

Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 6 in A minor (1903–1904, revised 1906)

No other work has flowed so directly from his heart as this one. We both cried at the time; we felt so deeply what this music meant, what it forebodingly told us. The Sixth is his most personal work and is also a prophetic one.

– Alma Mahler, describing her husband's Sixth Symphony

Mahler's Life before 1906

1. Mahler was born into a Jewish family in Bohemia in 1860. Nine of his thirteen siblings died in childhood. Two more siblings died in their twenties. When Mahler was twenty-nine, he lost his mother, father, and a sister in the same year.
2. Mahler studied music at the Vienna Conservatory, followed by a study of history, literature, and philosophy at Vienna University. After leaving school, he conducted at successively larger opera houses in Slovenia, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.
3. After converting to Catholicism in 1897, Mahler became Director of the Vienna State Opera, the most prestigious position for a musician in Europe. He served as Director until 1907.
4. In March 1902, Mahler married Alma Schindler. In November 1902, Alma gave birth to a daughter, Maríá. In 1904, Alma gave birth to a second daughter, Anna.
5. Mahler composed his Sixth Symphony during the years 1903 to 1906, probably the happiest years of his life.

What to Expect from Mahler's Sixth Symphony

1. **A personal work of art.**
 - Although the Sixth is autobiographical, its message is universal — life turns on a dime. Individuals, institutions, and societies that are apparently strong and stable can rapidly collapse.
2. **Two general themes.**
 - **The March of Life** – life constantly moving forward, perpetually changing
 - **Domestic Bliss** – the transcendent love of family (stability, happiness)
3. **A tragic symphony?**
 - The Sixth is the only one of Mahler's nine symphonies that does not end in either **victory** or **peace**. Even so, it does not necessarily deserve to be labeled a tragic symphony. It contains great drama, but the tension can break either way—victory or peace—until the final few seconds of the last movement.
 - The epithet “tragic” comes from what happened to Mahler after he had completed the symphony.

Mahler's Life after 1906

1907 – Mahler's *annus horribilus*.

- **January** – A resurgence of anti-Semitism in Vienna sparked a campaign against Mahler in the press that continued unabated throughout the year. Vienna was a city of many newspapers and every publication, with the exception of one leftist newspaper, attacked Mahler with references to “the frightening Jewification of art in Vienna” and questions about whether a Jew should continue to perform “our great music—our German opera.”
- **April** – A performance of *Tristan und Isolde* conducted by Mahler was booed by a Viennese audience, something that would have been unimaginable a few months earlier.
- **May** – Mahler resigned his position as Director of the Vienna State Opera.
- **May** – After Alma returned ill from a trip to Italy, Anna, age two, scalded her hand and then caught scarlet fever. María, age four, also came down with scarlet fever.
- **July** – María caught diphtheria and died ten days later.
- **August** – Mahler was diagnosed with a “compensated heart-valve defect” (*infective endocarditis*).
- **November** – Mahler conducted his final performance in Vienna. He was given no official farewell.

1908 – Mahler began conducting the New York Philharmonic and Metropolitan Opera.

1910 – Mahler's second *annus horribilus*.

- **August** – Mahler found a letter that an architect, Walter Gropius, had written for Alma, revealing that Alma was having an affair with Gropius and had fallen in love with him.
- **September** – Mahler caught a sore throat from his daughter's nanny, leading to a *streptococcal* attack which would not go away and would eventually kill him.

1911 – Mahler became gravely ill in New York and was forced to return to Europe. He died in Vienna on May 18 at the age of 50.

Why do I visit Mahler's grave? Because he invites us into his life, asks us to share his struggles, his torments, his doubts, as if they were our own, as they often are. And then he withdraws, "Lost to the World," and leaves the rest to us. Life is a fight, says Mahler, and art does not end with death. There are no pat solutions, no magic bullets. Life flows on and art changes, different every day. Seeking Gustav Mahler is a route to the few things that are worth fighting for in the short time that we spend on this good earth. It is the start of a quest for the meaning of life and, sometimes, an end.

– Norman Lebrecht, *Why Mahler?*
How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World

Miscellanea

1. Mahler's Sixth is a purely instrumental work containing a traditional four-movement structure that Haydn and Mozart would have recognized during the late 1700s.

Movement 1 – Allegro in sonata form (intellectual)

Movement 2 – Andante in sonata form (meditative)

Movement 3 – Scherzo in ternary form (physical)

Movement 4 – Allegro in sonata form (uplifting? — it's complicated)

Note: The order of the Andante and Scherzo is open to debate and is generally left to the discretion of the conductor.

2. Only three of Mahler's symphonies begin and end in the same key.

No. 1 – D major

No. 2 – C minor to E-flat major

No. 3 – D minor to D major

No. 4 – G major to E major

No. 5 – C-sharp minor to D major

No. 6 – A minor

No. 7 – B minor to C major

No. 8 – E-flat major

The Song of the Earth – A minor to D major

No. 9 – D major to D-flat major

3. The Sixth contains some fascinating and sometimes unorthodox instrumentation.
 - **Percussion** – bass drum, snare drum, tam-tam (gong), cymbals, glockenspiel, xylophone, triangle, timpani, **deep-sounding untuned bells**, **cowbells**, **rute** (a bundle of twigs struck against the rim of a drum)
 - **Celeste** – a keyboard instrument in which the hammers strike metal plates rather than strings
 - **The Mahler Hammer** – the score calls for a massive hammer that delivers “short, powerful, but dull sounding strokes of a nonmetallic character, like the fall of an axe.” (Mahler originally placed three hammer blows in the fourth movement. The revised score of 1906 included only two hammer blows.)

Takeaways from Mahler's Sixth

1. A universal theme about how life's fortunes can turn on a dime.
2. Unusual timbres in the first and fourth movements (“Music from Far Away”).
3. One of the most beautiful slow movements ever composed.
4. Hammer Blows of Fate in the fourth movement.
5. One of the most memorable and well-known endings from any piece of music

Recordings

1. **Audio:** Leonard Bernstein conducting the New York Philharmonic (1967, Sony recording)
 - Find the recording on Spotify at <https://spoti.fi/2Y76NxA>.
 - The **time stamps on pages 4-7** refer to the Spotify version of this recording.
2. **Video:** Manuel López-Gómez conducting the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela (2013)
 - Find a recording of the Andante on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/Q1KkLmRZXjc>.

More versions of Mahler's Sixth are embedded on Jim Smith's website at www.ClassicalTyro.com/presentations/mahler6

Mahler, Symphony No. 6 in A minor

FIRST MOVEMENT (Sonata Form) – 21:31

INTRODUCTION

1. 0:00 / 4:26 **Introductory Theme**

(A) EXPOSITION

2. 0:10 / 4:36 • **Theme 1 (Part 1) – The March of Life**
3. 0:45 / 5:06 • **Theme 1 (Part 2) – The March of Life**

4. 1:44 / 6:07 • **Bridge**
5. 1:48 / 6:11 • **Bridge – Major-Minor Seal!**
6. 1:52 / 6:15 • **Bridge – Chorale**

7. 2:25 / 6:48 • **Theme 2 – Alma’s Theme**
8. 2:59 / 7:23 • **Interlude – The March of Life**
9. 3:13 / 7:37 • **Theme 2 – Alma’s Theme**

10. 3:56 / 8:20 • **Closing**

The exposition is repeated, including the Introductory Theme.

After he had finished the first movement, he came down from the woods and said, “I have tried to capture you in a theme; I do not know whether I have been successful. You will have to put up with it.” It is the long sweeping theme of the first movement.

– Alma Mahler

(B) DEVELOPMENT

11. 8:45 • **Part 1**
12. 10:27 • **Part 2**
13. 11:00 • **Part 3 – Music from Far Away**
14. 13:48 • **Part 4**

The last terrestrial sounds penetrating into the remote solitude of mountain peaks.

– Gustav Mahler,
describing the
Music from Far Away

(A) RECAPITULATION

15. 14:55 **Theme 1 – The March of Life**

16. 16:17 • **Bridge**
17. 16:21 • **Bridge – Major-Minor Seal!**
18. 16:25 • **Bridge – Chorale**

19. 16:57 • **Theme 2 – Alma’s Theme**

20. **Closing**

CODA

21. 18:16 • **Part 1**
22. 19:52 • **Part 2**
23. 20:18 • **Part 3**

SECOND MOVEMENT, "SCHERZO" (Sonata Form) – 12:25

SECTION A – The March of Life (in triple time and a minor key)

1. 0:00 • **Part 1**
2. 0:50 • **Part 2**
3. 1:15 • **Part 3**
4. 1:46 • **Major-Minor Seal!**
5. 4:16 • **Transition to SECTION B**

SECTION B – Odd-Meter Dance (in a major key)

6. 2:01 • **Part 1**
7. 2:35 • **Part 2**
8. 3:01 • **Part 3**
9. 3:36 • **Part 4**
10. 4:16 • **Transition to SECTION A-1**
11. 4:36 • **Interlude**

SECTION A-1 – The March of Life (in triple time and a minor key)

12. 5:10 • **Part 1**
13. 6:06 • **Part 2**
14. 6:34 • **Major-Minor Seal!**
15. 6:39 • **Transition to SECTION B-1**

SECTION B-1 – Odd-Meter Dance (in a major key)

16. 6:53 • **Part 1**
17. 7:11 • **Part 2**
18. 7:32 • **Part 3**
19. 8:32 • **Part 4**
20. 9:02 • **Part 5**
21. 9:15 • **Transition to SECTION A-2**
22. 9:32 • **Interlude**

SECTION A-2 – The March of Life (in triple time and a minor key)

23. 10:05 • **The March begins**

CODA

24. 11:02 • **Beginning of Coda**

In the [scherzo], he describes the arrhythmic playing of our two children, staggering through the sand. Horrible — those children's voices become more and more tragic, and at the end there is one fading little voice, whimpering.

– Alma Mahler

THIRD MOVEMENT, "Andante" (Ternary Form) – 15:20

SECTION A

1. 0:00 • Beginning of Section A

SECTION B

2. 4:35 • Part 1
3. 6:35 • Part 2

SECTION A-1

4. 7:27 • Beginning of Section A-1

SECTION B-1

5. 8:50 • Part 1
6. 9:34 • Part 2
7. 10:38 • Part 3
8. 11:09 • Part 4

SECTION A-2

9. 12:09 • Beginning of Section A-2

CODA

10. 14:27 • Beginning of Coda

Gustav often played with María, taking her in his arms, dancing and singing. He was so young and so unencumbered.

– Alma Mahler

Enjoy the little things in life because one day you'll look back and realize they were the big things.

– Kurt Vonnegut

FOURTH MOVEMENT (Sonata Form) – 28:50

INTRODUCTION

1. 0:00 • **Searching for a Direction**
2. 2:34 • **Chorale**
3. 3:24 • **Major-Minor Seal!**
4. 3:30 • **Searching for a Direction**
5. 4:30 • **Major-Minor Seal!**
6. 4:33 • **Anticipating Theme 1**

(A) EXPOSITION (not repeated)

7. 5:00 • **Theme 1 (Part 1) – The March of Life**
8. 5:41 • **Theme 1 (Part 2) – The March of Life**
9. 6:48 • **Theme 1 (Closing)**

10. 7:14 • **Theme 2 – Major-Key Motifs**

11. 8:16 • **Epilogue (with Music from Far Away)**

(B) DEVELOPMENT

12. 9:47 • **Part 1 – major-key motifs**
13. 11:45 • **HAMMER BLOW OF FATE!**
14. 11:46 • **Part 2 – struggle and strife**
15. 12:27 • **Part 3 – major-key motifs**
16. 13:10 • **Part 4 – “brute strength”**
17. 13:29 • **Major-Minor Seal!**
18. 13:32 • **Part 5 – The March of Life**
19. 15:26 • **Part 6 – major-key motifs**
20. 16:14 • **HAMMER BLOW OF FATE!**
21. 16:15 • **Part 7 – struggle and strife**

The hero is assaulted by three hammer blows of fate, the last of which fells him like a tree.

– Gustav Mahler

(B) RECAPITULATION

22. 17:08 • **Introductory Section**
23. 17:45 • **Searching for a Direction**
24. 18:50 • **Music from Far Away**
25. 19:44 • **Theme 2 – Major-Key Motifs**
26. 21:33 • **Theme 1 – The March of Life**
27. 22:20 • **Major-Minor Seal!**
28. 22:34 • **Development (Themes 1 and 2 developed simultaneously)**
29. 24:08 • **Abgesang (After Song) – tonality in a major key finally breaks through!**

CODA

30. 25:39 • **Part 1**
31. 26:01 • **HAMMER BLOW OF FATE!**
32. 26:04 • **Part 2**
33. 26:21 • **Part 3**
34. 28:51 • **Part 4**
35. 27:55 • **Part 5** – one of the most well-known endings to any piece of music

Resources

1. Ashby, Arved. *Experiencing Mahler: A Listener's Companion* (2020)
2. Carr, Jonathan. *Mahler: A Biography* (1997)
3. Fischer, Jens Malte. *Gustav Mahler* (2011)
4. Floros, Constantin. *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies* (1985)
5. Hurwitz, David. *The Mahler Symphonies: An Owner's Manual* (2004)
6. Johnson Stephen. *Mahler: His Life & Music* (2007)
7. Kennedy, Michael. *Mahler* (1974)
8. Lebrecht, Norman. *Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World* (2010)

Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 6 in A minor

Presented by Jim Smith
(online presentation, July1, 2020)

jameslsmith@icloud.com
www.ClassicalTyro.com

Western Institute for Lifelong Learning
Western New Mexico University

© 2020 James L. Smith