

Program Notes for VSO Concert – May 8-9, 2025

Mahler – Des Knaben Wunderhorn; Rachmaninoff – Isle of the Dead; Zemlinsky – The Mermaid

By Jonathan Berkowitz

GUSTAV MAHLER (1860 to 1911)

Gustav Mahler wrote massive symphonies for massive orchestras, and he asked massive questions about life. Where do we come from? Where does our road take us? Will the meaning of life be revealed by death? Questions like these made him something of a symbol of the 20th century, an age plagued by doubts and anxieties. He is still very popular. Although he was obsessed with the meaning of life, he found no answers. The great German conductor Bruno Walter believed that each of Mahler's symphonies attempted to answer these questions.

Born in Kalischt, Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic) in 1860 to a Jewish family, Mahler began piano lessons at age six, entered the Vienna Conservatory at 15, and the University of Vienna at 18. He was a good pianist, but an even better conductor. In the early part of his career he conducted in a series of opera houses, building his reputation. He then moved on to more important posts, first with the Budapest Royal Opera and then in Hamburg. At 37, he became director of the Vienna Opera, at the time the most important musical position in the Austrian empire. Because antisemitism was rampant in Vienna, Mahler converted to Catholicism to secure this post. But he lamented that he was thrice homeless: as a Bohemian born in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world.

Mahler was not a nice man! A neurotic psyche and basic insecurity led to an austere and arrogant outer character. Convinced of his own superior morals and musical knowledge, musicians both respected and feared him. He had no time for personal relationships and his marriage to Alma Schindler Mahler ended because of his neglect. (Alma has a fascinating story of her own; I encourage you to look her up.)

Mahler's ten years with the Vienna Opera were a great success. He taught the public to love operas by Mozart, Beethoven, Gluck, and Wagner. But his fiery temperament and iron will resulted in enemies and intrigues against him. He said, "Humanly I make every concession, artistically none!" The death of a daughter and discovery of a heart ailment left him grief-stricken. He resigned from the Vienna Opera at age 48 and moved to New York to take a position first with the Metropolitan Opera and then the Philharmonic Orchestra. His three years in New York were unhappy. His lack of tact was evident when he called the orchestra, "the true American orchestra—without talent and phlegmatic." He was already fatally ill and returned to Paris and then Vienna where he died in 1911. Reputedly, his final word on his deathbed was "Mozart..."

Mahler's busy life as a conductor left him little time for his own composing. In fact, he referred to himself as a part-time composer, leaving a relatively small but mighty list of compositions that include nine symphonies and an incomplete tenth. Mahler's interest in song permeated all his works. In the spirit of Schubert and Schumann, he wrote song cycles, the pinnacle being *Das Lied von der Erde* (*The Song of the Earth*). One can hear Austrian popular song and dance throughout his works.

Mahler was the last in the line of great Viennese symphonists, from Haydn to Brahms. His monumental symphonies are marked by lyricism, long melody lines and rich harmonies. They are deeply personal and introspective works, exploring themes of life, death, fate, and the human experience. He was one of the great masters of orchestration, combining solo instruments with texture and counterpoint. His musical language had a strong influence on composers such as Shostakovich, Bernstein, and Copland.

Aesthetically and technically, Mahler was a 19th-century Romantic, but also a child of his time. He wrote, "My music is, everywhere and always, only a sound of Nature." By Nature he meant life and death, earth and universe. More than 50 years ago, author Harold Schonberg wrote, "To make him a modern symbol is to misunderstand modernism and misunderstand Mahler."

Des Knaben Wunderhorn – Mahler

Orchestration: piccolo, 2 flutes (both=piccolo), 2 oboes (both=English horn), 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet (=bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, field drum, glockenspiel, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle), harp, strings, and solo voice

In addition to his massive symphonies, Mahler composed song cycles in the tradition of German art songs or lieder. An admirer of Franz Schubert, by the age of 30, he had already published three volumes of *Songs and Chants (Lieder und Gesänge)*, the *Songs of a Wayfarer (Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen)*, and several individual songs.

Not just standalone compositions, some of them reappeared in subsequent symphonies. The First Symphony uses *Songs of a Wayfarer* throughout. The Second Symphony uses *Urlicht* from *The Youth's Magic Horn (Des Knaben Wunderhorn)*, and one song from his *Songs and Changes* appears in the Third Symphony. His monumental song cycle, *The Song of the Earth*, better known by its German name *Das Lied von der Erde*, was the culmination of his union of symphony and song. Leonard Bernstein called it Mahler's "greatest symphony."

Des Knaben Wunderhorn, a three-volume collection of German folk poetry, was published between 1806 and 1809, and had a tremendous influence on 19th-century German art. It was a mix of everyday experience, the supernatural, the bizarre, and German culture, so it was perfectly suited to the Romantic movement. Instead of operas about knights and mythology, composers set poems about peasants and foot soldiers to music. The collection inspired the Brothers Grimm to begin gathering folk tales. *Wunderhorn* captivated many other writers such as Heine, Goethe, and the Americans, Longfellow and Hawthorne. *Wunderhorn* poems were turned into songs by Weber, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms.

Mahler, however, was the most influenced by the anthology. He composed many songs based on *Wunderhorn* settings, but an exact count is challenging. The first published cycle includes 10 songs for soprano or baritone and orchestra. Some sources say 12 orchestral songs exist, and roughly that many for voice and piano. The Mahler Foundation reports 14 large-scale songs with orchestral accompaniment. The discrepancy comes from some songs being removed and replaced by others. Adding to the confusion, shortly after Mahler's death the publisher replaced Mahler's own piano

versions of the *Wunderhorn* songs with piano reductions of the orchestral versions. Whatever the number is, and however many are performed, they are a delight to listen to.

The program begins with one selection from *Songs of a Wayfarer*, and then four songs from *Wunderhorn*. Here are the titles in German and English:

Ging heut morgen über's Feld – I walked across the fields this morning
Lied des Verfolgten im Turm – Song of the prisoner in the tower
Das irdische Leben – Life on Earth
Das himmlische Leben – Heavenly life
Urlicht – Primal light

When you hear *Urlicht* you will understand why Mahler chose to reuse it in his Second Symphony. It is also a marvellous way to end this set of songs.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

This season has included Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 and his Symphony No. 3. A biography of the composer accompanied the extended program notes for those concerts. It is reprised here.

There was never a time when the music of Rachmaninoff was out of the repertory. He is as popular as ever, largely on the strength of two marvellous Piano Concertos, the Second and the Third.

His music is vastly different from that of Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Scriabin and Stravinsky, and the group known as The Five—Cui, Borodin, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov, who tried to create a truly national school of Russian music.

Rachmaninoff entered the Moscow Conservatory at the age of fourteen. He was described as dour, serious, taciturn, private, and stubborn. At 17 he composed his First Piano Concerto, which he later revised. A one-act opera, written for his graduation, was admired by Tchaikovsky, who perhaps saw his successor in Rachmaninoff.

Although a formidable pianist, Rachmaninoff's career—teaching and performing—progressed slowly. He wrote his famous *Prelude in C sharp minor* for piano in 1892. However, the premiere of a symphony three years later was a fiasco, liked by nobody. A crisis of confidence was remedied by a Moscow psychiatrist. Hypnosis and autosuggestion convinced Rachmaninoff that he would write “a concerto of excellent quality.” The result was the great *Piano Concerto #2 in C minor*, the “*Rach 2*”, finished in 1901. It remains his most popular work. Three pop songs have their roots in this concerto: *I Think of You* and *Full Moon and Empty Arms*, both made famous by Frank Sinatra, and *All By Myself*, a 1975 ballad by Eric Carmen.

Rachmaninoff spent the summer of 1909 with his wife and daughters in a country house far away from Moscow. He loved how the natural setting stimulated his imagination. He commented, “...and they come: all voices at once. Not a bit here, a bit there. All.”

Soon those voices sang a new work, his *Piano Concerto No. 3*. Years later, Rachmaninoff recalled that the first theme just ‘wrote itself.’ The piece grew into one of the towering masterpieces of the

piano concerto repertoire. Rachmaninoff performed it at the premiere and many times after, including a memorable performance with Gustav Mahler conducting the New York Philharmonic.

Because of the Concerto's extreme technical requirements, most pianists shied away from playing it. Although dedicated to the pianist Joseph Hoffman, he never dared to play it. It was not until Vladimir Horowitz championed the Concerto in the 1930s that it began to be widely performed. It received another boost as the feature piece in the Academy Award-winning 1996 film *Shine*, based on the life of David Helfgott. Calvin Dotsey, writing for the Houston Symphony commented, "Today it is recognized as one of the greatest of all concertos, a test for all pianists and a breathtaking emotional journey for listeners."

Like Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff wrote in a completely traditional framework but infused with Russian melancholy. His style of composition never really deviated from what he began with his Second Piano Concerto. Critics and the listening public were diametrically opposed in their opinions of his music. While admiring his pianistic prowess, critics sneered at his use of 19th-century models for his music. Rachmaninoff is summarily disposed of in only five paragraphs in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 5th edition*.

But Rachmaninoff gets the last laugh. His music has indeed lasted and remains as popular as ever, for good reason. Its international renown is part of its appeal. Although he contributed little to 20th-century form or harmony, he did breathe new life into old forms with his memorable, distinctive melodies, just as Tchaikovsky did. You recognize his work after hearing just a few measures. And you leave the concert humming his melodies over and over again.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Rachmaninoff left Russia for good. He moved to Switzerland and started a new life as a piano virtuoso. Settling permanently in the US in 1935, he decided to concentrate on the piano. His piano music was tailored to his own spectacular hands: it was difficult, made use of wide stretches, and displayed tremendous virtuosity but without the pyrotechnics associated with Liszt. Compositions during his time in the US include the *Piano Concerto # 4, Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Symphony #3* and *Symphonic Dances*. Rachmaninoff died in Beverly Hills in 1943.

Isle of the Dead, Op. 29 – Rachmaninoff

Orchestration: 3 flutes (3rd = piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals), harp, and strings

Rachmaninoff searched for some time to find inspiration for a symphonic poem, a single-movement orchestral composition inspired by literature, art, or nature that tells a story or conveys a mood through the music itself.

In 1907 he found what he was looking for in Paris: a black and white reproduction of the Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin's painting titled *Isle of the Dead (Die Toteninsel)*. Böcklin painted five different versions of the piece and reproductions spread across Europe. Vladimir Nabokov commented that

prints of it were “found in every Berlin home,” as well as in the offices of Sigmund Freud, Vladimir Lenin, and Georges Clemenceau.

Two years later Rachmaninoff composed his new work; it premiered in Moscow in 1909 with Rachmaninoff conducting. He made numerous revisions after the premiere. Even 20 years later, prior to recording the piece in 1929, Rachmaninoff made significant cuts to the work. Even more cuts and revisions followed. This work is an example of the joke that a book is never finished, it is just published or abandoned. Interestingly, when Rachmaninoff eventually saw the original painting, he was disappointed by it, stating, “If I had seen first the original, I, probably, would have not written my *Isle of the Dead*. I like it in black and white.”

The painting depicts a small boat arriving at a desolate island as seen from across dark water. The music starts softly, like the sound of oars in the water on the way to the Isle of the Dead. The slowly rising and falling music also suggests waves. Rachmaninoff accomplished this by using 5/8 time as a sort of barcarolle or boat song. It is remarkably hypnotic. As the boat approaches the island, the music grows ever louder, steadily leading to a climax. A second section, marked *tranquillo* (tranquil), also begins softly, rising to another massive climax.

As he did in his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Rachmaninoff incorporated the *Dies irae* plainchant from the medieval requiem mass. It is an allusion to death. Written in 3/4 time, this section has a feeling of liberation and ecstasy, signifying acceptance after grief and mourning. The 5/8 “rowing” meter, which also depicts breathing, then returns. Perhaps Rachmaninoff intended the contrast to symbolize the intertwining of life and death.

John Henken, writing for the LA Philharmonic, commented, “The pictorial and metaphorical aspects of the piece are supported by music of great craft and inspiration. Rachmaninoff finds an amazing range of warm and glinting colour within an essentially somber palette, and extends and intensifies his organically growing lines with fluent contrapuntal combinations.”

ALEXANDER ZEMLINSKY (1871 - 1942)

Why did a composer connected with many big names in music languish in obscurity until recent times? Why was he paired with Mahler in this program?

Alexander Zemlinsky (also known as Alexander von Zemlinsky) was born in Vienna to a family with a complicated background. His father was from a Catholic family; his mother had Sephardic Jewish and Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) parents. Alexander’s entire family converted to Judaism before his birth and he was raised Jewish. His father added an aristocratic “von” to his name, though neither he nor his ancestors were nobles.

Zemlinsky started learning piano at a young age and played the organ in his synagogue on holidays. From 1884 to 1892 he studied at the Vienna Conservatory where one of his composition teachers was Anton Bruckner. It was there that Zemlinsky also met Johannes Brahms. Later, Zemlinsky became acquainted with Arnold Schoenberg in an amateur orchestra. They became close friends, mutual admirers, and later, brothers-in-law when Schoenberg married Zemlinsky's sister. Zemlinsky was also Schoenberg’s only formal music teacher, instructing him on counterpoint.

In 1897, Zemlinsky's *Symphony No. 2* won the Beethoven Prize, a competition founded by Brahms. His reputation as a composer was further enhanced when Gustav Mahler conducted the premiere of one of his operas. In 1899, Zemlinsky was hired as Kapellmeister at Vienna's Carltheater, and, just as Mahler had done because of antisemitism, converted to Protestantism.

But then things went downhill. Zemlinsky fell in love with one of his students, Alma Schindler. But because her family and friends disapproved, she ended the relationship, marrying Mahler a couple of years later. This sad story was the inspiration for *The Mermaid*, discussed later in these notes. Zemlinsky eventually married, but unhappily. He enjoyed a much more contented second marriage which lasted until his death.

Zemlinsky was appointed to various conductor positions in Vienna, Prague, and Berlin. He was an influential musical figure in Prague from 1911 to 1927. However, he made a miscalculation in 1923 that hurt his career. He turned down the post of music director at the Staatsoper in Berlin (a position once held by Richard Strauss), accepting instead a position at the Kroll Oper, also in Berlin.

In 1933, with the rise of the Nazi Party, he was forced into exile. Eventually, he and his wife and daughter made their way to New York where he spent his final few years. Unlike Schoenberg who had also emigrated and was celebrated in Los Angeles, Zemlinsky was neglected and virtually unknown in his adopted country. He suffered a series of strokes and stopped composing, dying in New York in 1942.

Despite the trials and tribulations of his life, he never lost confidence in his ability as a composer. Zemlinsky's compositions bridge the gap between late Romanticism and 20th-century modernist styles. He was influenced by Brahms, Mahler, and Wagner. While he eventually explored symbolism, he avoided extreme dissonance, the twelve-tone technique, and atonal music in general. His works comprise eight operas, four string quartets, an unfinished ballet, pieces for chorus and orchestra, and numerous song cycles. Perhaps his best-known work is the *Lyric Symphony* for soprano, baritone, and orchestra, set to poems by the Bengali poet Tagore (in German translation); Zemlinsky compared his piece to Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*.

It is a mystery why Zemlinsky's work disappeared from concert and opera programs. His music started to be rediscovered in the late 1960s, partly as a result of the newfound zeal for Mahler's music. He is now recognized as one of the 20th century's significant voices of composition.

The Mermaid (*Die Seejungfrau*) – Zemlinsky

Orchestration: 4 flutes (3rd and 4th = piccolo), 4 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, 6 horns, 3 trumpets, 4 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (glockenspiel, suspended cymbal, triangle, tubular bells), 2 harps, and strings

The Mermaid is a fantasy for large orchestra in three movements based on Hans Christian Andersen's tale *The Little Mermaid*. Zemlinsky composed it to try to heal from heartbreak and rejection following his tumultuous affair with Alma Schindler, and her subsequent marriage to Mahler. Zemlinsky thought *The Little Mermaid* resonated with his own situation.

The work premiered in 1905 in Vienna, conducted by the composer, in a concert that also included the premiere of Arnold Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande*. Further performances took place in Berlin and Prague, after which Zemlinsky withdrew the work. He gave a friend the score of the first movement as a gift and took the second and third movements with him to New York. These and all his manuscripts made their way to the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

For many years after the composer's death, it was believed that the score of *The Mermaid* was lost or destroyed. In the early 1980s, two British doctoral students figured out that the separated movements in Vienna and in Washington belonged together. The first modern performance of the work was given in Vienna in 1984, by the Austrian Youth Orchestra. It has gone on to be one of the most frequently performed of Zemlinsky's works.

John Mangum, writing for the LA Philharmonic, gives an excellent summary of the story:

“In Andersen’s story, a Mermaid saves a Prince from drowning and falls in love with him in the process. She goes to the Merwitch, who makes her human in exchange for her voice. But the bargain is perilous, for if the Mermaid fails to win the Prince, she will die. When the Prince marries another, the Mermaid’s sisters go to the Merwitch to try to save her. The Witch says that the Mermaid must kill the Prince, but she cannot bring herself to do it. Heartbroken, she plunges into the sea, but, instead of dying, is transformed into a Daughter of the Air and given another chance to regain her immortal soul. According to Beaumont, the composer saw himself as the Mermaid, with Alma as the Prince. In his musical setting of the tale, Zemlinsky expressed his pain.”

The work has three movements. The opening movement musically depicts the first lines of the original Andersen tale, using a series of motifs for the bottom of the ocean and the Mermaid's theme, played by solo violin. The middle of the movement portrays the storm when the Prince falls overboard. But instead of it leading to the expected climax, Zemlinsky gives a delicate and lyrical version of the Mermaid's theme.

The second movement is a sparkling scherzo with brilliant orchestration representing the ball at the Merking's palace. Next comes a quiet, mysterious, almost tragic passage where the Mermaid makes her way to Merwitch's lair. Then the movement returns to the music of the ball, with even more glittering orchestration.

The third movement begins with the Mermaid taking her first steps onto land. The themes and motifs from the first two movements reappear, leading to a monumental climax, as the Mermaid encounters the Prince and his bride. Her sadness changes to rapture in a final coda, that represents, as John Mangum put it, “her transfiguration and its promise of immortality.”