Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
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98th Season / Subscription Program 5
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To open this program, we welcome back pianist Joyce Yang. Ms. Yang previously appeared with Madison Symphony Orchestra in 2019, with a memorable performance of Prokofiev's third piano concerto. At these concerts she performs Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 24*, among his most tense and serious works for solo piano. We then turn to the vast *Symphony No. 5* by Gustav Mahler, a work the composer sidentified as a new phase in his development.

This uncharacteristically serious work was one of three piano concertos Mozart composed at the same time he was working on his opera *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Born: January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria.
Died: December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria.

Concerto No. 24 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, K. 491

- **Composed**: Completed March 24, 1786.
- **Premiere**: The composer probably played and conducted the first performance in a concert at Vienna's Burgtheatre on April 7, 1786.
- **Previous MSO Performance**: 1984, with pianist Charles Rosen.
- **Duration**: 23:00.

Background

Fifteen of Mozart's twenty-seven piano concertos, including *No. 24*, were written for his public concerts in Vienna. These concerts were a major factor in establishing himself in the imperial capital.

Mozart's reputation and success in his early years in Vienna came largely through his private recitals, and public "subscription" performances of his own works. Viennese audiences demanded new concertos at every concert, and Mozart responded with an amazing series of fifteen concertos written during his first five years in Vienna. The winter of 1785-86 was a particularly busy time: his main concern was the opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, which would premiere in Vienna in May 1786, but he was obliged to take time in February to dash off a one-act *Singspiel*, *The Impresario*, for a commission by the Emperor. He also managed to find time to complete three piano concertos: *No. 22* in December, *No. 23* on March 2, and *No. 24* just three weeks later on March 24. The bulk of Viennese public concerts occurred during the Christmas season and Lent, and *No. 22* was played on December 26. Mozart had at least three subscription concerts that spring, and the other two concertos were probably performed at these. One innovation he introduced in these three concertos was a pair of clarinets, substituting for the usual oboes in the first two, and as part of a relatively large scoring in *No. 24*. He was inspired by his friendship with the clarinetist Anton Stadler, and he used clarinets prominently in *Figaro* as well.

What You'll Hear

This work is in three movements:

- A broad opening movement set in sonata form.
- A *Larghetto*, with a lyrical main theme and two contrasting episodes.
- A set of variations on a march-style theme.

The *Piano Concerto No. 24* is the largest of the three concertos, and certainly the most serious in tone: it is one of only two piano concertos he cast in a minor key. The opening *Allegro* begins with a stern orchestral exposition that presents a rich array of material for the movement, alternating between a threatening main theme (sounding very much like the introduction to a tragic opera) and flowing woodwind passages. When the piano enters, it is with an entirely new idea, lyrical and melancholy, before the orchestra announces the main theme and the solo part begins a decorated version of the exposition. The extensive development section begins with a return to the piano's initial music and then works primarily with the main theme. Following an abbreviated recapitulation, Mozart leaves space for a solo cadenza, before ending in a stormy coda.

The *Larghetto* is a complete change in mood, beginning with a main idea from the piano in luminous E-flat Major. This idea alternates with a pair of contrasting episodes, both of them led by the woodwinds: the first pensive and the second more pastoral. The final statement of the main theme is interrupted briefly for a short cadenza. The closing movement (*Allegretto*) presents a set of six variations on a marchlike theme introduced by the orchestra. After three increasingly intense variations, the fourth variation is suddenly in a pastoral major key, led by the woodwinds. A more agitated variation by the solo piano follows, and the sixth variation transforms the theme into much happier music in C Major. Mozart returns firmly to C minor at the end, setting up a final solo cadenza. This leads directly into the coda, based upon an entirely new idea set in 6/8.

In describing his fifth symphony, Mahler referred to it as a work in a "completely new style." This colossal work breaks with his earlier symphonies: there is no program and no reliance on vocal music, but instead a starker and more intellectual approach.

Gustav Mahler
Born: July 7, 1860, Kalischte, Bohemia.
Died: May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor

- **Composed**: 1901-1902. He continued to revise the score over the next several years.
- **Premiere**: October 18, 1904 in Cologne, conducted by the composer.
- **Previous MSO Performances**: 1982 and 1998.
- **Duration**: 69:00.

Background

This work was composed at the time of Mahler's marriage to Alma Schindler and other momentous changes in his career. Due to his conducting schedule, the time and solitude he needed to compose was available only in during summer holidays. The *Symphony No. 5* was completed in the summers of 1901 and 1902.

1901 was one of the most significant years of Mahler's life. He acquired property at Mayernigg, near Lake Wörther in southern Austria: the beloved summer retreat where most of his late works were composed. There were professional changes as well: early that year, health problems, apparently caused by overwork, forced him to step down as conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic. (From all accounts, the musicians of this democratically-run orchestra had long chafed under Mahler's authoritarian style. During his absence, they quickly elected another conductor, even before Mahler had a chance to resign officially!) However, the most important event of 1901 was meeting Alma Schindler at a dinner party. Mahler was instantly attracted to this brilliant and beautiful 20-year-old, who was a composer in her own right. For her part, Alma Schindler was just a bit awed by the conductor and composer, who was twice her age. A romance blossomed quickly, and they were married on March 2, 1902. Marriage was a very good thing for Gustav, though Alma's musical career was cut short at his insistence: she was to be his partner in most things, but there was apparently room for only one composer in the family. Alma was able to take care of the day-to-day details of housekeeping and business that he found so irritating, leaving him freer to compose.

Composition was almost exclusively limited to summer holidays, and the time Mahler spent at Mayernigg was jealously guarded. According to Alma's diary, he maintained a strict regime. He rose at dawn and tromped up to his "composition cottage" in the woods—a small shed that contained little besides a desk and a piano. His breakfast was brought up by a maid, who according to Alma, was terrified of Mahler, and would leave the tray and run. He would work in solitude all morning, and after lunch would hike or row with Alma. Even during the afternoons and evenings, he would be working on compositional problems, and would suddenly break away from guests or other activities to work for hours at a time. The *Symphony No. 5* was composed during two of these holidays, in 1901 and 1902.

This work, which Mahler originally nicknamed the "giant symphony," was essentially complete in 1902, but was to be revised extensively several times. After a preliminary sight-reading in 1904, he deleted many of the percussion parts that were prominent in the first version. (Alma writes in her diary of "sobbing aloud" when she heard the percussion drowning out the rest of the orchestra.) Though the premiere went well later that year, he made significant changes before conducting the work in Amsterdam in 1906, and revised it yet again for a performance in 1908. It was not until shortly before his death—and after completing four more symphonies—that Mahler wrote to a friend: "I have finished the Fifth. I actually had to reorchestrate it completely. I don't understand how I could have gone so completely astray—just like a beginner. Evidently the routines I had established with the first four symphonies were entirely inadequate for this one—for a completely new style demands a new technique."

This "completely new style" represents a break with what he had done in the first four symphonies. Despite their variety in style, all of these were programmatic: having a clear storyline or meaning. All of them are also based in some way upon Mahler's musical settings of the folk-style poems from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*The Boy's Magic Horn*). In the *Symphony No.5*, Mahler rejects the idea of an extramusical program, and breaks with the use of vocal music and text that had been so much a part of the second, third, and fourth symphonies. The symphony also makes a musical break with his previous works. It was during this period that Mahler began to study the works of J. S. Bach. (The only printed music in Mahler's "composition cottage" at Mayernigg was a prized set of the Bach *Complete Works*.) A newer, more intellectual contrapuntal style is heard in this symphony.

What You'll Hear

The symphony is laid out in five large movements:

- A stern "funeral march," beginning with a trumpet fanfare. Mahler intended this to serve as an extended introduction to the second movement.
- A ferocious second movement in a loose sonata form that builds towards a titanic brass chorale.
- An enormous scherzo organized around a series of Austrian-style dance tunes, and a darker contrasting trio.
- A serene *Adagietto*, scored for strings and harp. This leads directly into the finale.
- The *Rondo-Finale*, which again uses a dance tune as a main theme, in a movement that features dense contrapuntal writing,

The *Symphony No.5* is set in five movements, which Mahler organizes into three parts: the funeral march and second movement constitute Part I, Part II consists of the gargantuan *Scherzo*, and Part III includes the *Adagietto* and *Rondo-Finale*. The symphony begins with a solemn fanfare from a solo trumpet—this rhythm pervades much of the movement's music. Mahler titles the movement *Trauermusik* (funeral music) and gives the direction *In gemessen Schritt, streng, wie ein Konduit* (In measured step, stern, as in a funeral procession). The opening fanfare leads into a somber march for brass, and a sad string melody. The trumpet fanfare appears again, and there is an almost violent middle passage that breaks the solemn march and moves towards an angry climax. Once again, the trumpet interjects, and there is a long concluding passage that returns to the defeated tread of the opening march. The movement dies away quietly and gradually.

Mahler considered the funeral march to be an introduction to the second movement, marked *Stürmische bewegt, mit grösster Vehemenz* (Stormily agitated, with greatest vehemence), which begins without a pause. The movement, set in a greatly expanded sonata form, begins with a furious figure in the basses that the brasses answer with equal rage. The mood breaks suddenly, and the cellos play a sad tune that recalls the march of the first movement. The development begins with a recitative-style line for the cellos that Mahler marks *Klagend* ("grieving"). This section builds gradually through restatements and recombinations of his themes, over a vast stretch of musical time, before culminating in a titanic brass chorale—Mahler marks this moment in the score *Höhepunkt* (high-point or climax—as if we could fail to notice!) When the opening theme returns, it is almost an afterthought to this moment—it builds towards a second peak, but then subsides to fade away to nothing. Mahler specifies a long break after the close of this movement.

The title *Scherzo* (Italian for "joke") usually implies a light, sometimes humorous, fast-paced movement. While there is certainly humor to be found in this movement, it is no lightweight—at over 800 measures, it is the longest section of the symphony. Mahler wrote to Alma while he was rehearsing for the premiere, describing it as

> "the devil of a movement. I see it is in for a lot of trouble. Conductors for the next fifty years will all take it too fast, and make nonsense of it; and the public—what are they to make of this chaos of which new worlds are forever being engendered, only to crumble in into ruin the moment after. What are they to say to this primeval music, this foaming, roaring, raging sea of flashing breakers? Oh that I might give my symphony its first performance fifty years after my death!"

The main theme is stated by all four horns, and the opening panel is series of several dance melodies—mostly in the rough-edged character of the Austrian country laendler, but occasionally lapsing into a citified waltz. The lengthy trio uses a more reflective idea stated by solo horn, which is then developed. Just when everything seems to be dwindling to a close, the strings begin an upbeat Laendler tune and sweep the rest of the orchestra towards a climax (listen for a prominent woodblock solo). The horns enter again and there is a varied restatement of the opening material, with dense contrapuntal elaboration. The coda turns briefly to the darker mood of the trio, before ending abruptly with a final horn fanfare: a formal trick Mahler certainly learned from the *Scherzo* movements of his hero, Beethoven.

Part III of the symphony begins with the dreamy *Adagietto*. This movement, scored simply for strings and harp, is dwarfed by the movements that surround it, and shows Mahler's more introspective side. It is based upon two long melodies sung by strings, and mounts to a subdued peak and then fades away. As in Part I, there is no break between this movement and the next.

The *Rondo-Finale* begins with a wonderful passage in which sustained tones from the horn are answered by solo woodwinds. This leads to a Austrian country-band passage that serves as the refrain in this movement. The refrain closes as the cellos begin vigorously laying out an agitated line that becomes the subject of an extended fugue. The refrain returns again, and another contrapuntal episode begins, eventually moving towards a new version of the *Adagietto*'s main melody. This becomes a theme for a series of loosely-structured variations, as the movement works inexorably towards a *Höhepunkt*—again, a triumphal brass chorale, now decorated by the strings and woodwinds playing the fugue subject. There is little that remains unsaid at this point, and the movement comes quickly to a close.

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