocations of natural beauty give way to tension and dissonance. The second movement, with its themes resembling first a peasant dance and then a waltz, has been called a farewell to Austrian peasant culture. The march-like third movement sounds most like music of the twentieth century, at moments seeming to anticipate similar passages in Shostakovich, who openly avowed his devotion to Mahler's music. And the fourth and final movement makes the farewell theme almost explicit, with a mood that becomes one of quiet acceptance.

The Juilliard musicians did full justice to this work. The final minutes of the symphony, trailing off into what is perhaps one of the lengthiest pianissimo conclusions of any orchestral work, were magnificently performed.

Considering the place of Mahler's final symphony in music history, a closer look at Mahler's years in New York City is also revealing.

His decade in Vienna had been a difficult one, despite many triumphs as conductor and composer. Many of Mahler's works, beloved today, were not appreciated when they were first performed. At the same time, the conductor faced constant criticism over what was considered his unusual programming. In addition to this, Austrian anti-Semitism led to continuous attacks on his Jewish ancestry.

Mahler faced no overt anti-Semitism in New York, but the other problems persisted. The New York Philharmonic Society, facing money problems, was rescued by donors such as J.P. Morgan, Joseph Pulitzer and Andrew Carnegie. The wealthy patrons asserted their control, as explained by Jonathan Kramer in his book *Listen to the Music*.

Some of the patrons and the critics complained about programs of such contemporary composers as Richard Strauss, Bruckner and Debussy. When members of the board attended a rehearsal of Beethoven's Emperor Concerto,

"some of the ladies did not like the unusual approach.... Harsh words were exchanged, and one of the ladies actually said to the most formidable Beethoven interpreter in the world, 'No, Mr. Mahler, this will never do!'"

After deciding somewhat reluctantly to retain Mahler for the 1910 season, Kramer continues, the board later that year "actually resorted to the underhanded by using the equivalent of a modern-day bugging device: a lawyer was hidden behind a curtain to copy down every word of Mahler's enraged statement as he was forced—yet again—to defend his artistic policies. He was defeated.... He conceded to the board the right to approve or reject his programs. The ladies had won. Ignorance had defeated genius, the spirit of a great man had been broken."

Mahler's time in New York ended soon after this episode, when he became ill and had to cancel his appearances. He died some months later.

A century later, the corporate and financial aristocrats have returned to regarding the field of classical music as their fiefdom. In the second Gilded Age, with conspicuous consumption on display in the midst of depression conditions for vast numbers, the wealthy boards of symphony orchestras and other institutions have focused on demands that the professional musicians forfeit their pay and working conditions.

The musicians of the Detroit Symphony have just suffered massive pay cuts after a six-month strike. Their counterparts in the Philadelphia Orchestra face unspecified concession demands, and the orchestra has filed for bankruptcy.

On Lincoln Center Plaza, directly across from Avery Fisher Hall and the Metropolitan Opera, stands the David H. Koch Theater, formerly called the New York State Theater. This is the home of the New York City Opera. Founded as the "people's opera" under New York's liberal Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in the 1940s, the City Opera now performs in an auditorium named for the prime financial backer of the Tea Party.



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