

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

# Mahler's Symphony No. 1

May 3 & 4

**STEVE REICH (1936- )**

**MUSIC FOR PIECES OF WOOD**

Duration: ca. 15 minutes

Ask 10 different people to describe minimalism in music and you get 10 different answers. What is it, when did it begin, and where is it going today?

Minimalism grew out of reaction to the academic, detached, cerebral music of the 1950s, much of which rubbed people the wrong way and gave orchestras and audiences little to chew. A "new Romanticism" followed, but so did something else: sounds propelled by simple, tonal ideas, hypnotic rhythms, and a pulse. It was music stripped naked, baring tendon and bone.

"Minimalism is the story not so much of a single sound as of a chain of connections," writes Alex Ross in his book *The Rest is Noise*. The ambient innovator Brian Eno described it as "a drift away from narrative and towards landscape, from performed event to sonic space." Steve Reich, one of the movement's founders along with Terry Riley, La Monte Young and Philip Glass, likens it to "placing your feet in the sand by the ocean's edge and watching, feeling, and listening to the waves gradually bury them."

Although Riley's 1964 composition *In C* launched minimalism into the public sphere, early nuggets can be heard as far back as the 1700s in the largo movement of J.S. Bach's *Concerto for Four Harpsichords*, or in Erik Satie's *Vexations* from 1894, where the performer repeats a 32-bar section 840 times (or until everyone goes home).

Reich remains the most popular of the original group, in part because of an inquisitive approach to music making and a desire to constantly reinvent himself. Although Juilliard-trained, he found his voice at the San Francisco Tape Music Center, and in the Ghanaian drumming of Africa. He raised eyebrows in his first large performance in 1971, *Drumming*, and established himself four years later with what may be his masterpiece, *Music for 18 Musicians*, built on a cycle of 11 chords. His *Different Trains* of 1988 conveys the tragedies of the Holocaust with harrowing impact.

This weekend, members of TFO's percussion section and guest artist Colin Currie take center stage with *Music for Pieces of Wood*. Written in 1973, the music involves five players who strike hardwood claves of different pitches. The music becomes more dense over its three sections, which are linked by a quarter note laid down by the first player, who serves as a human metronome. Reich offers directions in the score but encourages players to improvise and have

fun so that no two performances are alike. The brittle density of the music can seem jarring after nearly 15 minutes, when everything stops and silence sinks in.

On his website, Reich writes that *Music for Pieces of Wood* grows out of a “desire to make music with the simplest possible instruments. ... To understand the piece, imagine listening to a kaleidoscope. A pattern is established, then it shifts as with the click of the kaleidoscope. ... This piece is one of the loudest I have ever composed, but uses no amplification whatsoever.”

## **ANDREW NORMAN (1979- )**

### **SWITCH**

Duration: ca. 30 minutes

What does an orchestra have in common with a video game? Just listen to the music of Andrew Norman, a Los Angeles-based composer who blends classical tradition with the avant-garde and modern technology. His works have been praised for their daring juxtapositions, dazzling colors and “staggering imagination,” all in a style that engages listeners of all ages.

Raised in California, Norman grew up loving the movies, and as a child was mesmerized by the John Williams soundtrack for *Star Wars*. He watched the film repeatedly and set his sights on becoming a composer. Educated at the University of Southern California and the Yale School of Music, he embraced the tenants of Romanticism but soon discovered the possibilities of digital technology, including video games and YouTube playbacks. This resulted in a series of concise, razor-sharp works with such names as *Split*, *Suspend*, *Play*, *Apart*, *Hopscotch*, and *Unstuck*. His body of work won him the honor of Musical America’s 2017 Composer of the Year.

Commissioned by the Utah Symphony, *Switch* is a percussion concerto, written for the soloist Colin Currie, who appears on tonight’s program. When performing *Switch*, Currie has said he feels like “being trapped inside a pinball machine.”

Norman describes the 30-minute piece as a game of control: “Each percussion instrument is a switch that controls other instruments in specific ways, making them play louder or softer, higher or lower, freezing them in place and setting them in motion again. The soloist, dropped into this complex contraption of causes and effects like the unwitting protagonist of a video game, must figure out the rules of this universe on the fly, all while trying to avoid the rewind-inducing missteps that prevent their progress from one side of the stage to the other.”

Instead of being broken into traditional movements, *Switch* is a system of different “channels,” each with its own unique sound world, that are flipped by the playful snaps of channel-surfing slapsticks at the back of the stage. When Music Director Michael Frances first heard *Switch*, which was first performed in 2015, he wanted to conduct it at home.

“I was blown away by it and thought I’d love to bring it to Florida,” he said. “It’s brilliantly virtuosic and extremely visual. It goes along and something clicks and then it goes to another level. It’s a tour de force but with a very poetic ending that has a great effect on the audience.”

**GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911)**  
**SYMPHONY NO. 1 IN D MAJOR, TITAN**

Duration: ca. 53 minutes

“My time will come,” Mahler predicted in response to criticism of his music. A century ago, the public puzzled over his sprawling sound world, where beautiful and grotesque ideas seem to float aimlessly, crash into one another and stretch the limits of the imagination – if not patience. Today, thanks to such advocates as Leonard Bernstein, Mahler’s nine completed symphonies are firmly rooted in the orchestral garden, and often celebrated as highlights of a season.

If anything, Mahler gives concertgoers their money’s worth. His symphonies aren’t just enormous in size, but in the depth and dimension of their message. Each symphony stands alone as an individual work, and together they form a life cycle from birth to death and beyond. “The symphony must be like the world,” Mahler said. “It must embrace everything.”

Among Mahlerians, choosing a favorite symphony is fun (mine is the *Third*), just as picking the most difficult to grasp (the *Seventh*) makes for good dinner party conversation. But most agree that the best introduction to Mahler is, fittingly, the *First Symphony*, which you will hear tonight.

Completed in 1888, the work is the shortest of the nine but large in scope, including seven horns, five trumpets, four trombones, four oboes and four flutes. Mahler originally called it a “symphonic poem in five movements,” which included the discarded second movement *Blumine (Flower Piece)*. The name *Titan* refers to the 900-page novel by Jean Paul, although the music has nothing to do with the book.

The symphony opens quietly and builds momentum in a crescendo of bird calls and frenzied fanfares, throwing off balance any preconceived ideas we might have about symphonic structure. Mahler wrote on the score that the introduction to the first movement should convey “the sounds of nature, not music!” A peasant-like dance known as a Landler dominates the *scherzo*, and with the end of this movement we leave the world of light behind. Darkness descends in the form of a grotesque-sounding variation on the French nursery rhythm *Frere Jacques*. This got Mahler into a bit of trouble, as audiences at the time didn’t know how to take such a vulgarity, and felt the composer had overstepped his bounds.

The finale opens with a bolt of lightning – an explosive cymbal crash that can send unsuspecting audiences a few inches off their seats. At more than 20 minutes, the longest of the movements brings together all the earlier elements into a whole, but not without a fight between contrasting keys that dissolve into F minor. As the struggle continues, Mahler goes back to the

opening of the symphony to steal musical snippets before introducing a barrage of brass that brings the music to a radiant conclusion in the home key of D major.

***Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.***