

Gustav Mahler's Fourth Symphony occupies a special place both in the composer's output and in Bruno Walter's long career. Completed in 1900, it stands apart from the vast philosophical landscapes of the Second and Third Symphonies as a work of formal concentration, transparency and deceptive simplicity. Beneath its surface grace lies one of Mahler's most subtle and elusive creations. Walter, who knew Mahler personally and worked closely with him in Vienna, remained one of the composer's most persuasive interpreters, and few conductors brought greater authority to this music.

This live performance was given at Carnegie Hall on the afternoon of Sunday 4 January 1953, with the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York, at a time when Walter's late Mahler interpretations had reached full maturity. The programme opened with Mozart's Symphony No. 35 in D major, the "Haffner", before Mahler's Fourth occupied the second half, with the Austrian soprano Irmgard Seefried as soloist in the finale.

Mahler came to regard the Fourth Symphony as one of his most finished creations. After the scale and complexity of the Third Symphony, he turned toward a world of greater concentration and clarity. As he told Natalie Bauer-Lechner, he was now satisfied to "pour my music into the customary molds somehow", seeking containment rather than expansion. Yet this is no retreat. The Fourth distils Mahler's imagination into a form lighter and more translucent, but no less profound.

Bruno Walter described the work beautifully in his book on Mahler: "In the fairy tale of the Fourth Symphony everything is floating and unburdened." That sense of weightless motion is heard immediately in the sleigh bells and luminous opening movement, whose childlike freshness conceals remarkable structural subtlety. Walter avoids sentimentality or exaggeration; instead, the music unfolds with an inevitability that makes its simplicity feel all the more searching.

The second movement introduces "Freund Hein", Death as a fiddler, represented by the solo violin tuned a tone higher than usual. Mahler described the music as a sudden shadow crossing the eternal blue of heaven: "It is only a sudden grisly feeling... the heavens... shine on, eternally blue." Walter understands precisely this balance between innocence and unease. The grotesquerie is present, but never overstated; it passes like a brief chill across sunlight.

The slow movement remains one of Mahler's most sublime inspirations, a set of variations of extraordinary serenity and inward radiance. Walter's control of long line and orchestral breathing is especially remarkable here. The movement grows naturally toward its great climax without manipulation, its emotional force emerging through patience rather than rhetoric.

In the finale, the soprano enters with *Das himmlische Leben*, the child's vision of heavenly life drawn from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Here Irmgard Seefried proves an ideal partner. Her voice combines purity, warmth and intelligence, never treating the movement as decorative innocence but as something intimate and quietly knowing. Seefried had already sung the work with Walter at the 1951 Edinburgh Festival, and their partnership shows complete naturalness.

Reviewing an earlier performance from the same week, Olin Downes in *The New York Times* wrote that "Had Mahler been present... he would have rendered devout thanks." Of Seefried he added that she was "a musician of the first class and an interpreter of the first class."

Preserved from a remarkably fine radio broadcast source, this performance survives in sound of unusual warmth and presence for its period. Orchestral textures retain striking clarity, from the shimmer of the opening sleigh bells to the delicate transparency of the slow movement, while Seefried's voice is caught with exceptional naturalness. Pristine's Ambient Stereo XR remastering brings both space and immediacy, allowing Walter's luminous balances and the orchestra's tonal richness to emerge with rare vividness.

This 1953 performance captures Walter in one of the works most closely bound to his musical identity: humane, transparent, and free of self-display. Mahler's Fourth can easily be made either too cosy or too portentous. Walter finds instead its perfect equilibrium, where joy and mystery, innocence and mortality remain suspended together.

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BRUNO WALTER

MAHLER Symphony No. 4

PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA OF NEW YORK

Irmgard Seefried

CARNEGIE HALL, NEW YORK

4 JANUARY 1953



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MAHLER SYMPHONY No. 4
WALTER, PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF NEW YORK, SEEFRIED

walter

conducts mahler

1. RADIO Introduction (0:33)

MAHLER Symphony No. 4 in G major

2. 1st mvt. - Bedächtig (16:27)
3. 2nd mvt. - In gemächlicher Bewegung; Ohne Hast (8:51)
4. 3rd mvt. - Ruhevoll (19:10)
5. 4th mvt. - Sehr behaglich (8:13)

Irmgard Seefried, soprano
Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York
conducted by Bruno Walter

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photograph of Bruno Walter

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New York City

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