



GUSTAV MAHLER

Symphony No. 4

Gustav Mahler (7 July 1860 – 18 May 1911) was a late-Romantic composer and one of the leading conductors of his generation. A Jew, he was born in the village of Kalischt, in what was then the Austrian Empire. After graduating from the Vienna Conservatory in 1878, he held a succession of conducting posts of rising importance in the opera houses of Europe, culminating in his appointment in 1897 as director of the Vienna Court Opera (Hofoper). His innovative productions and insistence on the highest performance standards ensured his reputation as one of the greatest of opera conductors. In comparison, Mahler's *œuvre* is relatively small; for much of his life composing was necessarily a part-time activity while he earned his living as a conductor. Most of Mahler's works are designed for large orchestral forces, symphonic choruses and operatic soloists. His symphonic scores are very large-scale works, often employing vocal soloists and choruses in addition to augmented orchestral forces. These works were often controversial when first performed, and several were slow to receive critical and popular approval. As a composer, Mahler acted as a bridge between the 19th-century Austro-German tradition and the modernism of the early 20th century. Although his music suffered periods of relative neglect, after 1945 it was discovered and championed by a new generation of listeners; Mahler thereafter became a frequently performed and recorded composer.

The **Symphony No. 4** in G major was written in 1899 and 1900, though it incorporates a song originally written in 1892. The song, "*Das himmlische Leben*", presents a child's vision of Heaven. It is sung by a soprano in the work's fourth and last movement. Like the previous three symphonies, the text comes from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, a collection of German folk poems. Flutes and sleigh bells open the unusually restrained first movement (and used later with a melodic theme known commonly as the 'bell theme', which helps define sections throughout the movement) often described as possessing classical poise. The second movement is a scherzo that features a part for a solo violin whose strings are tuned a tone higher than usual. The violin depicts Freund Hein, (lit. "Friend Henry") a figure from medieval German art; Hein, the traditional German personification of death, is a skeleton who plays the fiddle and leads a *Totentanz* or "danse macabre". According to Mahler's widow, Alma, Mahler took inspiration for this movement from an 1872 painting by the Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin entitled *Self-Portrait with Death playing the Fiddle*. The scherzo represents his dance and the unusual tuning of the violin adds tension to its sound and contributes to the music's ghostly character. The third movement is a solemn processional march cast as a set of variations, and the fourth opens with a relaxed, bucolic scene. A child, voiced by a soprano, presents a sunny, naive vision of Heaven and describes the feast being prepared for all the saints. However, the scene has its darker elements: the child makes it clear that the heavenly feast takes place at the expense of animals, including a sacrificed lamb.