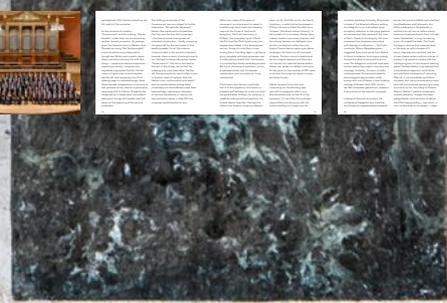




Mahler Symphony No. 5
Czech Philharmonic
Semyon Bychkov



Mahler Symphony No. 5
Czech Republic
Prague, 2018



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Detail of Rudolfinum interior

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Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp Minor (1901-1902)

1	I. Trauermarsch. In gemessenem Schritt. Streng. Wie ein Kondukt	13. 11
2	II. Stürmisch bewegt. Mit größter Vehemenz	15. 30
3	III. Scherzo. Kräftig, nicht zu schnell	17. 52
4	IV. Adagietto. Sehr langsam	9. 06
5	V. Rondo-Finale. Allegro	15. 58

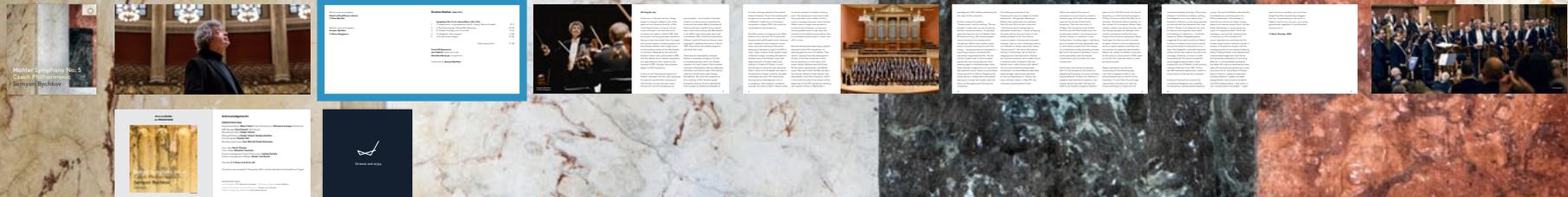
Total playing time: 71. 44

Czech Philharmonic

Jan Vobořil, French horn solo

Stanislav Masaryk, trumpet solo

conducted by **Semyon Bychkov**





Semyon Bychkov
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Striving for Joy

At the turn of the last century, things began to change in Mahler's life. A few years into his tenure as director of the Court Opera House in Vienna, he was a man of means, not least due to an increase in his salary in March 1901. And, following a formerly peripatetic existence during his summer breaks from the opera and concert season, including sojourns at the Attersee, Mahler had bought a plot on the southern banks of the Wörthersee in Carinthia. Designed by the architect Friedrich Theuer and constructed in 1900, the Villa Mahler and a nearby composing hut were ready for their owner by the summer of 1901, the year the composer began his Fifth Symphony.

It was not just the physical aspects of Mahler's domestic life that were changing. A couple of months after returning to Vienna from his new summer home — the score of the Fifth Symphony not

yet complete — he met Alma Schindler. Guests at a dinner party hosted by the writer and salonnière Berta Zuckerkandl, Alma and Gustav had first encountered each other while cycling near Bad Aussee in July 1899, when exchanges were brief. In November 1901, matters proved rather different, and by Christmas the pair were engaged. A wedding followed on 9 March 1902, when Alma was already pregnant with their first child.

These events undoubtedly changed Mahler's worldview, though so too did a contemporaneous shift in his literary interests. For over 15 years, the composer had been influenced by Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim's early 19th-century collection of folk poetry *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. But with the composition of his setting of 'Der Tamboursg'sell' during the summer that he started the Fifth Symphony, Mahler bid farewell to



its verse, turning instead to the work of Friedrich Rückert. One of the earliest gifts he gave to his new wife was a response to Rückert's 'Liebst du um Schönheit', composed in August 1902, the month he completed his new Symphony.

The Fifth reveals a changing mind. While Mahler's First, Second, Third and Fourth Symphonies had followed similar schemes, each indebted to the composer's vocal music and each following a Romantic teleology of darkness to light, the Fifth is much more complex. There remain traces of Mahler's Lieder, including *Wunderhorn* settings and a new Rückert song. And, beginning with a funeral march and ending in a blaze of D Major, it could also be seen to follow the 'per ardua ad astra' outline of its forebears. But even if the direction of travel is similar, the path is decidedly less sure. The vistas along the way are so heterogenous, so rich in polyphony, that shadows constantly impinge. This was no flaw in Mahler's plan,

of course. Instead, it marked a turning point. The Symphony's structural model may have been more unified, but the music's message was even more intricate. Mahler was no longer looking back to naive pictures of heaven, sincere and closely guarded they though were, but forward to the hellish hammer blows and more ethereal Alpine havens of what was still to come.

Notwithstanding the seemingly prophetic elements of the Fifth Symphony, its opening gestures are a throwback. They recall a moment from the development section of the first movement of the Fourth Symphony. In that work, with which Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic opened their new Mahler cycle, there was a brief fanfare, buried in the texture. Mahler himself called it 'der kleine Appel' (the little summons). And it is this motif of ascent that returns at the beginning of the Fifth Symphony, echoing the rhythmic tattoo of Beethoven's



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paradigmatic Fifth, before unleashing the full might of the orchestra.

As the movement's subtitle, 'Trauermarsch', and its marking, 'Wie ein Kondukt', make clear, we are witnessing another funeral procession. Or perhaps, given the thematic links to Mahler's final Wunderhorn song, 'Der Tamboursg'sell', a poor drummer-boy is being led to the gallows. Within such a public scene there is private mourning too, with the strings — *sempre pianissimo e espressivo* — imparting a lament, complete with anguished augmented fourths. Yet the colours of grief cover a much broader palette still and can quickly turn from sobbing regret to unbridled anger. Amid these frenzied juxtapositions of communal and personal sorrow, there is a particularly unnerving shift to A Minor. Played by the strings alone, it makes what was present seem past, though the tonality itself will return at the beginning of the second movement.

The shifting panoramas of the Trauermarsch are now subject to further elaboration, 'Mit grösster Vehemenz'. Mahler later explained to his publisher that this was the true first movement — the funeral march having been an extended introduction — boldly occupying the space left by the last traces of that deathly parade. For all the violence communicated in the second movement, however, there is music of aching sincerity too. Marked 'im Tempo des ersten Satzes "Trauermarsch"', the cellos, followed by the rest of the strings, tell us that the weeping may never be done. Neither will the recriminations, which often mount to feverish levels of hysteria. Was this Mahler's own confrontation with death? Just six months before writing these movements, he had suffered a near fatal haemorrhage, requiring an operation at the Löw Sanatorium in Vienna, the very institution where, in May 1911, the composer would breathe his last.

Within the melee of the second movement, an olive branch is raised: a breakthrough that recalls the heavenly leap into the Finale of the Fourth Symphony. This bold new music, in D Major, the triumphant goal of both the First and the Third Symphonies, has already been trailed in the development section, though it could find no sure footing there. Sounding again in glittering glory, complete with harp glissandos and a confirmatory rumble from the timpani, it is marked by a boldly ascending chorale. But for all the sense of exultation, victory proves premature, and the façade crashes down just as quickly as it was constructed.

The Scherzo that follows constitutes Part II of the Symphony. And there is a palpable gulf between its mood and what has gone before. D Major, for instance, is suddenly restored without question, the funeral drama forgotten. Perhaps this reflects the Scherzo's origins in Mahler's

plans not for the Fifth but for the Fourth Symphony, in which he had envisaged a D Major Scherzo entitled 'Die Welt ohne Schwere' (The World without Gravity). In the context of its successor, Mahler does, indeed, create a new sense of space, with the rallying between an obbligato horn and its counterparts within the main body of the orchestra implying an Alpine landscape. Yet there are still moments of pause. The horn soloist is doleful and heroic in equal measure, and there are not one but two spectral dances before Mahler can tender his defiant conclusion. At this point, as the summer of 1901 came to an end, the composer seems to have put down his pen.

Mahler returned to his villa and composing hut the following year, now with his pregnant wife in tow, and continued work on Part III of the Symphony. It is as if the 12-month gap were written into the score, with the tonality shifting to F major and the



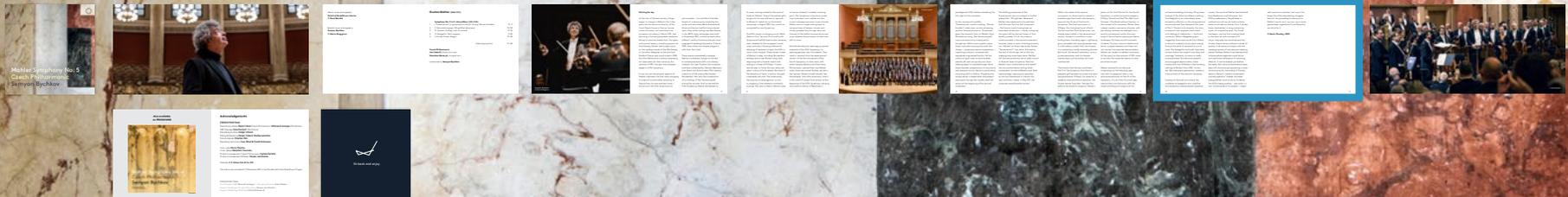
orchestra shedding its brassy, fiffing tones. Instead of the Scherzo's alfresco setting, the Adagietto is an internalised (even domestic) reflection on the rising gestures announced and then denied at the close of Part I. Thanks to its ubiquity, this slow movement has long been associated with feelings of infatuation — the Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg even suggested there were words from Mahler to Alma to underpin its principal melody. And yet the date of composition is not clear. The Adagietto could well have been written before the couple's courtship and marriage. Certainly, its music is hardly uncomplicated. The harmonic palette alone suggests equivocation, while kinship with one of Mahler's most probing settings of Rückert from 1901, 'Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen', reveals a truer portrait of the hermitic composer.

Looking at the work as a whole, the confessional Adagietto also unsettles the Symphony's presumed philosophical

course, the one that Mahler had inherited from Beethoven and followed in the Fifth's predecessors. Nonetheless, a matinal horn will sound, before a larky bassoon introduces strands from 'Lob des hohen Verstandes', a song concerning a pair of competitive birds. The Finale has begun, and we find ourselves back in the open air with a breeze of D major. Jeopardy has vanished, and the chorale theme returns without a shred of anxiety. It all seems so simple, with the overlapping lines of counterpoint dashing ahead. Perhaps Mahler truly believed that untrammelled happiness could follow such profound statements of mourning. After all, it can be darkest just before the dawn. But many commentators have been left unconvinced, perceiving a richer conclusion by far. According to Theodor Adorno, Mahler's 'jubilant movements unmask jubilation'. Indeed, the sheer energy Mahler must summon to deliver the Fifth's happy ending — and which, in turn, he demands of his players — might

well convince in isolation, but only if we forget the often-devastating struggles found in the preceding movements. In Mahler's world, as in our own, joy is rarely guaranteed, regardless of how feverishly we strive for it.

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