

Mahler's symphonies – reduced orchestration

Klaus Simon

Arranger Klaus Simon has produced reduced versions of Gustav Mahler's Symphonies No. 1 and 4 – and is already working on Symphony No. 9. Here he describes his working criteria:

Gustav Mahler's symphonies arranged for chamber orchestra or chamber ensemble: a sacrilege or simply impossible? Surely it is Mahler's unique instrumentation and powerful sound that make his symphonies what they are.

Indeed – but any good music will also work in a different form. Arnold Schönberg was aware of this when he founded the Society for Private Musical Performances in Vienna in 1918. With its high, idealistic goals, the society aimed to provide an insight into contemporary works, in particular, and to stage exemplary performances of them in a private setting. During the three years of the society's existence, a number of contemporary orchestral works were arranged for chamber ensemble and performed by Schönberg himself, by Alban Berg, Anton Webern, Erwin Stein, Hanns Eisler and others.

Schönberg's idea was to create a streamlined sound to examine the essence of these works, which were originally composed for large orchestra. Over time, something akin to a standard orchestration emerged: flute, clarinet, sometimes oboe, harmonium, piano, string quartet and double bass.

I was aware of this tradition when I began working on my arrangement of Mahler's Symphony No. 4 in 2007 – his most chamber music-like contribution to the genre.

Erwin Stein's version remained very close to the aforementioned standard orchestration. I personally felt the lack of the horn and the bassoon, in particular, and wanted more colour and a greater richness. In my work, I tried to focus on the original score. Neither keyboard instrument – the harmonium nor the piano – was actually part of Mahler's original sound, but they are useful for supporting structures, supplementing missing harmonies and adding missing registers.

Mahler's original Symphony No. 1 has a larger orchestral structure and greater symphonic dimensions than his Symphony No. 4. Hence, my arrangement is slightly more lavish than that of No. 4 – with an extra clarinet (also bass clarinet), a second horn and a trumpet in B flat.

In summer 2010, I received a commission to arrange Mahler's Symphony No. 9. I can reveal that the Ninth will have the same orchestration as "my" No. 1 because the original orchestration is similarly large. I am still working on the Ninth, which is set to première in the Chamber Music Hall of the Philharmonie in Berlin on 24 November 2011.



GUSTAV MAHLER (ARRANGED BY KLAUS SIMON)

Symphony No. 1 in 4 movements

for chamber orchestra: 1 1 2 1 - 2 1 0 0 – perc, harm, pno, str

Symphony No. 4 in 4 movements

G major

for soprano and chamber orchestra: 1 1 1 1 - 1 0 0 0 – perc (2), harm, pno, str (1 1 1 1 1 or in groups max. 6 6 5 4 2)