

MAHLER'S FOURTH SYMPHONY

Friday 16 April, 5.30pm and 8.30pm
Federation Concert Hall, Hobart

Johannes Fritzsich conductor
Lorina Gore soprano
Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra

MAHLER (arr Simon) Symphony No 4

Bedächtig – Recht gemächlich [Deliberately – Really unhurried]
In gemächlicher Bewegung. Ohne Hast [In a leisurely tempo. Without haste]
Ruhevoll [Peacefully]
Sehr behaglich [Very homely and comfortable]

During his lifetime, Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) was far better known as a conductor than as a composer. Coming from a small town in what is now the Czech Republic, Mahler went on to become director of the Royal Hungarian Opera in Budapest, chief conductor of the Hamburg State Theatre and, in 1897, at the age of 37, director of the Vienna Court Opera, one of the most prestigious conducting positions in Europe. After ten years in Vienna, Mahler moved to New York to become director of the Metropolitan Opera and subsequently director of the New York Philharmonic. In July 1907, shortly before leaving for America, one of his two young daughters died and, soon thereafter, Mahler was diagnosed with a degenerative heart condition, the illness that would lead to his death at the age of only 50. From the early 1890s onwards, Mahler followed a routine of composing in the summer – usually in a picturesque rural retreat – and conducting and orchestrating in the winter. Among Mahler's works are ten large-scale symphonic works. These consist of nine numbered symphonies and *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth). There is also an unfinished Symphony No 10. Mahler expanded the bounds of the symphony – both in terms of overall length and forces involved – and used it as a vehicle for exploring as far as possible the joys, sorrows, mysteries, conflicts and contradictions of human existence.

The Fourth Symphony was composed in 1899-1900 and received its première in Munich in 1901. In this concert, we hear an arrangement of the symphony made for large chamber orchestra by Klaus Simon in 2007. The first movement opens to the sound of sleigh bells and a plethora of melodies which have a folk-like freshness and vitality. Their meaning and significance will become clear once we arrive at the final movement. The second movement calls for a mistuned solo violin – each of the four open strings is tuned a tone higher (the G string tuned to A, the D string to E and so on), a practice known as 'scordatura' (mistuning). Mahler asks for the violin to sound 'like a fiddle'. Evidently, the image he had in mind was Death in the guise of a fiddler. The movement takes the form and style of the rustic Austrian dance the Ländler. The third movement, which is the longest of the four, is the emotional heart of the symphony. It commences with a slow, poignant theme played by the cellos over a pizzicato (or plucked) double-bass line. Mahler's directions in the score include 'expressively', 'always singing' and 'with increasing expression'. The cellos hand the heartfelt theme to the second violins who extend it further with a similar set of expressive performance instructions. Towards the end of the movement we hear a loud and obtrusive E-major chord (a classic example of a Mahler 'breakthrough') which leads us to the final movement and the appearance of the soprano soloist. The folk-like gestures from earlier in the symphony come into focus as the singer delivers a child's vision of heaven – the poem is from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Youth's Magic Horn) – and the symphony winds down to a blissfully serene close.

Robert Gibson, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, © 2021

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