In 1883 Gustav Mahler was named second conductor and choirmaster of the opera in Kassel, and during his first season there he and one of the sopranos in the company, Johanna Richter, fell in love. By the following autumn the affair had come to a painful end, and the 24-year-old Mahler transformed his experience into music: in December 1884-January 1885 he composed a set of songs about an unhappy young man setting out to find himself in the aftermath of a shattered affair. That cycle initially consisted of six songs, and to a friend Mahler described their subject: “The songs are a sequence in which a wayfaring craftsman, who has had a great sorrow, goes out into the world and wanders aimlessly.” Mahler titled the cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen: Songs of a Wayfarer*. The completed version, which consists of only four songs, was at first composed for voice and piano and was performed in this version – Mahler apparently did not make the orchestral version until about 1892-3. Each of these songs concludes in a different key from its opening, and such progressive tonality serves to underline the notion of progress by the wayfarer across each of these songs.

The *Wayfarer* songs are more focused than Mahler’s early description might make them seem – rather than wandering “aimlessly,” the young man eventually achieves some measure of peace in these songs, and so the progress of the cycle is from pain to acceptance. Mahler himself wrote the texts for the four songs, though he adapted the first from a poem in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn: in Wenn mein Schatz* the young man imagines his beloved’s wedding day and his own grief on that occasion. Mahler builds the two parts of the song on the same musical phrase, which is presented at two quite different speeds. In the course of the song the young man moves out – the beginning of his wayfaring – and encounters the happy sound of trilling birds, yet he cannot partake of that sunshine and the song collapses in gloom. The second song, *Ging Heut’ Morgens*, extends the pattern of the first: it begins happily with the young man strolling through shining morning fields and hearing the invitation of the birds to partake of their cheer, but gloom penetrates this sunny world, and the end of the song finds him marooned outside hope. The main theme of this song is also the principal subject of the first movement of Mahler’s First Symphony, begun at exactly this same time and itself inspired by the same failed love affair.

The third song, *Ich hab’ ein glühend Messer*, is a more conventional song of lost love. It explodes to life – Mahler marks the beginning *Stormy, wild* – and the text seems a *Sturm und Drang* stereotype: the lover’s pain is a burning dagger in his heart, and the only possible relief will come with death. Mahler’s exciting setting does much to rescue this song from the conventionality of its text. The concluding *Die zwei blauen Augen*, which incorporates two themes from the third movement of the *First Symphony*, brings a measure of tentative solace. Once again the young man, haunted by the blue eyes of his love, is on the
lonely road, but he finds peace in the shade of a linden tree, a traditional symbol of domestic happiness in German folklore. The ending, which trails off into ambiguous silence musically, brings no triumph. Covered with the snowy blossoms of the linden tree, the wayfarer at last finds a measure of peace and acceptance.

**Lieder aus Des Knaben Wunderhorn**

**Premiere**
Circa 1899

**Performance Time**
38 minutes (20 minutes before intermission; 18 minutes after intermission)

In 1805-8 the German poets (and brothers-in-law) Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim published a three-volume collection of German folk-poetry that they called *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*: “The Youth’s Magic Horn.” Mahler discovered these poems about 1886, when he was in his mid-twenties, and their tales of love, mystery, horror, magic, humor, and many other topics took hold of his imagination. In the years 1888-91 Mahler composed nine songs on texts from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and published them in 1892 as Books II and III of his *Lieder und Gesänge aus der Jugendzeit*. But his passion for these poems remained strong, and between 1892 and 1895, while he was at work on his Second Symphony, Mahler set twelve more of them. Like the first *Wunderhorn* songs, these were for voice and piano, but Mahler orchestrated these twelve and published them in 1899 under the title *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. On this recital Mr. Gerhaher offers ten songs on *Wunderhorn* texts drawn from all three of these collections.

*Wer hat dies Liedlein erdacht?* (“Who Made Up this Little Song?”) swirls giddily along its quick 3/8 pulse and manages to be both slightly bizarre and incredibly beautiful at the same time. The text seems at first to be full of romantic longing, then veers suddenly into the question of authorship among three geese. Mahler marks the song *Mit heiteren Behagen* (“With a pleasing cheerfulness”), and it soars and dances along its happy way.

Many listeners will discover that they already know *Ablösung im Sommer* (“The New Order in Summer”) because Mahler used this music as the opening section of the third movement of his Third Symphony. In this droll little song, a cuckoo has flown into a tree and been killed, and the content nightingale waits her turn to take over duties as the mistress of song in the forest.

*Ich ging mit Lust* (“I Go with Joy through a Green Wood”) is a nicely ironic song about a nightingale sent to summon a lover, but then the young woman sleeps through the scheduled tryst as the bird sings in the moonlit night. Mahler gives this cautionary tale a gentle setting, complete with the song of the nightingale in the piano – his marking is *Träumerisch, durchaus zart*: “Dreamily, tender throughout.” Those interested in Mahler should know that in 1905 he made a piano roll of the accompaniment to this song, so it is possible to hear Mahler perform his own interpretation of *Ich ging mit Lust*. 
The light mood continues with *Um schlimme Kinder artig zu machen* (“To Teach Naughty Children to Be Good”), a comic song about parenting; Mahler apparently wrote it during the summer of 1887 for the children of Hauptmann and Marion von Weber. This is a fun song — and a noisy one, complete with the cries of a cuckoo.

*Rheinlegendchen* (“Little Rhine Legend”) tells a tale that is part love-song, part folk-song, part humor, and part magic. It swings along comfortably and finally comes to a sparkling (and charming) close.

*Der Schildwache Nachtlied* (“The Sentry’s Nightsong”) is both a military song and a dialogue song: the sentry on watch at night converses with a mysterious girl, who may or may not be real and who questions what he is doing. His music is martial, full of the sound of military fanfares and swagger. Hers is soft and seductive.

*Lied des Verfolgten im Turm* (“Song of the Prisoner in the Tower”) seems at first to be a dialogue song, but the two voices in this song remain separate rather than conversing. The song of the prisoner is powerful and defiant — his thoughts will remain free even if he is confined. The girl outside the tower sings of freedom and escape to nature, but finally both conclude that that will never be, and the song ends in defiance.

*Das irdische Leben* (“Life on Earth”) is another dialogue song, but a grim one. It is built on the conversation between a mother and her starving child, who finally have enough to eat when the child is laid out in a casket at the funeral. Mahler’s marking is *Unheimliche bewegt*: “With sinister (or uncanny) motion.”

This collection of *Wunderhorn* settings concludes with two military songs. *Zu Strassburg auf der Schanz* (“On the Ramparts of Strassburg”) has been called the first of Mahler’s great military songs — it is a slow march that tells of a recruit who abandoned his post and now faces execution; the song echoes the sound of drums and fanfares.

*Wo die schönen Trompeten blasen* (“Where the Shining Trumpets Sound”) is one of the oldest types of song — a lovers’ farewell — but here it has a sharper edge: the young man is a soldier about to go off to war, and a distant fanfare functions as a grim refrain here, punctuating the lovers’ conversation. The song is written for one voice, but it offers parts for both the man and woman and is sometimes sung as a duet. The shining trumpets may ring out distantly, but Mahler maneuvers us very carefully to the dark final line.
PROGRAM NOTES

Kindertotenlieder

Premiere
January 29, 1905, Vienna

Performance Time
23 minutes

Gustav Mahler spent the summer of 1901 at his newly-built retreat at Maiernigg on the Wörthersee in southern Austria. Music seemed to pour out of him that summer: he began his Fifth Symphony and also composed songs for voice and orchestra, setting poems of Friedrich Rückert. Five of these songs were gathered as the Rückert-Lieder, but Mahler also set three poems from Rückert’s Kindertotenlieder before laying that project aside. He returned to it three years later during the summer of 1904, also spent at Maiernigg – that summer he finished his Sixth Symphony and made two more Kindertotenlieder settings to complete that cycle. Mahler conducted the first performance of the Kindertotenlieder, with Friedrich Weidemann as baritone soloist, in Vienna on January 29, 1905.

Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) was a German poet and professor of Oriental languages who made a number of translations from Chinese, Persian, and Arabic. Rückert lost two children to scarlet fever, and he tried to come to terms with that loss by writing a collection of 448 poems that he titled Kindertotenlieder (“Songs on the Death of Children”); this collection was published posthumously in 1872. The poems clearly had autobiographical significance for the poet, and many have suggested that they did for Mahler as well: the 41-year-old bachelor composer may have been drawn to these poems in response to the most traumatic event of his childhood, the death of his brother Ernst at 13 (Gustav had been 14 at the time).

When Mahler returned to Maiernigg in the summer of 1904 to complete the cycle, much had changed in his own life. Since composing the first three Kindertotenlieder songs, he had married and now had two daughters: Maria, born in November 1902, and Anna, born in June 1904 and so just an infant that summer. Mahler’s wife was horrified that he would write songs on such a subject at this moment in his life. Many years later she wrote: “I could understand setting such frightful words to music if one had no children, or had lost those one had … What I could not understand was bewailing the deaths of children who were in the best of health and spirits, hardly an hour after having kissed and fondled them. I exclaimed at the time – ‘for heaven’s sake, don’t tempt providence!’” That warning proved prophetic – three years later their daughter Maria died of scarlet fever.

Though the Kindertotenlieder are often sung by a contralto, Mahler preferred a male voice in these songs, which speak from the point of view of the father. Mahler’s settings are marked by unusual restraint, both emotionally and musically – these songs do not agonize but speak with a controlled grief. Textures are lean, tempos are generally slow, and the dynamic level is restrained – all five songs end very quietly.

All five of the Rückert poems Mahler chose to set rest on the opposition of light and dark: symbols of disaster (night, darkness, and a storm) are countered by the hopeful symbols of daylight, warmth, and bright stars. The dark tone of Rückert’s poems is frequently penetrated by this redeeming light, and
Mahler’s music – both bittersweet and painfully expressive – mirrors that opposition perfectly.

The first song, *Nun will die Sonn’ so hell aufgeh’n*, establishes the dark mood and lean sound of the entire cycle. Mahler marks this beginning *klagend* (“grieving”), and the lonely sound of solo oboe and solo horn draw us in to this bleak landscape (though these songs are sung with piano accompaniment at this recital, references to the orchestral version will help evoke the sound-world Mahler creates here). The scene is at daybreak, and the returning sunlight reminds the poet of the light he has lost. The restrained mood is set off delicately by the soft ring of the glockenspiel; that silvery, bell-like sound rings throughout the darkness of this song, and finally it brings this song to a muted close. Mahler moves from D minor in the first song to C minor in the equally dark *Nun seh’ ich woll*, where shining stars in the night sky remind the poet of the bright eyes of his children. The sound-world changes completely in the third song, *Wenn dein Mütterlein*: violins do not play at all in the orchestral version of this song, and Mahler instead emphasizes the sound of solo woodwinds, led by the long opening English horn solo. Mahler marks this song *Schwer, dumpf* (“Heavy, gloomy”), and the absence of the high violin sound underlines the loss of the poet’s “light of joy.”

The fourth song, *Oft denk’ ich*, moves to E-flat major, and the mood almost relaxes as the poet can deceive himself that his children are absent only momentarily. He imagines them out walking and about to appear on a sunny hillside before him, and the music’s comfortable swing seems to participate in this self-deception, rising to a *fortissimo* climax on the song’s final words. This bright world vanishes at the start of *In diesem Wetter* as Mahler goes back to D minor to depict the storm. Marked *Agitato*, this is the only (relatively) fast music in the entire cycle, and the poet looks out on the storm and notes how he would never have allowed his children out in such dark weather. And finally consolation arrives: Mahler slows the tempo and moves to D major as the poet realizes that his children are now in God’s hands, beyond any danger. A long postlude draws this final song to its quiet conclusion on an untroubled D-major chord.

Those who know Mahler’s symphonies will hear many echoes of them in these songs: themes from the Fifth Symphony appear in the first two movements, the music that sets the consoling final line of the third song re-appears on the last page of the Ninth Symphony, and there are premonitions of *Das Lied von der Erde* in the final song. These five songs would exert a strong influence on their creator across the remainder of his brief life.

— Program notes by Eric Bromberger