Subject: Today's Recommendation: Gustav Mahler
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For those of you who may just be dipping your toe into classical music – with Bach, say, or Beethoven – Gustav Mahler is too much. His symphonies are too long, too episodic, too disjointed, too contradictory, too jumbled, too weird.I don't care. I just can't bear to post six or seven reviews without including a recommendation of the composer I love the most.Gustav Mahler was born in 1860 in Kaliste, Bohemia (now in the Czech Republic, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Although Jewish, he became a leading conductor in Central Europe, working his way up from regional ensembles in Austria-Hungary and Germany to the prestigious Vienna Court Opera, the center of the musical world, in 1897 (he had to convert to Roman Catholicism to get the job). After serving in that post for ten years, he came under increasingly vicious anti-semitic attacks, which he escaped by accepting offers of employment in New York as conductor of the Metropolitan Opera (1908) and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (1909-11). In 1901 he met and in 1902 married 23 year-old Alma Schindler, beautiful, vivacious and mercurial. About her, Tom Lehrer quite accurately wrote:The loveliest girl in ViennaWas Alma, the smartest as well.Once you picked her up on your antenna,You'd never be free of her spell.Mahler was smitten the first time he met her, and some of his most beautiful music reflects his deep love for her (most famously the Adagietto from his Fifth Symphony, written in 1901-02). He also experienced tragedy in the death of a young daughter in 1907, likewise reflected in his late symphonies. That same year, Mahler was diagnosed with having serious heart disease and was told he could die at any time. After returning to Europe from New York in April 1911, he died the following month in Vienna.All the while, Mahler was also composing. As the years progressed, he developed a fairly regular schedule. After the conclusion of the conducting season he repaired to Southern Austria and the Austrian Alps, where he spent the summer months in romantic agony giving painful birth some of the most beautiful music ever created. He then completed orchestration over the winter while conducting. In this manner, he composed roughly a symphony a year from 1901 on, except for the years around 1907, when his daughter died and he learned of his heart disease. Even before this, thoughts of death informed Mahler's music. In 1901-04, he wrote a haunting song cycle entitled Kindertotenlieder, Songs on the Death of Children. After 1907, the obsession deepened.At the time, Mahler's music was largely met with incomprehension. Although Mahler had his vigorous partisans from the time of his death, notably the conductor Bruno Walter, his reputation really revived only in the 1960s, thanks to the forceful advocacy of Leonard Bernstein, whose wildly passionate recordings of Mahler's works remain available on Sony and DG.I use the term "romantic" purposefully, for Mahler was a profoundly Romantic composer. Steeped in the German Classical and Romantic traditions, from Bach, Hayden, Mozart and Beethoven though Schubert and ultimately Richard Wagner and Anton Bruckner, Mahler (together, perhaps, with Richard Strauss, who looked into and drew back from the abyss) took Romanticism to the breaking point, to the point that it became so overripe and lush that it just fell apart, producing the Schoenberg revolution. (An aside: the only composer who wrote music more ripe than Mahler was Schoenberg himself, a friend and admirer of Mahler's, whose beautiful and stupendously overwrought Gurrelieder, completed in 1911, is the terminal point of Romanticism.)At the same time, Mahler was an intellectual and musical omnivore, an establishment insider who always remained an outsider by virtue of his Jewish heritage, a man torn by existential uncertainty, ever doubting, always unsure, ever experimenting. As a result, his music contains bizarre

juxtapositions – a ripe, exquisitely beautiful romantic theme intermingled with a military march or a drunken and frivolous peasant dance or the bells of a herd of cows in a distant Alpine field. It can be tremendously disorienting.My recommendation for a Mahler starter is his Ninth Symphony. Mahler appears to have composed the work, without orchestration, during the summer of 1909 and then orchestrated it in New York in the Fall and Winter of 1909-1910. Mahler viewed the composition of his Ninth as a death sentence. Alma (and many others) reported that, bearing Beethoven's example in mind, Mahler had an outright, superstitious "fear of the idea of a Ninth Symphony," "that no great symphonic writer was to live beyond his Ninth." Mahler proved prescient. He began a Tenth Symphony, but the Ninth was the last work he completed before his death.The Ninth contains all the stylistic difficulties mentioned above. Incongruous admixtures of different genres and moods, themes that half form and then dissolve, or having formed trail off into existential uncertainty. And yet . . . and yet . . . the Ninth is one of the most glorious, heartwrenching and beautiful pieces of music ever created. The ebb and flow and halting uncertainty of the piece, punctuated by glorious, swelling melodies, seems to capture the entire range of human emotion – the emotions of a man deeply in love, trying to absorb the entire world, knowing that death was near. Alternately rapturous, frivolous, resigned and sad, it is a shout of defiance, a paean to life, a wistful ode of regret for pleasures soon to be lost, a cry of despair, a quiet acceptance of impending fate holding out the faint yet irresistable hope of redemption all at the same time. Describing the lurching progression of the symphony's first movement, the composer Alban Berg captured the feeling perfectly:"Once again I played through Mahler's Ninth Symphony. The first movement is the most wonderful music Mahler wrote. It is the expression of remarkable love for this earth, the longing to live upon it in peace, to enjoy nature to its greatest depths before death enters. Because death does come, inexorably. This whole movement is based on a foreboding of death. It appears over and over. All earthly enchantment reaches a peak; therefore we have these rising outbursts, always after the tenderest passages. This foreboding is strongest at the tremendous moment when in this profound, yet painful joy of life, death forcefully announces its arrival. Then there are those eerie viola and violin solos and knightly sounds: Death in armor! There is no rebellion against him! What comes after this seems to me like resignation. . . . And once again, for the last time, Mahler turns toward earth – not to battles and deeds, which he brushes off . . . but rather totally and only to nature. He wants to enjoy whatever treasures earth still offers him for as long as he can. He wants to create for himself a home, far away from all troubles, in the free and thin air of the Semmering Mountains, to drink this air, this purest earthly air with deeper and deeper breaths – deeper and deeper breaths, so that the heart, this most wonderful heart ever to have beaten among men, widens – widens more and more – before it must stop beating."This is not just some critic's artificial construct. The manuscripts and original score of the Ninth are replete with notes reflecting Mahler's obsession: "with anger", "shadowlike", "with greatest force", "like a solemn funeral procession". And even more tellingly: "Oh Youth! Lost! Oh Love! Vanished!"; "Farewell! Farewell!"The first time you listen to the Ninth, you may well find it a disorganized, incomprehensible mess. Don't despair. My suggestion is to try to give it one or two good listens. It's long, well over an hour, but set aside the time to listen to the entire thing, including the stunning final movement. Take breaks between movements if you wish. After that, put it away for a week or a month or two. Then put it on as background music. Don't focus on it; let the music come to you. After a while, you'll find yourself involuntarily looking up now and again to hear a glorious tune swelling and find yourself disappointed when it fades away. Gradually, you will come to realize that the juxtapositions and spaces add to, rather than subtract from, the glory of the piece. The parts are beautiful, but the whole is truly greater than the sum of the parts.There are countless versions of

the Ninth. I'll suggest John Barbirolli conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra on EMI. The performance has received accolades since it first appeared, and EMI has remastered the disc in reissuing it as (rightly) one of its Great Recordings of the Century series. On one medium-priced ($11.98) disc (many performances slop onto a second disc), it's an outstanding performance worthy of the work and a bargain to boot.One last piece of advice. If you ever get a chance to hear the Ninth, or any Mahler symphony, live, run, do not walk, to the box office. Mahler employs huge orchestral forces and a tremendous dynamic range, from massive trumpet fanfares, massed strings and thunderous percussion thwacks to solo instruments (and those cowbells) echoing faintly in the distance. All of this is difficult for even the best stereo system to duplicate in the home environment. Of all composers, I think Mahler benefits the most from hearing him in the true space of an orchestral hall. Listening live to the final notes of the Ninth fade away, almost imperceptibly, into utter silence – the audience doesn't breathe – is one of the most powerful musical experiences I have ever encountered.
Mahler's Ninth