



Season 2016/2017

Friday, 17 March 2017
Ilija M. Kolarac Foundation, 8pm

Cycle: For Connoisseurs

Conductor: **John Axelrod**

Programme:

G. Mahler: Symphony No. 6

Allegro energico, ma non troppo.

Andante

Scherzo: Wuchtig

Finale: Allegro moderato

Duration: approx. 80 minutes

Concert master: **Tijana Milošević**

“There is only one Sixth, despite the *Pastoral!*” With these words, Austrian composer Alban Berg expressed his admiration for Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) and his Symphony No 6, having compared it to Beethoven’s symphony with the same enumeration. This comparison with Beethoven, the great artist who was idolised by almost all subsequent generations of composers, clearly illustrates Mahler’s greatness and significance, as well as the value of his sixth symphony.

Gustav Mahler was born in Kaliště, a small village in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, now Czech Republic. He studied piano performance at the Vienna Conservatory and, since he was a very talented student, his teachers predicted he would have a very successful career as a pianist. However, Mahler dedicated his life to conducting and composing. During the 1880s and 1890s, until 1907, he worked as an opera and orchestra conductor in Halle, Ljubljana, Olomouc, Prague, Leipzig, Budapest, Hamburg and, finally, in Vienna, where he became very committed to promoting the works of young composers (including Arnold Schönberg). In 1907, he moved to the United States, where he took up a conducting position at the Metropolitan Opera New York, as well as at the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. He returned to Vienna in 1911, shortly before his death.

Mahler’s oeuvre is essentially one of late Romanticism, since it builds on the foundations of the 19th century Western European music, in particular its Austrian-German branch spearheaded by Beethoven and including the music of Schubert, Brahms, Wagner and Bruckner. Moreover, his works also show influences of Austrian folklore. Mahler’s view of the world and his contemplations about music also developed under the influence of philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Mahler’s oeuvre includes *only* nine symphonies and a number of cycles of songs for voice and orchestra (*Songs of a Wayfarer, The Youth’s Magic Horn, Songs on the Death of Children, The Song of the Earth*). Apart from these, he composed only one more collection of songs for voice and piano and a piano quintet. The focus of his composing was on the orchestra, which he knew very well and used it to present his ideas. For that reason, his cycles of songs for voice and orchestra bear special significance, as they raised this genre to an exceptionally high level.

Mahler’s symphonies, as well as his cycles of songs, were being produced with almost equal intensity throughout his career; hence their strong mutual connection. His first symphony, conceived as a tone poem nicknamed *Titan*, was written in 1888, whereas his death in 1911 interrupted his work on the unfinished Symphony No 10. The symphonies of Gustav Mahler abound with the elements of the composer’s acoustic environment – the sounds of the music heard in the streets and fairs, organ music, various folklore dances (usually the Ländler – the popular Austrian dance), as well as virtually onomatopoeic sounds of the nature, Austrian villages, birds and cow bells. These environmental sounds are processed and interpreted in his music in a manner that is very distinctive for the composer, infused with deeply rooted Romantic conventions of expression, but also characterised by their gradual dissolution, so that the sound of Mahler’s symphonies, especially the inner movements, seems to almost transcend the boundaries of the late Romantic musical expression on which it was initially based. The mutual connection between Mahler’s songs and symphonies is reflected in the use of the melodies of the

songs as themes for his symphonies. Thus, his first four symphonies elaborate on the melodies from the cycles *Songs of a Wayfarer* and *The Youth's Magic Horn*, as well as from some of the songs from the cycle for voice and piano. His middle-period symphonies No 5, 6 and 7 are subtitled as the *Rückert* symphonies, since they are related to the cycle of *Songs on the Death of Children*, which he composed to the verses of poet Friedrich Rückert.

Symphony No 6 (nicknamed *Tragic*) was written in 1904, but it was not premiered until two years later, after being revised by the composer. The symphony represents Mahler's reflection on the German symphonic music tradition. In his earlier symphonies, he tested the boundaries of the sonata-form symphonic cycle with regard to the sequence and number of movements (by expanding the cycle to five or six movements, or dividing the composition in two parts) and performers (by adding vocal and additional instrumental parts), which he would also continue to do after the Sixth Symphony. The piece is traditionally structured in four movements, all of them in the opening key of A minor except for the slow movement.

The first movement, a sonata Allegro, is based on two themes – the first one is dramatic, with an emotionally tense and tragic sound, and the second, lyrical one, called the *Alma theme* after Mahler's wife. The order of the inner movements has been a matter of many debates. Although the original, as well as many subsequent versions put the slow movement after the Scherzo, tonight's performance is based on Mahler's idea that the slow movement should come in the second place. Thus, the contemplative, meditative *Andante*, which includes reminders of the cycle of *Songs on the Death of Children*, is followed by the third movement *Scherzo*, which evokes the ambience of the ghastly dance of death. The symphony ends with the sonata finale that starts with an easy introduction (*Largo*), followed by the turbulent, marching segment (*Allegro moderato*) that culminates with a strong blow of the timpani and the bass drum as an abrupt ending to the symphony.

Ana Đorđević*

*In the season 2016/17, the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra offers an opportunity to selected young musicologists to enhance their professional training by writing programme notes.