

The 20
GREATEST
SYMPHONIES
of all time



AS VOTED FOR BY 151 OF THE WORLD'S TOP CONDUCTORS

See p36 for how each maestro voted

The mighty symphony has been the bedrock of western orchestral music since its flowering in the 18th century. But which are the greatest masterpieces of them all? We reveal the votes of 151 leading maestros

It's a classic rags to riches story. From humble beginnings in the Baroque period the symphony has grown in size and influence, becoming a badge of honour among composers clamouring for recognition.

When Haydn went to London in 1791, it was his symphonies the public wanted, not his string quartets or sonatas. They were, literally, the ideal way to make a noise in society, the vehicle for a communal experience wholly different in scale to that of chamber music in a domestic setting. Haydn's symphonies 'electrified' his London audiences, causing 'a pleasure superior to any that had ever been caused by instrumental music in England'. These were new sounds, bigger and more viscerally exciting than any heard previously, and they were ready to conquer Europe.

The symphony quickly became more than simply social entertainment. Haydn used it as a vehicle of emotion, which intensified when Beethoven took on the symphony. To this day his symphonies are viewed as brilliant models of how music can express the most powerful of human feelings, in ways that even words can't emulate. How did the symphony so rapidly become capable of this?

The answer lies in how composers quickly developed a habit in their symphonies of pitting one theme against another, weighing the relative merits of each, then pulling their conclusions together. This closely mirrored the processes of debate and interaction used in human communication, and it struck a chord deep in audiences. With Beethoven,

the symphony suddenly became a forum of debate about life's deeper meanings, a source of inspiration and spiritual enlightenment.

This idea of the symphony as a teeming interactive medium, with intellectual cachet as well as entertainment value, proved irresistible to composers seeking the ultimate challenge of their craft outside opera. Orchestras relished the opportunities for display and impact these works presented, and audiences feasted on the resplendent sounds of the expanded 'symphony orchestra', and the frequently momentous import of the music, as the 19th century developed.

And although the 20th century severely tested the ability of composers to make coherent, meaningful statements in a world lacerated by violence and atrocities,


the symphony remains, in the words of the late, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, a key medium for making 'sense of chaos', and presenting 'an argument which is comprehensible, even under the most dire circumstances. A symphony is what you make it, and it changes with each generation, with each set of circumstances, and the lives that the composers live'.

But which of the thousands of symphonies written over the centuries is the greatest? To find out, we asked 151 of today's leading conductors to name the three symphonies they consider to be the greatest. It wasn't an easy task, but a democratic consensus soon emerged. We counted up the votes, and, where there were tie-breakers, gave the deciding vote to our trusted critics. And so, at last, all is finally revealed overleaf... *Terry Blain*

*Symphonies can express
the most powerful
of human feelings*

20 Bruckner SYMPHONY NO. 7 (1883)


Bruckner pays homage to his hero, Richard Wagner, in a work of great hope and light
Hailed as a masterpiece after its Leipzig premiere in 1883, Bruckner's Seventh Symphony became his first (and only) instant success. It had taken him two years to write, during which time Wagner – to whom Bruckner had dedicated his gigantic Third Symphony – became ill and died. The Seventh's sweeping *Adagio* became a poignant tribute to him with four Wagner tubas included in his honour – the first time these instruments had been used in a symphony. From the yearning opening cello melody to the dramatic hunting horn motif that begins the third movement, the Seventh is full of striking moments, none more so than the brilliant finale, in which shimmering strings and heroic horns surge upwards to a euphoric close. *Elinor Cooper*

 Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra/
Bernard Haitink Decca 478 5690

19 Beethoven SYMPHONY NO. 6 (1808)

Beethoven's groundbreaking pastoral masterpiece is the ultimate hymn to nature
It would be hard to imagine a symphony more different to Beethoven's stormy, compressed C minor Fifth than the gentle, expansive *Pastoral*. They were, however, written during the same period and premiered in the same – lengthy – concert in Vienna in 1808.

Cast in five titled movements, Beethoven's *Pastoral* takes us on a tour of the countryside, complete with birdsong and a sense of bucolic joy. Where the Fifth progresses inexorably, the Sixth meanders and lingers. Until, that is, the Storm, which rips through this peaceful idyll with extraordinary violence. With this major piece of programme music, Beethoven paved the way for Berlioz and Richard Strauss. And his homage to nature encouraged composers, including Mahler, to explore the sounds of the outdoors. *Rebecca Franks*


 London Classical Players/Sir Roger
Norrington Virgin 083 4232

18 Brahms SYMPHONY NO. 2 (1877)

Brahms hits his symphonic stride with a work of surface serenity and dark undercurrents
Schumann prophesied that Brahms would be the greatest symphonist of his age, but –

14 Sibelius SYMPHONY NO. 7 (1924)

In his final symphony, Sibelius paints a broad, shifting landscape that beguiles with unexpected, twisting paths
Scored in one 22-minute-long movement, originally christened *Fantasia sinfonica*, Sibelius wrote his Symphony No. 7 at night, aided by substantial amounts of whisky. Extraordinarily, though, the work is among his most lucid and profound musical statements. Within its single movement are four interweaving episodes, continuously floating in the ether, always seeking resolution. Weighty anchor points are dropped by three glorious, heroic calls on a trombone, sounds which seem to emerge from the very beginning of time, but the Seventh's delicate, transient beauty defies attempts to hold it down. It would be his last symphony before a 30-year musical silence – its closing bars, a major seventh B rising to a burnished C major chord, were described by conductor Sir Colin Davis as 'the closing of the coffin lid'. *Oliver Condy*

 Lahti Symphony Orchestra/Osmo Vänskä
BIS BIS-CD864


According to... Paul Daniel



'The Seventh is incredibly concentrated. Somehow Sibelius has combined all the elements of his quite tormented life and his influences. He's reduced everything to a musical, emotional, truth and found his way to the simplest means, if you like.

And he uses a simple key – C major – and perhaps the simplest theme of all, a scale, to communicate this purity. Symphony No. 7 is the lodestone, the essential base metal, of Sibelius's musical expression.'


had he lived long enough – even he surely would have wondered when his 'young eagle' would actually finish writing a symphony. But once the long-awaited First was done, it was just a matter of months before Brahms had also completed the Second. Written in the summer of 1877, this is on the surface a sunny, serene work. It's even been dubbed Brahms's *Pastoral*. Yet, as ever with his music, a darkly elegiac tone is never far away, set up in the opening movement by timpani, trombones and tuba. A three-note motif – and its developments and variants – underpins the whole four-movement symphony, making this work a remarkable feat of construction, even if all we consciously hear is a delicious outpouring of melody and inventive writing. No wonder it went down well at the premiere, with the critic Eduard Hanslick declaring it an 'unqualified success'. *Rebecca Franks*

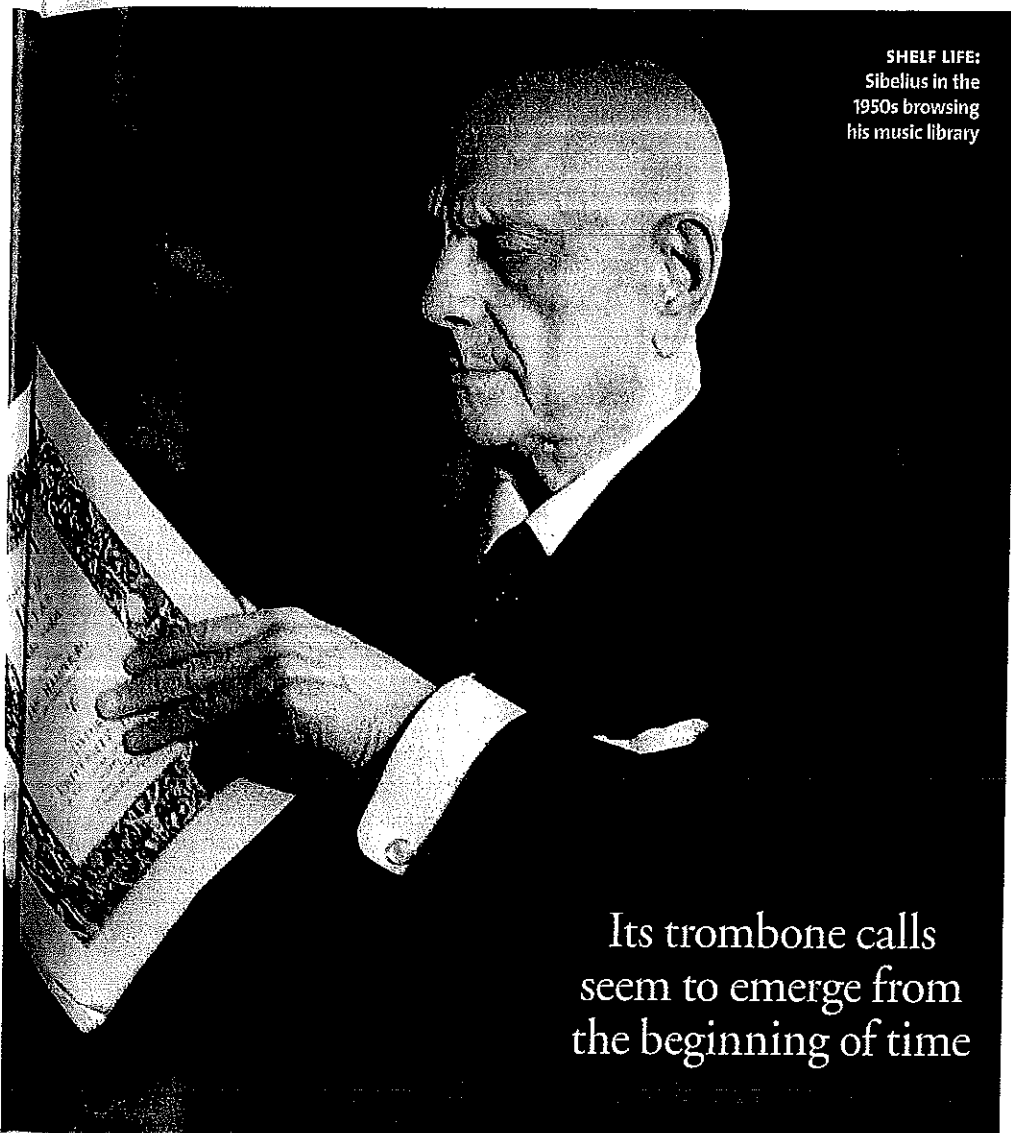
 London Philharmonic Orchestra/
Vladimir Jurowski LPO LPO0043

17 Shostakovich SYMPHONY NO. 5 (1937)

The Soviet composer tapped into a deep well of public emotion with his mighty Fifth

It was in the teeth of official denunciation of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mstensk* that Shostakovich composed what appeared to be one of his most conventional works. His Fifth Symphony uses the dignified tones of a neo-classical symphony. Yet it contains hints of a subtext indicating that the work was not simply to mollify Stalin and his cultural henchmen. The symphony sounds a lament in its third movement, expressing what was too dangerous to be said during Stalin's 'Great Terror'. Many of the audience at its premiere were reduced to tears by this movement, and the work received a half-hour standing ovation. *Daniel Jaffe*

 BBC National Orchestra of Wales/
Mark Wigglesworth BIS-CD-973/974



SHELF LIFE:
Sibelius in the
1950s browsing
his music library

Its trombone calls
seem to emerge from
the beginning of time

16 Beethoven SYMPHONY NO. 7 (1812)

Beethoven's 'return to life' – a bubbling cauldron of exuberance and vitality

Beethoven's Seventh is a restless beast, full of driving, unnerving energy – less about melody, more about rhythm and orchestration. For Wagner, the Symphony's sunny aspect represented the 'apotheosis of the dance', but Carl Maria von Weber saw darker hues within and declared Beethoven 'ripe for the madhouse'. For sure, it teeters on the edge of obsession, in the hypnotic repetitions of the ambiguous *Allegretto* (the work's only 'slow' movement) and the syncopated, wayward rhythms of the final *Allegro* that pushes the orchestra to its absolute limits. *Elinor Cooper*

Staatskapelle Berlin/Daniel Barenboim
Warner 256461890-2

15 Mozart SYMPHONY NO. 40 (1788)

A 35-minute miracle that blends elegance and tragedy, and confounds expectations

Mozart's penultimate symphony was written during testing times – *Don Giovanni* had been ill-received by the Viennese and money was short. But out of adversity, and in a single summer, sprung three extraordinary symphonies. No. 40 combines elegance and unease, its dark opening yielding to calmer waters, only to return to despair. Mozart explores this pattern again in the *Andante*, harmonic clashes, falling motifs and rhythmic twists gently poisoning its bucolic charm. A stately, stormy Minuetto precedes the brilliant, fizzing finale which has at its heart a moment of baffling brilliance. As a preface to the development, the orchestra declaims, in unison, ten of the 12 notes of the western

WHAT IS A SYMPHONY?

Julian Haylock explores the origins of orchestral music's principal genre

Although the term 'symphony' (or 'sinfonia') in its original sense of 'sounding together' had been employed by musicians for centuries, the orchestral genre as we know it today first appeared in the mid-18th century. With more sophisticated instruments at their disposal and the modern system of major and minor keys in place, composers began experimenting with ways of organising contrasting musical ideas, initially by gravitating towards specific key centres. Emerging from the opera overture or *sinfonia* – typically in three continuous sections (fast-slow-fast) – a new kind of tonal drama was developed, unleashing an unprecedented range of expression within the same work. This was the symphony.

The speed at which the genre caught on was phenomenal – within half a century the symphony had established itself as a

The symphony emerged from the opera overture

musical flagship in the hands of two great masters of the Classical style: Haydn and Mozart. By now it had settled into a four-movement pattern, opening with a sonata-form first movement in which a number of contrasted themes were announced (exposition), meditated upon (development) and then revisited in the light of what had gone before (recapitulation). Next came a slower, more reflective movement, then some dance music (typically a minuet, or later a *scherzo*) and a lively finale to round things off. Remarkably, this basic template – with certain honourable exceptions – has remained intact to the present day.

Part of the reason for the symphony's resilience is its ability to reinvent itself, often driving purist commentators to the point of apoplexy. Yet, from the expansive sonic delirium of Mahler Eight to the microcosmic compression of Webern's Op. 21, one thing has proved immutable: a profound sense of belonging that makes even the most divergent of ideas feel inseparable.




12 Brahms

SYMPHONY NO. 3 (1883)

Written during a happy summer near the Rhine, Brahms's concise *Third* was inspired by the motto 'free but happy' 'Frei aber einsam' (free but lonely) was the motto of Brahms's friend, the German virtuoso violinist Joseph Joachim. Here, in symphonic form, is Brahms's answer: the notes F-A/A flat -F - 'frei aber froh' (free but happy) – sing out at the start and subtly


underpin what follows. And the 50-year-old Brahms was free, by which he meant unmarried – though when he wrote his glorious *Third Symphony* in the summer of 1883 he was in love with his 'Rhine-maiden' the contralto Hermine Spies. He even decamped to rooms overlooking the Rhine to be near her home town of Wiesbaden. Was he also happy? If the music is any guide, the story was far more complex. From contentment to passion, emotion wells up and subsides in music of yearning, bittersweet beauty and each movement ends quietly – rare for symphonies of this time. In abstract terms, it's a masterclass in cohesion, concision, rhythmic and metrical complexity. It also pays homage to Robert Schumann, echoing the *Rhenish Symphony* in the violins' first melody, and when Brahms sent the score to Clara Schumann, she said it was a 'wonderful work.' *Rebecca Franks*

 Gewandhaus Orchestra/Riccardo Chailly
Decca 478 7471

ROMANTIC CONNECTION:
Wiesbaden, home to the
object of Brahms's affections



scale. Atonal and entirely modern, it's a jolting Mozartian masterstroke. *Oliver Condy*

 Scottish Chamber Orchestra/
Sir Charles Mackerras Linn CKD308


13 Bruckner

SYMPHONY NO. 8 (1887/1890)

A synthesis of Bruckner's symphonic genius – majestic, sensuous and conflicted...

The Austrian's cathedral-sized Eighth is the apogee of his symphonic achievements. Although Wagnerian in character and scope, chorale-like themes and harmonies flow through all four movements as Bruckner brings his skill as an organist to bear on this grandest of masterpieces. *Symphony No. 8* starts with a hushed string tremolo – a

homage to the first few bars of Beethoven's Ninth – that allows the music to emerge from the deep; the troubled opening minutes (Bruckner, suggested conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, battling with his demons) unfold towards what composer Robert Simpson called a 'blazing calm'. An unsettled, searching *scherzo* precedes Bruckner's most divine slow movement, a half-hour supplication of erotic beauty and power. Even here, as major key tussles with minor, things are not as they seem. Peace is hard to grasp. But a resolution awaits with the gleaming *Finale*, 'the most significant movement of my life,' as the composer said, with the themes of previous movements uniting in contented solidarity. *Oliver Condy*

 Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra/
Riccardo Chailly Decca 466 6532


11 Beethoven

SYMPHONY NO. 5 (1808)

The Fifth blazes from turbulence to triumph, its structure unfolding from a single motif

After completing his groundbreaking *Eroica*, Beethoven began not what is now known as his Fourth Symphony, but his Fifth. In many ways it complements its epic predecessor, the succinct first movement, its feisty, sturdy structure hammered out almost entirely from a slight musical idea, a striking contrast to the expansive *Third's*. The apparently titanic force with which that opening *Allegro con brio* takes form echoes Beethoven's struggle in creating this movement: he laid it aside several times to complete other works, including what became his Fourth

Symphony. Beethoven gives the entire work a remarkable cohesion by referring to that opening rhythmic motif at key moments, for instance by the horns in the penultimate *Scherzo* movement, recalling it in the finale. In another inspired touch, Beethoven uses the rhythmic motif as a subdued timpani pulse which links the *Scherzo* to the glorious blaze of the finale's opening. *Daniel Jaffé*

 Vienna Philharmonic/
Carlos Kleiber DG 447 4002


9 Tchaikovsky

SYMPHONY NO. 6 (1893)

A wretched struggle between life and death that ultimately ends in abject despair

Tchaikovsky was self-critical when it came to assessing his work, but in the case of the *Pathétique* Symphony, his judgment proved flawless. Soon after its completion, he wrote, 'I believe it to be the best and especially the most sincere of all my works' — almost above everything else he had written, the distinctive qualities of the thematic material were matched by an infallible control of structure.

Of course, originality, ingenuity and structural control are not in themselves signifiers of greatness. What really marks this work out is the brilliant way in which Tchaikovsky manipulates the emotional argument and brings a new, frightening dimension to symphonic thinking, the unifying factor a sequence of descending scales that mirrors the Symphony's long-term narrative of a descent into the abyss. But Tchaikovsky conceals this unity through his ability to effect the most dramatic contrasts in mood. Such tensions are already exposed in the first movement which juxtaposes tautly argued symphonic material with one of the most ardent of all his melodies. Even more disturbing is the disparity between the final mock-triumphant bars of the third movement March and the despairing slow Finale. *Erik Levi*

 Leningrad Philharmonic/
Evgeny Mravinsky DG 477 5911

8 Brahms

SYMPHONY NO. 1 (1876)

With his First Symphony, Brahms proves himself a worthy successor to Beethoven

'You don't know what it means to the likes of us when we hear his footsteps behind us.' Brahms's remark was about the near-impossible standard that Beethoven had set. As the 19th century unfolded, Schumann and Mendelssohn's symphonies, while respected, weren't rated in the same league; Berlioz's

10 Mahler

SYMPHONY NO. 3 (1896)

All of nature and human existence in Mahler's most ambitious symphony

When Mahler met Sibelius in 1907, he told him that 'a symphony must be like the world, it must embrace everything'. In none of his nine completed symphonies did Mahler come closer to filling that prescription than in the Third, premiered five years previously.


Nowadays we'd say the Third has an ecological agenda. The opening movement — all 35 minutes of it — depicts the natural world awakening, its primeval heavings eventually engendering life from 'soulless, rigid matter'. Primary sensual phenomena infuse the music, with its 'atmosphere of brooding summer midday heat' where 'all life is suspended, and the sun-drenched air trembles and vibrates'.

In movements two and three flowers sway elegantly in the meadows, and birds and beasts disport themselves in the forest. The arrival of humankind in the 'very slow, mysterious' fourth movement brings introspection, resolved in the pantheistic love song to all creation in the sublime, lingering finale.

If Mahler were rewriting the Third Symphony today, more ugliness

would be necessary. A century on, the progressive despoliation of the planet is sharply evident, and the relatively benign relationship in the Third between human beings and their environment has drastically deteriorated.

This would have hurt Mahler deeply. He loved the natural world, and all the creatures in it: the Third Symphony encapsulates that profound attachment, in music of life-enhancing physicality and wresting melodic beauty. *Terry Blain*

 Bamberg Symphony Orchestra/
Jonathan Nott Tudor TUDOR7170

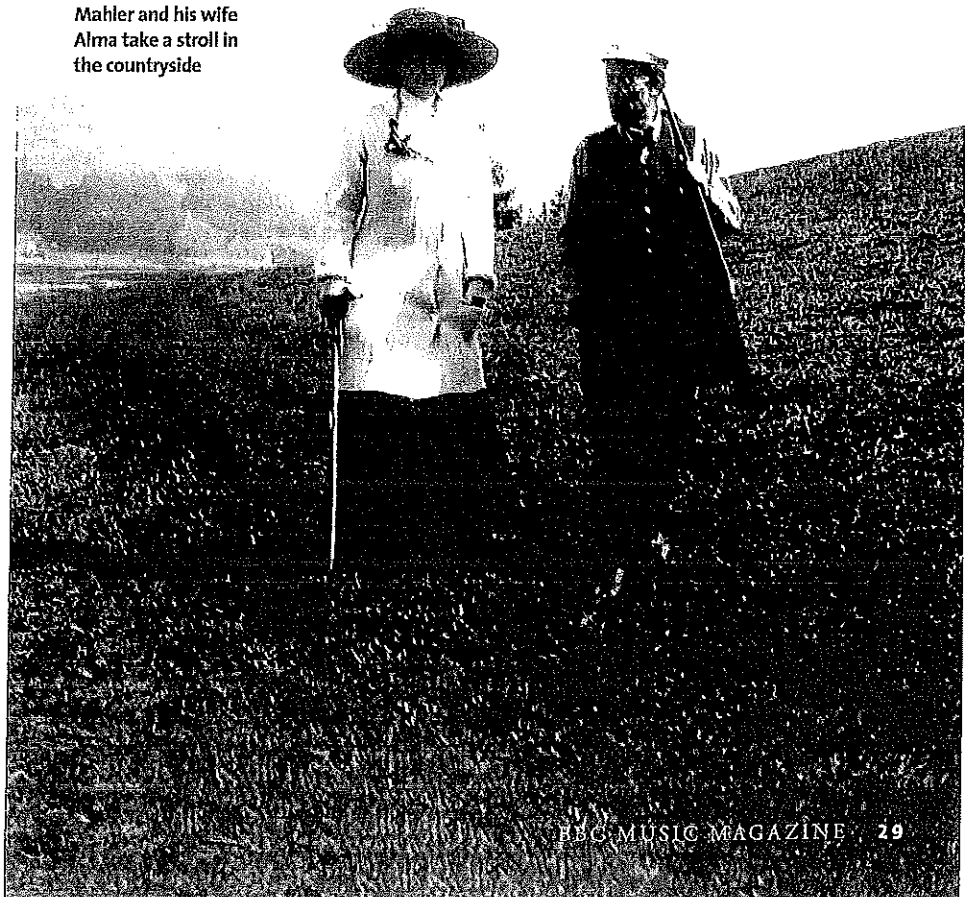
According to... Robert Spano



'Beethoven said that music is highest philosophy. No composer seems to have incorporated that cue more deeply than Mahler. In his Third Symphony, it is evinced

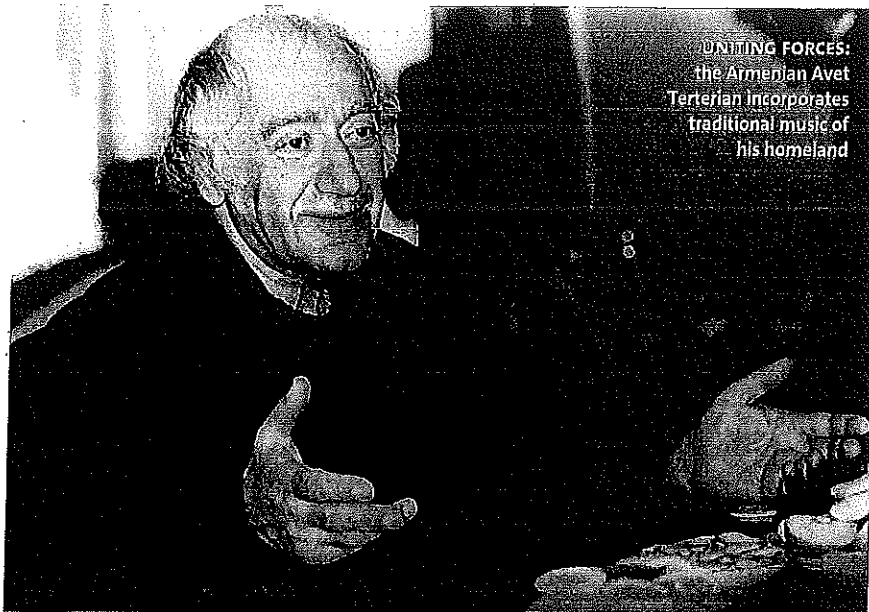
not only by the quotation of Nietzsche, but by a plan of movements that reveals a metaphysical map of a great chain of Being. That alone would not make it a great symphony, but those ideas are expressed through some of the most sublime music ever penned, and that does make it great. As Mahler ascends through these metaphysical spheres, we too are elevated by hearing it. This transcendent journey culminates in an incomparable expression of love, making this symphony one of the most profound and affecting of the genre.'

CALL OF THE WILD:
Mahler and his wife
Alma take a stroll in
the countryside



10 UNUSUAL SYMPHONIC CHOICES

Here are a few of the more unexpected works our conductors voted for



UNITING FORCES:
The Armenian Avet Terterian incorporates traditional music of his homeland

Borys Lyatoshynsky *Symphony No. 3 (1951)*

For conductor Kirill Karabits, this symphony is 'the sound of Ukraine and Kiev'. Dedicated to the '25th anniversary of the October revolution', the four-movement symphony is a stirring, epic work and is the most often performed of the Ukrainian's five symphonies.

Per Nørgård *Symphony No. 8 (2012)*

Inspired by the form of the Classical symphony, with two fast outer movements and a slow middle movement, the Eighth is one of the Danish composer's most playful symphonies. Instrumental textures glitter and shift throughout; while the *Adagio molto* is, in Nørgård's words, 'sensually melodic'.

Allan Pettersson *Symphony No. 7 (1967)*

Brooding uncertainty and furious outbursts are tempered with serenity and hope in Pettersson's erratic Seventh. At its premiere in 1968 the work by the ailing Swedish composer earned no fewer than four standing ovations and brought most of the audience to tears.

Luciano Berio *Sinfonia (1969)*

In this seminal avant-garde work, the Italian composer explores the very essence of the word 'symphony' – the idea of 'sounding together'. It's a riot of quotations, allusions and references to writers and composers. The third movement is written over the top of the *scherzo* of Mahler's Second Symphony.

Avet Terterian *Symphony No. 3 (1975)*

A battery of percussion opens this remarkable three-movement symphony by the Armenian composer Avet Terterian. In his stark writing, he taps into a wild primeval energy, making use of traditional Armenian double-reed instruments, the *duduk* and *zurna*.

Charles Ives *Symphony No. 4 (1920s)*

Often regarded as the first American symphonic masterpiece, Ives's Fourth, written between 1910 and the mid-1920s, features cacophonous mosaics of overlaid sounds – brass band, choir, full orchestra and more. Unsurprisingly, it requires two conductors.

Havergal Brian *Symphony No. 1 (Gothic) (1927)*

Two orchestras, ten choirs, four soloists, a scarecrow, and a thunder machine are required for Brian's epic *Gothic* Symphony. This mammoth work is often surprisingly delicate, eloquent solos offer a welcome contrast to the gargantuan full ensemble.

Jan van Gilse *Symphony No. 3 (1907)*

Dutchman Van Gilse's Third is a sweeping hour-long Romantic epic that teeters on the edge of tonality before embracing Mahlerian complexity gilded with Hollywood sheen; a soprano pops up twice to sing words from the *Song of Songs*, sandwiching a rollicking Korngold-esque fourth movement.

Wilhelm Stenhammar *Symphony No. 1 (1903)*


Lying somewhere between Schumann, early Wagner and Bruckner, the Swedish composer's First Symphony has a steadfast quality to it – it's a solid, serious, often very beautiful work with an Elgarian skipping *Scherzo* to lighten the mood.

Lepo Sumera *Symphony No. 2 (1984)*

Estonian composer (and sometime Minister for Culture) Lepo Sumera wrote six symphonies before his early and unexpected death in June 2000. In this aleatoric work, themes are passed around the orchestra, gradually growing into a veritable cacophony.

story-telling *Symphonie fantastique* had pointed the medium in a different direction; and the radical Liszt and Wagner considered the abstract, Classical-style symphony to be dead. When Brahms came to compose his own First Symphony, pressure was extreme.


The work's creation took him 20 years of on-off struggle, but the achievement was stellar. The first movement's slow introduction – a tragic vision of imposing power – leads into a tumultuous minor-key *Allegro*, searching for a true main theme which it never quite finds. Then comes a richly tuneful second movement, followed by a genial *Intermezzo* and finally the great finale, whose C major horn-call in the slow introduction is one of music's great moments. The finale's main *Allegro non troppo* theme fleetingly resembles a similar moment in Beethoven's Ninth. But the music's feeling of freewheeling triumph is very much Brahms's own. *Malcolm Hayes*

 Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique/Gardiner SDG SDG702

7 Berlioz SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE (1830)

The French composer takes the symphony into a new realm of reverie and imagination

'M. Berlioz, if he carries on like this, will one day be worthy to take his place beside Beethoven.' So ended one review after the Symphony's first performance in 1830. The shock of hearing Beethoven's Fifth a couple of years earlier had been, according to Berlioz, almost as great as that of encountering Shakespeare, but in some areas he already goes beyond Beethoven. Where the Ninth Symphony introduces words as a climactic feature, in the *Symphonie fantastique* the story is embedded from the start; and where the nine symphonies in general may be said to afford what Evelyn Waugh called 'the sober and elevating happiness which we derive from the great masters', Berlioz assails us with what the above reviewer called 'cries, moans, outbursts of laughter and explosions of rage'. The storm in the *Pastoral* Symphony certainly goes some way beyond Haydn, but no one before 1830 had come close to writing the note clusters for four timpani that produce such an extraordinary sound at the end of the 'Scene in the Fields' – not to mention the bizarre alternations of D flat major and G minor towards the end of the 'March to the Scaffold'. Most impressive is the blending of reverie with wildness, of seriousness with farce, of private passions with the sense that here we are presented with a new world. *Roger Nichols*

 Mahler Chamber Orchestra/
Marc Minkowski DG 474 2092


6 Brahms

SYMPHONY NO. 4 (1885)

A visionary masterpiece combining the spirit of JS Bach with Beethovenian energy
Brahms's Fourth baffled even his friends: sombre, austere with a Baroque passacaglia – it appeared willfully unfashionable. There's something almost intimidating about the Fourth's formal perfection: its thematic integration, economy, richness of variation, fusion of polyphony with sonata form.

The Symphony sails in on a sea of arpeggios, resonating in E minor, the dark growl of the double-bass's lowest string. Horns announce the *Andante's* threnody: here Brahms as visionary historian summons the archaic Phrygian mode, with its eerie flattened second. There's nothing in all music quite like the moment it melts into E major, light spilling in from all sides on tender strings. Then comes the gorgeous cello theme, which returns in sumptuous eight-part texture. An exuberant *scherzo* pounces over the barlines, hurling down vast slabs of vertical dissonance.

In the passacaglia, formal rigour turbo-charges Romantic expression, each variation building inexorably until Variation 29, when chains of descending thirds break the spell, releasing a whirlwind of energy. *Helen Wallace*

 London Philharmonic Orchestra/
Marin Alsop Naxos 8.570233

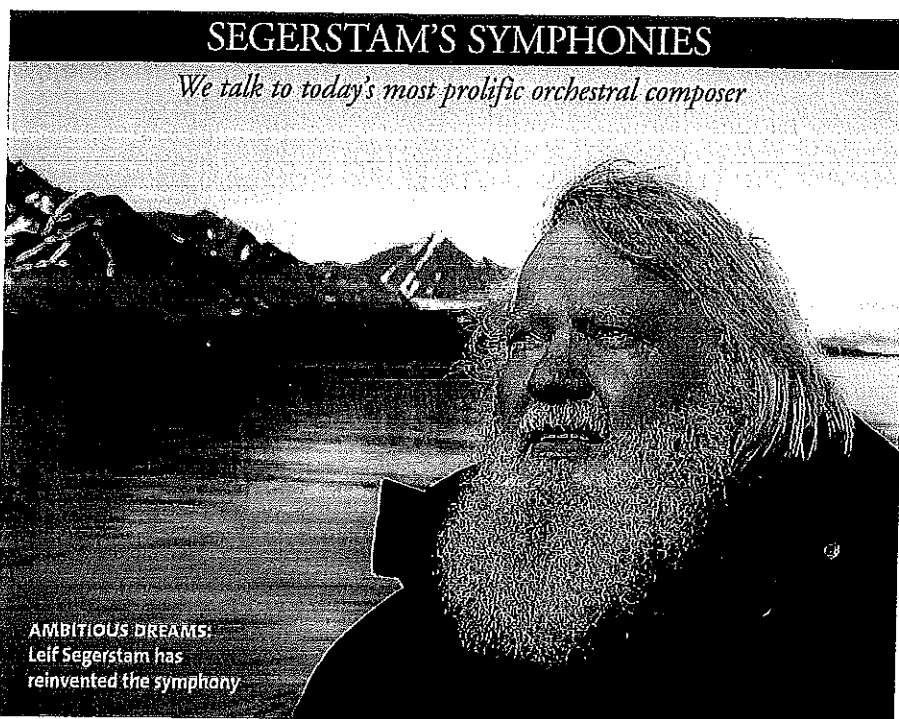
5 Mahler

SYMPHONY NO. 2 (1894 rev. 1903)

Symphonic form disturbed, distorted – and finally renewed and redeemed

From the 'titanic struggles of a mighty being still caught in the toils of this world' which the composer said fired the first movement, to redemption and resurrection in the choral finale, Mahler couldn't resist describing his C minor Symphony in programmatic terms. The second and third movements, he said, were episodes in a hero's life: a gentle Austrian Ländler as a 'shaft of sunlight', followed by a dark *Scherzo* with a specific pictorial reference – that of the swaying of dancers glimpsed, without sound, through a window. This was a world distorted, 'reflected in a concave mirror'.

The entry of the human voice in 'Urilicht', was Mahler's attempt 'to make myself intelligible at this point'. Here, clarified by the words, is the struggle of a mortal to grasp immortality. So, with Mahler's 'programme', we experience a musical diorama of human experience, focused in the greatest human questions: why do we exist? Is there an afterlife? But listen without awareness of a 'programme',




WITH 306 SYMPHONIES to his name, Leif Segerstam is the world's most prolific symphonist. The Finnish conductor and composer wrote his First in 1977; his latest was penned between 8-10 July this year while on holiday in Suonenjoki, which, it turns out, is the strawberry capital of Finland. 'It's called "Strawberrylic surfings during carnival time in Suonenjoki...: summery thoughts and visions zooming penetratively through the global origos in the rich Finnish Nature..."'

he helpfully explains. 'There's a special inspiration in the time of the strawberry carnival. It was also about people meeting, drinking, kissing and... you know what.'

The colourful, off-the-wall title is one of the hallmarks of a Segerstam symphony, with previous works including *sorrowmosquitocaterpillarformations... towards... because...* (No. 11) and *When a cat visited* (No. 289). He has a clear vision of what constitutes a symphony – 'not Beethoven or

and it becomes clear that what makes this Symphony great is its extraordinary creative tension, produced by the composer's exploration beyond the intellect, through the transcendent abstraction of daring orchestral technique and brilliantly reinvented form and structure. The imaginings of an often disordered mind become ordered, by faith in creation itself, into a new coherence, as musical resolution and spiritual redemption become one. *Hilary Finch*

 Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra/
Mariss Jansons RCO Live RCO 10102

Shostakovich in four movements, but the old Greek meaning of symphony as "sounding together" – and has come up with his own notation and philosophy. His symphonies are single movements for conductorless orchestra in 'free-pulsative' style – in which performers stick to the notes he's written, but are free to make choices about how loud, how soft and so on – and 'Rosenkranz' form. 'The music is in six portions like a prayer bracelet with six pearls,' Segerstam says. Each portion has to

be at least three minutes but not more than four, so each work is between 18-24 minutes long. But the best timing is 22 minutes, 'like Sibelius's last symphony, the Seventh'. For Segerstam, it's important that every performance is unique and spontaneous. 'The usage of my notation is a little bit pedagogic in how to handle musical material but it is also philosophical, as it's how to handle life. It's a life score, it's life and death. Music is, like Nielsen said, inextinguishable.'


4 Mahler

SYMPHONY NO. 9 (1909)

An epic work from the dying embers of the Austro-German Romantic tradition

Mahler Symphony No. 9 is a glorious apotheosis and a brave new dawn. Scored for vast orchestral forces – huge woodwind and brass, with a percussion section that includes timpani, bass drum, side drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, glockenspiel and three

deep bells – the most striking thing about its soundworld is Mahler's exquisite handling of sonorities. Despite its expansive timescale of around 85 minutes, much of this music feels as though it is sustained under superheated compression. There are times when Mahler takes us to the brink of atonality as the four movements progress unconventionally from D major to C major to A minor to D flat major for the *Adagio* finale. Yet it all feels profoundly intuitive, natural and logical. Mahler's symphonic instincts are underpinned by the same structural procedures used by Mozart and Haydn, but he goes beyond sonata form and allows the music to self-generate organically. We are floating free of musical gravity. Saving his best till last, the finale hovers on an emotional knife-edge between a serene acceptance and the bitter resignation of a man, still only 50, suffering from a congenital heart condition, and destined to bow out after a completed Ninth. *Julian Haylock*

 Berlin Philharmonic/Herbert von Karajan DG 474 5372

2 Beethoven

SYMPHONY NO. 9 (1824)


The symphonic game-changer which has both terrified and inspired composers ever since

Wagner called it 'the keystone of a great epoch of art, beyond whose limits no man could hope to press'. And at the start of the final movement you can hear western music's bedrock shifting. The lower strings take on the shape of operatic recitative; it is as though every cello and bass has a great singer trapped inside, ready to burst out in a shower of splinters and transform the symphonic landscape for ever. 'This is as far as it goes without words,' Beethoven seems to say; and with that 'O Freunde', everything changes.

Yet what has gone before is groundbreaking too. Had audiences in 1824 heard anything more elemental than the Ninth's opening bars? And it was a stroke of genius to place the slow movement not second but third, enabling its climactic profundity – something Gustav Mahler learnt from.

So the first three movements clinch the Ninth's greatness – but then comes Schiller's utopian *Ode to Joy*, set to a once-heard-never-forgotten tune that everyone wants as an anthem. Thanks to that, the Ninth today still has a growing cultural significance.

It casts a long shadow – had it never been written we would surely have far more symphonies to talk about. But would you give up Beethoven Nine for a chance to hear them? Of course not. *Erica Jeal*

 Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment/
Charles Mackerras *Signum SIGCD254* ▶

GETTY, JULIAN HARGREAVES

3 Mozart

SYMPHONY NO. 41 (1788)

A triumph of structure, crowned with one of music's most dazzling fugal finales

Mozart's last symphony – though it was not his intention it should be so – was written in two weeks immediately after its two predecessors, in the summer of 1788. The 'Jupiter' is astonishing in every respect, perhaps the most obvious being that it is not built out of memorable or striking material, as the other two are, but out of tags which might crop up anywhere in his or his contemporaries' works – indeed the jaunty little tune which comes a hundred bars in was originally written for an aria in someone else's opera. The miracle of the work is its immense design, with a mixture of celebratory fanfares, cascading scales and yearning

figures. The slow movement, with strings muted throughout, is deeply expressive, and the minuet and trio the model of elegance and decorum. It's the last movement which shifts for the first time in a symphony the whole weight of the work towards its end. Famously, it consists of five distinct motifs which, in the coda, sail in together to bring the symphony to a climax which,

temporarily at least, makes you believe in the Universal Harmony. The main body of the movement has climaxes in which

Mozart's Jupiter is astonishing in every aspect

stunning descending passages alternate and then combine with tremendous upward thrusts; while the centre of the movement enters areas of dense conflict from which there seems no escape. There is no greater or more exhilarating feat than this, nor could there be. *Michael Tanner*

 Orchestra Mozart/
Claudio Abbado DG 477 7598

According to... Daniel Harding



'The *Jupiter* Symphony was written in a time of war – because the Habsburg coffers were empty and the theatres were closed, they needed music that could be played outdoors and rouse people. Of the Classical period symphonies, I think it's the ultimate demonstration of rhetorical gesture. He describes very clearly what was going on at the time, what people were living through, and juxtaposes it with a kind of supplication and praying. So the Symphony begins with war music, and then two bars later, a plea for peace. The second movement describes in graphic detail the suffering, the fear and the anguish, but it ends with an extraordinary, uplifting coda, based on the ultimate expression of the enlightenment of intellect in music, which is counterpoint. Mozart conjures up this incredibly complex counterpoint which is as inspiring as anything I can think of.'

The conductors' view

Paavo Järvi



'The *Eroica* is a landmark. It was a breakthrough in Beethoven's output, but it also created a new direction for the symphony as a personal, subjective point of view on world affairs. It can have a political, dramatic and literal meaning, and be something that expresses protest in a very powerful way. It's also a shocking composition. There is nothing else that starts like that – it is as if someone has walked up to you and slapped you in the face. To this day it's shocking, if done well. The *Eroica* inspired later composers to take it as a kind of starting point. It created a new direction for everything that came after it.'

Han-Na Chang



'Beethoven made a quantum leap with his Third Symphony. He finds his voice and we see who he is. The way he works out all the motifs, melodies and themes in such detail, while at the same time maintaining a completely organic development of the emotional message, seems to me unbeatable. And it's also a new era for the symphony: it becomes not just a structural thing, but a tool for addressing humanity. For the first time, Beethoven shows us that the symphony must say something to the listener. It's a means of bringing people together or moving their spirits. It really becomes an art for humanity.'

Jonathan Nott



'We all know the incredible intellectual audacity of this composition. It breaks all previous boundaries. This symphony is not about the glory of God; it's about humans – our struggles, challenges and victories. Even that opening noble theme with its rising triad and descent to the C sharp in the cello is extremely important. At that point we're presented with searching, insecurity and vulnerability. In the symphony we experience death, sadness, emptiness, hope and exuberance, intoxication and transfiguration. He defines the Romantic period as we move from the abstract to "I, the composer, feel". Later, composers became preoccupied with life's depression and bitterness, but I never get that in Beethoven. You come away having experienced the power and joy of being alive.'

DO YOU AGREE?

Let us know which symphonies you would have voted for by emailing music@classical-music.com, or casting your votes in our Twitter poll @MusicMagazine



Heroic Triumph

Beethoven's *Eroica* has been voted the greatest symphony ever written – and with good reason, says *Stephen Johnson*

1 Beethoven SYMPHONY NO. 3 (1803)

A trailblazing, mammoth masterpiece, glorifying the life of a great heroic figure

It had to be the *Eroica*. Of the other top Beethoven contenders, Five and Nine both have their impassioned dissenters, but almost from the start the Third Symphony seems to have awed and thrilled would-be critics into silence. From those first two electrifying orchestral chords to the final victorious timpani flourish it never puts a toe wrong. How different from the historical figure of Napoleon Bonaparte, to whom Beethoven originally intended to dedicate the Symphony.

Architecturally it's stunning. The spacious but beautifully proportioned first movement 'rides time like riding a river', to borrow a phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins. The whole thing is wrought from the brilliantly simple notion of a not-quite-finished tune (first heard on cellos) that continually strives for completion, and each time goes off in some fascinating new direction. Then, at the first movement's final climax, do the trumpets triumphantly clinch the matter, complete the tune? Or do they fail – is that why Beethoven has the first trumpet 'miss' the top note?

If so, what could be more natural than this hymn to flawed heroism to be followed by a funeral march, the grandest, most soul-scouring funeral march ever composed. There are moments here where the weight of feeling stretches the formal container almost to breaking point (the violins' 'broken' phrases in the coda can still make one hold one's breath), and yet, having taken us through this Dark Night of the Soul, Beethoven lets the double basses wind it all up with a kind of grim musical QED – the logic of fate prevails.

After this comes one of Beethoven's most exhilarating, rhythmically audacious *Scherzos* with, at its heart, a telling glance back at the past: three virtuoso horns remind us of the origin of the word 'Trio'. Then, after a momentarily dazzling *coup de théâtre* (formal 'introduction', or what?), the Finale resumes the heroic theme – but with a vital difference. Gradually Beethoven assembles his new big tune from the bottom (*pizzicato* strings) upwards. The texture fills out until at last the melody arrives, riding on the tide created by the previous variations. At its apotheosis, in the Finale's slower *poco andante* section, we realise this movement has achieved what the first movement failed to do: it has created a fully rounded-off heroic hymn, which now sings in triumph. Significantly,

... the grandest, most soul-scouring funeral march ever composed

this music stems from a ballet about Prometheus, the Titan who defined the gods to bring fire (or knowledge) to mankind – a more genuinely liberating example than the little

Corsican general who proclaimed himself Emperor then tragically overreached himself.

Music that stirs, challenges and delights, a sense of vibrant musical form which ensures coherence yet remains elastic enough to admit the most acute human drama – surely that's enough? But the *Eroica* also outlines what Jung what call an 'archetypal' pattern. Many of the world's great myths tell of a hero/heroine who strives, fails, dies and then miraculously returns. There is, Jung would argue, a universal human truth contained in that story. Because Beethoven's *Eroica* tells that story in music, not words, it presents that truth in its purest, most universal form. But you don't have to know any of that to be thrilled by what Beethoven forged from it: by democratic consent, the greatest symphony ever composed.

Chamber Orchestra of Europe/Nikolaus Harnoncourt Warner 2564637792