

Sir John Barbirolli, CH (2 December 1899 – 29 July 1970), né Giovanni Battista Barbirolli, was a British conductor and cellist. He is remembered above all as conductor of the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, which he helped save from dissolution in 1943 and conducted for the rest of his life. Earlier in his career he was Arturo Toscanini's successor as music director of the New York Philharmonic, serving from 1936 to 1943. He was also chief conductor of the Houston Symphony from 1961 to 1967, and was a guest conductor of many other orchestras, including the BBC Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, the Philharmonia, the Berlin Philharmonic and the Vienna Philharmonic, with all of which he made recordings.



Born in London of Italian and French parentage, Barbirolli grew up in a family of professional musicians. After starting out as a cellist, he was given the chance to conduct, from 1926 with the British National Opera Company, and then with Covent Garden's touring company. On taking up the conductorship of the Hallé he had less opportunity to work in the opera house, but in the 1950s he conducted productions of works by Verdi, Wagner, Gluck, and Puccini at Covent Garden with such success that he was invited to become the company's permanent musical director, an invitation he declined. Late in his career he made several recordings of operas, of which his 1967 set of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* for EMI is probably the best known.

Both in the concert hall and on record, Barbirolli was particularly associated with the music of English composers such as Elgar, Delius and Vaughan Williams. His interpretations of other late romantic composers, such as Mahler and Sibelius, as well as of earlier classical composers, including Schubert, are also still admired.

Mahler Symphony No. 9

Sir John Barbirolli

Berliner Philharmoniker

Where *Das Lied von der Erde* ended with gentle resignation, here Mahler attacks death head-on with music of profound violence and irony. The grim character of the music, certain cryptic phrases Mahler marked into the drafts of the symphony, and the recurring use of an unusual motive and chord progression from Beethoven's "Les adieux" Sonata, Op. 81, have led commentators to believe that this symphony is autobiographical, a kind of "farewell" symphony. Since Mahler immediately proceeded to the composition of his Tenth Symphony, though, this interpretation is without real merit. It seems sufficient to accept that death, once again, is simply an obsessive theme.

Musically, what is new in this symphony is a synthesis of the sharp-edged style of the Sixth and Seventh with the rarefied, contrapuntal technique of *Das Lied*. Combined with Mahler's increasingly advanced harmony and sophisticated thematic development, the result is music that is more closely allied with the expressionism of Schoenberg than with Mahler's earlier romanticism. At times it approaches a complete collapse of tonality, blurring traditional thematic and tonal differentiations in a totally modernistic way.

Andante comodo (Moving.) This powerful and devastating movement begins innocently enough with gentle figures in the strings, harp, and horns and expands into a beautifully resigned, sighing theme. Soon it is interrupted by a chromatic and despairing theme. These two ideas alternate in various forms, rising to several great climaxes. The movement culminates in a complete transfiguration of the opening motives into a nearly cacophonous collapse. It never recovers as solo instruments seem to wander aimlessly before the final resignation of the coda.

Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Ländlers. (In a leisurely Ländler Tempo.) This dance movement alternates a quirky and awkward Ländler devoid of charm with a tawdry Waltz, clearly meant to evoke cheap, popular styles as a metaphor for the pointlessness of life. These two ideas intermingle in increasingly complex ways, only interrupted once by a more gentle, nostalgic Trio.

Rondo. Burleske. Allegro assai. Sehr trotzig. (Very fast and defiantly.) This is ostensibly a Scherzo, but has the proportions and weight of a Finale. It is also Mahler's most modern movement, consisting of intensely complex and dissonant linear counterpoint. There are alternations with some grotesque band music, but these only add to the insanely off-balance and violently ferocious general style. This wild pandemonium is interrupted suddenly by a transcendent section reminiscent of the beginning of the symphony. It slowly expands into a passionate melody for the strings before finally returning to the diabolical. The ending is defiant and grim.

Adagio. Sehr Langsam und noch zurückhaltend. (Very slow yet still held back.) The violence of the preceding movement is transformed into a calm, if bitter, acceptance. A hymn-like passage of stately character seems to express Mahler's deepest yearnings. This alternates with a somewhat spare, rarefied section in barest counterpoint that seems to express emotional exhaustion. A big and tragic climax, highlighted by a fanfare transfigured from the first movement leads to the resigned and quiet coda.

Mahler Symphony No. 9

Sir John Barbirolli / Berliner Philharmoniker

1 Andante Comodo 26:46

2 Im Tempo Eines Gemächlichen Ländlers (Etwas Täppisch Und Sehr Derb) 14:51

3 Rondo-Burleske (Allegro Assai. Sehr Trotzig) 13:34

4 Adagio (Sehr Langsam; Molto Adagio) 23:01

Total Time: 1:18:12

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Engineer – Ernst Roth Producer – Ronald Kinloch Anderson



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