

Budapest Festival Orchestra conducted by Iván Fischer

Thursday, February 12, 2026 at 8pm

This is the 1,500th concert in Koerner Hall

Iván Fischer, conductor

Gerhild Romberger, mezzo-soprano

Budapest Festival Orchestra

Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, Jean-Sébastien Vallée, Artistic Director

Toronto Children's Chorus, Dr. Zimfira Poloz, Artistic Director

PROGRAM

Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 3 in D Minor

Part One

1. Kräftig. Entschieden. (Powerful and resolute).

Part Two

2. Tempo di menuetto. Sehr mässig. Ja nicht eilen! (Very steady. Don't hurry!).

3. Comodo. Scherzando. Ohne hast. (Unhurried).

4. Sehr langsam (Very slow). Misterioso. Durchaus ppp. (As quiet as possible).

5. Lustig in tempo und keck im Ausdruck (At a jaunty tempo with bold expression).

6. Langsam. Ruhevoll. Empfunden. (Slow. Peaceful. Deeply felt).

THE MICHAEL AND SONJA KOERNER FUND FOR CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING

The Royal Conservatory's mission to develop future generations of musicians and to bring the world's greatest performers to Toronto has been made possible, in large part, due to the generosity of Michael and Sonja Koerner. In 2022, the Koerners invested \$10 million to create The Michael and Sonja Koerner Fund for Classical Programming, securing the future of the finest classical music concerts at Koerner Hall and our other performance venues. This latest investment, along with the naming of Michael and Sonja Koerner Hall, support of Glenn Gould School students through The Michael & Sonja Koerner Scholarships, the donation of The Michael and Sonja Koerner Early Instrument Collection, the naming of The Alexandra Yeo Cello Program and The Alexandra Yeo Chair in Cello, and support of the annual 21C Music Festival, underscores the Koerner family's dedication to music and to the RCM.

Gustav Mahler

Born in Kalischt, nr. Iglau, Bohemia [now Kaliště, Jihlava, Czech Republic], July 7, 1860; died in Vienna, Austria, May 18, 1911

Symphony No. 3 in D Minor (1895-6)

"My Third symphony will be something the world has never heard before!" Mahler wrote to the young, talented soprano Anna von Mildenburg, with whom he was having an intense, stormy affair. Before he wrote a note of music, Mahler mapped out a programmatic scenario for the symphony. It was to change as the concept of the work evolved. But it has clear origins in nature – the nature he saw and heard around him in the Austrian alps, close to Salzburg, as

he began work in the summer of 1895. "In it, Nature herself acquires a voice and tells secrets so profound that they are perhaps glimpsed only in dreams," he said. He gave the new symphony an overall title, *The Happy Life: a summer night's dream*. The main title came from the Nietzsche book of the same name (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*), although the essence of the symphony is Christian, as much as Nietzschean.

Mahler's correspondence with von Mildenburg tell us a great deal about the origins of the Third. The original scenario began as five sections: *What the forest tells me*, *What the trees tell me*, *What twilight tells me*, *What the cuckoo tells me*, and *What the child tells me*. By the summer of 1896, after a season of conducting at the Hamburg Opera, the scenario changed and the overall title became simply *A summer-morning dream*. By the time of the work's premiere in Krefeld on June 9, 1902, Mahler was to withdraw any program or title, feeling that words were inadequate to describe the significance of the music. Nevertheless, Mahler's own words do help provide a 'way in' and prepare us to grasp the philosophy we find in the music – the relationship of Man to nature, the relationship between art and life, and between Man and God.

The final titles Mahler arrived at for each of the six movements were as follows: *Summer marches in*, *What the flowers of the meadow tell me*, *What the animals of the forest tell me*, *What night tells me*, *What the angels/morning bells tell me*, and *What love tells me*. His feelings about withdrawing the program were ambivalent. "Beginning with Beethoven, there is no modern music without its underlying program," he told a music critic in the year of the work's premiere.

1. The first movement is huge, as befits a symphony that is itself an entire concert. At over half an hour, the raw, brutal power of this craggy opening movement was likened by scholar Deryck Cooke – a former BBC colleague whose deep knowledge opened my own ears to the wonder of Mahler's music – to a kind of late-romantic equivalent of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Certainly, the music does not follow the conventional route of a symphonic first movement. What we have is a colossal juxtaposition of three descriptive ideas. There is the eruptive awakening of nature, "throwing off her chains," as Mahler put it, in the opening primordial sounds. Then there is the birth pangs of spring (sharp trumpet calls and exuberant horns) and the more pastoral sounds of birdsong (wind and string trills) – "the approach of summer with her flowers." And then comes "the battle against hostile forces," as summer gains victory over life, with bright, martial music and a glorious blazing of colour. The huge structure is a giant crescendo of sound with glorious, thrilling climaxes as it continues to gather strength and progress inexorably forward.

Remarkably, given the subsequent transformation of several themes in the last three movements of the symphony, Mahler wrote this first movement last. "I would never have had the courage, I think, to finish this gigantic task if the other movements had not already been completed," he said.

2. Then comes the most carefree piece Mahler said that he had ever written. The music of the second movement is on a more intimate scale, with delicate orchestration, clear harp accompaniment, pizzicato basses (Mahler realised that the basses do not use their bows at all only after he had composed the work!), and a sentimental minuet melody from the strings. "It is carefree as only flowers can be," Mahler wrote. "Everything hovers in the air with grace and lightness, like flowers bending on their stems and being caressed by the wind."

3. The third movement continues the terraced ascent towards the finale. The main musical material comes from one of his own songs, *Ablösung im Sommer* (*Relief in Summer*), a setting of a rustic folk-poem about the death of a cuckoo and the arrival of the nightingale. This music alternates with two trio sections, the second even more beautiful than the first, with a distant horn twice magically sounding through a halo of hushed strings. As the strings die away to near silence, there is a sudden and dramatic transformation of one of the bird calls from the full orchestra. It is as though the great god Pan, whom Mahler initially thought of as the figurehead symbolising the entire symphony, asserts himself in a blaze of power.

4. Music from the opening movement is invoked as the purely 'nature' part of the symphony gives way to a setting for contralto of Nietzsche's famous *Midnight Song* from *Also sprach Zarathustra*. In the 11 lines of this muted nocturne, Mahler portrays Man's essential spiritual conflict.

O Mensch! Gib acht!
Was spricht, die tiefe Mitternacht?
"Ich schlief, ich schlief -
Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht:
Die Welt ist tief,
Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.

O Mensch! O Mensch!
Tief ist ihr Weh -
Lust - tiefer noch als Herzeleid;
Weh spricht; Vergeh!

Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit,
will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!"

O Man! Take heed!
What speaks the deep midnight?
"I slept, I slept -
From deep dream I awoke:
The world is deep,
And deeper than the day conceives.

O Man! O Man!
Deep is its woe -
Joy deeper than heartache.
Woe speaks: be gone!

But joy desires eternity.
Desires deep, deep, eternity."

5. The music now runs continuously through to the end, as boys' choir and women's voices sing an old folk-carol "Three angels were singing a sweet song." The text comes from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the collection of folk-poetry that Mahler frequently drew from. Angels tell of God's forgiveness of Peter, to a bright accompaniment of woodwinds, horns, trumpets, glockenspiel, harps, and bells. The violins are silent throughout this movement. Mahler adds a line of verse into the troubled middle section of the movement. "Du sollst ja nicht weinen," ("But you must not weep"), the boys sing, comforting the soloist.

Bimm bamm, bimm, bamm.

Es sungen drei Engel einen süßen Gesang,
Mit Freuden es selig in den Himmel klang.
Sie jauchzten fröhlich auch dabei,
Daß Petrus sei von Sünden frei.

Und als der Herr Jesus zu Tische saß,
Mit seinen zwölf Jügern das Abendmahl aß,
Da sprach der Herr Jesus: "Was stehst du den hier?
Wenn ich dich anseh', so weinest du mir."

"Und sollt' ich nicht weinen, du gütiger Gott" ...
Du sollst ja nicht weinen!
"Ich hab übertreten die Zehn Gebot;

Ich gehe und weine ja bitterlich,
Ach komm und erbarme duch über mich."

Hast du denn übertreten die zehn Gebot,
So fall auf die Knie und bete zu Gott!

Liebe nut Gott in alle Zeit,
So wirst du erlangen die himmlische Freud
Die himmlische Freud' is ein selige Stadt;
Die himmlische Freud', die kein Ende mehr hat.
Die himmlische Freude war Petro bereit'
Durch Jesum und allen zur Seligkeit.

Ding, dong, ding, dong.

Three angels sang a sweet song;
Joyfully it sounded through Heaven,
They shouted joyfully the while
That St. Peter was free of sin,

And when the Lord Jesus sat at the board,
For the last supper with his twelve disciples,
The Lord Jesus spoke: what doest thou here?
As I behold thee, thou weepest!

And should I not weep, thou merciful God?
I have broken the Ten Commandments.
I go my way with bitter tears.

Thou shalt not weep!
Ah, come, and have mercy on me!

If thou hast broken the Ten Commandments
Fall on thy knees and pray to God!

Love only God in eternity!
So shalt thou know heavenly joys,
The heavenly city was made ready for Peter
Through Jesus and for the salvation of all.

Ding, dong, ding, dong.

6. "I could almost call my finale *What God tells me*," Mahler said to Anna von Mildenburg. "And so my symphony begins as a musical poem embracing all stages of development in a step-wise ascent. It begins with inanimate nature and ascends to the love of God." A deeply felt Adagio finale, purely instrumental, with an achingly beautiful drawn-out string melody reaches forward from still meditation to awe-inspiring affirmation. The movement is on the same broad scale as the music of the opening movement. Themes from earlier in the symphony are recalled as the music reaches to its final, grand apotheosis. "In Adagio movements," Mahler wrote, "everything is resolved and quiet. In fast movements, everything is motion, change, flux. Therefore, I have ended my Second and Third symphonies contrary to custom ... with an Adagio – the higher form as distinguished from the lower."

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Iván Fischer

Conductor

Conductor, composer, opera director, thinker, and educator, Iván Fischer is considered one of the most visionary musicians of our time. In the mid-1980s he founded the Budapest Festival Orchestra, where he has developed several new concert formats and reformed the structure and working method of the symphony orchestra. His work as Music Director of the BFO, his international tours, and a series of recordings for Philips Classics and Channel Classics, has developed into one of the greatest musical success stories of the last 40 years.

He has founded a number of festivals, including the Budapest Mahlerfest, the Bridging Europe festival, and the Vicenza Opera Festival.

He was principal conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, the Opéra National de Lyon, and the Konzerthausorchester Berlin, the latter appointing him Conductor Laureate.

The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra named him Honorary Guest Conductor following many decades of working together. He is a frequent guest conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, and the New York Philharmonic. In July 2024, Iván Fischer was named Music Director of the European Union Youth Orchestra.

After various guest appearances at international opera houses, he founded the Iván Fischer Opera Company. His staging always sets as its goal an organic unity between music and theatre. IFOC productions have been received with great acclaim in Hamburg, New York, London, Edinburgh, Abu Dhabi, Berlin, Geneva, and Budapest.

Iván Fischer has been active as a composer since 2004, writing mostly vocal music with instrumental ensembles.

Budapest Festival Orchestra

Iván Fischer founded the Budapest Festival Orchestra in 1983 together with Zoltán Kocsis.

Thanks to its innovative approach to music and the uncompromising dedication of its musicians, the BFO has become the youngest ensemble to join the world's top 10 symphony orchestras. They are both present at the most important international concert venues and streaming platforms. The BFO has been recognized by Gramophone magazine three times: in 1998 and 2007 for the best recording, while in 2022 they were named Orchestra of the Year. The BFO's most considerable successes are connected to Mahler: their recording of Symphony No. 1 was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2013.

The BFO has also made a name for itself with its series of innovative concerts. The Autism-friendly Cocoa Concerts, the Surprise Concerts, Midnight Music performances, free open-air concerts in Budapest, and the Community Weeks are all unique in their own ways. Another special feature of the orchestra is that its members regularly form a choir at their concerts.

Each year, the BFO stages an opera production directed and conducted by Iván Fischer. The performances have been invited to the Mostly Mozart Festival, Spoleto Festival dei Due Mondi, the Edinburgh International Festival, and the Elbphilharmonie, Hamburg; in 2013, *The Marriage of Figaro* led the *New York Magazine*'s list of the best classical music events of the year. The Vicenza Opera Festival, founded by Iván Fischer, debuted in the fall of 2018 at the Teatro Olimpico.

Gerhild Romberger

Mezzo-soprano

German mezzo-soprano Gerhild Romberger is internationally acclaimed for her expressive artistry and versatility in the concert repertoire. Her wide-ranging performances span major alto roles from the Baroque to modern music, with a particular focus on the works of Gustav Mahler.

She has appeared with leading orchestras such as the Berlin and Vienna philharmonics, the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. She has worked with renowned conductors including Andris Nelsons, Kent Nagano, Bernard Haitink, Herbert Blomstedt, Riccardo Chailly, and Franz Welser-Möst.

Current highlights include a North American tour performing Mahler's Third Symphony with the Budapest Festival Orchestra under Iván Fischer, as well as a guest appearance in Sapporo, Japan, with the same work under Elias Grandy. She also sings Erda in Wagner's *Siegfried* with Concerto Köln under Kent Nagano.

Gerhild Romberger is professor of voice at the Hochschule für Musik in Detmold.

Toronto Mendelssohn Choir

Toronto Mendelssohn Choir (TMChoir) is proud to be one of Canada's oldest, largest, and best-known choral organizations. The choir presented its first concert on January 15, 1895, as part of Massey Hall's inaugural season, and has been a leader in choral music in Canada ever since, commissioning works by Canadian composers, and presenting world and Canadian premieres. The choir also regularly performs and records with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. In May 2021, Jean-Sébastien Vallée was named as Artistic Director, only the eighth conductor in TMChoir's 130-year history.

Through its performances, educational programs, and community engagement, TMChoir aspires to introduce its audiences to choral masterworks from the past and present – and make both renowned and lesser-known pieces available, accessible, and inspirational to all.

TMChoir includes a core of professional singers and more than 160 auditioned and experienced volunteer choristers. The smaller professional ensemble, the Toronto Mendelssohn Singers (TMSingers), was created to deliver more intimate repertoire in a variety of nontraditional venues. This past 130th anniversary season included a commercial recording *Remember: 130 Years of Canadian Choral Music*, by ATMA Classique, and a recording with Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra and Orchestre symphonique de Québec celebrating the late composer Jacques Hétu.

Toronto Children's Chorus

The Toronto Children's Chorus (TCC) is a vibrant musical community that has been nurturing young voices for generations. The Chorus is led by internationally acclaimed Artistic Director Dr. Zimfira Poloz (2022-present), who follows in the esteemed footsteps of founder and artistic director Jean Ashworth Bartle C.M., O.Ont., and artistic director Elise Bradley, MNZM. The TCC is proud to have been a cornerstone of choral excellence in Toronto and Canada for 48 years.

TCC consists of eight choirs for ages six through 18 that provide exceptional music, vocal, and performance training. TCC presents a concert series each season and regularly collaborates with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and other Toronto performing arts organizations.

Throughout TCC's illustrious history, its senior choir, TCC Chamber Choir, has graced world-renowned stages including Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, the Sydney Opera House, Royal Albert Hall, and The Dom in Salzburg. As choral ambassadors, the TCC has represented Canada on 33 international tours and seven national tours. The TCC has also earned accolades at several prestigious competitions, including the International Eisteddfod in Wales, the Let the Peoples Sing competition in Europe, the CBC National Radio Competition, and the International Choral Kathaumixw. The Choir returned to International Choral Kathaumixw in July 2025.

Toronto Mendelssohn Choir made its Royal Conservatory debut on February 9, 2022 and Toronto Children's Chorus on December 6, 2014. All other artists are making their Conservatory debuts.