

50 greatest symphonies



“The symphony, and how it changed our world.”

Selections taken from: The Guardian website: Author: Tom Service

Contents

Introduction	3
Symphonie Fantastique: Berlioz	5
3rd Symphony ('Eroica'): Beethoven	8
6th Symphony ('Pastoral'): Beethoven	9
Faust Symphony: Liszt	11
9th Symphony ('The Great'): Schubert	13
41st Symphony ('Jupiter'): Mozart	15
29th Symphony: Mozart	17
4th Symphony: Brahms	19
6th Symphony: JC Bach	21
1st Symphony: Brahms	23
8th Symphony: Beethoven	26
31st Symphony ('Paris'): Mozart	28
1st Symphony: Tchaikovsky	30
10th Symphony ('Unfinished'): Schubert	32
8th Symphony: Dvořák	34
102nd Symphony ('The Miracle'): Haydn	35
8th Symphony: Bruckner	37
1st Symphony: Mahler	39
2nd Symphony: Schumann	41
6th Symphony: Haydn	43
38th Symphony ('Prague'): Mozart	44
5th Symphony: Beethoven	46

Introduction

I hope what will come over is the sense that the development of a supposedly abstract musical structure isn't simply about compositional invention or experimentation, but about how we hear ourselves and our place in the world: from the courtly entertainment of the early Rococo symphony to the world-changing idealism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Brahms, Bruckner, and Mahler; from a social order bounded by conventions and their transgressions in the 18th century, as in the music of Haydn and Mozart, to a more recent age of creative freedoms and limitless possibilities, the symphonies by Berio (yes, that's what his *Sinfonia* actually is!), Peter Maxwell Davies, Oliver Knussen, or Per Nørgård.

But before all that comes the most basic question of defining my terms: what is a symphony? It's usually how we refer to the multi-movement form that evolved in the early 18th century in central Europe (from the Baroque suite and the operatic overture) as a self-contained work of purely instrumental music, and which went on to become the single most prestigious expression of musical architecture in the late 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, the highpoint of many composers' ambition and achievement.

But it's much, much more than that. A symphony isn't just a structure, a musical formula, or a set of containers - three or four movements of contrasting speeds and characters - that composers merely had to fill in to qualify as "symphonic" writers. The symphony is really a way of thinking about what music actually is, what it's really for.

Because if you accept the idea that instrumental music is capable of "saying" anything at all, then it's in the symphony that that power is released most grandly, most extravagantly, and most directly. The symphony is the ultimate embodiment of the idealist notion of music being the "highest of the arts", a place beyond words or representative images in which transcendent feelings were given pure, unadulterated expression. As we'll find out, the crucible of those ideas is the way Beethoven's symphonies have been thought about and performed: such music as the Third (the "Eroica"), the Fifth, or the Ninth - even if that piece was the first symphony to use a choir, and a text.

But the problem with thinking of the symphony as idealistic transcendence is that you lose sight of how it communicates and who it communicates to. A symphony is always public: in terms of who it's written for, in the ever-changing and ever-expanding orchestral forces that composers have been able to call on, and who hears it, from private aristocratic gatherings at the end of the 18th century, bourgeois entertainments in the 19th, to today's huge auditoriums. The story of the symphony from Haydn's genre-defining pieces that were composed for his handful of musicians at the court in Esterhazy to Mahler's symphonies, with their forces of hundreds is a drama that's as much social as it is musical. It's about who paid the composer and the musicians, about what the symphony was heard to represent, and about what role composers were supposed to fulfil in society.

It's often said that the story of the symphony is bounded by historical time, and that we're now living in a post-symphonic age. That's because a symphonic frame of mind, with its associations of order and coherence doesn't fit with our more fractured and fractious sensibilities. What I hope you might hear in exploring the 50 symphonies over the next 12 months is rather the opposite: the extremities, disturbances, and strangenesses at the heart of the symphonies of the 18th and 19th centuries, and the urge to create some kind of order from chaos in the works of the later 20th and 21st.

Other threads I hope we'll pick up along the way: the paradox of pieces that aren't called symphonies but which really are "symphonic" in the musical language they speak - Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* is only the most obvious example. And then there's astonishing range of ways of playing the canonic symphonies of Mozart, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler - and everyone else! - that we can all now instantly hear at our fingertips. That's a phenomenon that amounts to much more than Wilhelm Furtwängler taking longer over a Beethoven slow movement in the 1940s than John Eliot Gardiner in the 1990s. The difference is actually a revelation of two completely different views of what the "same" piece of music means. That's a process of renewal that continues any time these great pieces are properly, intelligently, passionately played -

which means that Beethoven's 5th Symphony, for example, isn't a fixed work so much as a palimpsest of musical histories that only gets richer and richer each time it's played, heard, and thought about.

Symphonic Fantastique: Berlioz

Symphony guide: Hector Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique

The most innovative symphony of the 19th century was born from diabolical passions

Delirious desire ... Berlioz's passion for Irish actor Harriet Smithson inspired the Symphonie Fantastique. Something a little different this week: our symphony is **Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique**, a piece that lays legitimate claim to adjectives such as "revolutionary", "radical" and "unprecedented" perhaps as much as, or even more than any other piece in this series so far. This jaw-dropping work was made by a 26-year-old composer who had already become a famous, indeed notorious, figure in Parisian musical life. But Hector Berlioz also happened to be **one of the most brilliant writers on music**; and in his letters he reveals the genesis of this diabolically and passionately inspired work.

The following is a collection of vivid fragments from Berlioz's own words, and some contemporary commentators, which chart Berlioz's state of mind just before he was writing the piece, his musical ambitions, his personal hopes and dreams, and the reality of putting on this uniquely challenging symphony. (A performance planned and rehearsed in May 1830 was cancelled, so its premiere had to wait until December.) A couple of ideas to bear in mind when you're reading these blazing bits of **Berlioziana**: this music is simultaneously the most subjective symphony ever composed, in writing out Berlioz's hallucinogenically morbid fantasies and unrequited love for the actress **Harriet Smithson** (whom he married thanks to a later performance of the Symphonie, but at the time of its composition was only an object of far-off longing and terrible desire). Yet it's also one of the most objective, since Berlioz is capable of analysing his emotions with all the cold-hearted dispassion of a scientist observing life forms through a microscope, as his biographer David Cairns puts it. I'm indebted to **Cairns's still-essential biography**, and to Michael Rose's brilliant **Berlioz Remembered** for the following extracts:

11 January 1829. The composer, writing to a friend about his hopes for Harriet – and for the new musical discoveries that are inseparable from his feelings for her:

"Oh if only I did not suffer so much! ... So many musical ideas are seething within me ... Now that I have broken the chains of routine, I see an immense territory stretching before me, which academic rules forbade me to enter. Now that I have heard that **awe-inspiring giant Beethoven**, I realise what point the art of music has reached; it's a question of taking it up at that point and carrying it further – no, not further, that's impossible, he attained the limits of art, but as far in another direction. There are new things, many new things to be done, I feel it with an immense energy, and I shall do it, have no doubt, if I live. Oh, must my entire destiny be engulfed by this overpowering passion? ... If on the other hand it turned out well, everything I've suffered would enhance my musical ideas. I would work non-stop ... my powers would be tripled, a whole new world of music would spring fully armed from my brain or rather from my heart, to conquer that which is most precious for an artist, the approval of those capable of appreciating him.

Time lies before me, and I am still living; with life and time great events may come to pass."

Three weeks later:

"For some time I have had a descriptive symphony ... in my brain. When I have released it, I mean to stagger the musical world."

19 February, to his father (he still hasn't started work on the piece):

"I wish I could ... calm the feverish excitement which so often torments me; but I shall never find it, it comes from the way I am made. In addition, the habit I have got into of constantly observing myself means that no sensation escapes me, and reflection doubles it – I see myself in a mirror. Often I experience the most extraordinary impressions, of which nothing can give an idea; nervous exaltation is no doubt the cause, but the effect is like that of opium [which Berlioz, in all probability, knew directly!].

Well, this **imaginary world is still part of me**, and has grown by the addition of all the new impressions that I experience as my life goes on; it's become a real malady. Sometimes I can scarcely endure this mental or physical pain (I can't separate the two) ... I see that wide horizon and the sun, and I suffer so much, so much, that if I did not take a grip of myself, I should shout and roll on the ground. I have found only one way of completely satisfying this immense appetite for emotion, and this is music."

A fortnight later, to the pianist and composer **Ferdinand Hiller**:

"Can you tell me what it is, this capacity for emotion, this force of suffering that is wearing me out? ... Oh my friend, I am indeed wretched – inexpressibly! ... Today it is a year since I saw HER for the last time ... Unhappy woman, how I loved you! I shudder as I write it – how I love you!"

And yet, six weeks after that letter, he has exposed and expunged his passion in writing the first version of the symphony: those weeks must have been an extraordinary torrent and torment of activity for Berlioz. He tells another close friend, Humbert Ferrand, what the symphony is about:

"**I conceive an artist**, gifted with a lively imagination, who ... sees for the first time a woman who realises the ideal of beauty and fascination that his heart has so long invoked, and falls madly in love with her. By a strange quirk, the image of the loved one never appears before his mind's eye with its corresponding musical idea, in which he finds a quality of grace and nobility similar to that which he attributes to the beloved object. [This is the symphony's *idée fixe*, the melody that appears in all five movements.]

After countless agitations, he imagines that there is some hope, he believes himself loved. **One day, in the country**, he hears in the distance two shepherds playing a *ranz des vaches* to one another; their rustic dialogue plunges him into a delightful daydream. [This is the 'Scene in the country', which we now know as the third movement; at this stage, Berlioz had his hero go to the country before 'The Ball', which we now know as the second movement.] The melody [of the beloved] reappears for a moment across the themes of the *adagio*.

He goes to a ball [now the second movement]. The tumult of the dance fails to distract him; his *idée fixe* haunts him still, and the cherished melody sets his heart beating during a brilliant waltz.

In a fit of despair he poisons himself with opium [**the fourth movement, the March to the Scaffold**]; but instead of killing him, the narcotic induces a horrific vision, in which he believes he has murdered the loved one, has been condemned to death, and witnesses his own execution. March to the scaffold; immense procession of headsman, soldiers and populace. At the end the melody reappears once again, like a last reminder of love, interrupted by the death stroke.

The next moment [**and the fifth movement, the Dream of a Witches' Sabbath**] he is surrounded by a hideous throng of demons and sorcerers, gathered to celebrate Sabbath night ... At last the melody arrives. Till then it had appeared only in a graceful guise, but now it has become a vulgar tavern tune, trivial and base; the beloved object has come to the sabbath to take part in her victim's funeral. She is nothing but a courtesan, fit to figure in the orgy. The ceremony begins; the bells toll, the whole hellish cohort prostrates

itself; a chorus chants the plainsong sequence of the dead [the Dies irae plainchant], two other choruses repeat it in a burlesque parody. Finally, the sabbath round-dance whirls. At its violent climax it mingles with the Dies irae, and the vision ends.”

Friedrich Zelter, composer and Mendelssohn’s teacher, presents one side of the critical opinion of Berlioz’s work: he’s talking about Berlioz’s **Huit scènes de Faust**, which the composer had sent to Goethe, and Goethe passed to Zelter for his assessment.

“There are some people who can only make their presence felt and call attention to their activities by means of noisy puffing, coughing, croaking, and spitting. One such appears to be Herr **Hector Berlioz**. The smell of sulphur surrounding Mephistopheles attracts him, so he must needs sneeze and snort till all the instruments of the orchestra leap around in a perfect frenzy – only not a hair stirs on Faust’s head ... I shall certainly find an opportunity when I am teaching to make use of this poisonous abscess, this abortion born of horrible incest.”

Zelter’s opinion of the *Symphonie Fantastique* is not recorded, but the composers and musical luminaries in the audience for the first performance of the piece, when it finally happened on 5 December – including Meyerbeer, Spontini and the 19-year-old Franz Liszt – were entranced. As was this anonymous reviewer.

“I accept that this symphony is of an almost inconceivable strangeness, and that the schoolmasters will no doubt pronounce an anathema on these profanations of the ‘truly beautiful’. But for anyone who isn’t too concerned about the rules I believe that M. Berlioz, if he carries on in the way he has begun, will one day be worthy to take his place beside Beethoven.”

There could be no higher praise for Berlioz; the wild alchemical mixture of Faustian diabolism, his extension and expansion of Beethovenian sonic possibility, the unflinching, opiate extremity of his musical imagination, and the essential catalyst of his incomparably intense emotional life, made – and still make – the *Symphonie Fantastique* an experience that turns all of us into its exalted, executed and eviscerated hero.

3rd Symphony ('Eroica'): Beethoven

Symphony guide: Beethoven's Third ('Eroica')

The story of the dedication of Beethoven's Third is the stuff of symphonic legend. Whatever the truth, the victory at the end of the piece doesn't just stand for Napoleon, or Beethoven, but for the possibilities of the symphony itself

Imagine if events hadn't intervened, and Beethoven had stuck to his original plan, and his **Third Symphony** had been called the "Bonaparte". Imagine the reams of interpretation and analysis that would have gone into aligning the piece with the Napoleonic project, its humanist ideals and its all-too-human historical realisation. Yet that is what Beethoven wanted the piece we know now as the Eroica symphony to be: this piece, during its composition and at its completion in 1804, and even when he was negotiating its publication, was a piece for and about **Napoleon**. Beethoven designed the piece as a memorial to the heroic achievements of a ruler who he hoped would go on to inspire Europe to a humanist, libertarian, egalitarian revolution. That's why the piece, you could say, describes Napoleon's heroic struggles (the huge **first movement**), then narrates the sorrow of his death in grand public style (the **funeral march** slow movement), and, with the open-air energy and teeming imagination of the **scherzo** and **finale**, demonstrates how his legacy and spirit were to have lived on in the world.

Instead, the story of how the piece's **original dedication to Bonaparte** was defaced by Beethoven is the stuff of symphonic legend, based on Ferdinand Ries's memory of what happened when he told the composer that **Napoleon had styled himself Emperor in May 1804**. With that Napoleon became, for Beethoven - as Ries reports the composer saying - "a tyrant", who "will think himself superior to all men". (In fact, it's even more complicated than that, **since Beethoven the apparently great revolutionary was also willing to change the symphony's dedication in order not to jeopardise the fee due from a royal patron.**) Yet that scrawling out of Napoleon's name doesn't change the specificity of Beethoven's inspiration in writing this symphony, the longest and largest-scale he had ever been composed, and the profound human, philosophical, and political motivations behind the musical innovations of this jaw-dropping piece.

And it's those novelties that usually inspire the panegyrics with which the Eroica is often described: the shattering dissonances and rhythmic dislocations of **the first movement**, the expressive grandeur and terror of **the funeral march**, the ludicrously challenging horn writing of **the scherzo**, the gigantic expressive range - from comic to tragic to lyrical to heroic - in **the fourth movement**, a set of variations that in one fell swoop reinvent the symphonic finale in a way that arguably only the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth comes close to.

And yet, these musical revolutions are not so - well, revolutionary as they might at first seem. In this piece as much as anything he composed, Beethoven didn't want to compromise his music's communicative power. For his music to sound its message of change, to inspire audiences to consider a new world-view just as they are also asked to participate in a new scale of symphonic drama, Beethoven needed to make sure he was taking his listeners with him. Which is why this vastly complex piece is also completely clear in its structure and in its extreme states of expressive character.

Think about **the first movement**: yes, its scale of thought and ambition are unprecedented when you consider the whole structure, but on the level of its themes and their working out, Beethoven's music is built on simple, graspable ideas: those two E flat major thunderbolts with which the symphony opens (Beethoven's initial thought was actually to start with a dissonance, as he had done at the start of his First Symphony), and the undulating arpeggio in the cellos that starts out so serenely but which soon introduces a

foreign note, a C sharp, the grit in the oyster that signals this movement's emotional and harmonic ambition. The most radical moments are shocking when heard in isolation, like the **grinding harmonic clash** at the centre of the movement which seems to bring the music to a shrieking, shuddering impasse; or the enormity of the movement's coda, turned by Beethoven into another opportunity to develop and explore his themes rather than simply to tie the room together with a handful of clichéd closing gestures. And there's also a moment that made Hector Berlioz – otherwise Ludwig van's greatest admirer – splutter with indignation that "if that was really what Beethoven wanted ... it must be admitted that this whim is an absurdity"; the passage when the horn seems to announce the return to the main theme **a few bars early**. It is what Beethoven "really wanted", but Berlioz's comments remind us just how weird it actually is.

Yet when you hear a performance such as **Frans Brüggen's** with the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, or **Otto Klemperer's** with the Philharmonia (strange bedfellows, you might think – one a period instrument guru, the other a big-band maestro of the old-school - but both create a mighty, granite-hewn first movement) it's not so much the individual moments that take your breath away, but the cumulative momentum that builds from the first bar to the last. That's the real revolution in the first movement of the Eroica symphony, and the fact that this implacable musical force should have been inspired by the representation of a great man's works only makes it more remarkable: this movement is the definitive symphonic alchemy of musical structure and poetic meaning.

As is the rest of the symphony. One thought to guide you through the next three movements from the funeral march to the explosion of joy in the final bars: this music is simultaneously rigorously symphonic yet novel in its cavalcade of dramatic and expressive characters. The achievement of the Eroica is not that Beethoven "unifies" all of this diversity, but rather that he creates and unleashes a symphonic energy in this piece that both frames and releases this elemental human drama. It's that mysterious momentum that is the true "heroism" of this symphony, so that the victory at the very end of the piece doesn't just stand for Napoleon, or Beethoven, but for the possibilities of the symphony itself, which is revealed as a carrier of new weight and meaning as never before in its history. What started out as a (pre-) memorial to a great man and his humanist ideals turns into an essential embodiment of symphonic life-force.

6th Symphony ('Pastoral'): Beethoven

Symphony guide: Beethoven's Sixth ('Pastoral')

Beethoven's Pastoral is no musical cul-de-sac, writes Tom Service. It's a radical work, and in its final movement is music more purely spine-tingling and life-enhancingly joyful than almost anywhere else in his output

This week, **Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony**, his Sixth. Well, it does what it says on the tin, doesn't it? A sentimental romp through the Viennese countryside, a programmatic sideline to the central sweep of Beethoven's development, a gentle counterpart to the fire and brimstone of the **Fifth Symphony** and the bacchanal of the **Seventh**.

But that's only because history, and music history in particular, likes its battles to be epic, its progress to be heroic, and its most important leaps of imagination to be noisy, radical, and aggressive. It's as if the **Fifth Symphony** is the "real" Beethoven – Beethoven as all-conquering hero – whereas the **Pastoral** is a sort of musical and biographical cul-de-sac. And whatever its veracity, the image of Beethoven the nature-loving

hippy has proved a much less enticing idea for historians to appropriate than Beethoven storming the gates of revolution in a blaze of C major glory, as he does at **the end of the Fifth**.

Yet Beethoven wrote this F major Symphony in tandem with the **Fifth**. It was premiered at the same, over-ambitious concert in December 1808, and as the symphonic yin to the Fifth's yang, the **Sixth Symphony** is just as "radical" as the Fifth – in some ways, more so. I think both pieces are experiments in symphonic extremity, because both are pushing completely different musical boundaries to their limits, and beyond. The realisation that Beethoven was composing both symphonies at the same time is simultaneously baffling and astounding – and it's proof that there ain't just one Beethoven. On one hand, there's the scowling man-of-the-people fomenting musical revolution and purging his inner demons through proto-minimalist compression and white-hot energy (that's **the Fifth**, by the way!), and on the other, there's the composer content to luxuriate in an early kind of musique concrète by transcribing birdsong into a symphony, who has time to allow his imagination to flow and fly, apparently unfettered by the constraints of formal convention or symphonic concision (that's **the Pastoral**). They're both wildly different, but they're still only two sides of the nine-sided coin that is Beethoven's symphonies.

But in lieu of (m)any other metaphors to riff on, I want to show how Beethoven creates a new kind of symphonic rhetoric in the Pastoral, a universe in which **lulling repetition** rather than teleological development is what defines the structure, on the small and large-scales, and in which the patterns, continuities, and disturbances of the natural world that Beethoven knew (above all in music's most violent storm, up to this point of world history, in the Pastoral's fourth movement!) are transmuted into the discourse of a **five-movement symphony**.

Take the **central section of the first movement**, for example, a passage that's dominated by a single rhythm – the one you've originally heard in the second bar of the piece. It's like looking at a landscape that changes slowly with the lengthening of the shadows and the deepening of the light, in which **time is virtually suspended**. That's a remarkable reversal of symphonic polarity: this place in the first movement of a big symphony is supposed to be full of driving drama and incident, not static contemplation. (Compare this central section with the hell-for-leather momentum of the similar place in **the Fifth Symphony**). That's nothing, though, next to the slow movement, the **Scene by the Brook** (the movements' titles are all Beethoven's own), in which Beethoven starts to spin what becomes a nearly continuous stream of semiquavers over a hypnotically repetitious harmonic background and collection of melodic motives in the woodwind and strings – until, that is, the stream reaches **a still pool**, and a chorus of birds attract our attention, as wanderers through Beethoven's symphonic stream-scape. **The Scherzo's** dances would and could jollily repeat into the infinite were it not for **the Storm**, which interrupts these "Merry Dances of the Countryfolk", and cuts across the rest of the symphony both dramatically and temporally. It's a shocking slice of verticality across the horizontal languorousness of the rest of the symphony. Storms, by their very nature, are protean, non-repeating, violent explosions, and that's what Beethoven's music is like too, with some wild rhythmic and textural effects: **the churning of four against five** in the double-basses and cellos, and electric currents of piccolo, timpani, and trombone. Just as suddenly as it has arrived, this lacerating music subsides, and gives way, without a break, to the most deliriously repeat-laden music in the symphony in the final "**Shepherd's Song: Thankful Feelings after the Storm**".

And it's in **this movement** where Beethoven achieves something more purely spine-tingling and life-enhancingly joyful than almost anywhere else in his output. **It's this place**, the climax of the whole movement, and the symphony. **This music** is also a consummation of the symphony's spirals of time and pattern: this is the last in the sequence of ever-more intense unfurlings of the movement's main melodic idea, and Beethoven takes both extremes of orchestral register – high and low – to their utmost extreme, and then resolves a magnificently aching dissonance through a long, slow, descent in pitch, dynamic, and emotional intensity. It's a moment that works expressively because of its sheer intensity, but which also is the apex of

the symphony's ever-intensifying interplay of cycles and repetitions. There's more: this passage in the fifth movement rhymes with a similar one in **the first movement**: the climax of the opening movement is also **the resolution** of a similar (but not identical) dissonance through a stepwise melodic descent, and it occurs at a similar place in the structure, just before the coda. It's as if all of these small-scale cycles of repetition are enclosed by an even bigger orbit of time. Orbits and time-flows ... "Pastoral"? This music is "cosmic", too! Now that's radical.

Faust Symphony: Liszt

Symphony guide: Liszt's Faust Symphony

Liszt's Faust Symphony blows the bogus symphonic vs programme music debate out of the water

A notional "symphonic principle" has implicitly underscored much of the discussion of the pieces in this series thus far. The idea of symphonic "integrity" (another word that needs to be in quotation marks!) is often contrasted in music-historical writing with its orchestral antipode in the 19th century, "programme music" - music that sets out to tell an "extra-musical" narrative, such as attempting to describe a work from literature, or a natural phenomenon, or a painterly image in sound; as if the former were the one true faith of music history, and the latter were a somehow less "pure" (quotation marks again, sorry) form of music.

Now, I hope I've demonstrate that those boundaries are much more fluid than that simple-minded distinction suggests, and that symphonies that are supposed bulwarks of "purity" or "integrity" are as porous to meanings, interpretations, and story-telling - often more so! - than orchestral pieces that really do set out to tell a story, whether a pre-existing one, such as **Tchaikovsky's Manfred Symphony**, or a new narrative, say **Strauss's Sinfonia Domestica**. And more than that, I hope this series, above anything else it might do, has demonstrated how the "symphonic principle" is always about telling stories and doing cultural work; and that any symphony - even the most apparently abstract - is never, ever, about just pushing notes around a piece of paper in a hermetically sealed cultural vacuum, but is an active engagement with the world of the composer who wrote it, the time and place it was written in, the way it's been received, and the range of its interpretations.

All of which is a monumental upbeat to this week's symphony: **Liszt's Faust Symphony**. This even more monumental work - it's about 75 minutes long - was inspired by Goethe's Faust, and each of the three movements is an epic depiction and conjuring of one of the characters from the defining work of German romanticism: Faust, Gretchen, and Mephistopheles. In each movement you will hear a crystallisation of the particular character. **The first music to be played** in the Faust movement sounds out an existential ennui in a

searchingly chromatic melody, a tune – and it really is a tune! – that includes all 12 pitches of the chromatic scale, a melody written in 1854, nearly 70 years before Schoenberg's serialism. Faust's music moves through nostalgia and heroism in the enormous, half-hour-long drama of this movement. **Gretchen's music** in the almost equally long second movement is pastoral, dream-like, and diaphanous; and then in **the third tableau**, Mephisto's is a warped, Satanic, but thrilling corruption and distortion of Faust's music. And all that sound and fury comes before the most remarkable passage in the symphony, music that presages Wagner's music of the Ring Cycle and Parsifal, and without which there would be a gaping hole at the heart of 19th century music: the **Chorus Mysticus** that Liszt added to the piece in 1857, for a choir of male voices and a solo tenor who sings words from end of the second part of Faust, Goethe's invocation of and paean to the Eternal Feminine.

Liszt – older than Wagner by just two years, his future father-in-law, the greatest piano virtuoso of all time, yet still in thrall to Wagner's musical magnetism - played this piece and his **Dante Symphony** to him in 1856. Wagner was obviously so inspired by what he heard that he nicked whole ideas from it - its thematic material, harmonic flexibility, and orchestrational sensuality - in everything from Die Walküre to Tristan und Isolde, from Siegfried to Parsifal. And if you're minded, you can hear pre-echoes of Bruckner's harmonic language in the Faust Symphony, as well as Mahler's emotional intensity, and even of the expressionist angst of the turn of the century as well. Liszt's Faust is a genuinely prophetic piece.

But there's a bigger issue at stake in Liszt's symphony, which returns us to the programme music vs symphonic music debate. For Liszt, his orchestral music – including his tone-poems as well his symphonies on Faust and Dante – wasn't an attempt to do something “extra-musical”, in the sense of relying on outside sources - stories or images or plays - for its expressive concentration. Instead, they are proof of what Liszt felt the true power of music could be: that it could do something much more elemental than simply represent or stand metaphorically for ideas or emotions – it could actually embody them as experiences. Music, for Liszt, possessed a magical power that could transcend other art-forms by becoming the sublime, otherworldly, and transcendent encounters that painting or literature could only symbolise. Which all means that the Faust Symphony's daemonic power is definitively, inherently intra-musical as opposed to “extra-musical” - and it expands the definition and reach of the symphony at the same time. It's an essential piece for this series, in other words!

9th Symphony ('The Great'): Schubert

Symphony guide: Schubert's Ninth ('the Great')

Schubert's ninth symphony quotes Beethoven's own ninth. An homage - ironic or not - or his own statement of grand symphonic intent? Tom Service unpicks Schubert's great, and final, symphony

Here's the thing about Schubert. Far from the **chubby little mushroom** ("Schwammerl" was his mates' nickname for him) that history has largely turned him into, Schubert was a person of huge creative ambition, who knew what was at stake for him in early 1820s Vienna. With a looming sense of his own mortality, especially after his devastating bout of syphilis in 1822 (an experience that may have been the catalyst for the other of his symphonies in this series, **the Unfinished**), Schubert's feeling of the necessity of doing the things he had to as a composer, and doing them right now, was one of the driving forces of his virtually ceaseless creativity all the way up to his death, at the age of 31 in 1828.

And that meant, for Schubert, coming to terms with the achievement of the most famous composer in the world, a neighbour of his in his home city, Ludwig van Beethoven. In a few short years, Schubert (27 years younger than Beethoven) had to pay homage to Beethoven's gigantic influence, but also – crucially – he had to have the courage to realise that what he could do as a composer was radically different from what Beethoven could, and then have the gumption to go ahead and do it.

Which is why, in the finale of **Schubert's Ninth Symphony**, the "Great" C Major, there's a quotation from the most infamous contemporary symphony, Beethoven's Ninth. Schubert wrote his own ninth symphony in 1825, a year after Beethoven's had its premiere, which the younger composer also attended. And on one hand, with this quotation from the **Ode to Joy** theme from Beethoven's epic finale he was explicitly acknowledging his debt to him, but he was also daring to compete with Beethoven's signature reputation as a symphonist.

And yet it's not that simple. **Schubert's quotation** comes at the middle point of his finale - one of the **wildest rhythmical rides** in symphonic literature - and it appears out of the blue. Instead of telegraphing this moment, or preparing us for a big musical reveal, Schubert slips this tune, pianissimo, in the clarinets and woodwind; there's another **pianissimo tremor** in the strings, also based on the Ode to Joy tune; and all of that, it turns out, is a dream-like upbeat before Schubert concentrates on the **main drama of the movement**.

And that drama has nothing to do with Beethoven's symphony, or even much to do with Beethoven's symphonism – which makes the quote more ironic than forelock-tugging. What I think Schubert is doing in this piece is showing that his own brand of tonal dramaturgy, one that so often produced lyrical reflection and a-temporal meditation, and was equally capable of creating and sustaining large-scale symphonic momentum. In one sense, the Great C Major Symphony is less extreme than its aborted predecessor, the **"Unfinished" B Minor Symphony**, since the expressive world of the C major piece is less raw and uncompromising. But it's also more ambitious because its completed symphonic journey is a self-conscious mark in the music-historical sand. (Even if it's one that took decades to come to public life - it only got its posthumous premiere in 1839, thanks to the efforts of Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann, whose review coined the notorious phrase, "heavenly length", a tag that has stuck to this piece and to Schubert's late music in general.)

I want to pick out some structural details for you, whether you might be coming to the symphony for the first time, think that the piece is dauntingly long, or are someone who has encountered the cliché that Schubert's symphony is all about endless repetition and not much dynamic progression. Consider the following: the way

the **second theme in the first movement** starts off in E minor rather than the G major you should rightly expect; and the way Schubert ties the room together in the first movement's coda, introducing the theme of the slow introduction to **clinch the music's architectural momentum**. The A minor **slow movement** does just as strange things with key-centres as the first movement, making **sideways moves** by thirds instead of conventional fifths – forget the jargon, the point is the emotional effect this produces when you hear the music: shifting by thirds creates a different kind of musical movement: it's more like walking into a new room, to be surprised and even shocked at how different it is to where you were before, rather than progressing through a slowly- but logically-changing landscape. (There's another great example of that in the transition in the scherzo movement **to its trio section**, where Schubert repeats a single note to the point where it's removed from its harmonic context, allowing him to slip into a totally different key, from C major to A major as if by magic.)

The slow movement climaxes with a passage of **terrifying contrapuntal severity and massive, inconsolable dissonance**, an experience that taints the return of the innocent little tune you heard at the start. Then come the scherzo and the finale, two of the most rhythmically relentless pieces in the orchestral repertoire. In the finale, listen out for the **22 repetitions** of the same obstinate harmony in the woodwinds and brass for a moment of genuine orchestral weirdness; and thrill, right at the end of the piece, when the violins at last **fulfil the destiny** of one of the tunes they've been playing, over and over again, by celebrating its cadence into C major. Schubert never completed another symphony, but it would take musical culture until late into the 19th century to digest and understand what he had really achieved in this one-of-a-kind piece.

41st Symphony ('Jupiter'): Mozart

Symphony guide: Mozart's 41st ('Jupiter')

Mozart's 41st symphony - the last he composed - is full of postmodernism, palimpsests, and pure exhilaration

“You’re a little dull/ My dear Pompeo/The ways of the world/Go study them”. The words of the aria, “**Un bacio di mano**” (“A kiss on the hand”), composed as an insert for Pasquale Anfossi’s opera *Le gelosie* fortunate by Mozart in 1788, to words probably by Lorenzo da Ponte. And what, pray, has that got to do with **Mozart’s C Major Symphony K551**, known since the early 19th century as the “Jupiter”? Well, rather a lot, actually: the music that accompanies **those words** in the aria also makes a cheeky and unexpected appearance **just before the end of the first section** of the first movement. This is a self-quotation that’s completely unnecessary according to the tonal and harmonic drama of the symphony so far. Mozart has got himself into the right key, he’s done all the hard work of modulating from C major to G major, and he’s already written one of the most memorable first sections to a symphony that anyone had conceived up to this point, the summer of 1788. So why risk interpolating yet another tune into the concatenation of ideas that he’s already given his listeners, and asked his orchestra to dramatise; and a melody, what’s more, that comes from a different expressive world, the low comedy of opera buffa as opposed to high-minded symphonic discussion? Mozart puts the whole structure of this movement on the line, seemingly for the sake of a compositional joke. It’s a piece of postmodernism *avant la lettre*, and the kind of thing that Beethoven, for all his iconoclasm, hardly risked in the same way in his symphonies.

This musical intervention is usually passed over in the way the symphony is performed and heard today. It’s as if this music has become too familiar, so we don’t often hear what I think the Jupiter symphony is really about. For me, this **C major symphony** is written at the furthest edges of the possible for Mozart, in terms of seeing just how many different expressive and compositional contrasts he can cram into a single symphony. And he’s not doing that for the sake of reconciling these opposites or to create a greater unity (the kind of thing that we like to imagine Mozart was up to, because we prefer to think of him as **a romantic idealist** rather than an 18th century humanist). Rather, I think he’s trying to achieve a complexity of emotional experience and richness of invention that is poised – sometimes on this side, sometimes on the other! – of a musical cliff-edge of coherence. A bit like the mixed metaphors of that sentence; what I mean is that this is a symphony of extremes, something that’s symbolised in the juxtaposition of the martial and the plangent in the two ideas you hear in the symphony’s very first four bars (**Nikolaus Harnoncourt** dramatises that initial collision best of all in his recording.)

But back to that interpolatory opera buffa melody: listen to what **René Jacobs does in his performance with the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra**, slowing the music right down to force you to be conscious of how weird this moment actually is, before speeding up to the “correct” tempo. In fact, Jacobs is only restoring the tune to the speed you would hear the melody at when it’s sung as an aria, making us aware that something from another world has landed in the world of the symphony. And Mozart’s secret is only revealed after you’ve heard the repeat of the first section. **In the central part of the movement**, this innocent little tune is exposed to all of the contrapuntal experience Mozart can muster, so instead of opera buffa, the tune is forced into a crucible of highfalutin compositional mastery and chromatic intensity. It’s a fulfilment of the prophecy of the words that originally accompany this music in Anfossi’s opera (they’re initially a warning about the fickleness of beautiful women, a trope of 18th century operatic stories); an exhortation to “study” and to be immersed in the “ways of the world”. It’s an intertextual gag of the highest musical and dramatic subtlety.

And that kind of compositional and expressive high-wire act is what defines this symphony, all the way through. There isn’t time or space here to wax lyrical about **the expanded song-form** of the slow movement

- among the most achingly sensual pieces of instrumental music that Mozart ever wrote, and certainly the most precipitously emotionally ambiguous slow movement in his symphonies; or to expound upon how the **chromatic descent** of the opening tune of the Menuetto is a transformation of an idea you've heard in the first movement (the **second main melody** of the Allegro vivace, since you ask), or how the **trio section** is an artfully artless prefiguration of the main motif of the **finale**.

However, I do have to tell you about that final movement. Famously, this Molto Allegro fuses sonata form with fugue; that's to say, it fuses the high-watermark of late 18th century practice in instrumental music with the most prestigious, and most compositionally involved, form of counterpoint in earlier music: the fugues of the Baroque, like those by Bach and Handel, that Mozart knew and loved. But that's not, in itself, an original idea – and neither is the four-note melodic tag (C-D-F-E) that is catalyst for this explosion of contrapuntal mastery. Mozart borrowed his supposed symphonic innovation from the Haydn brothers, Joseph (the famous one) and Michael (less famous, but equally influential on Mozart). We know that Mozart wanted to hear the latest fugues from Michael's symphonies, which were written in Salzburg, and he asked his father to send them to him. That means he would have known the finale of **Michael's 28th Symphony**, with its obsessive fugato, also in C major; probably the fugue that crowns his 34th, in E flat major; and quite possibly another fugue-finale from his 39th symphony, also in C major, composed just a few months before Mozart's. The similarities between Michael's 29th and 39th, and Mozart's 41st are sometimes startling, as you can hear. Even more shocking, have a listen to this, the final movement of **Joseph's 13th Symphony**, written in 1764. There's the very same four-note idea used as the basis of a contrapuntal work-out of a symphonic finale. There ain't nothing so old – or so new – as a fugato-style finale.

And that four-note motif has a history, and not just in Mozart's own music (you can hear it most clearly in the Credo of his **Missa Brevis K192**, and in his **1st** and **33rd** Symphonies) and that of his contemporaries. In fact, it goes back to a 13th-century hymn attributed to Thomas of Aquinas, **Pange Lingua**, which **Josquin des Prez** used as the basis for probably his last Mass setting in 1515. Since then, the four-note melody at the start of the third line of the original hymn (which Josquin employs as a **contrapuntal catalyst** in his Kyrie) has turned up throughout musical history, especially as a fugal inspiration. That includes its use by Johannes Fux, the 17th and 18th century composer and theorist, in his famous textbook of musical polyphony **Gradus ad Parnassum** (which Mozart knew, and used in his own teaching of his English pupil, Thomas Attwood).

Which all means that Mozart's composition of the finale of the Jupiter Symphony is a palimpsest on music history as well as his own. As a musical achievement, its most obvious predecessor is really the fugal finale of his **G major String Quartet K387**, but this symphonic finale trumps even that piece in its scale and ambition. If the story of that operatic tune first movement is to turn instinctive emotion into contrapuntal experience, the finale does exactly the reverse, transmuting the most complex arts of compositional craft into **pure, exhilarating feeling**. Its models in Michael and Joseph Haydn are unquestionable, but Mozart simultaneously pays homage to them – and transcends them. Now that's what I call real originality.

29th Symphony: Mozart

Symphony guide: Mozart's 29th

The 18-year-old composer's 29th symphony in A major might not have changed musical history, but it changed Tom Service's life.

There are many specifically musical reasons why this apparently unselfconscious piece ought to be part of this series on its own terms, but my reason for including **Mozart's A Major Symphony, K201** in the series is a simple one. This was the first piece of music that I ever heard in an orchestral concert, and it was an experience that had the immediacy of an epiphany, a revelation of a new world of feeling and being. Not that I thought any of that consciously when I heard it played by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Richard Hickox, in the early 1980s; but this music symbolises, for me, the potential power of the musical experience and the start of a never-ending journey of discovery.

This symphony might have changed my own musical history, but I'm not going to argue that it changed musical history from the moment it was first written, in Salzburg in early 1774 by the **18-year-old Mozart**. It's music that crystallises the young man's emerging compositional self-confidence, and that shows him spreading his wings in symphonic music just as he had already started to do in the opera house and in his chamber music. It's a work that sums up everything he had heard and learnt about symphonic form up to this point in his life (the influence of **JC Bach** was still crucial for him, whose music he had first heard as a child in London) but which is much more than the sum of those influences, and is something that only Mozart could have written. For **not-quite-but-almost** the first time, this is Mozart's individual symphonic voice that you hear loudly and clearly.

Or rather, **softly and sensually**. The first movement opens with the opposite of the grand rhetorical flourish that the vast majority of contemporary symphonies (including **Mozart's own**) start with. The first thing you hear is a soft, descending octave in the first violins, the simplest of musical ideas, and a stepwise progression up the first four steps of the A major scale – along with a little chromatic agitation - over some serenely, almost ecclesiastically sonorous polyphony in the lower strings. **This theme is then repeated**, loudly, and with the addition of a canon: two beats later, the violas and cellos have the same theme as the violins, but at the third and fifth of the chord rather than the tonic - which means there's a greater harmonic and contrapuntal richness than when we first heard the melody. In the space of 30 seconds or so, Mozart has used an enormous arsenal of sophisticated compositional techniques to create a miniature symphonic drama.

And that's just the first theme. What's wonderful about this symphony is how much Mozart is clearly enjoying himself, in the **extra melody** he composes at the end of the first section of the first movement, a joyous little tune that symbolises the sheer invention of this symphony; in the **contrapuntal conversation** between the violas and the cellos and basses in the movement's central section; and in the **cheekily inventive coda**, with its chromaticism and, again, its counterpoint, this time in an outrageously fulsome four parts.

It's worth remembering at this point that Mozart, like all talented 18-year-olds, would not have been thinking of himself as anything less than the fully-formed article as a composer. This wasn't a transitional work for him, or a piece that heralded his maturity – all that's mere historical hindsight. Aged 18 he was already an astonishingly experienced composer, writing the most expressive and adventurous instrumental music he had ever composed. That sense of confidence radiates through **the slow movement**, a languidly beautiful pastoral piece in D major, coloured by the soft-focus glow of muted strings, which creates a nocturnal world of expressive and even erotic pleasure. There are hints, too, of mysterious shadows in the moonlight, in the

low-register trills in the violins in the middle of the movement, and the splinters of **high-register interruption**, also in the violins, just after the main melody has been reclaimed.

All that, and a brilliant, undance-ably imaginative **Menuetto** third movement, and a finale of unstoppably dazzling energy, which, played at **the right tempo** – it's marked "Allegro con spirito", after all – ought to have a tempestuous and sometimes rustic wildness, climaxing in another **brehtaking little coda**, which begins with a thrilling unison statement of the theme, and includes some raucous horn-calls and a rocketing string line before the final chords. Actually, you know what, I've changed my mind: this piece really is a symphonic and historic epiphany, whether you're seven years old or 107! Enjoy.

4th Symphony: Brahms

Symphony guide: Brahms's Fourth

This symphony might be a reliable and over-familiar staple on concert programmes, but listen to it with fresh ears. It contains some of the darkest and deepest music in the 19th century

The very first people to hear or see any part of **Brahms's Fourth Symphony** in 1885 had some surprisingly heretical things to say about the piece. Brahms and a friend played through the symphony on the piano to a group of his closest confidants, critics and collaborators, but the reaction was one of those devastatingly uncomfortable silences. Eduard Hanslick, Brahms's critical champion, broke the uneasy atmosphere after the first movement with the unforgettable comment, "I feel I've just been beaten up by two terribly intelligent people". As Brahms's biographer **Jan Swafford** reveals, another friend, the writer Max Kalbeck, turned up at Brahms's apartment the next day to recommend that the composer should not release the piece to the public in its current form. Instead, he suggested, he should keep the **finale** as a stand-alone piece, and replace both the **slow movement** and the **scherzo**. Riven by self-doubt, Brahms was unsure that he would allow the piece to have any life beyond its premiere in Meiningen that October. Only the work's positive reception there, and the gradual, grudging change in his friends' attitude to the piece at its Viennese premiere, convinced Brahms that the Fourth Symphony could survive.

That less-than-straightforward gestation seems hard to believe nowadays, when Brahms's Fourth Symphony is trotted out on concert programmes as a sure-fire way to put bums on seats, with its comfortingly familiar melodies and melancholy, its promise of satisfying symphonic coherence, and its apparently easy appeal to musicians, conductors and audiences. But I think those early commentators were on to something – not in terms of the work's failure to live up to the promise of its three symphonic predecessors, but in the sense of the uncompromising intellectual complexity and refinement of this music, and its expressive implacability and even tragedy. You hear that above all in the **final movement**, the passacaglia, which ends with one of the bleakest minor-key cadences in symphonic music.

This is a symphony that ought to leave you intellectually battered and emotionally bruised rather than superficially consoled. So what's bizarre is the idea that Brahms's Fourth Symphony represents a nice night out at your local concert hall. This music is some of the darkest and deepest in the 19th century. What you're hearing in it is an E minor nail in the coffin of the possibility of a symphonic happy ending. Jan Swafford goes even further, calling the piece "a funeral song for [Brahms's] heritage, for a world at peace, for an Austro-German middle class that honored and understood music like no other culture, for the sweet Vienna he knew, for his own lost loves"; it's a work that "narrates a progression from a troubling twilight to a dark night: fin de siècle", instead of the "darkness to light" trajectories of so many minor-key 19th century symphonies, which end in a major key – think of Beethoven's **Fifth** and Ninth, or all of Bruckner's completed minor-key symphonies. And for the musicologist **Reinhold Brinkmann**, "The chorales in [Brahms's] **First** and Third Symphonies resound with 'hope,' directly and positively ... With its negative ending, the Fourth Symphony denies this hope; it is the composed revocation of it."

What's astonishing about Brahms's achievement in the Fourth Symphony is that this ferocity and concentration of expression is achieved not through a heightened emotional rhetoric, but through a relentless focus on supposedly "abstract" musical details. I'll explain those quotation marks later, but to get a sense of the all-pervasive nature of Brahms's musical thinking in this piece, you only have to hear - or re-hear - **the very opening of the piece**. That melody – criminally over-familiar to many of our ears today! – is built from a series of **descending and ascending thirds**, a favourite Brahmsian device, and a decidedly systematic approach to building a musical melody that he nonetheless turns into one of the most immediately attractive

moments in his symphonic output. But it's the construction that counts here, because that chain of thirds allows Brahms to outline the principal tonal areas of the symphony: there is an unusual emphasis in the melody on the flat-submediant of the E minor scale (C major), which is the home key of the third movement, it's one of the tonal pivots of the slow movement, and it's important in the finale too. But this melody also functions as a kind of generative DNA for the first movement's - and the whole symphony's - motivic drama. What I mean by that is the continuous meshing, churning and changing of musical ideas that Brahms creates, so that each line of music in the orchestral score functions as a cog in a symphonic machine. Arnold Schoenberg thought of this sort of compositional process - in which everything you hear can be understood as a transformation of a series of musical motives - as evidence of "**Brahms the Progressive**" (as he dubbed him in a famous essay): Brahms's motivic manipulation is a kind of precursor of Schoenberg's "composition with 12 tones", his serialism. But for others, this technique is an all-too obvious sign of Brahms's conscious cleverness. That's what Hanslick meant about being beaten up by two intelligent people, and it's precisely the idea that Thomas Adès sends up in his piece, **Brahms**, for baritone and orchestra, setting a poem by **Alfred Brendel**.

In Adès's piece, those chains of thirds from the start of the Fourth Symphony descend into a kind of musical oblivion, obliterated by their own logic. But in a way, that's exactly that Brahms himself does in the Fourth Symphony. Brahms takes his techniques to compositional extremes. So much so that, as the composer and conductor Gunther Schuller points out in his book **The Compleat Conductor**, there are passages in the first movement that create "a multi-layered structure of such complexity that I dare say there is nothing like it even in the Rite of Spring; one has to turn to Ives's Fourth Symphony to find a parallel" - he means **this place** of teeming rhythmic and polyphonic intensity - and later, Schuller identifies "one of the more complex and motivically convoluted passages in all music", in the first movement's **central section**. Brahms's music demands this kind of forensic attention to detail to reveal its full riches, but in the symphony as a whole, the brilliance of the piece is to carry you through its structure, whatever of its motivic felicities you consciously appreciate when you're listening. What you can't escape is that the expressive intensity that you hear in the Fourth Symphony is a direct result of the density of its compositional thinking. Listen to the way **the second movement** sounds its lonely modal introduction before relaxing into a chromatically inflected E major; or hear how the scherzo's galumphing energy also continues the symphony's motivic journey: **at the climax** of this most extrovert movement in Brahms's symphonic canon, the widely and wildly-spaced notes prefigure the **main melody** of the finale.

The finale. Brahms's symphonic passacaglia is when I can explain the meaning of those "abstract" quotation marks. This is one of the most tightly constructed movements ever composed, with 30 variations (and a concluding coda) on the melody you hear blazed out at the beginning in the brass and woodwind; that melody is part of the texture of every single succeeding variation, as the passacaglia form demands. But although it's made from the highest watermark of musical arcana and compositional virtuosity, all that supposed "abstractness" means that the piece is actually an explosion of expressive meanings. The main melody is an expansion of a chaconne tune from Bach's cantata 150 (a "chaconne", like the one in **Bach's D Minor Partita** for solo violin, is a similar form to a passacaglia), and Brahms's use of a baroque method of construction is his homage to an era of musical history that this piece simultaneously honours and draws to a tragic conclusion. For me, the finale has the ineluctable power of a Greek drama: it's a dark prophecy that's fulfilled in that shattering final cadence. The journey from Brahms's First Symphony to his Fourth is from optimism to pessimism, from the possibility of reshaping the world to a resignation at its essential melancholy. By 1885, in his early 50s but already somehow an old man, that was a historical trajectory that Brahms felt to be his own as well. Yet like all tragedies, the Fourth Symphony has a cathartic power - which is one explanation, at least, for the popularity of this despairing, troubling and astonishing symphony.

6th Symphony: JC Bach

Symphony guide: Johann Christian Bach's Sixth

JC Bach's symphonies aren't just important because of their influence on the young Mozart. They're signature works of the 18th century – and his G minor symphony, Op 6 no 6, is arguably the darkest and most dramatic he composed

We think of the symphony in the 20th and 21st centuries as the apogee of radicalism and experimentation in the form, as composers strove to create new kinds of thinking and feeling after it was thought to have exhausted itself (not true! – as you'll know if you've been following **this series so far**). But to experience a true sense of adventure, novelty and symphonic discovery, you have to cast yourself back to the mid-18th century, and an era in which this self-sustaining species of public instrumental music was still forming itself in the minds of composers and the ears of listeners.

And that's where this week's symphony, Johann Christian Bach's G minor work, **Op 6 No 6**, comes in. Composed in the 1760s (definitely before 1769), it was almost certainly on the programmes of the concerts that Bach and fellow composer and impresario Carl Friedrich Abel put on in their series of prophetic and fashionable concerts at Carlisle House in London's Soho, then St James, and finally at the bespoke concert room they had built at Hanover Square. **JC Bach** – the “London” Bach: Johann Christian had moved to Britain in 1762, initially to write operas for the King's theatre, and was music master to Queen Charlotte, but subsequently focused on **concertos** and symphonies – arguably did more to cultivate an appetite and an audience for instrumental music than anyone else of his time. Consisting mostly of Bach's own music, the performances became essential events in Georgian London's social and cultural calendar, even inspiring this paean from a contemporary:

Where Carlisle house attracts the light and gay
And countless tapers emulate the day,
There youth and beauty chase the hours along,
And aid time's flight by revelry and song;
.....

Then worn with pleasure, forth the revellers stray,
And hail with languid looks the new-born day: –
They seek their homes; – there, weary with ennui,
Joyless and dull, is all they hear and see;

Spiritless and void, of every charm bereft,
Unlike that scene of magic they have left,
They childe the lingering hours that move so slow,
Till the night comes, when they again can go

And mingle in the enchantments of Soho.

Plus ça change ... but in the 18th century, alchemical delight was reached through symphonies rather than through anything more – well, chemical. And one of the pieces that would certainly have conjured a “scene of magic”, albeit a turbulent sorcery rather than anything more comforting, was the **G minor symphony, Op 6 No 6**. In three minor-key movements – including, in its central **Andante, piu tosto adagio**, one of the longest symphonic movements JC Bach ever wrote – this work reveals Bach's major symphonic innovations

as well as creating an explosive burst of the **sturm und drang** (“storm and stress”) passions that were the dark side of the 18th century’s sense and sensibility.

Bach’s music was designed to appeal to its audiences. His tunes, his simple harmonies and his innovative use of orchestral colour were all supposed to enliven, entertain and elevate his listeners when they first heard his new pieces. But that deliberate attempt to make instrumental music an embodiment of instantaneous feeling and passion instead of the intellectual rigour and contrapuntal complexity of an earlier era – above all, that of Bach’s father, Johann Sebastian, and in London the imposing legacy of Handel – was much more sophisticated than posterity would give him credit for. After his death, Bach’s music was scarcely heard in the 19th century, yet in his day JC was among the most famous composers in Europe. But somebody who did realise how Johann Christian was opening up new possibilities for the expressive potential of instrumental music was Mozart, who heard Bach’s music when he came to London in **1764 at the age of 8**. Mozart arranged Bach’s music, he played at the keyboard with him – and the young man’s own music was transformed by the encounter. Mozart later memorialised JC Bach in the slow movement of his **A major piano concerto, K414**, produced just after he had heard the news of Bach’s death in 1782, basing the piece on one of the elder composer’s overtures. “What a loss to the musical world!” he wrote. It was JC Bach, much more than Haydn, who was the most important influence on the young Mozart’s style and ideas about the form.

In JC Bach’s G minor symphony, there are moments when you feel you’re hearing premonitions of Mozart – most clearly in the atmosphere of headlong intensity in the first movement, which Mozart seems to recreate and remember in his own G minor symphony, **K183, from 1773**; there’s a specific musical connection between the way **one of Bach’s melodic ideas** emerges (a rocking semitone in the strings) and what he does with it in the central and **most stormy section** of the movement, and what Mozart does with **a similar idea** in his visionary C major symphony, K338. There’s even a connection between the slow movement’s opening **C minor tune** and Wolfgang’s C minor piano concerto, K491, whose **first three notes** are exactly the same.

But better to forget what you know – or what you think you know – and instead try to experience JC Bach’s symphony as those listeners in Soho must have done. Brace yourselves for the compressed edge-of-the-seat drama of its **first movement**, the unsettlingly emotional slow movement (with **a final appoggiatura**, a harmonic sigh that wounds its final cadence, mimicking the very end of the **St Matthew Passion** by JC’s father), and the **minor-key rocket** of the finale, propelled by horn-calls and explosions in the upper strings. The whole piece ends with a disturbing musical question-mark, a dramatic and **sudden decrescendo** from forte to piano. Bach doesn’t resolve the tensions in this G minor symphony, as later composers might have felt they had to; instead, he leaves the tempest he has just unleashed fizzing electrically in the air and in your imagination.

1st Symphony: Brahms

Symphony guide: Brahms's First

Listen to Brahms's first symphony with fresh ears. It's a piece that took on history - and won.

This week, a first. **Johannes Brahms's First** Symphony, in C minor. But if there's one thing I want you to try and to do with this piece, it's to hear it without the clichés of its supposed associated historical accretions: the fact that it took Brahms 14 years to complete the piece because he felt the weight of Beethoven so much on his shoulders; or the fact that **the big tune** in the finale sounds a wee bit like the one in Beethoven's 9th ("any ass can see that", Brahms said); or even that its instantly acknowledged symphonic success after its premiere in 1876 meant that it was dubbed "Beethoven's 10th". I think we should reclaim Brahms's First on its own terms, not because it continues what Beethoven might have done with the symphony had he somehow lived another few decades, but because the piece presents a completely different idea of what the symphony could be. Whatever the modesty of Brahms's own assessment of his music, his First Symphony is a magnificently immodest achievement, a piece that takes history on, in both sense of the phrase – and wins.

So, a few moments that will try to make the case: firstly, **the very opening**, the slow introduction before the tortuous Allegro gets going. To find music that sounds anything like this, the models are not Beethoven or even Schumann, but Bach, and possibly even earlier repertoires of German music. Brahms composes a richly chromatic counterpoint at the start of his symphony, music that's rhythmically and expressively connected to the opening of Bach's **Matthew Passion**. If Brahms was worried about Beethoven, he shows it by bypassing entirely the latter's ideas of clearly identifiable thematic cells and continual, dynamic, dialectical development. Instead, this introduction is defined by music that's a polyphony of different musical ideas all happening simultaneously. Listen to **the opening again**, and hear how Brahms counterpoints that rising line in the violins and cellos with the descending, lamenting musical line in the woodwinds and violas. The texture isn't reducible to a single musical thought, a "theme" or a "melody", but is defined rather by a network of interrelated musical lines churning away at the same time.

If that sounds a wee bit complex, that's because it is! Brahms was attempting to make a symphony that works in musical space as well as time, one that has all the internal consistency and multi-dimensional splendour of a Bach fugue but also has the dynamism and energy of a large-scale orchestral work. No wonder it took him a few years: Brahms was reforging the symphonic project for the late 19th century. And he does it: listen to the way the main tune of the Allegro, the main part of the first movement, is **reclaimed** about two-thirds of the way through: it's another pitting of simultaneously rising and descending lines against each other, along with a thrillingly emphatic bass line, a moment that clinches both the music's contrapuntal consistency and its symphonic power.

Brahms's compositional high-wire act of that polyphonic work-out in the first movement is sidestepped by the **slow movement** and the **Allegretto e grazioso** that come second and third in the symphony. But there's a covert radicalism going on here too: again, directly contradicting Beethoven's example in all of his symphonies (apart from the 8th), Brahms does not even try to compose a wildly energetic scherzo, but rather the genteel and subtle character piece of his Allegretto; the slow movement in turn is the opposite of Beethoven's visionary symphonic songs, but an intimately lyrical study crowned by the florid outpouring of a solo violin.

Brahms has turned the symphony inward, in both musical and emotional senses. He is resolutely focused on the inner workings of his musical material rather an overt expressive programme – let alone an attempt to change the world, as Beethoven's Ninth wants to do – and for all its public grandeur as a large-scale

symphony, this music sounds as if it's addressed to us as individuals rather than speaking to our collective humanity.

Yet **Brahms's finale** changes all of that. This movement is his solution to what he saw as the 19th century's symphonic problem - the tendency for the pieces to be weighted towards their opening allegros, to have worked out all their major structural tensions by the end of the first movement. Brahms's fourth movement is different: everything is at stake here. It's the longest part of the symphony, and from the outset, its drama is set out on a bigger stage than the previous three movements. Brahms puts us in the middle of sublime, terrifying, and minor-key nature at the start of the finale in a swirling, impressionistic Adagio. But the mists clear and from the heights, a **horn-call** (transcribed by Brahms from the alphorns of Switzerland) sounds in resplendent C major – a premonition of the trajectory of the whole movement. But to get there, we need a big tune, and the most assertively dynamic drama of the whole symphony - which is exactly what Brahms provides with **that melody** - the one his first listeners kept comparing to Beethoven. There's a moment of exquisite tension and release when **the horn call returns**, now harmonised by an aching dissonant chord, then salved when the music melts into a major key. And at the very end of the symphony, there's the most overtly, **heroically triumphant music** that Brahms ever composed for an orchestra. But what makes it moving rather than bombastic is the sense that this is a hard-won musical and personal victory for its composer. On one hand, this music crowns the work's dramatic trajectory, but it also celebrates Brahms's own vanquishing of his symphonic demons. And if we've only the ears to hear it, we'll hear how completely he created something subtly, multi-dimensionally new.

50 greatest symphonies

Culture

Symphony guide: Saint-Saëns's Third (the Organ symphony)

Don't consign Saint-Saëns's organ symphony to the orchestral glue-factory for knackered thoroughbreds. This was a cutting-edge - and gloriously tuneful - work.

"I gave everything to it I was able to give. What I have here accomplished, I will never achieve again." Thus spake Camille Saint-Saëns about his **C minor Symphony**, "avec orgue" (with organ), the third and last of his symphonies, and one of the crowning glories of his prodigious life in music. This week, I make a plea that we take the Organ Symphony seriously as one of the late 19th century's most significant and technically sophisticated orchestral works. And also of course that we enjoy its remarkable concatenation of tunes, colours, and kaleidoscopic thematic invention that have made the symphony so popular ever since its premiere in London's St James's Hall in 1886, when Saint-Saëns himself conducted the orchestra of the Royal Philharmonic Society, who had commissioned the piece.

It's all too easy to think of the Organ Symphony as a perennial symphonic pot-boiler, one of those knackered ex-thoroughbred warhorses of the repertoire whose every appearance on concert programmes is another stage in its consignment to the orchestral glue-factory. It doesn't help that the Big Tune of the last movement is one of the most used and abused motifs of classical music history, in everything from Disney's Babe movies to it being adopted as the national anthem of the micro-nation of **Atlantium**, a postage-stamp-sized potential principality in Eastern Australia. Its over-familiarity means it's hard to recognise the real achievement of this symphony which fused what were genuinely cutting-edge innovations with Saint-Saëns's inherently classical, conventional (with a small "c") instincts. So forget what you might think you know about this symphony, and prepare to re-hear the rafinesse, joie de vivre, and technical coup-d'orchestre of arguably Saint-Saëns's greatest single composition.

First off, what we're dealing with here is something almost without precedent in 19th century symphonic practice: a piece cast in two movements. OK, the work also encloses the archetypes of a classic four-movement pattern within its two halves, but in the first half Saint-Saëns elides the end of the C minor

Allegro moderato with the slow movement that follows, a **Poco Adagio** in a thrillingly unconventional D flat major, a startling semitonal shift away from the home key. And, in the second half, he changes gear from the **scherzo-like music** that opens this section to the massive, shocking intervention of the introduction to the chorale-like Big Tune itself at the start of the **final movement**.

Saint-Saëns further reconfigured the basic outlines of the 19th century's symphonic masterplan with his use of keyboards as part of the orchestral panoply. And he didn't just use an organ - which makes its quietly dramatic entrance at the start of the slow movement - but a piano as well, which needs two players to get to grips with the virtuosic figuration Saint-Saëns composed for it: listen to the glittering carillon of sound these four pianistic hands conjure around the **main theme of the finale**, one of the most satisfying moments in the whole symphony. But as well as the by turns gigantic and intimate soundworlds Saint-Saëns makes his orchestra produce (compare the organ's first entry to the thrilling, bombastic sonic coronation it gives to the symphony's final bars), you need to listen out for the way the whole piece prepares and prefigures that (in)famous melody, and what Saint-Saëns then does with it.

That's how the piece achieves its real ambition, which is to employ the progressive ideas of thematic transformation that Liszt had pioneered earlier in the century (the piece was subsequently dedicated to Liszt, who died a couple of months after the premiere), and makes them work not as part of a programmatic narrative, but as the engine of an abstract, symphonic discourse. The strings' tremulous and ominous figuration at the start of the allegro, after the symphony's short, mysterious introduction (itself full of symphonic premonitions, only realised much later in the piece), becomes a teasing ear-worm the first time you hear it. Expressively speaking, in terms of how Saint-Saëns dramatises and orchestrates them, they're at the opposite end of the expressive spectrum, and in different modalities too, but if you compare the outline of this tune to the Grande Mélodie, you can't fail to spot the connection.

There's more symbiosis between the scherzo's main melody and the crowning chorale. The scherzo section is a kind of gigantic upbeat to the finale - fragments of its melody are disguised, transformed, and finally revealed. The slow movement's Poco adagio does, crucially, introduce the gentle, lowering presence of the organ as a key character in the work's drama, and it also acts as a moment of visionary repose in the middle of the sounds and furies around it.

There's something else, too. In **the finale's** coda, after a showily effective fugue - Saint-Saëns manages to do something in the symphony that it would take Sibelius to top. He warps time and space - the Theme of Themes is sped up so much that time seems to slow down. Capped by the organ's thunderous bass-line - playing notes that the human ear can only just "hear", but which you should feel in the hall as more like primordial vibrations - the effect is both a masterstroke of time-melting symphonism, and an irresistibly joyous coda to the technical glories of this piece.

I have the image, at the end of the symphony, of the concert hall being miraculously lifted off the ground and held aloft by the combined efforts of all those pipes and all that air; all that counterpoint and all that time-stretching speeding up and slowing down; all that scraping and blowing, and all those keyboards. The whole work is a magnificent and fantastical symphonic machine that's an apotheosis of the orchestral technology of the late 19th century. In other words: the Organ Symphony is the definitive steampunk symphony.

8th Symphony: Beethoven

Symphony guide: Beethoven's Eighth

It's one of the shortest, weirdest, but most compelling symphonies of the 19th century.

One of the most important things about **Beethoven's Eighth Symphony** is that it puts a definitive kibosh on the idea of a symbiotic relationship between a composer's biography and their music. In the summer of 1812 when Beethoven was obsessively working on this piece, he wrote the most infamous letter of his life, to his mysterious "**Immortal Beloved**". The pain-wracked and heartbreaking sentimentality of that letter, with its doomed love and self-pitying prostrations, finds absolutely no corollary in the fabric of the **Eighth Symphony**, which is the most ebulliently experimental symphony that Beethoven composed – and therefore, quite possibly the most ebulliently experimental symphony in the canon. (More proof needed? I give you the **Heiligenstadt Testament**, that despairing document in which Beethoven realises the full magnitude of his hearing loss, written around the time of his thrillingly self-confident Second Symphony.)

First performed in public at a concert in 1814 in Vienna that also included the **Seventh Symphony** and **Wellington's Victory** (that work of tub-thumping jingoism that caused Beethoven to tell one of his detractors "what I shit is better than anything you could ever think up") the F major Eighth Symphony didn't generate the kind of applause that would signify "universal delight", and "did not create a furore", according to a contemporary account. Frankly, I'm surprised that the public's reaction wasn't total bewilderment - a more than comprehensible response to one of the shortest, weirdest, but most compelling symphonies of the 19th century.

What's brilliant about the Eighth's relatively small (time) scale is that it allows Beethoven to be more structurally radical than he could dare to be on the larger canvasses of his other symphonies. In the Eighth Symphony, there are holes that are left open **after the final chord**, questions that remain unanswered, loose ends that are deliberately not tied up. Most obviously, the Eighth Symphony has no slow movement (Beethoven did sketch one, but he abandoned it), but instead there's an impish **Allegretto scherzando** that comes second, a four-minute (or less) piece that was thought to be a homage to **Johann Maelzel's** metronome, but which is now recognised for what it is: an unprecedented intermezzo in place of an adagio. Except it isn't an "intermezzo" in the sense of being "incidental" to the music's argument, because this piece embodies the central and paradoxical substance of this symphony: this short movement, in its rhythmic obsessions, like the repeated staccato chords in the woodwind, or the demi-semiquaver chirrup of the first theme, and the bass-line that answers it; in its extremes of dynamic, often putting a fortissimo right next to a pianissimo, its **hocketing textures** of interlocking orchestral lines, and its warped musical mechanisms, sounds more like a proto-Stravinskian orchestral scherzo than an early romantic orchestral movement.

And that's the paradox of this symphony. It makes you think you're listening to a light-hearted witticism, but Beethoven is in reality reforming the symphony right in front of your ears. If you hear the **second movement** as a musical joke, you're missing the point. Beethoven is trying to make a symphony in which textural, rhythmic, orchestral and harmonic invention take the place of the expressive intensity; so much so, that the piece can do without a conventional slow movement. That's a gigantic leap of musical imagination and compositional technique, and it means that the rest of the symphony is similarly reoriented towards this goal, so that Beethoven – in this piece perhaps more relentlessly than in any other of his symphonies – is focused on specifically musical questions that create and obey their own logic rather than any pre-existing models or forms. In that sense alone this symphony is "Haydnesque", an adjective often applied to it, but usually in a way that manages to patronise both Haydn and Beethoven, as if Haydn was only capable of comic

symphonic entertainment, and as if the Eighth Symphony was somehow a lesser thing than the supposed titans that surround it – which it decidedly isn't.

The first movement begins with a gesture of closure. The first two bars of the piece ought to be the end of a symphonic argument, not its beginning, and in fact the first movement ends with the very same music, now in its proper place. Continuing this inversion of common practice, the first movement soon finds **weird keys**, strange silences, and odd sounds – **this solo bassoon**, for example, or this **ambiguous pianissimo**. But it's the central section and the reprise of the first theme that should knock your symphonic socks off: over a strangely foreboding **ticking mechanism in the violas** – an alternating octave you've just heard at the end of the first section – Beethoven inexorably **screws up the harmonic tension** through a halting, uncertain sequence of variations on the first bar of the symphony, separated by gigantic walls of orchestral sound. That contrast catalyses a thrilling section of orchestral counterpoint, propelled by the **tortuous transformation** the cellos and basses visit on the main theme; Beethoven generates massive harmonic and rhythmic friction here which is at last released in a **triple fff (forte-fortissimo!)** restatement of the first theme in the bassoons, cellos, and basses. It's a moment when Beethoven gets rightly carried away with what he's done: that triple forte in the rest of the orchestra is so loud that it tends to obscure the tune in the bass line.

Charles Mackerras **found an excellent solution** in his performance; Colin Davis and Hans Pfitzner (Pfitzner with a theatrical change of tempo) get the balance better than anyone else in my list of recordings.

The third movement is Beethoven's only symphonic minuet: a stately antipode to the Allegretto second movement, people often say, but that's again only if you choose not to hear what Beethoven's doing under the surface of the music. The piece is called only "Tempo di menuetto" - in the "time of a minuet" rather than a real courtly dance, suggesting that Beethoven is playing with instead of inhabiting the genre of the minuet. He luxuriates in a different soundworld from the rest of the symphony – sensuous and lyrical rather than crystalline – and plays with your sense of pulse and metre.

The finale starts with an existential itch: a pianissimo aggravation in the violins that sounds like a scurrying upbeat to a tune that never comes. Instead, after subsiding to piano-pianissimo, there's an **orchestral onslaught**, built over those alternating octaves again, which you'll hear throughout this movement, marking time but fragmenting orchestral space, especially when the **timpani have them** with the bassoons. Beethoven starts his second theme in A flat major, he atomises his itching idea into its constituent elements and disperses it over the orchestra; he manages to wrench the music from F sharp minor and B minor back to F major in an astonishing **sleight of ear**. He creates a Klangfarbenmelodie, a melody of **changing orchestral colour**, a century before Schoenberg and Webern had the idea, he makes silence, dramatic pauses, integral to symphonic discourse in a way the symphony had never done before, and he creates a **barnstorming coda** that seems out of proportion to the rest of the movement, which makes you ask: what on earth just happened? Instead of resolution, the Eighth's fundamental musical questioning goes on long after the piece has finished. And it's quite possible it doesn't have an answer – and just as well, too: keep on listening, and keep on asking those questions!

31st Symphony ('Paris'): Mozart

Symphony guide: Mozart's 31st ('Paris')

'I hope that even these idiots will find something in it to like', wrote the young composer of his Parisian audience. Calculated to please, Mozart's brilliantly wrought and supremely confident symphony is still delighting audiences nearly 250 years later.

Mozart, who was so delighted at the reception of his 31st symphony that he 'had a large ice, said the rosary, as I'd vowed to do, and then went home.'

Paris, spring 1778. The 22-year-old **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** is in the city with his mother. A performance of his **Sinfonia Concertante** has been - he claimed - sabotaged by an Italian composer, **Giuseppe Cambini**, and so to make amends, the director of the public concerts series **Concert Spirituel**, **Joseph Legros**, asks Mozart to write a new symphony. It's a chance for the young composer to make his mark as a newly mature musician with a public to whom he last performed as an infant prodigy on his family's lengthy tour of Europe's courts, when he and his sister were paraded in front of Europe's aristocrats

Father Leopold isn't with his son this time, having stayed at home in Salzburg to appease their employer, **Count Colloredo**. In Paris, **Mozart's mother** is very sick, and she will die shortly after the premiere of this new symphony, his 31st, still known as the "Paris".

This **D major symphony, K297**, is a unique document in Mozart's symphonic canon not just for what the three-movement work does musically, but for what it tells us about how Mozart played with his audience's expectations and reactions, how he consciously manipulated them to achieve the biggest possible effect on Paris's most prestigious stage for instrumental music.

He had no great opinion of Frenchman. He played through his new symphony in private to two friends before the premiere, and wrote to his father: "They both liked it very much. I too am very pleased with it. But whether other people will like it I do not know ... I can vouch for the few intelligent French people who may be there; as for the stupid ones - I see no great harm if they don't like it. But I hope that even these idiots will find something in it to like; and I've taken care not to overlook the premier coup d'archet [A fancy term that simply means all the instruments playing together at the start of a symphony, one of the contemporary fashions of the Concert Spirituel.] ... What a fuss these boors make of this! What the devil! - I can't see any difference - they all begin together - just as they do elsewhere. It's a joke."

And indeed, **the opening movement** of the Paris symphony is one of the grandest, most thrilling sounds Mozart ever made from an orchestra. He revelled in the fact that he could use clarinets for the first time in a symphony, having heard the new instrument for the first time in Mannheim, where he had toured before coming to Paris; there are horns, trumpets, and timpani, and a full compliment of woodwind - flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, the biggest orchestra Mozart had used in a symphonic context. The very opening is almost a parody of that coup d'archet, a unison, forte D in the first two bars that releases its tension in an orchestral firework of an excitably ascending scale in semiquavers in the third bar, and the whole movement is magnificently, swaggeringly confident.

In the first performance on 18 June (after a dress rehearsal that appalled Mozart with the (s)crappiness of the orchestra - "I've never heard worse playing in my life!" - and which made him unsure whether even to turn up for the concert) the Allegro impressed the public with more than its idiot- and crowd-pleasing opening. He wrote to Leopold, "In the middle of the opening Allegro there was a passage that I knew people would like; the whole audience was carried away by it, and there was tremendous applause. But I knew when I

wrote it what sort of an effect it would make, and so I introduced it again at the end, with the result that it was encored." Now, that's fascinating testimony for what it reveals about this Parisian audience, who weren't only clapping between the movements to try and get them encored, but within them, as well. There's debate about exactly which passage Mozart means – Nikolaus Harnoncourt reckons it could be the beautifully scored **few bars here**, with a pizzicato bass line underpinning a subtly changing harmony in the strings and sustaining chords in the woodwinds, Mozart scholar Stanley Sadie thought it could be **this place**, from a little later in the movement, with its chromatic lyricism; I reckon it could have been this **forcibly impressive music**, which rejoices in all the glorious noise Mozart can make from his luxurious orchestral forces.

In fact, the whole symphony is a kind of negotiation and collaboration with ways of listening. The **Andante** exists in two versions, after Legros complained that the first one had too many ideas in it, so Mozart wrote another for when the symphony was repeated on 15 August. No-one's sure which is the first and which the second, but it seems likely the more elaborate movement in 6/8 is the original, and it's this that's usually played: you can listen to the alternate version, **in 3/4 time, here**.

The finale proves the point most of all. Here's Mozart again: "They liked the Andante, too, but most of all the **final Allegro**. I'd heard that all final Allegros, like all opening Allegros begin here with all the instruments playing together, generally in unison [another blessed coup d'archet, in other words], and so I began mine with just the 2 violin, piano for the first eight bars – immediately followed by a forte; the audience (as I expected) said 'Shh!' at the piano – then came the forte. The moment they heard the forte, they started to clap. I was so happy that as soon as the symphony was over I went off to the Palais Royal and had a large ice, said the rosary, as I'd vowed to do, and then went home." More audience intervention as part of the symphony's power, and even, its composition: Mozart says he "expected" the audience to say "Shh!". Mozart is also playing with rhythm as well as dynamic **at the start** of this movement: the first violins are syncopated above the burble of the seconds, which means that the forte seems to come in a beat early when you first hear it. That only amplifies the pleasure of surprise of this music, something Mozart absolutely calculated to achieve.

But the finale is also a miniature masterpiece because of how it layers some brilliantly worked counterpoint underneath the surface of its public spectacle. Mozart composes a **fantastic fugato** in the central section of the movement, music that must have tested the togetherness of the Parisian orchestra, and which would have gone over the heads of the "idiots" in his French audience. A contemporary review, almost certainly of the Paris symphony, remarked, "the composer obtained the commendation of lovers of the kind of music that interests the mind without touching the heart." That sort of thing would become a critical commonplace in contemporary accounts of Mozart's music - that it simply contained too many ideas, too much variety, too much content. No matter. Mozart had skillfully managed to win over the idiots and the savants of his Parisian audience, and written his grandest work of instrumental music so far.

1st Symphony: Tchaikovsky

Symphony guide: Tchaikovsky's First

Tchaikovsky's first symphony remodelled the form into a truly Russian style, staking out territory that his five other symphonies continued to explore

Russia in the 1860s - the land without the symphony. Well, actually that's not quite true: **Anton Rubinstein** had written three, but, based in the language of Mendelssohn and Schumann, they propounded a backward-looking solution to the problem of finding what a Russian symphony might be. Thanks to **the "Five"**, the loose group of composers (Mussorgsky, Borodin, Cui, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Balakirev), Russian musical culture was also trying to define itself as something distinctive rather than derivative, but by the mid-1860s, a truly Russian symphony was still proving elusive.

Bypassing what his elders were up to, the prodigiously gifted 20-something **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky**, just appointed to a job at the Moscow Conservatory, saw a chance to compose his First Symphony and provide what Russian musical culture desperately needed. And, given the ambition of what he was attempting, it's no surprise that the piece caused him a lot of personal pain – it was the single work that gave him more anguish than any other, according to his brother Modest – and that it proved controversial to both factions of the Russian music scene. His conservative, formalist teachers, including Rubinstein, refused to endorse or perform what they saw of the symphony when it was a work-in-progress, and the progressives weren't well-disposed to Tchaikovsky's ambitions either: Cui had written a devastatingly negative review of Tchaikovsky's graduation piece.

That dichotomy between classical conformity – which Rubinstein demanded of symphonic music – and some other kind of still-to-be-discovered Russianness defines the scope of what Tchaikovsky is trying to make happen in his First Symphony. To say it's a musically tall order is putting it mildly. Tchaikovsky was throwing his hat into the most public, prestigious, but risky musical arena you could imagine, competing not just with his fractious, polemicised peers but with the greats of the German symphonic canon. His mental and physical health suffered so much during the composition of the piece that the 26-year-old thought he might not survive.

With these multiple pressures, and with the outside masters he felt he had to please and appease as well as his own pride and ambition, it's miraculous that this **G minor symphony** was completed at all. And the fact that in parts of this piece, Tchaikovsky does more than simply pull off a symphonic-stylistic balancing act but manages to find a melodic and structural confidence that's completely his own, was proof that this 26-year-old symphonic tyro was already on a path to a music that was distinctively his own, yet definitively Russian.

Listen to the **opening of the piece**, and you're already in a symphonic world that a German composer simply couldn't have conceived. There's the sheer melancholic beauty of the melody in the flute and bassoon, but there's also what Tchaikovsky does with it, or rather doesn't do with it. As with both of the main tunes in this movement, Tchaikovsky wants to give his melodies - closed, circular objects rather than Beethovenian cells of symphonic possibility - their full expression, and at the same time create a sense of musical momentum. Tchaikovsky's subtitle for the whole symphony, "Winter Daydreams", and for this movement, "Daydreams on a winter journey", suggest that he wants to let himself off the symphonic hook, as if he's signalling to his listeners that this piece is as much a tone-poem as a symphony. But the first movement doesn't need that excuse: listen to the way he conjures the return to the first tune after the storm and drama of the central section: there's a breathtaking pause for the whole orchestra, and the cellos and basses are reduced to a

shocked palpitation in a harmonic limbo, before the horns steal in with an extraordinarily chromatic meditation which gradually wrenches the music back to the home key, G minor. There's real structural invention in the coda, too, returning the piece to the piano-pianissimo "reverie" with which it opened.

Tchaikovsky calls his **slow movement** "Land of gloom, land of mists", but this piece is in really a land of endless melody, of continual and seductive song, in which Tchaikovsky reveals that he can make a large-scale structure from a pure outpouring of the once-heard, never-forgotten tunes that he composed more brilliantly than any other symphonist of his time - or any other. The paradox is that this new kind of slow movement, something only Tchaikovsky could sustain, took more confidence and more compositional boldness to conceive than any of the other movements that are reliant on pre-existing models. **The scherzo** is a masterful Russian reimagining of a Mendelssohnian flightiness, and then there's **the finale**. For Tchaikovsky scholar **David Brown**, after its folksong-inspired slow introduction, this fourth movement descends into a "rhythmic stodginess" in its obsession with noisy fugal counterpoint – Tchaikovsky proving a point to Rubinstein that he knew all the tricks in the academic book – and ends with a "very noisy, and overblown" coda.

But I think Tchaikovsky deserves that irresistibly over-the-top conclusion: his First Symphony is one of the most important markers in the symphonic story in the 19th century, the piece in which a new type of symphony – absolutely Tchaikovsky's own, and Russia's too – is not just glimpsed, but claimed, staking out the territory his next five symphonies continued to explore. And as well as all that historical significance, it's also one of the most irresistibly attractive first symphonies ever written.

10th Symphony ('Unfinished'): Schubert

Symphony guide: Schubert's Unfinished

Only two movements were completed, but Schubert's eighth symphony stands as one of the greatest, and strangest, of the genre, writes Tom Service

When Schubert began writing his **symphony in B minor** in the autumn of 1822, the 25-year-old Viennese composer was charting new musical terrain. His first **six symphonies** - he cut his teeth on the genre as a teenager in a series of miraculously joyful pieces from 1813 to 1818 - were four years and a compositional epoch ago; two subsequent attempts at symphonies wouldn't get beyond the sketch stage. The most recent masterpieces in the genre were **Beethoven's 7th and 8th**, premiered in 1813 and 1814 in Vienna. By 1822, Schubert was ready to attempt in the symphony what he already done in his songs and had started to glimpse in his piano sonatas and chamber music. Instead of trying to take Beethoven on at his own game of dynamism, dialectic, and confrontation, Schubert found in the music he completed for this **B minor symphony** a way of shaping time and tonality that no other symphonic composer up to this point had managed. In terms of the history of the symphony, this music is unprecedented. To borrow Nikolaus Harnoncourt's phrase (who was originally talking about the draft of the finale of Bruckner's unfinished Ninth Symphony), what Schubert finished of this B minor symphony has all the strangeness, surprise, and shock of a "stone from the moon".

What we know today as Schubert's Unfinished Symphony is the two movements: an **Allegro moderato** and **Andante con moto**. And while there are many musical reasons for its extraordinary power, there may be some biographical factors, too. The syphilis that would kill him six years later had its first serious effects on Schubert's health in 1822, and while it's an affront to his achievement in this symphony (or, say, the **A minor piano sonata** written at the start of 1823, whose expressive world and musical rawness are, if anything, even bleaker) to limit the music to an interpretation that ties it too closely to the biography, there's a fearlessness and directness about this symphony that may come from Schubert's experience of a world of darkness and pain he had not previously encountered.

The music sounds its strangeness from the very beginning. Instead of the self-confident theme, statement, or energy that classical and early romantic symphonies should start with, this symphony **opens with a ghost**, with music that sounds like a revenant of a dream. A pianissimo shadow in the cellos and basses functions as an eight-bar introduction to another musical spectre, the first theme proper of the symphony, an embodiment of melancholy in the **oboe and clarinet** over a nervous shimmer of semiquavers in the strings. Schubert's orchestration signals a different spiritual dimension to this music as well: trombones, last used in a major symphony to triumphant effect in Beethoven's 5th, connote something different here. **Used throughout both movements**, they hark back to their earlier symbolism of the numinous and the uncanny (for example as in Mozart's **Don Giovanni**, in which they are associated with the Commendatore's ghost).

In place of a highly wrought transition to the major-key second theme, there's a musical cross-fade after the orchestra's climactic B minor chord, a harmonic sleight of hand in a few seconds of music as the **horns and bassoons** magic the music to G major. Schubert unveils another pianissimo theme in the cellos and then violins whose apparent major-key serenity, over a gently syncopated accompaniment - like a supernatural accordion - is really a tonal and emotional illusion. In mid-flow, just before you think the music's going to comfortably cadence again, Schubert pulls the **rug out from under your ears** - so to speak. There's a breathtaking pause, and then a plunge into a scalding minor-key fortissimo chord. The rest of the first section stabilises the music's trajectory into G major. But that tranquility doesn't last for long, as Schubert composes

another revelatory few bars that lead back into the spectral opening - if the conductor observes Schubert's repeat sign - as he or she should do - or on into the works' central section.

This central section confronts the ghost of the very start of the symphony head on. This is the Unfinished Symphony's chilling **heart of darkness**: the theme in the cellos and basses is brought from out of the shadows to be revealed with a devastating glare. Apart from some **haunting reminiscences** of the accompaniment of the serene second theme - now sounding all the more disturbing in this precarious context - the whole of the middle of the movement is based on that opening music. Schubert conjures some extraordinary textures: **the tremolo and slow chromatic ascent** in the low strings that creates heartbreaking dissonance; the repetition of a sequence of ever-more intense phrases that builds up to a **full, fortissimo encounter** with the symphony's musical apparition, which in turn catalyses music of menacing energy and contrapuntal ferocity - before the movement returns to the oboe and clarinet theme we heard earlier. **The reprise** of both minor and major-key themes finds new strangenesses in the way Schubert subtly alters what we've heard, as if the music were infected by the darkness we have experienced. **The end of the movement** is no less remarkable: that ghostly theme returns, but Schubert manages to wrest the music towards a B minor resolution instead of another existential exploration of its musical and emotional possibilities.

The second movement, in E major, is also in three beats to the bar, and **many conductors** take a similar if not identical tempo in both movements, which amplifies the strange sense of unity across both pieces. There are specific thematic and gestural connections between them (compare the first cadence in the **Andante** in the bassoons with music **you've recently heard** at the end of the first movement), and on a larger scale, the movements are almost like negative images of each other: you've got a minor key first theme in the Allegro, but major-key opening melody in the Andante; a major key second theme in the first movement, and a minor key second melody in the second (keeping up?... good!). What's more, the second movement's **minor-key theme** floats above exactly the same gently throbbing rhythmic accompaniment that the first movement's second theme does - and the calm of the Andante's opening melody is yet another illusion, as it melts into weird keys and chromaticisms along the way. And in a piece full of sleights of ear, the slow movement has some of the symphony's most discombobulating **transitions**. Marked with three ppps to emphasise the weirdness of what's going on, the first violins twice tease the music into new harmonic realms with just five unaccompanied notes - a stroke of uniquely Schubertian genius - just after you think you've got back to the right key; once, **into A flat major**, and then into what's really **F-flat major** but is actually, enharmonically speaking, the home key of E major, just before the end of the movement... Told you this was illusive music!

Why didn't Schubert write more of the symphony, apart from 20 orchestrated bars of a **fragment of the scherzo**? (You can hear the fragment in **Jonathan Nott's** recording; **Charles Mackerras** gives you **Brian Newbould's completion** of the whole movement and a speculative finale, the Entr'acte that Schubert wrote for the play Rosamunde.) The reasons can only be guesswork: whether they're psychological, connected to the period of illness he went through; musical, in the sense of not feeling he could compose another two movements that would satisfactorily complement the new symphonic dramaturgy of the two completed ones; or simply practical, that having put the piece to one side, he wanted to get on with new projects rather than return to older music? Whatever the reason, it all conspired to mean that the Unfinished Symphony wasn't premiered until 1865 in Vienna - when it would still have sounded ahead of its time. Schubert's C major symphony, known as the Great, which he would complete in 1826, takes a different, more extrovert approach to the symphonic project; only **Bruckner** could be said to follow or continue the Unfinished's true legacy. "Unfinished" it may be in a strictly four-movement structural sense, but this B minor symphony is a complete, essential, and mysterious symphonic experience.

8th Symphony: Dvořák

Symphony guide: Dvořák's Eighth

Dvořák's musical energy showed a way for the late 19th century symphony to be both profound and immediate in its joyful communicative power

So much of the symphonic thinking of the late 19th century is bound up with doing so many things at the same time, through densities of structure and motive, of harmony and counterpoint, that some of the most obvious yet hardest things to achieve in music can get forgotten in a complex symphonic maelstrom of ideas and technicalities. I'm talking about the art of writing tunes: not just any old tunes, either, but composing a whole symphony that teems with tunes that appeal straight to the musical pleasure zones of any listener, but which can also carry and create a whole symphonic edifice.

Which is all an upbeat to this week's symphony, **Antonin Dvořák's Eighth**. I'm not going to cast Dvořák as some earthy Bohemian in touch with his roots in a way that those bunged-up Germans and Austro-Germanophiles could never be: the Eighth, composed in 1889, would be impossible for Dvořák to have imagined without Beethoven and Brahms as models and catalysts. Yet Dvořák does have a gift that neither of his symphonic predecessors had in the same way, which is that he could compose a seemingly unending torrent of **indelible melodies**, and he could cast them in **crystal-clear orchestration**. What's more, in the Eighth Symphony he found a way simultaneously to serve his melodic over-endowment while also creating a kind of symphonic discourse that was definitively his own.

But as well as all of its felicities, this symphony is also, frankly, a popular and even populist pageant of a piece that disguises the brilliance of its construction because its expressive effects are so completely, thrillingly direct, from the miraculous, melancholic waltz of the **third movement** to the **self-assured tune** that propels the finale. But you can't have one without the other, immediacy without architecture: Dvořák's is an art that conceals art, and which appeals on many different levels precisely and paradoxically because this symphony's initial impact is so powerful, because Dvořák has distilled his melodic gifts to their symphonic essence.

I'm making this more tortuous than the experience of listening to this perhaps most joyful of all late 19th century symphonies (but you can't have true joy without a sense of darkness, which this piece also contains). So let's begin, with a symphony in G major, as it says on the tin, that actually starts in an **achingly expressive G minor** with a tune in the cellos, and music that's supposed to be an Allegro con brio ("with movement"), but which sounds in all the world like an andante. A **bird-like, arpeggiated tune** in the flute signals the movement's true tempo and tonality, but there's still the feeling of an introduction about this section of the symphony, as if Dvořák's just warming us all up for what's to come. You could describe this as an unprecedented elision of time, tonality, and structure in Dvořák's music – which it is! - but the effect it has on you is of unforced naturalness. All of that music comes before a **palpitating, perfectly judged crescendo** gives way to the main theme of the movement in the strings. Well, I say "main theme": there are a lot of them in this first movement! Instead of Dvořák pulling his melodic material together in some pseudo-'organic' coherence, it's rather that he gives all his tunes space to breathe while also ensuring that they have some resemblances to each other so as to keep them in your ears and brain. That's true on a much bigger scale as well: for example, the **main tune** of the variations in the finale is based on the same rising arpeggio as the flute's bird-song, which also relates to the first tune you hear in the **third movement**, and it's expressively comparable to some of the **chirruping woodwind music** in the slow movement.

The first movement has its most thrilling and adventurous moment at the **stormy climax** of its central section, which also functions as a **kind of bridge** to what was the second subject area of the exposition. Ah, those labels – second subject, exposition – how useless they are (as ever) in describing the experience of listening to this piece! The first movement is really in two parts, because you hear what you think is a **return to the opening music** just over a third of the way through the movement, and then the rest of the Allegro is really an improvisation on those themes, and it ends in a marvellously brusque coda.

I hear **the slow movement** – in C minor, but it also contains a lot of triumphant, fanfare-festooned music in a major key – as a kind of ironic homage to the C minor funeral march from **Beethoven's Eroica Symphony**. Some of the melodies and gestures of Dvořák's symphony are similar to Beethoven's, but Dvořák transforms the oppressive tragedy of his Beethovenian model into something **much more optimistic**. The fanfares in the brass might also derive from those strange militaristic irruptions in the slow movement of **Beethoven's Ninth Symphony**, but Dvořák's heartfelt, and hard-won joyfulness by the end of the Adagio is his own achievement. Hard-won? For sure: listen to the **chromatic darkness** Dvořák creates at the centre of the movement, just when you think the music has found its positivity and major-key solidity; the way the cellos and basses subside into a new and dangerous tonal region, called out by the horns and woodwind – the most chilling image of doubt in the whole symphony.

The Allegretto third movement **is pure melancholic deliciousness**, and the finale, starting with that bracing trumpet fanfare (as Dvořák's Czech countryman, conductor Rafael Kubelik, has pointed out, trumpets in Bohemia are calls to the dance, not to war) pricks the potential pomposity of the cello theme you hear next with **raucous brass writing**. Here, it's as if an East-European brass band have suddenly taken over the orchestra – and contains, for me, the symphony's most thrilling moment: the major-key breakthrough of the trumpet call, now accompanied by the whole orchestra, after a **violently visceral minor-key episode**. **After a magnificently lyrical come-down** after all this excitement, **the very end of the symphony** is pure, unalloyed joy, as the music threatens to run away with itself – so much so, it trips up, and ends on the wrong beat of the bar.

Dvořák's musical energy didn't just transfuse new life into his own music, it showed a way for the late 19th century symphony to be profound in its musical implications as well as brilliant and immediate in its communicative power, without all that Teutonic introversion and angst. It's 35 minutes (or so) of life-enhancing joy.

102nd Symphony ('The Miracle'): Haydn

Symphony guide: Haydn's 102nd (The Miracle)

On his visits to London, Haydn discovered audiences who were eager to be surprised – and he met their expectations.

The evening of 2 February, 1795, at the King's Theatre, London. The audience awaits with keen anticipation the performance of a new symphony by the city's most famous musical visitor, the 62-year-old **Joseph Haydn**. It is a time of war, revolutionary fervour, and establishment-threatening radicalism. As the concert advertised that Haydn would direct the new piece himself "from the Pianofort", the audience "pressed forward towards the orchestra", as AC Dies reported, trying to see the master at close range. That neatly emptied the middle of parterre of spectators, which meant that when a chandelier crashed from the ceiling into the floor, it conveniently hit only empty seats rather than bewigged heads. "Miracle! miracle!" the audience shouted. As Dies wrote: "Haydn himself was much moved, and thanked merciful Providence who

had allowed it to happen that he could, to a certain extent, be the reason, or the machine, by which at least thirty persons' lives were saved. Only a few of the audience received minor bruises."

No less miraculous than those few bruises was the symphony Haydn was about to perform. Confusingly, this isn't the symphony with the epithet "**The Miracle**", no 96; the chandelier actually fell at the first performance of Haydn's 102nd symphony, in B flat major. All **12 of the symphonies** Haydn wrote for his two trips to London – in 1791 and 1795 – prove how he developed the symphony from courtly entertainment to public spectacle. Simultaneously, these pieces mark a watershed in what the symphony means in social and even political terms, and they mark an expansion of the symphony's musical ambitions. I could have chosen any of the pieces known as numbers 93-104; 102 just happens to be a favourite.

By the time Haydn was preparing for his second visit to London, he knew what to expect from his audiences. He knew how much this middle-class audience of concert-goers – among the first properly public, as opposed to aristocratic, audiences for symphonic music in history – understood and appreciated his invention, his games of expectation and surprise, his effortless manipulation of genre, affect, and expressivity. And he knew he could push them and himself even further when he came back, when his celebrity and status were even greater than before. That means these symphonies are, in effect, palimpsests of listening, pieces composed with their effectiveness for a musically literate audience in mind. Haydn needed to keep surprising his London audiences, and to do that, he became still more skilful and economical – as well as bold and chandelier-breakingly shocking – in his deployment of his symphonic resources.

In the 102nd Symphony, that plays out in the **lyrical slow introduction** Haydn composes at the very start of the piece, whose alternation of serenity and aching chromatic harmony dissolves in a delicious filigree of flute arpeggio **before the main vivace section** of the movement. Haydn turns this movement into a miniature musical roller-coaster of the flouting of classical conventions. Just when you think you've safely arrived at the end of the first part of the movement in a stable key, **a steamroller-like (to mix various mechanical metaphors) semibreve** stops the music in its tracks, before Haydn wrenches the music back to where it's supposed to be. In **the central section** of the vivace, Haydn atomises his themes into discombobulated fragments, puts them together in some chaotic high-octane counterpoint, and then engineers a return to the main theme. But all is not as it seems: we're in the wrong key, so Haydn plunges us back into a tempestuous modulatory foment before the movement's real moment of return, 40 bars later.

Haydn's symphonic rhetoric is so brilliantly calibrated that you feel the drama of the music instinctively without needing a background of keys, structures, and conventions – but his first audiences in the 1790s would certainly have understood what was going on. **The slow movement**, a transcription of the adagio from his F sharp minor Piano Trio, features some of Haydn's most dream-like music, yet the idyll of the solo cello obbligato underneath the ornate, ornamented main melody is **unsettlingly accentuated** by the soft pulses of the timpani. In **the Menuet** that comes next, it's the **languid trio** that stands out for me, especially with the chromatic inflections of **its second section**. **And the finale**, after its impish beginnings, finds some obsessive moments of momentum and joyously **churning dissonance** that Beethoven must have known: the finales of his **Second** and even **Seventh** symphonies are foreshadowed in passages like this. But Haydn's 102nd, just like all of his London symphonies, consecrates a moment in symphonic history when this composer and his listeners were in excellent, mutually appreciative accord, a bond that's renewed every time this symphony is played or listened to today.

8th Symphony: Bruckner

Symphony guide: Bruckner's Eighth

A contemporary critic slated its 'nightmarish hangover style', but Bruckner's last completed symphony contains music of sheer, breathtaking magnificence

Anton Bruckner's Eighth Symphony is the last he would complete. He never lived to finish his Ninth (although he came agonisingly close to **completing the finale**, music that's still shamefully little heard in concert halls), so the Eighth is the summation of his symphonic journey. And what a summit the Eighth is! Bruckner himself said when he finished the work's gigantic, revelatory finale: "Hallelujah!... The Finale is the most significant movement of my life." Themes from all of the work's huge movements sound together at the end of the symphony, a moment that burns with what Robert Simpson calls a "blazing calm". It's the end point of a 75-minute (well, up to 100-minute, if you're conductor **Sergiu Celibidache**...) symphonic journey, and it's one of the most existentially thrilling experiences a symphony has ever created. Bruckner's achievement is to make you feel, when you get there, that the whole experience of the piece is contained and transfigured in this crowning coming-together of **symphonic space and time**, and that the work's sublime darknesses - like the **terrifying abysses of dissonance** in the first movement, the kind of music that conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler described as Bruckner's "battle of demons" - and its equally transcendent light, like the **climax of the slow movement**, are simultaneously vindicated and vanquished by the sheer, breathtaking magnificence of **this music**, the last symphonic coda that Bruckner would ever compose.

But Bruckner's journey to the work's first performance, by the Vienna Philharmonic in 1892, was as tortuous as the music is (sometimes) serene. He finished a **first version of the piece** in 1887, and sent it to the conductor Hermann Levi, "my artistic father", who had already conducted the seventh symphony with huge success in Munich. Levi rejected the piece, saying it was basically unperformable; Bruckner was wounded, but returned to the piece to effectively recompose it over the next few years. And instead of the weak-minded naif who never got over people's criticism - as Bruckner is sometimes described - his revision amounts to a much deeper act of recomposition than simply answering Levi's concerns. The first movement ended in 1887 with a major-key triumph; **in 1892**, the audience heard instead music that winds down in minor-key desolation with a repeated, exhausted, **death-rattle of a sigh** in the violas. Bruckner himself wrote about this desperate moment, the only time in his life that he composed a symphonic first movement that didn't end with a fanfare of fortissimo power: "this is how it is when one is on his deathbed, and opposite hangs a clock, which, while his life comes to its end, beats on ever steadily: tick, tock, tick, tock". The other movements were also subtly but profoundly recalibrated; the effect is an intensification and sharpening of focus of Bruckner's musical ideas.

So all should have been set for the greatest night of his life at the premiere. And while the Musikverein was full of the great and good, including Johannes Brahms, Hugo Wolf and Johann Strauss, and with Bruckner's partisan supporters out in force, the naysayers were there as well. Brahms thought of Bruckner's works as "symphonic boa-constrictors", and the critic Eduard Hanslick - who left before the symphony's finale - wrote grudgingly, "In each of the four movements, especially the first and third, some interesting passages, flashes of genius, shine through - if only the rest of it was not there! It is not impossible that the future belongs to this nightmarish hangover style - a future we therefore do not envy!" Just as well he didn't stay till the end, Bruckner thought; he would only have become "even angrier".

Today, Bruckner's Eighth should still be controversial. This is a piece that is attempting something so extraordinary that if you're not prepared to encounter its expressive demons, or to be shocked and awed by the places Bruckner's imagination takes you, then you're missing out on the essential experience of the

symphony. If you think of Bruckner only as a creator of symphonic cathedrals of mindful - or mindless, according to taste - spiritual contemplation, who wields huge chunks of musical material around like an orchestral stone mason with implacable, monumental perfection, then you won't hear the profoundly disturbing drama of what he's really up to. That unsettling darkness is sounded right at the start of this symphony. Instead of setting out on a journey in which the outcome is certain, in which everything is its rightful place in the symphonic, tonal, and structural universe, Bruckner builds his grandest symphonic edifice on musical quicksand. The Eighth starts with an **unstable tremor of a semitone in the violas, cellos, and basses**, which turns into a snaking, searching, chromatic collection of fragments. It's not so much a theme as a series of atomic musical explorations, and all of them in the wrong key. This is a symphony 'in' C minor, and yet in the early stages of the first movement, that home key is confirmed more by how much Bruckner avoids it instead of how much he inhabits it. You can describe the progress of this whole opening movement in terms of sonata forms and second and third themes and the other trainspotting jargon of the symphonic rulebook, but that scarcely relates to the experience of living inside this music, which is what you will feel happens when you hear it. One special moment to listen out for: the **cataclysm** at the centre of the movement that results in one of the emptiest, most desolate musical landscapes Bruckner, or anyone else, ever conceived: a single flute that somehow survives the onslaught to play a remnant of the orchestral tutti over tolling, funereal tattoos in the trumpets and chromatic sighs in the basses.

All of this intensity invites a search for meaning. Bruckner's music is open to our imaginations, and he even suggested possible interpretations himself for the symphony. In a letter to the conductor Felix Weingartner, he said that **the scherzo**, which comes second in this symphony (the first time Bruckner places the scherzo before the slow movement in a symphony) is a portrait of the figure of "German Michael", a bucolic rustic from German folk tradition. The somnolent, radiant, harp-haloed **trio section** of the scherzo depicts Michael dreaming, Bruckner says.

The opening of the finale is inspired by the Cossacks, as the Russians had recently visited the Austrian Emperor, to whom the Eighth is dedicated; this movement also features 'the death march and then (brass) transfiguration. Bruckner doesn't talk about the slow movement, but the adagio, the third movement, is the huge, generous heart of the symphony; **a consoling, palpitating dream** in D flat major whose opening is the closest Bruckner ever came to an evocation of the erotic; yet that bodily experience is transfigured into a **blindingly radiant climax** that seems to speak for the universe rather than mere individual figures.

Or maybe that's just me: you will make up your own mind, because the power of this piece can't be limited by any single interpretation, whether that's Bruckner's words, or the vision a particular conductor has of this symphony. But as you listen to that awe-inspiring but intimate, visionary but coherent finale - whose drama again can't be explicated by the crude pigeonholes of musical rules and regulations; instead, its "form" is phenomenological, something you just have to experience - I think you should hear the **darkness as much as the "blazing calm"** of the coda. It's in its acceptance of doubt, darkness, and despair that this symphony achieves its real glory. Bruckner's Eighth is an act of enormous empathetic consolation because it's unafraid to confront and to recognise sublime terror and darkness as well as light. Just like him when he wrote the piece, you need to feel engaged in that "battle of demons" when you're listening. Enjoy - if that's the right word!

1st Symphony: Mahler

Symphony guide: Mahler's First

The Austrian composer's first symphony meshed the imagination and narrative of the symphonic poem with the architectural cohesion of earlier models. His crazily ambitious project changed the genre for ever.

It's one of the most spellbinding moments of symphonic inspiration in the 19th century: the opening of **Gustav Mahler's First Symphony**. It's not a theme, an idea, a melody, or a rhythm, but a state of being: a seven-octave-spread A, played as quietly and ethereally as possible by the strings, a shimmer of sonority that sounds out the whole compass of the orchestra. It's the symphony as space as much as time, and whatever its familiarity to us 21st century sophisticates, when we hear this music, we should try and recreate some of the sense of wonder that audiences at the piece's premiere in Budapest in 1889 must have felt, when Mahler - not yet 30 - conducted the symphony.

That's only the first of the stunning symphonic shocks of the new in this symphony. And while it's possible to trace an ancestry of this ultra-spacious opening through the inchoate rustlings that start many of Bruckner's symphonies, which Mahler knew well (he had transcribed Bruckner's 3rd for two pianos as a teenager), back to the primeval beginnings of Beethoven's 9th, the stasis and quietness of Mahler's 1st takes those models into another dimension. You can't possibly know it at this stage of the piece, but this is going to

also be the most earthy symphony yet written, with a **slow movement** that incorporates street bands, klezmer inflections, and the tune known as "Frère Jacques", and whose **final movement** will rail against the cosmos with symphonic music's most terrifying expressionist outburst, and which, at the end of its drama, will find a sheer musical joy that's both a transcendence of the bodily and the spiritual, in the most **uninhibited, tumultuous noise** the orchestra had yet made.

Back in 1889, the piece had five movements instead of the four you hear in concert halls today, and it also had a narrative of sorts, implicit in the title - Titan - Mahler gave his piece. He wrote out some of the meanings of his "Titan: a Tone Poem in the Form of a Symphony" at a later performance in 1893: the first movement represents "the waking of Nature after a long winter"; there originally followed the movement - "**Blumine**" - that he subsequently withdrew from the symphony; the Scherzo meanwhile was "The wind in my sails". Mahler says that the slow movement, with its opening double-bass solo (probably, although not definitively, the whole double-bass section rather than a single player) with the Frère Jacques tune, is a satiric cartoon of "The Hunter's Funeral" turned into musical life, a vision of a hunter's coffin drawn by animals; the finale he calls "Dall'Inferno" - From Hell, "the sudden explosion of despair coming from a deeply wounded heart".

By 1896, however, Mahler was calling the piece merely "Symphony in D Major". The change of thinking is typical for Mahler, who rejected most of the programmes he devised for his other early symphonies. But it's not because the "so-called Titan" no longer suggested all of those programmatic images, but rather that Mahler didn't want to limit the music's range of possible meanings, which are wilder, more cosmic, and more profound than any single programmatic formulation could suggest. It's also because, as Mahler must have realised, this piece contains and represents the world of nature, a world of human satire, of personal emotional trauma turned into universal experience, but it achieves all of that through the nuts and bolts of the precision of its notes (even if they were notes that Mahler was tinkering with all his life; even after the last time he performed this symphony, in New York in 1909, Mahler was making changes to the orchestration).

Composer **George Benjamin told me about his favourite note in the symphony** - the tuba's low F in the first movement - but there are plenty of others! There's the way the symphony's final victory is prefigured in the music you hear in the fast section of the first movement, the achingly moving slow music at the centre of the finale that balances the terrifying cry into the abyss the movement opens with, the way Mahler paces the final climax, storming the orchestral heavens with an apotheosis of D major.

Mahler's First laid down the gauntlet for a new kind of symphony that would fuse the imagination and narrative of the symphonic poem with the architectural cohesion of earlier models. And more: in meshing them together, and by incorporating everything from the sounds of the world around him, in nature and on the street, to his latest poetic and philosophical obsessions, Mahler wanted his symphonic journey to encompass the whole world. It's the most crazily ambitious symphonic project in the genre's history - and it starts here.

2nd Symphony: Schumann

Symphony guide: Schumann's 2nd

In which Schumann reinvented his own compositional language and created an alternative way of thinking about the symphony – despite the onset of the syphilis that was eventually to kill him

Here's the thing. If you were writing a symphony in the 1830s or 1840s, you were faced with a pretty mighty challenge. Beethoven's symphonies were still being digested by a variously admiring, comprehending and baffled world, but there was something monstrous about the gauntlet the ninth symphony had thrown down. Who could go further? How could you take the **ninth's structural grandiosity** and metaphysical, choral power to greater heights than those Ludwig had already scaled? The truth is, you couldn't: not **Mendelssohn**, not **Berlioz**, not **Spohr**, not even **Schubert** (whose own ninth symphony was brought to the public for the first time by Schumann and Mendelssohn in 1839) attempted anything like the ninth. What you had to do was to find a different approach to the symphony, a way of renewing the form without having to emulate Beethoven's **cosmic crankiness**.

By the mid 1840s, Robert Schumann, in his 30s, was on the cusp of a new kind of composition. He already had significant symphonic experience: there was the miraculously sunny **B flat major work** he had written in just four days, the "Spring" Symphony; a **D minor piece** trying out an experimental structure that elided each movement into the next, a piece that would later become known as his 4th symphony; and there was another ambitious symphonic hybrid in his **Overture, Scherzo, and Finale**. There was also an early and incomplete symphony in G minor, now known as the "**Zwickau**".

But the inspirations for what would (rather erroneously) become known as Schumann's second symphony, composed over 1845 and 1846, sidestepped symphonic grandiosity. Instead, Schumann found in **Bach's counterpoint** the bracing intellectual challenge he felt he needed after years living on his compositional instincts. But as well as paying homage to Bach and to Beethoven (the Ludwig of songs, not the imposing symphonist), the C major second symphony is also rooted in the crisis in Schumann's personal life. He had started to feel the first effects of the syphilitic infection that would eventually kill him; he wrote that his illness – hearing problems, depression, dizziness, rheumatism – is inscribed in the fabric of the piece. "I would say that my resistant spirit had a visible influence on it and it is through that that I sought to fight my condition. The first movement is full of this combativeness, is very moody and rebellious in character."

Yet what you hear at **the start of the symphony** seems superficially serene: a quiet, long-breathed fanfare in the brass, an endlessly meandering string line, like a far-off vision of prayer at some mist-shrouded gothic cathedral. As the conductor **Kenneth Woods** says, there's a combination here of a Bachian choral prelude and a possible quotation from Haydn (that simple fanfare is a version of the music Haydn uses at the start of **his last symphony**, number 104; but if it's a conscious reference, Schumann replaces Haydn's assurance with shadows, ambiguities, and doubts). The moodiness or rebelliousness comes from the way Schumann's chromatic lines undermine the certainty of the fanfare idea, and that's just the first of the churning conflicts that this opening movement sets up. Schumann **melts the boundary** from the introduction into the main allegro through a masterly transition that pulls the rug from under you, and he makes the whole first movement rhythmically and harmonically unstable, so the tunes you hear on the surface are being continually buffeted by **strange undercurrents and disturbances**.

Yet despite Schumann's protestations, this isn't a piece that mawkishly wears its heart on its sleeve. Instead, if there is a relationship between his physical state and the music of the symphony, it's in the work's feverish concentration of ideas, and its polyphony of styles. The way they are fused together amounts to a symphonic

solution that's definitively Schumann's own. After the skittish, unsettled start to **the second, scherzo movement**, one of the contrasting trios creates another **Bach-like texture**, a chorale that disappears like a dream before the chromatic whirlwind engulfs it. **The slow movement** is the most contemporary – in its aching, restrained emotion – and ancient of the symphony, given that the main melody is based on a work of Bach's that Schumann had recently been studying, **the Musical Offering**.

But it's **the finale** that's the most original shape. After a helter-skelter march – **Kenneth Woods** again points out another possible reference here, this time to Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* – much of the music is based on transformations of the tunes you heard in the slow movement. However, Schumann saves a new melody until nearly **half-way through the movement**. When it first appears in the strings, it sings of calm serenity in the middle of the joyous sound and fury you've heard so far. This tune is yet another allusion, to Beethoven's song-cycle **An die ferne Geliebte**, music that originally set the words "Take them then, these songs". Schumann's symphony is a gift of a new kind of symphonic song for the mid 19th century.

Schumann said that he had started to feel better by the time he wrote the finale, but the whole of the second symphony bears witness to an astonishing creative vigour and strength that Schumann found at one of the most difficult times of his life. He didn't just reinvent his own compositional language, he created an alternative way of thinking about the symphony – and produced one of the richest, most compelling pieces he would ever write.

6th Symphony: Haydn

Symphony guide: Haydn's 6th

The first of Haydn's Esterhazy symphonies, in *Le Matin* nothing is taken for granted, and its musical structure is full of startling moments

How else should the most productive period of symphonic composition in the 18th century - indeed of all time - begin but with a **sunrise**? The sixth symphony is the first that **Joseph Haydn** wrote for the court at Esterhazy, where he was employed from 1761, and where his nearly thirty-year working relationship with **Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy** would change symphonic history. The relative isolation of Esterhazy "forced me to become original", as Haydn later put it, and pretty well every Esterhazy symphony he wrote (and there are around 70 or thereabouts, from Haydn's complete symphonic tally of 104 - officially, or 106 if you're being more precise), shows how he created a completely new repertory for his court musicians.

In "*Le Matin*" (not Haydn's moniker) you can hear how he hit the ground running. Not yet 30, Haydn had already mastered instrumental music in the central decades of the 18th century, a time in which everything was in flux: how you shaped a piece, what you called it, how your harmony was going to function, and what it all meant. Outwardly, *Le Matin* looks like it establishes a template of the four-movement design that would dominate symphonic thinking, but what's thrilling about this piece is that you never feel that he's just filling out a form for the sake of it. Nothing is taken for granted, right from that six-bar sunrise of a **slow introduction** that heralds the allegro. It's a miniature piece of tone-painting magic, that sunrise, as it glows from pianissimo to fortissimo, from the smallest of sounds and scales to a grand public statement. No surprise that it subsequently inspired its "*Le Matin*" nickname (Haydn's next two symphonies were also given titles, "*Le Midi*" and "*Le Soir*", making a neat symphonic triptych for the times of day).

There are some startling moments in the music's structure: the way the horn preempts the return of the main tune before the rest of the orchestra gets there in **the first movement** (exactly the same gag Beethoven would use, incidentally, in his **Eroica Symphony**, when the horns seem to come in a few bars early before the recapitulation of the opening movement; Haydn was the daddy of this kind of thing nearly 50 years earlier), the dream-like adagio at the start and end of the **second movement**; or the playfully but also painfully acidulous dissonance Haydn creates a couple of times **in the finale**, a moment of deliberately deliciously delayed resolution.

But what's most remarkable about this piece, and symphonies 7 and 8 as well, is how Haydn makes the discourse of the whole symphony a continual interplay of soloists playing within the ensemble. You might expect a flute, oboe or violin solo, but the duet for **double-bass and bassoon** soloists in the trio of the third movement is a joyously startling surprise, as is the **frantic cello obbligato** in the finale, which also features yelping horn calls and some virtuosic writing for the solo violinist – which could have been Haydn himself in Esterhazy.

This symphony is a compositional tour-de-force, in fusing all those solo voices into a bigger symphonic design, and creating an ideal dialogue between chamber music playfulness and the biggest canvas Haydn could compose on at the time (even if his orchestra probably numbered only 15 players or so), and in heralding the sheer musical inventiveness and astonishing rate of production of Haydn's next decades. But besides all that, it's also proof of Haydn's sensitivity and generosity, in writing a piece that would show off to the Prince the quality of his players, which would entertain them, their patron - and, as it turns out, posterity.

38th Symphony ('Prague'): Mozart

Symphony guide: Mozart's 38th - 'Prague'

In the third in **his symphony series**, Tom Service goes back to 1786 Prague and Mozart's 38th symphony, in which you can hear the composer straining at the limits of what his orchestra, and the form, can do.

The 30-year-old Mozart hadn't written a symphony for three years when he started composing **a new piece for Prague** at the end of 1786, the Bohemian city where *The Marriage of Figaro* was going down much more of a storm than it had in Vienna.

Since the Linz Symphony of 1783, Mozart had pushed himself as a composer and musician in all possible directions: he had incarnated pretty well his own genre of the piano concerto and had already brought it to astonishing heights; as an opera composer, he was embarked on those epoch-making collaborations with Lorenzo da Ponte, starting with *Figaro*; and in the six string quartets he dedicated to Haydn, published the year before, he challenged himself - and his listeners and performers - to attain a new kind of chamber-music consciousness. All that, and he had begun seriously to investigate earlier Baroque repertoires.

In the Prague, you hear the effect of all these expanding musical horizons on Mozart's idea of what a symphony could be. This is really the first of Mozart's symphonies - and he had written at least 36 before (**no. 37** is a misnomer) - in which Mozart transforms the social and entertainment functions of a piece of grand orchestral music into signifiers of a different kind of discourse. In virtually every bar of this piece, you hear him straining at the limits of what his invention, his orchestra, and the symphony can do.

Some crazy facts before we get down to the counterpoint. The Prague has three movements rather than the by then conventional four; Mozart does without the minuet because of the scale of this symphony's first movement and the andante; the tune at the start of the finale is a quote from *The Marriage of Figaro*, exploding the **little duet between Susanna and Cherubino** in Act II into a **dazzling presto** that's by turns coquettish and muscularly dissonant; **the slow movement** is the most operatically lyrical and emotionally varied he had yet composed in a symphony; and the first movement starts with the most **expressively extreme slow introduction** to a symphony in the history of the genre.

And it's that opening movement, above all its main allegro, that is the Prague's most endlessly fascinating phenomenon. That's to do with a combination of its structure, its size, and its contrapuntal complexity. This is the longest single symphony movement of the 18th century. In fact, if you perform it observing Mozart's repeat-marks (not just the first half, as conventionally the case, but the second as well) it's longer - longer! - in performance than the supposedly genre-smashingly massive opening movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony. But it also attempts something that the *Eroica*, even, does not. In its teeming concatenation of motives that you hear at the start of the allegro (a patchwork assemblage of ideas that makes a nonsense of the conventional analytical parsing into "first theme" and "second theme", incidentally, if you're following a sonata/symphonic-form rule-book) the Prague sets out Mozart's biggest compositional challenge as a symphonist so far. His task is to give coherence to this superabundance of invention. And, thankfully, he doesn't quite manage it.

What I mean is that in trying to tame his riotous creativity, he creates a tumult of symphonic imagination that transcends mere coherence or comprehensibility. In the second section, the orchestra embarks on the most multi-layered polyphonic texture a symphony had yet been asked to sustain. Mozart brings together the motives he has exposed in the symphony so far, and combines them in a contrapuntal crucible that's one of the most thrilling things you can hear an orchestra play. And play again: there's a reason Mozart asks the

second half of the movement to be repeated – you need at least another time around the block to make sense of what's going on. In fact, a lifetime of listening won't exhaust its riches. That's my experience, at least. In these performances, it might be yours, too.

5th Symphony: Beethoven

Symphony guide: Beethoven's 5th

In the first in his new series Tom Service looks at the most famous, and influential, symphonic work of them all

Da-Da-Da-DUM... the opening bars of Beethoven's 5th symphony.

And so, it begins. **Beethoven's Fifth Symphony** sounds its hammer blows of fate; or perhaps those four notes are a transcription of the song of a **Viennese yellow-hammer**; or a symbol of war-time victory; or a transformation of a Cherubini **choral song**. Those first notes of Beethoven's symphony have been heard, interpreted, and explained as all those things and more. It's the single most famous symphonic trajectory of expressive minor-key darkness to coruscating major-key light.

They're notes that are so familiar that we don't even hear them properly today. Quite possibly the only life-forms who now really hear the ambiguities in the opening of **Beethoven's 1808 symphony** are infants or extra-terrestrials. What I mean is that this symphony doesn't begin in C minor - the key it says it's in on the title page. In fact, it's not until the four-note rhythm is played a third time that we really know we're in C minor, rather than what could be E flat major. You see, if you hum the **first four pitches of the piece** – da-da-da-DUM; da-da-da-DUM, you could still conceivably be listening to a symphony in a major key, if you were next to sing the note of your first "DUM" and harmonise it with a major chord... Apologies if this is getting a bit da-da-ist, or quite possibly dum-dum-ist, but the point is that this is only the first way that music we take for granted – the single most forceful, electrifying, and recognisable opening to a symphony – is actually much more complex and multi-layered than we realise.

The power, concentration and white-hot compression of Beethoven's music is staggering. The **first movement** creates its tumultuous organic chemistry of interrelationships from the atomic particles of the notes it started with; in different guises, the four-note rhythmic idea permeates the rest of the symphony as well; then comes the elaborate variations of the **slow movement**, and its teeming effulgence of string writing that is a lyrical, long-breathed structural counterpoint to the first movement's explosive fragments. **The scherzo** is one of Beethoven's most obvious borrowings from Mozart: he quotes and subtly transforms the opening of the finale of **Mozart's 40th Symphony** to create his own theme; and out of this world of shadows the horns blare out another version of the 3+1 rhythmic idea, this time reduced to a single pitch. The transition from the **scherzo to the finale** is one of the dramatic masterstrokes of orchestral music. From an entropic mist of desolate memories of the scherzo's opening theme, underscored by the timpani's ominous heartbeat, the violins' arpeggios climb until they reach a tremolo, a crescendo and a blaze of unadulterated C major glory - and the **start of the finale**, with its trombones, piccolo, and contrabassoon, all held in reserve by Beethoven until this climactic movement.

Thanks to the **less-than-ideal conditions of its first performance in December 1808**, it took time for the Fifth to become the symphony of symphonies that embodied all of the power and possibilities of instrumental music, the template for a journey from tragedy to triumph that would become a musical and dramatic blueprint for all subsequent symphonic composers.

Beethoven's contemporary **ETA Hoffmann** wrote in 1813 **that the Fifth incarnated the romantic axiom that orchestral music, untethered to words or other worldly concepts, could glimpse "the realm of the infinite"**. This symphony, Hoffman wrote, "sets in motion the machinery of awe, of fear, of terror, of pain, and awakens that infinite yearning which is the essence of romanticism". And that became a whole way of thinking about this symphony and many others, as "pure" or abstract music. But that means you lose sight of

what the symphony is trying to do. And what we're at last realising, more than two centuries on, is that the Fifth inhabits the "realm of the infinite" not because it escapes meaning or significance, but because it's saturated by intra- and extra-musical meanings. Read the father of artificial intelligence, **Marvin Minsky**, on what and how the first few bars of the Fifth Symphony communicate in our brains. From the other side of the debate, **John Eliot Gardiner** hears - and conducts - the piece as a gloss on the hopes, dreams, and tunes of the French revolution, identifying one of the themes in the finale as related to a melody by **Rouget de l'Isle**, the composer of the Marseillaise.

The Fifth is still a contested space, in terms of how it's played, how it's thought of, and even in terms of its text (another other things, a debate rages to this day about whether the repeat of the scherzo should be observed or not). Its familiarity is a sign not of its exhaustion, but of its endless potential for renewal. All we have to do is keep thinking, keep listening, and keep alive the possibility to be stunned by this symphony, whether you hear it as a metaphysical progress (listen to **Wilhelm Furtwängler**) or a blood-and-thunder protest (**John Eliot Gardiner**). Simultaneously, miraculously, it's all that - and more!