
SONGS FOR
MAHLER
IN THE ABSENCE
OF WORDS
NEW YORK
PIANO QUARTET
Urlicht
AUDIOVISUAL

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IN THE ABSENCE OF WORDS

1	**Gustav Mahler:** *Piano Quartet*	12:26
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3	**Gernot Wolfgang:** *From Vienna with Love*	5:53
4	**Christina Spinei:** *Mahler Remixed*	5:19
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8	**Patricia Leonard:** *Strangely Close, Yet Distant*	14:11
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NEW YORK PIANO QUARTET

Elmira Darvarova, *violin* • **Ronald Carbone,** *viola* • **Samuel Magill,** *cello* • **Linda Hall,** *piano*

Gustav Mahler's earliest surviving instrumental work is a quartet movement for piano and strings. It was to be the opening movement of a full-scale chamber work, written at the end of his first academic year at the Vienna Conservatory. The first performance took place at the Conservatory on July 10th, 1876, three days after the composer's 16th birthday, with Mahler himself playing the piano part. The manuscript—not only the 234 fully scored bars of the opening movement in A minor, marked "Nicht zu schnell–Entschlossen", but 27 bars in the form of a sketch for a Scherzo, along with 9 illegible bars—is the only surviving chamber music by Mahler.

Being an early work, the opening movement of the **Piano Quartet** is evidently influenced by Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, with a grimness and anxious anticipation characteristic of the mature Mahler. It is easy to lose objectivity when judging this music individually, considering the *a posteriori* knowledge we have about Mahler's creative opus as a whole. Depending on one's point of view, structural and material flaws of the complete quartet movement can be attributed to young Mahler's lack of creativity or to his struggle to compose something that would be *different* rather than completely new.

As is the case with most young artists, there is always a trace of homage to someone they hold in particular esteem; we can hear a possible tribute to Wagner in the motif announced by the left hand of the pianist in the third and the fourth bar of the movement. The A-F-E motif, strongly emphasized by octaves, is reminiscent of the beginning of *Tristan und Isolde*.

The fragmentary **Scherzo**, as left by Mahler, can hardly be considered anything more than a sketch. Given the explosion of interest in Mahler's music over the last half century, it was only a question of time before someone would attempt to make something of the fragments. The underlying motivation is mostly the desire to complete a work someone left unfinished, a task made difficult while walking the line between ambition, whatever its roots, and awareness that the final result will be more of a new creation rather than the composer's fulfilment of an already planted and cultivated seed. The problems in such an endeavour are numerous, and have much to do with the nature of the intention of the person who seeks to complete the work. The outcome is mostly unpredictable, as no one can really tell what the composer might have wanted to do with the piece.

Alfred Schnittke was the first to be intrigued, not only in theory, with the orphaned Scherzo. What wasn't there could not be re-invented—or, as Schnittke himself observed, he tried to "recall something which had never been accomplished". The result was a tormented movement full of struggle between Mahler's stubborn leftovers, Schnittke's passionate desire to build upon them, and the painful realization that his memory would not give him a helping hand in the process.

Pianist and composer **Enguerrand-Friedrich Lühl** went much further, not only fleshing out the Scherzo in a stylistically and formally authentic manner, but adding two movements from his own pen to the existing music in order to have the material form a full quartet. Interestingly, Lühl himself was sixteen when he decided to tackle the fragment. There cannot be talk of a completion, as there is none. The musicological work behind Lühl's score, an earnest effort to get into the tonal language of the young Mahler and the musical forms utilized at the time, is admirable. In listening in particular to Lühl's version of the Scherzo, as well as any other similar attempt (for example, Mahler's own Symphony No. 10), it is crucial to understand that, regardless of the initial intention of the composer working on the fragments, Lühl is not attempting to be Mahler (however enticing the idea of getting into his head might be). Lühl's Scherzo is not even a hypothesis of what might have been, nor an interpretation of the existing material. It is a product of a composer's ardent longing for closure. As for the rest, let us leave being Mahler to Mahler himself.

— **Milijana Pavlović**

Ironically, being from Austria, my first real musical love was neither Haydn, nor Mozart, nor Mahler. It was the wonderful jazz coming from the instruments of guitar greats Wes Montgomery and Jim Hall. My love for concert music emerged much later in life. Growing up in Austria, however, one cannot escape the sound of authentically performed classical and romantic music, and that sound I consider Austria's gift to me.

From Vienna with Love begins with the main melody presented in two very different musical environments: first a slow introduction, divided in half between solo piano and strings, harmonically foreshadowing musical developments to take place in Vienna early in the 20th Century; then an upbeat section incorporating uneven meters —a reflection on Vienna's cultural plurality at the time. The theme here is carried by violin and viola in 2-octave unison and supported by a jazzy combination of pizzicato cello and piano.

Jazz continues to be an audible factor during the middle section of the piece. Written-out (but could-have-been-improvised) soli for cello and piano build towards a massive ensemble unison in which again the main theme is spelled out. From there on the composition calms down. A gentle ostinato tapestry of pizzicato cello and piano sets the mood, and a mirror version of the theme appears in the violin, harmonized by the viola. The composition seems to end the same way it started, with a quiet, pensive presentation of the main melody (this time with the strings going first), but an upbeat tag brings us back in the world of uneven meters and allows the piece to end on a forceful note.

— Gernot Wolfgang

Barney Johnson's ***Mahler***[99] takes a staple element of minimalism—repeated, slowly transforming musical "cells"—and adds to it changes of tempo, accelerandos, and ritardandos, all crucial expressive elements of music both from the late romantic era and early twentieth century musical styles including that of the Second Viennese School, which itself was strongly influenced by Mahler.

The work begins with motives dominated by the pitches of a D minor melodic scale rising, winding through transformations of tempo and chromaticism, and culminating in figures that ascend in pitch and accelerate in tempo toward a bracing final gesture.

— Gene Gaudette

On a day that we remember Mahler [the New York Chamber Music Festival's 2012 Mahler memorial program, for which this piece was commissioned], his absence often turns into a sharp sense of loss. What would I tell him if he is sitting among us watching this concert unfold?

Songs for Mahler in the Absence of Words depicts that moment of mind. Words can never be sufficient enough for what only music can bear and utter. To quote from Mahler's most beloved song *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (*I am lost to the world*): "I live alone in my heaven, In my love and in my song!"

— **Wang Jie**

The first thing that struck me about Mahler's Piano Quartet was the ambiguous opening rhythm. Listening to it for the first time without the score, I thought that the piece began in 6/8. The opening triplets sounded to me like a compound meter against which the left hand plays syncopated octaves. The polyrhythm created in the first few measures inspired me to use that kernel as a basis for a new piece. For the past few years I have been fascinated with rhythm and the different ways in which rhythm is perceived. Mahler's Piano Quartet was the perfect piece for me to explore the different relationships and interplay of those ideas.

Mahler Remixed is formed by looping actual fragments from Mahler's Piano Quartet. Each time a loop appears, it is transformed through a changing rhythmic texture. Just like the original, Mahler Remixed opens with the solo piano. It continues in a sort of polyrhythmic conversation between the strings and piano.

— Cristina Spinei

Le miroir de l'ombre derives its thematic material from one of the main motives of the Mahler Piano Quartet, but treats it in an entirely personal manner. Four short sections follow the openingand explore a previously stated element. In most of my chamber music, I am interested in the composite ensemble working as a single instrument. *Le miroir de l'ombre* continues this interest. I try to make each of the parts the performers play interesting and expressive, but nonetheless challenging. My hope is that both the listener and the performer will be intrigued by a glimpse into my imagination, here derived from the Mahler composition, as I work with the sounds and rhythms that comprise my sonic vocabulary.

— Noel Zahler

In 1912, Alma Mahler met the young Viennese painter Oskar Kokoschka. They began a passionate love affair that soon evolved into an intensively obsessive relationship. When Oskar wasn't loving Alma, he was painting her. Oskar's already jealous temperament escalated in his constant fear of losing Alma. Although she had many suitors, the one man always standing between them was Alma's late husband and composer, Gustav Mahler. To Oskar, Gustav's memories surrounded Alma and lived inside her with his music, preventing the kind of emotional intimacy Kokoschka longed for with her. Although their love affair ultimately could not endure, Kokoschka s most famous painting, *The Bride of the Wind,* is a testament to his true, yet tormented, love for Alma. Written in 2003, ***Strangely Close, Yet Distant*** was inspired by Kokoschka's *The Bride of the Wind.* Like the painting, I wanted this composition to portray the passion, the longing, and the madness of the relationship between these two extraordinary people.

The piece is composed for piano, viola and cello. The opening themes for Alma and Oskar invoke the possibilities of new found love. These themes continuously transform and ultimately break down, as their relationship began to disintegrate. The opening four bars of the fourth movement Adagio from Mahler's Ninth Symphony are used throughout the piece as bridging material between Alma and Oskar's themes, initially in soft, distant fragments, then clearly and completely as the piece concludes. This bridging theme symbolizes how Mahler's music always came between these ill-fated lovers prohibiting Alma and Oskar's themes from ever touching. The title of this composition comes from Alma's diary entry of 1922, when she met Kokoschka by chance in Venice; "strangely close, yet distant" is how she referred to their meeting.

— Patricia Leonard

Reflections on Mahler is a short piece that adopts the Colombian folklore view about the first three notes appearing in Mahler's Piano Quartet. The strong rhythms and the typical Colombian music, accompanied by the chromatic harmony, virtuoso passages, glissando effects, counterpoint development and even a little fugue, give their own personality to the music, always keeping as clear as possible Mahler's principal theme. The particular stamp on this work is based on rusticity of rhythm and use of *bambuco*, which is one of my favorite traditional Colombian rhythms.

— **Nicolás Prada**

The **New York Piano Quartet** — Metropolitan Opera musicians **Elmira Darvarova** (violin, former MET Orchestra concertmaster), **Ronald Carbone** (viola), **Samuel Magill** (cello), and **Linda Hall** (piano, MET assistant conductor) — are the core ensemble of the New York Chamber Music Festival. The Quartet has presented numerous world, American, and New York premieres since their founding in 2009, and has also recorded works by Joseph Marx and Erich Wolfgang Korngold for Urlicht AudioVisual.

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