

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

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Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Piano Concerto in D major
(for the Left Hand)

Commissioned by the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein who lost his right arm in World War I, this would be the last of two works Ravel would compose before his death. Ravel had already begun composing the *Piano Concerto in G major* in 1929 presumably with himself in mind to premiere the work. However, when he received the commission from Wittgenstein, he immediately stopped work on the former and spent a great deal of time studying previous works written for left hand only, including the left-hand études of Czerny, Scriabin and Saint-Saëns.

It was only after careful consideration of these and other similar works that Ravel felt prepared to compose this work, the *Piano Concerto in D major (for the Left Hand)*. Composed in a single long movement with a slow-fast-slow form, Ravel included the jazz influences he had experienced on his recent tour in America. Once he completed this work he immediately went back to working on the former piano concerto and in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph* of London described the process of composing both concertos in such close proximity:

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“It was an interesting experience to conceive and realize the two concertos at the same time. The first... is a concerto in the strict sense, written in the spirit of Mozart and Saint-Saëns... It uses effects borrowed from jazz, but only in moderation. The Concerto for Left Hand Alone is quite different, and has only one movement, with many jazz effects; the writing is not so simple. In a work of this sort it is essential to give the impression of a texture no thinner than that of a part written for both hands. For the same reason, I have resorted to a style that is much nearer to that of the more solemn kind of traditional concerto. After an introductory section pervaded by this feeling, there comes an episode like an improvisation, which is followed by a jazz section. Only afterwards is one aware that the jazz episode is actually built up from the themes of the first section.”

Paul Wittgenstein premiered the *Piano Concerto in D major* in Vienna on January 5th, 1932 with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra. He had commissioned a number of other works by composers such as Prokofiev, Strauss, and Britten, but Ravel's ‘Concerto for Left Hand’ has become perhaps the best known of these specially commissioned works.

Work composed: 1929–1930 **World premiere:** January 5, 1932 in Vienna conducted by Robert Heger with Paul Wittgenstein as the soloist

Instrumentation: piccolo (doubling on flute), 2 flute, 2 oboes, english horn, small clarinet, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, wood block), harp, strings, solo piano

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 1 in D major "Titan"

One of the great composers in the Austro-German tradition, Mahler was well known as a conductor as well. He completed nine symphonies and numerous orchestral songs, not only expanding the size of the ensembles, but also incorporating new instrumental explorations in various combinations. In addition, he infused song (or 'lied') into his symphonies. His exposure as a child to a large repertoire of folksongs had great effect on his themes, as can be heard in this symphony, as well as many of his other works.

Perhaps the key feature of Mahler's compositions is in this very close relationship between the lieder and symphonies. The First Symphony, composed initially in 1888, and variously revised over the years, draws much of its material from his song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer, 1883-1885). The first movement takes its thematic motives from the second of this collection of lieder. *Hans und Grethe* (Hansel and Gretel), a lieder composed when Mahler was 20 years old, supplies several motifs for the second movement, while *Freres Jacques* provides the framework for the minor Funeral March of the third movement.

The fourth movement opens with a tempestuous storm featuring two sets of timpani with cymbals clashing, and incorporates a typical Mahlerian ascending motif that is often heard when wishing to express ascension to a higher order. This is perhaps in direct contrast to the descending fourth heard in the first movement which is meant to portray the sound of a cuckoo (typically given a descending third) and more earthly aspects of nature and spring.

It has been said that Mahler wrote program notes of his own to assist the audiences of his time to better understand this work, at the time titled 'Symphonic Poem'. And although he insisted that the eventual subtitle 'Titan' did not reflect accurately any reference to Jean Paul Richter's novel of the same name, the program notes seemed to suggest otherwise, since some of the original titles ascribed to each of the movements appear to be borrowed from

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Mr. Richter. Here then are excerpts from Mahler's own program notes that show his inclination to integrate lieder into his symphony as well as perhaps themes from significant literature of the time:

Part I

'Memories of Youth': fruit, flower and thorn pieces

1. 'Spring goes on and on' (Introduction and Allegro comodo).

The introduction describes nature's awakening from its long winter sleep

2. 'Blumine' (Andante)

[later omitted]

3. 'Full sail' (Scherzo)

Part II

4. 'Aground!' (A funeral march in the style of Callot)

The following will help to explain this movement: the initial inspiration for it was found by the composer in a burlesque engraving: 'The Huntsman's Funeral', well known to all Austrian children, and taken from an old book of fairy stories.... This movement is intended to express a mood alternating between ironic gaiety and uncanny brooding, which is then suddenly interrupted by:

5. 'Dall'Inferno' (Allegro Furioso)

The sudden outburst of despair from a deeply wounded heart.

In the original version of the work, the piece was presented as 'Programme music' and included a slower, andante movement entitled '*Blumine*' (Flowers). In fact the composer himself described the work as a 'Symphonic Poem' for the first premiere. For the second performance the title was edited and included the 'Titan' subtitle along with the additional description: 'Tone Poem

in Symphonic Form'. The '*Blumine*' movement was apparently still included for the second and third performances, but on the latter occasion the title had been further simplified to 'Symphony', still including the 'Titan' subtitle.

It wasn't until the fourth performance that Mahler would make the decision to forego all of his program notes, since he considered them 'inadequate', and also because he felt 'the public had been misled by them'. The composer would also drop the '*Blumine*' movement (after much criticism), and settle on the final title: Symphony in D major, presented in four movements, as it will be performed by the TPO for this concert series:

I. Langsam. Schleppend

[Slow, held back]

II. Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell

[Moving strongly, but not too fast]

III. Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen

[Solemn and measured, without dragging]

IV. Stürmisch bewegt

[Tempestuously]

Work composed: 1884-1888 **World premiere:** November 20, 1889 in Budapest conducted by the composer

Instrumentation: 4 flutes (3rd & 4th doubling on piccolo), 4 oboes (3rd doubling on english horn), 4 clarinets (3rd doubling on bass clarinet, 4th doubling on small clarinet) 3 bassoons (3rd doubling on contrabassoon), 7 horns, 5 trumpets, 4 trombones, tuba, 2 timpanies, percussion (bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam), harp, strings

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