

Our new composer is Gustav Mahler who has nothing in common with our artist Sanzio Raphael. Gustav Mahler was a peer of Claude Debussy — born in the mid 1800s and died in the early 1900s. The two composers have no connection between them, not even a letter. Mahler was Bohemian, which is in the Czech Republic today. Bohemians love to sing and, as the eldest son of six children, helping his father in the tavern business, he heard street songs, dance tunes, folk songs, trumpet calls, and military band marches in addition to the kind of songs children learn growing up. He thought of that time of his life as gathering musical blocks. Mahler once said this, “Composing is like playing with building blocks, where new buildings are created again and again, using the same blocks. Indeed, these blocks have been there, ready to be used, since childhood, the only time that is designed for gathering.”

Even though he grew up in what we would call the Czech Republic today, Gustav Mahler spoke German because the Austrians ruled over his land. Like Debussy, he got an early start in music. When he was a little lad of only four years old, he was spending time at his grandparents’ house like many of you like to do. They had a piano and he ran his little fingers across the keyboard. By the time he was ten years old, he started playing for the public at the town theater. His mind and heart belonged to music and his grades suffered because he stared off into space instead of paying attention to his lessons. He was fifteen years old when something terrible happened. His beloved younger brother Ernst died after a long illness. Poor Gustav was heart-broken and he poured his feelings into his music. He and a friend began to work on an opera as a memorial to Ernst but it came to nothing.

When Gustav Mahler was 28 years old, he lived in a town in Germany called Leipzig (lipe-zeek). He was the conductor of the Leipzig City Theater and he spent his days rehearsing for the premiere of another composer’s opera. If it did well, he would win money and fame. Another reason for him to feel nervous was that the Russian composer Peter Tchaikovsky (who wrote *The Nutcracker Suite*) was in the audience. The director of opera houses from all over Europe were there to decide if they wanted to have this piece performed. All the hard work and rehearsing paid off for people recognized his talent as a conductor. The glowing comments gave Mahler the courage to write his first symphony. He worked feverishly for six weeks in between opera rehearsals and conducting. He stayed up until ten o’clock, night after night, to put all his favorite building blocks together.

When Gustav Mahler was 28 years old, he wrote his first symphony while rehearsing for the premiere of another composer’s opera. He was nervous about

opening the opera because it might lead to money and fame since famous composers and directors of opera houses were in the audience. The glowing comments of listeners encouraged Mahler to write his first symphony. He worked feverishly for six weeks in between opera rehearsals and conducting. He stayed up until ten o'clock, night after night, to put all his favorite building blocks together.

Not long after writing his first symphony, Mahler started writing his second symphony, which took six years! Mahler started it in 1888 and quickly wrote the first movement which we heard last week. All his creative juices for this work dried up and he put it on the shelf. It took four years to find the right building blocks for the next two movements: the music for an Austrian folk dance and Mahler's own from the Wunderhorn songs. He named it, "The Sermon of St. Anthony to the Fish," which depicts a saint preaching to slippery, unhearing fish swirling in the water. All his creative juices for this work dried up and he put it on the shelf. It took four years to find the right building blocks for the next two movements: the music for an Austrian folk dance and Mahler's own from the Wunderhorn songs about St. Anthony preaching to the fish. He moved to Budapest, Hungary, where there was a clash between the government which pushed for the German culture to smother the local culture of the Hungarian people. Mahler tried to balance between the two wishes and played a little of both. All in the same year (1889), his father, sister, and mother died and he had to take charge of four siblings. He placed them in the care of someone in Vienna, Austria so he could continue his work. No wonder he had major health problems! He spent only two years in Hungary before being called to work in Hamburg, Germany. Mahler wanted the final movement to have a chorus. He heard a hymn called "The Resurrection" at a friend's death funeral and the lyrics were exactly what he needed. He finished it within a year.

Mahler faced a lot of tragedy in his childhood. His mother gave birth to fourteen children. Only six survived their infancy. Today we live in a time when this sad situation is rare, thanks to medicine and a better understanding of health. The fear of loss must have haunted Mahler because he wrote five lieder about the death of a child during the time when his two children were born. A German wrote a series of poems on this topic. Mahler chose five and set them to music. His wife Alma was not at all happy about writing such songs because she feared her husband was tempting fate. She was right, the second child, little Maria came down with scarlet fever four years later and she died.