

## PROGRAM NOTES by Eric Bromberger

### Symphony No. 4 in G Major

GUSTAV MAHLER

Born July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia

Died May 18, 1911, Vienna

In April 1897 Mahler was named director of the Vienna Court Opera, the most prestigious post in the world of music. But the fierce demands of that position brought his composing to a standstill, and from the summer of 1896 until the summer of 1899 he composed no new music. Finally established in Vienna, he could return to creative work, and during the summer of 1899 he retreated to the resort town of Alt-Aussee in the Styrian Alps and composed the first two movements of his *Fourth Symphony*. He completed the symphony the following year at his new summer home on the shores of the Wörthersee and led the premiere in Munich on November 25, 1901.

The *Fourth* is Mahler's friendliest symphony—even people who claim not to like Mahler take this music to their hearts. At just under an hour in length, it is also the shortest of Mahler's ten symphonies, and it is scored for an orchestra that is—by his standards—relatively modest: it lacks trombones and tuba. Mahler's claim that the *Fourth* never rises to a *fortissimo* is not literally true, but it is figuratively true, for even at its loudest this symphony is Mahler's most approachable work. Much of its charm comes from the text sung by the soprano in the last movement, with its wide-eyed child's vision of heaven. In fact, several recordings use a boy soprano in place of a woman in the finale, because the sound of a child's voice is exactly right in this music. This sense of a child's vision—full of wonder, innocence, and radiance—touches the entire *Fourth Symphony*.

The symphony opens with the sound of sleighbells, and violins quickly sing the graceful main subject. Mahler marks this movement *Bedächtig* ("Deliberately"), and it is remarkable for the profusion of its melodic material: a jaunty tune for clarinets, a broad and noble melody for cellos, a lyric melody for cellos, a poised little duet for oboes and bassoons. We arrive at what seems to be the development, and scarcely has this begun when an entirely new theme—a radiant call for four unison flutes—looks ahead to the celestial glories of the final movement. This movement proceeds melodically rather than dramatically—there are no battles fought and won here—and at the end the opening violin theme drives the movement to its ringing close on great

G-major chords.

The second movement—*In gemächlicher Bewegung* (“Moving leisurely”)—is in a rather free form: it might be described as a scherzo with two trios. Mahler requires here that the concertmaster play two violins, one of them tuned up a whole step to give it a whining, piercing sound—Mahler asks that it sound *Wie eine Fiedel*: “like a fiddle.” Mahler said that this movement was inspired by a self-portrait by the German painter Arnold Böcklin in which the devil—in this case a skeleton—plays a violin (with only one string!) in the painter’s ear. Despite all Mahler’s suggestions of demonic influence, this music remains genial rather than nightmarish—in Donald Francis Tovey’s wonderful phrase, the shadows cast here “are those of the nursery candlelight.”

However attractive the second movement may be, it finds its match in the third, marked *Ruhevoll* (“Peaceful”), which begins with some of the most beautiful music ever written: a long, glowing melody for cellos and its countertheme in the violins. This movement is in variation form, with the variations based on this opening theme and on a more somber second subject, sung first by the oboe. Near the close, violins suddenly leap up and the gates of heaven swing open: brilliant brass fanfares and smashing timpani offer a glimpse of paradise, but that finale must wait for this movement to reach its utterly peaceful close.

Out of the silence, solo clarinet sings the main theme of the finale, marked *Sehr behaglich* (“Very comfortable”), and soon the soprano takes up her gentle song. Mahler had originally composed this song, titled *Das himmlische Leben* (“The Heavenly Life”), in 1892 when he was conductor of the Hamburg Opera. Its text, drawn from *Das Knaben Wunderhorn*, offers a child’s vision of heaven. Mahler said that he wished to create a portrait of heaven as “clear blue sky,” and this vision of heaven glows with a child’s sense of wonder. It is a place full of apples, pears, and grapes, a place where Saint Martha does the cooking, Saint Peter the fishing, where there is music and dancing and joy. The sleighbells from the symphony’s opening now return to separate the four stanzas, and at the end the soprano sings the key line: “Kein Musik ist ja nicht auf Erden” (“There is no such music on earth”). For this truly is heavenly music, music of such innocence that it feels as if it must have come from another world, and at the end of this most peaceful of Mahler symphonies the harp and contrabasses draw the music to its barely-audible close.

**M.Alone: a theater and percussion concerto for Fiona Digney**

ROLAND AUZET

*(The composer has supplied the following program note.)*

The writing of a musical project very often is linked to the meeting of a composer with an interpreter. The history of Art tells us, and once again, we check it. With Fiona Digney, the meeting triggered this desire to write a concerto or rather a musical and theatrical concertante form between an orchestra and a percussionist who travels between a musical and theatrical expression.

The form of the project is theatrical and musical. Everything is the result of extreme listening.

Fiona is a fabulous musician, a virtuoso percussionist, and an extraordinary performer. The confrontation with the orchestra is an exciting challenge.

Poetry comes from the strange manipulation that plays on exchange, magic, illusion, and relationships between her and the orchestra. She is thus a strange tamer of musical objects. She punctuates her fits of mood with strange sounds. The tension comes from the friction between this voluntary body and the resistance of things, the whole facing the “animal” that is an orchestra, as a set of prejudices of the crowd, and even the crowd itself, in the form of the opinion.

This relationship is about jousting, confrontation and dialogue with the orchestra on the stage.

Just as the sound environment of nature sometimes comes from the symphony, the music played on the stage is the most appropriate relationship between the musical or choreographic gesture and the theatrical relationship.

First, the silence, and little by little, under the fingers, the feet, the mission of Fiona is the fate of objects generating sounds, inhabited by a proper vibration.

In the space gradually multiplied by moving and mobile objects, Fiona implements a community of gestures, which are close to ancestral traditions, summoning repertoires and answering fundamental questions, human, solitude, the powerful, knowledge, strength, virtuosity and doubt ...

Poetry comes from the strange manipulation of instruments and objects that plays on exchange, magic, illusion. Illusion of the relationship between her and the orchestra, but also

hands that strike, only as the force of despair ...

The project questions the tradition of music and the tradition of contemporary writing while confronting these different worlds so far from each other but so close ...