

Symphony No. 3 in D Major
Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)

Written: 1895–1896

Movements: Six

Style: Romantic

Duration: 99 minutes

In the summer of 1896, the young conductor Bruno Walter paid a visit to Gustav Mahler in the little Alpine village of Steinbach am Attersee. Standing there admiring the beautiful mountain scenery, Mahler brought him up short. “You needn’t stand staring at that,” he said. “I’ve already composed it all.” He was speaking of his *Third Symphony*. It encapsulates his entire cosmology and is the longest symphony that he wrote. “Just imagine a work of such magnitude that it actually mirrors the whole world – one is, so to speak, only an instrument, played on by the universe. . . . In it the whole of nature finds a voice,” he wrote. “A symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything.”

By the time Mahler wrote this symphony (he was 35) he had established his work pattern. He would spend September through May at his job (as chief conductor of the Hamburg Opera, then later as director of the Vienna Opera) and the summer months composing in the mountains. After writing all morning, he would roam the countryside, alone or with friends. Inspired by nature, he laid out the form of his new symphony. He subtitled it “*A Summer Morning’s Dream*.” Each movement would tell a story: *What the forests tell me; What the trees tell me; What twilight tells me; What the cuckoos tell me; What the child tells me*. In three short but intense weeks, he wrote what would eventually become the second through fifth movements. Typically for Mahler, as the work progressed, he changed the scheme and things got out of hand. He wanted the first movement to be a sort of introduction, in which the god

Pan awakes and “summer comes marching in.” It grew to such proportions that it alone lasts more than half an hour! He deleted what was the last movement (efficiently using it in his next symphony) and came up with a new program and subtitle: *A Midsummer Noon’s Dream*. Six years after he completed the symphony, he explained it to a conductor:

I imagined the steady intensification of feeling, from the indistinct, unyielding, elemental existences (of the forces of nature) to the tender formation of the human heart, which in turn points toward a region beyond itself (God).”

The title to each movement shows this evolution: *Pan Awakes, Summer Comes Marching In; What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me; What the Animals in the Forest Tell Me; What Humanity Tells Me; What the Angels Tell Me; What Love Tells Me*. With such clear subtitles to each movement, it is maddening that Mahler later wrote,

no music is worth anything if first you have to tell the listener what experience lies behind it and what he is supposed to experience in it . . . Those titles were an attempt on my part to provide non-musicians with something to hold on to and signposts for the intellectual.

Writing to his mistress, Anna von Mildenburg, Mahler explained the first movement: The introduction to this movement expresses once again the mood of brooding summer midday heat. No breeze is moving, all life is at a standstill, the sun-drenched air trembles and flickers. . . . In between, a young man moans, struggling for salvation. Life is still chained in the abyss of lifeless, rigid nature, until it emerges victorious.

The first movement is a fantastic display of sound: tender, soft, “mystic sounds, extraordinary, mysterious resting-points”; a brooding solo played by the trombone;

tremendous orchestral storms and raucous victory marches. It ends with a bacchanalian salute to Pan.

The remaining movements are much shorter than the first. The second is a delightful, sentimental minuet with contrasting middle sections, all with the beauty and grace of a bouquet of wild-flowers. The third movement begins with a simple folk-like quality, but it quickly becomes more robust. The central section has an extended solo for trumpet: a distant sort of bugle call that turns into a song. A return to the simple beginning doesn't last for long as the orchestra gets stirred up into a furious storm. The trumpet solo returns amid distant birdcalls and, just as it dies away to almost nothing, there is a final wind-up with a curious quotation from the finale of Mahler's *Second Symphony*.

The fourth movement is all peace and quiet as the mezzo-soprano sings the *Midnight Song* from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. It leads directly into the next movement where women and boys join the soloist in an angelic setting of *Three Angels Were Singing* from a collection of folk-poetry known as the *Boy's Magic Horn*. The brightness of this movement contrasts with what came before and what is to follow: a solemn, noble movement, played very slowly. Although it is mostly quiet, it represents the top of the natural ascent of the preceding movements. As Mahler explained:

It is the zenith, the highest level from which the world can be viewed. I could also name the movement something like 'What God Tells Me,' in the sense that God can only be comprehended as 'love.' In this sense, my work is a musical poem, ascending step-by-step, encompassing all steps of evolution. It begins with lifeless nature and rises up to the love of God!

