



2025-2026 Musical Interludes

Songs About Story

Program Notes

Music has always been one of the most powerful tools for telling stories. Not just of events, but of our lives, traditions, and imagination. The pieces on today's program explore narration through the sung word, borrowed melody, spiritual and cultural memory, and classic literature. Together, they form a portrait of storytelling at its most expansive, crafting musical narratives that communicate across time.

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Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) composed *Songs of a Wayfarer* in the winter of 1884–85, in the aftermath of a failed love affair with soprano Johanna Richter, a singer in the opera company that he was conducting in Kassel, Germany. He wrote the texts himself – unusual for the time – drawing on the imagery of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the celebrated anthology of German folk poetry that would preoccupy him for years. The four songs trace a journey of heartbreak through nature, memory, and, eventually, quiet resignation. *Songs of a Wayfarer* is a cornerstone of German *Lied*, and an early showcase of the expansive emotional range that would later define Mahler's symphonies.

Today's performance begins with the second song, "Ging heut' Morgen übers Feld" ("I walked across the fields this morning"), in which the wayfarer steps into a bright spring morning with birdsong, sunlight, and blooming flowers. Mahler's writing is luminous and deceptively simple, the voice carried by a lilting, folk-like melody. The third song, "Ich hab' ein glühend Messer" ("I've a gleaming knife"), is the cycle's most anguished, with the wayfarer tormented by the image of his beloved wherever he turns. The music becomes agitated and fragmented, the vocal line increasingly angular. The final song, "Die zwei blauen Augen" ("The two blue eyes of my love"), brings resolution: the wayfarer rests beneath a linden tree and finds not happiness, but stillness. The music settles into a hushed, rocking lullaby, fading into near-silence – a melody Mahler would later borrow for the first movement of his First Symphony.

Oswaldo Golijov (b. 1960) was born in La Plata, Argentina, to Eastern European Jewish immigrants, and grew up in a home filled with klezmer music, classical chamber music, and the liturgical traditions of the synagogue. Commissioned by the Kronos Quartet and premiered in 1994, *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* takes its title from a 12th-century Kabbalistic mystic who believed that the Hebrew alphabet was the very fabric of the universe. Golijov has described the work in his own words:

“*The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind is a kind of epic, a history of Judaism. It has Abraham, exile, and redemption. The movements sound like they are in three of the languages spoken in almost 6,000 years of Jewish history: the first in Aramaic; the second in Yiddish; and the third in Hebrew. I never wrote it with this idea in mind, and only understood it when the work was finished.*”

The second movement — the Yiddish movement — opens, again in Golijov’s words, “with a hesitating, irregular pulse, a skipping heartbeat, the rhythm of death. The violin and the clarinet hold forth in monologue at the same time, like those Bashevis Singer stories told in a poorhouse on a winter night. The same four notes, the same theme, playing in endless combinations.”

Franz Schubert (1797–1828) composed his **String Quartet No. 14** (“Death and the Maiden”) in 1824, during a period of declining health and emotional darkness. He was twenty-six, had recently been diagnosed with syphilis, and knew his prospects were grave. “Imagine a man,” he wrote to a friend, “whose health will never be right again, and who in sheer despair over this ever makes things worse and worse instead of better.”

The quartet’s nickname comes from Schubert’s own 1817 song, “Der Tod und das Mädchen” — a setting of a poem by Matthias Claudius in which a frightened young girl pleads with Death, and Death answers her, calmly and almost tenderly, that he has come as a friend. For the quartet’s second movement, Schubert uses a serene, rocking melody for Death’s reply and builds a set of five variations upon it. The theme is introduced simply and quietly by the strings in unison, later shifting emotional registers through the variations — tender, frantic, haunting— before the theme returns in its original stillness. The music holds grief and acceptance simultaneously, standing as one of the great slow movements in the chamber repertoire.

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) composed the **Dante Sonata** between 1837 and 1849, inspired by Victor Hugo’s poem “Après une lecture de Dante,” which itself was a response to reading Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. It is a work born across centuries: Dante’s medieval vision of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise filtered through Hugo’s Romantic imagination, then transformed by Liszt into one of the most technically and emotionally demanding works in the piano repertoire.

Liszt pioneered what he called the symphonic poem, a form in which music tells a story or conjures a scene without words. The Dante Sonata is among the earliest and most powerful examples of that idea applied to the piano. The piece opens with a descending motif built on the tritone — the highly dissonant interval that medieval theorists called “diabolus in musica”, the devil in music — immediately plunging the listener into the Inferno. A single, unbroken movement of remarkable range follows: turbulent in its depictions of damnation, melancholic in its evocations of Purgatory and the souls Dante encounters there. The extraordinary demands of the work commanded the respect of his peers: Clara Schumann, not easily impressed, described Liszt's playing of the piece as “really unique, a phenomenon.”

## **Songs of a Wayfarer**

English translation © Richard Stokes

### **“Ging heut’ Morgen über’s Feld”**

Ging heut’ morgen über’s Feld,  
Tau noch auf den Gräsern hing;  
Sprach zu mir der lust’ge Fink:  
„Ei du! Gelt?  
Guten Morgen! Ei, Gelt? Du!  
Wird’s nicht eine schöne Welt?  
Zink! Zink! Schön und flink!  
Wie mir doch die Welt gefällt!“

Auch die Glockenblum’ am Feld  
Hat mir lustig, guter Ding’,  
Mit den Glöckchen, klinge, kling,  
Ihren Morgengruß geschellt:  
„Wird’s nicht eine schöne Welt?  
Kling! Kling! Schönes Ding!  
Wie mir doch die Welt gefällt!

Und da fing im Sonnenschein  
Gleich die Welt zu funkeln an;  
Alles, alles, Ton und Farbe gewann!  
Im Sonnenschein!  
Blum’ und Vogel, groß und klein!  
„Guten Tag! Guten Tag!  
Ist’s nicht eine schöne Welt?  
Ei, du! Gelt? Schöne Welt!“

Nun fängt auch mein Glück wohl an?  
Nein! Nein! Das ich mein’,  
Mir nimmer, nimmer blühen kann!

### **“I walked across the fields this morning”**

I walked across the fields this morning,  
Dew still hung on the grass,  
The merry finch said to me:  
‘You there, hey –  
Good morning! Hey, you there!  
Isn’t it a lovely world?  
Tweet! Tweet! Bright and sweet!  
O how I love the world!’

And the harebell at the field’s edge,  
Merrily and in good spirits,  
Ding-ding with its tiny bell  
Rang out its morning greeting:  
‘Isn’t it a lovely world?  
Ding-ding! Beautiful thing!  
O how I love the world!’

And then in the gleaming sun  
The world at once began to sparkle;  
All things gained in tone and colour!  
In the sunshine!  
Flower and bird, great and small.  
‘Good day! Good day!  
Isn’t it a lovely world?  
Hey, you there?! A lovely world!’

Will my happiness now begin?  
No! No! The happiness I mean  
Can never bloom for me!

**“Ich hab’ ein glühend Messer”**

Ich hab’ ein glühend Messer,  
Ein Messer in meiner Brust,  
O weh! O weh!  
Das schneid’t so tief  
In jede Freud’ und jede Lust,  
So tief! so tief!  
Es schneid’t so weh und tief!

Ach, was ist das für ein böser Gast!  
Nimmer hält er Ruh’,  
Nimmer hält er Rast!  
Nicht bei Tag,  
Nicht bei Nacht, wenn ich schlief!  
O weh! O weh! O weh!

Wenn ich in dem Himmel seh’,  
Seh’ ich zwei blaue Augen steh’n!  
O weh! O weh!  
Wenn ich im gelben Felde geh’,  
Seh’ ich von fern das blonde Haar  
Im Winde wehn! O weh! O weh!  
Wenn ich aus dem Traum auffahr’  
Und höre klingen ihr silbern Lachen,  
O weh! O weh!  
Ich wollt’, ich läg’ auf der schwarzen Bahr’,  
Könnt’ nimmer die Augen aufmachen!

**“I’ve a gleaming knife”**

I’ve a gleaming knife,  
A knife in my breast,  
Alas! Alas!  
It cuts so deep  
Into every joy and every bliss,  
So deep, so deep!  
It cuts so sharp and deep!

Ah, what a cruel guest it is!  
Never at peace,  
Never at rest!  
Neither by day  
Nor by night, when I’d sleep!  
Alas! Alas! Alas!

When I look into the sky,  
I see two blue eyes!  
Alas! Alas!  
When I walk in the yellow field,  
I see from afar her golden hair  
Blowing in the wind! Alas! Alas!  
When I wake with a jolt from my dream  
And hear her silvery laugh,  
Alas! Alas!  
I wish I were lying on the black bier,  
And might never open my eyes again!

**“Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz”**

Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz,  
Die haben mich in die weite Welt geschickt.  
Da mußst' ich Abschied nehmen  
Vom allerliebsten Platz!  
O Augen blau, warum habt ihr mich angeblickt?  
Nun hab' ich ewig Leid und Grämen!

Ich bin ausgegangen in stiller Nacht,  
Wohl über die dunkle Heide.  
Hat mir niemand Ade gesagt, Ade!  
Mein Gesell' war Lieb' und Leide!

Auf der Straße stand ein Lindenbaum,  
Da hab' ich zum ersten Mal im Schlaf geruht!  
Unter dem Lindenbaum,  
Der hat seine Blüten über mich geschneit,  
Da wußt' ich nicht, wie das Leben tut,  
War alles, alles wieder gut!  
Alles! Alles!  
Lieb und Leid, und Welt und Traum!

**“The two blue eyes of my love”**

The two blue eyes of my love  
Have sent me into the wide world.  
I had to bid farewell  
To the place I loved most!  
O blue eyes, why did you look on me?  
Grief and sorrow shall now be mine forever!

I set out in the still night,  
Across the dark heath.  
No one bade me farewell, farewell!  
My companions were love and sorrow!

A lime tree stood by the roadside,  
Where I first found peace in sleep!  
Under the lime tree  
Which snowed its blossom on me,  
I was not aware of how life hurts,  
And all, all was well once more!  
All! All!  
Love and sorrow, and world and dream!

**Der Tod und das Mädchen (“Death and the Maiden”), by Matthias Claudius**

English translation © Richard Wigmore

*DAS MÄDCHEN*

Vorüber, ach, vorüber!  
Geh, wilder Knochenmann!  
Ich bin noch jung, geh, Lieber!  
Und rühre mich nicht an.

*DER TOD*

Gib deine Hand, du schön und zart Gebilde!  
Bin Freund und komme nicht zu strafen.  
Sei gutes Muts! Ich bin nicht wild,  
Sollst sanft in meinen Armen schlafen!

*THE MAIDEN*

Pass by, ah, pass by!  
Away, cruel Death!  
I am still young; leave me, dear one  
and do not touch me.

*DEATH*

Give me your hand, you lovely, tender creature.  
I am your friend, and come not to chastise.  
Be of good courage. I am not cruel;  
you shall sleep softly in my arms.