

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**March 19, 2023**  
**97th Season / Beyond the Score**  
**J. Michael Allsen**

One of our more popular features over the past few seasons have been presentations in the Beyond the Score® series developed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. These innovative programs combine live actors, multimedia, and the orchestra to present deep and entertaining background on a featured work—followed by performance of the full work. At this program, led by our Associate Conductor, Kyle Knox, actors James Ridge, Colleen Madden, and Gavin Lawrence from American Players Theatre will be on stage for the story of Mahler’s joyous *Symphony No.4*. Soprano Emily Secor will sing the final movement: a song describing a child’s colorful vision of Heaven.

Mahler’s *Symphony No 4*, the smallest and most joyful of his symphonies, was completed during his stressful first years as conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic.

**Gustav Mahler**

**Born:** July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia.

**Died:** May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria.

***Symphony No. 4 in G Major***

- **Composed:** Mahler composed the fourth movement in 1892. The opening three movements were written during the summers of 1899 and 1900.
- **Premiere:** November 23, 1901 in Munich, with Mahler conducting the Kaim Orchestra.
- **Previous MSO Performance:** 1969 (with Bettina Bjorksten as soloist), 1985 (Lorna Haywood), 1998 (Helen Donath), and 2016 (Alisa Jordhelm).
- **Duration:** 57:00.

**Background**

*Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy’s Magic Horn), a collection of folk poetry, had a profound effect on Mahler. He set several of these poems to music early in his career, and the poems were in the background of the first four of his symphonies, including the vocal finale of the fourth.

Mahler's fourth symphony represents a kind of peaceful interlude in his series of works: not only is it something of a miniature by Mahler's standards (a work of less than an hour's duration, scored for a relatively modest orchestra), it is almost completely upbeat and joyful. This is not the fierce, triumphant joy that closes the second symphony, nor is it the exaltation that ends the third—here, it is a simple, childlike joy that pervades most of the symphony and reaches its purest expression in the fourth movement's song.

This joy does not reflect the stress of Mahler's life at the time. In 1898, he accepted the post of Music Director for the Vienna Philharmonic, at that time the best orchestra in the world. Mahler had converted to Catholicism as part of his campaign for this position, but antisemitism remained a hindrance throughout his time in Vienna. His authoritarian style did not please the musicians, and his unorthodox and highly personal interpretations drew fire from conservative Viennese critics. The upside of all this controversy was that ticket revenues soared, and that management loved him! He eventually resigned his post in 1901. Mahler's output as a composer fell in 1898, even during his precious-guarded summer holiday. In the summer holiday of 1899, however, he had a burst of creativity and sketched out much of the opening three movements, finishing them the following summer.

One of Mahler's inspirations in this period was *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Boy's Magic Horn," 1805-1808) a collection of German folk-poetry, collected and heavily edited by the German poets Achim vom Arnim and Clemens Brentano, together with some of their own poems. These texts, filled with folk-religion and fairytale imagery—an idealized version of country life—were hugely popular among the German Romantics. Several composers, Weber, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms among them, set *Wunderhorn* texts to music. But the collection was a particularly powerful source of inspiration for Mahler, generating several song-settings and playing a role in the creation of his first four symphonies, three of which include solo settings of *Wunderhorn* poems. These texts seem to have had a special significance for Mahler, who viewed these simple, sometime naïve poems as symbolic of events in his own life.

The three movements written in 1899-1900 were composed to complement a work written some eight years earlier. In 1892, Mahler wrote an orchestral setting of the poem *Das himmlische Leben* ("The Heavenly Life") from the *Wunderhorn* collection. His setting of this poem went through two different incarnations before it found a home in the *Symphony No. 4*. It was originally an independent song for soprano and orchestra, but then in 1896, Mahler included the piece as the seventh

movement of his enormous *Symphony No. 3*, with the title “What the Child Tells Me.” He abandoned this plan, and set the movement aside. It eventually found a home as the core of *Symphony No. 4*. The opening three movements serve as preparation for this sublime song—according to Mahler: “In the first three movements, there reigns the serenity of a higher realm, a realm strange to us, oddly frightening, even terrifying. In the finale, the child, who in his previous existence belonged to this higher realm, tells us what it all means...”

### What You’ll Hear

The symphony is in four movements:

- A large opening movement that develops two distinct themes in an innovative way.
- A rather sinister scherzo, featuring the solo violin in the guise of a demoni fiddler.
- A tranquil slow movement.
- The concluding movement is a song for solo soprano, setting a poem from the *Wunderhorn* collection.

The opening movement is set in an unorthodox sonata form. The opening bars set a pastoral mood with a chirping combination of flutes and sleighbells—a motto that serves to mark off the sections of this form, and which will reoccur in the finale. The exposition continues in perfectly Classical form, as two main ideas are introduced. The first of these is a lilting melody introduced by the strings and picked up by the solo horn and woodwinds. The second, much more sonorous and flowing, is heard in the cellos. A wry little episode for oboe, bassoon, and clarinet rounds off the exposition, and the sleigh bells begin a lengthy development section which works out the material laid out previously, and moves gradually towards one of the few forceful moments in the symphony, led by the trumpets—a moment that quickly subsides. The recapitulation, also signaled subtly by the motto, brings back the main thematic material, but out of order and in transformed fashion. The clearest statement of the opening theme is reserved for the very end, just before a brief, sparkling coda.

Mahler’s original title for the second movement was *Freund Hein spielt auf* (“Friend Hein plays”). Hein, a figure from Austrian folktales, was a demonic fiddler who led people into Hell with his playing. Also in the background of this deliberately spooky movement is a self-portrait by the Romantic painter Arnold Böcklin, a picture that shows the artist listening as the figure of Death fiddles just behind his shoulder. True to the subject-matter, much of the scherzo is carried by fiddling from a solo violin. (Mahler directs that the violinist tune all strings a

whole-step high, and play “like a country fiddler,” creating a deliberately shrill effect.) This brilliantly-orchestrated movement is a series of contrasts between the slightly macabre music of the scherzo and contrasting episodes of lighter character.

In comparing the second and third movements, Mahler wrote: “The scherzo is so uncanny, almost sinister, that your hair may stand on end. Yet in the following *Adagio*, where all complications are dissolved, you will feel that it really wasn’t all that sinister...” This quiet and serene movement is a pair of interlocked theme-and-variations forms, one dominated by string sonorities and the other by woodwinds. The movement explodes briefly with trumpets and horns at the end, but is quickly hushed. The fourth movement follows after a brief pause.

The culmination of this work, Mahler’s setting of *Das himmlische Leben*, is simplicity itself. The stanzas of the poem are set in an uncomplicated strophic form: essentially the same music with some variation for each stanza of poetry. This poem seems to call for a very direct setting, with its innocent images of a heaven populated by friendly saints, where the tables are overflowing with the best food (a Romantic German take on *The Big Rock Candy Mountain!*), and where heavenly music resounds. The movement begins with a clarinet solo, which introduces the tune sung by the soprano. After the opening stanzas, the orchestra enters with a frantic-sounding version of the first movement’s motto. The next stanzas, dealing with the death of St. John’s “little lamb” (Christ), are set in a minor key and again set off by a statement of the motto. Major tonality returns again for the stanzas detailing the heavenly feast, which are punctuated by woodwind motives. After a brief moment the motto returns, but the orchestra continues with a quiet passage that leads into the final stanzas, now in a luminous E Major—this serene mood remains until the final chord quietly dies away.