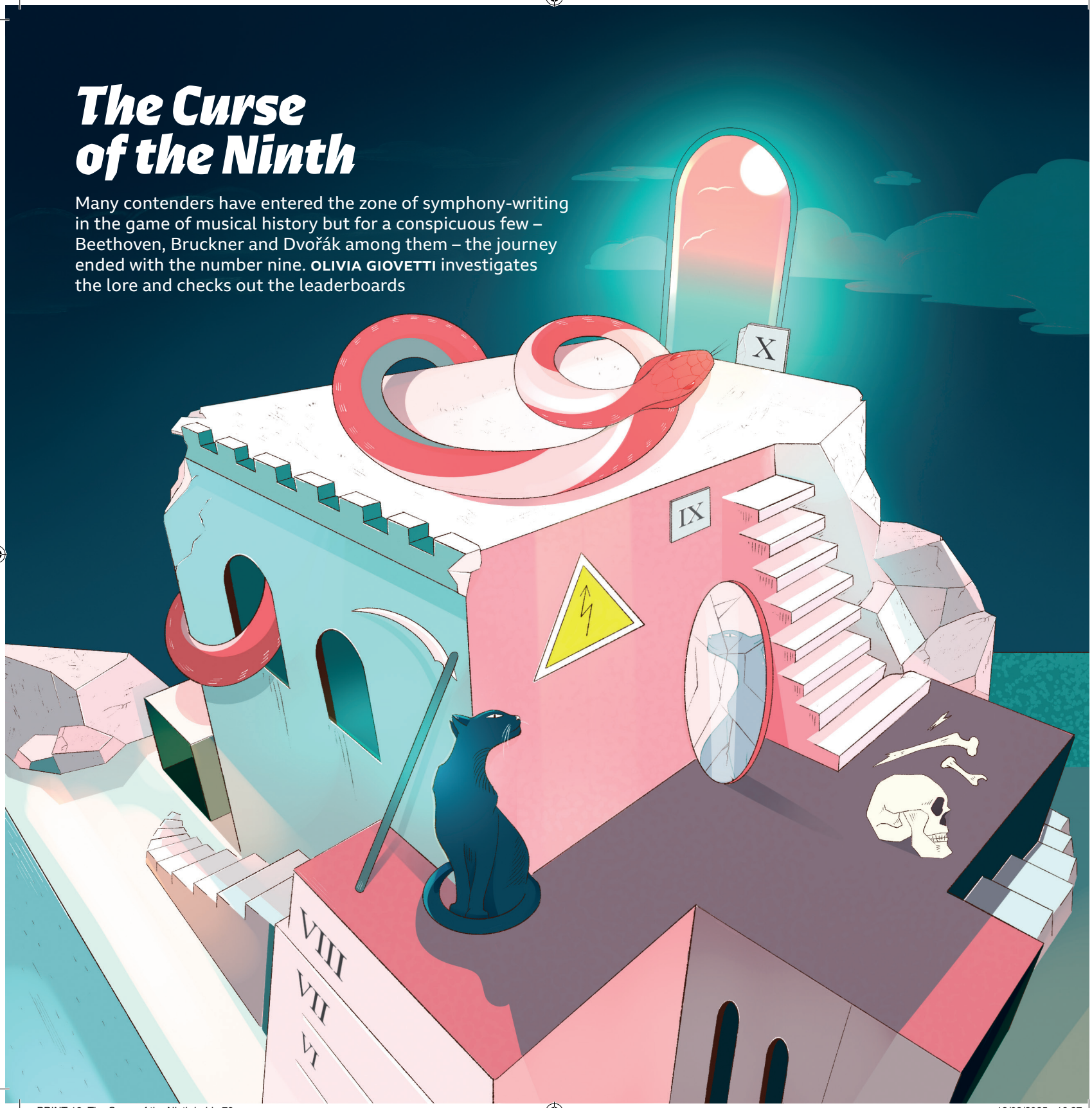
The Curse of the Ninth

Many contenders have entered the zone of symphony-writing in the game of musical history but for a conspicuous few – Beethoven, Bruckner and Dvořák among them – the journey ended with the number nine. **OLIVIA GIOVETTI** investigates the lore and checks out the leaderboards



A spectre has been haunting composers – the spectre of the Ninth Symphony. A number of our most celebrated composers died after writing their ninth symphony but before completing their 10th. Beethoven, Bruckner, Dvořák, Vaughan Williams and Schnittke all fell prey to the Curse of the Ninth.

This pattern haunted Gustav Mahler who, according to his wife Alma, 'dreaded' the prospect of crossing this musical Rubicon. His fear originated with Beethoven and Bruckner. The fact that neither of these made it past their ninth became a kind of shibboleth for him. 'It was a superstition of Mahler's that no great writer of symphonies got beyond his ninth,' Alma wrote.

Mahler tried to hoodwink fate. When he came to write his ninth symphony, instead of naming it so, he gave it the title *Das Lied von der Erde* and cast it as an orchestral song-cycle. Later, while working on what he would call his Ninth, he told Alma: 'Actually, of course, it's the Tenth because *Das Lied von der Erde* was really the Ninth.' When he then began work on his 10th Symphony, he sighed with relief: 'Now the danger is past.' Except it wasn't: when Mahler died, he left his 10th unfinished. Critic Tim Ashley has described this work as 'a legendary, if futile, attempt to ward off mortality'.

Ree Basova/BBC

◀ Next-level challenge: for a surprising number of ill-fated composers, finishing their ninth symphony has spelled 'game over'

The Curse of the Ninth was the classical precursor to the 27 Club – that informal collective of pop musicians, from Jimi Hendrix to Kurt Cobain to Amy Winehouse – who all died at 27. 'It seems that the ninth is a limit. He who wants to go beyond it must pass away,' wrote Arnold Schoenberg. 'Those who have written a ninth stood too close to the hereafter.' A devotee of numerology, Schoenberg would have known that, as the last single digit, the number represents an end point. Had he lived to see the 27 Club take form he might have pointed out that 27 is a multiple of nine.

Schoenberg helped to propagate the Curse of the Ninth, to the point that even sceptics tread carefully: 'You get nervous … ninth symphony, what kind of silly jinx is that?' composer Philip Glass said shortly before the 2012 premiere of his own Ninth. 'But I wasn't going to wait to find out.' He completed his 10th Symphony less than two months after his Ninth.

But does the curse actually hold water? Plenty of composers have entered symphonic double digits *(see 'Beyond the Ninth', overleaf)*, while even in Mahler's day the symphony was becoming less of a concern as composers explored other musical forms. Richard Strauss, like Berlioz and Liszt before him, focused more on tone-poems. Verdi and Wagner were following in the footsteps of Rossini and Donizetti in busying themselves with operas. Schoenberg himself never wrote a numbered symphony for full orchestra (nor did Chopin, Bartók, Debussy, Gershwin or Ravel).

If the number nine stood out to Mahler, it was in part because few other composers in his time were as dedicated to the symphonic cause. Speaking at an American Symphony Orchestra League meeting in 1980, Leonard Bernstein noted that there had been significant contributions to the genre since Mahler (Sibelius, Copland and Prokofiev among them), but that Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements* was 'the last really great symphony, in the broad classical sense of the term'. By the 20th century composers had many more genres to work with and, often, less access to a full orchestra.

The greater curse for many composers seems to be Beethoven's Ninth, in and of itself. 'Who would be able to do anything after Beethoven?' wondered Schubert, who himself died just a few weeks after starting his 10th Symphony. Over a century later, British composer George Lloyd echoed the sentiment: 'There are other very good Number Fives and Number Threes, for instance, but how can one possibly have the temerity of trying to write another Ninth Symphony?'

Beethoven's Ninth sits at the crossroads of personal and political crisis and renewal. Though he wrote his 'Heiligenstadt Testament' 22 years before the symphony's 1824 premiere, its shadow looms large over the work. In this 1802 letter, Beethoven described his growing deafness and the despair to which it had driven him: 'O you men who think or say that I am malevolent, stubborn or misanthropic, how greatly do you wrong me,' he begins. 'You do not

Reece Shearsmith with *(left to right)* Natalie Dormer, Hayley Squires and Steve Pemberton in the gothic-Edwardian 'Curse of the Ninth', an episode from the ninth – and final! – series of the BBC's dark-comedy anthology *Inside No. 9*; as one of the characters observes: 'Beethoven, Dvořák, Schubert, Bruckner. After the Ninth, they all went from composing to decomposing.'

know the secret cause that makes me seem that way.' He mirrors this silent agitation in the opening of his Ninth: a tremolo of strings set against the drone of horns, a flicker of melody that soon blazes into a full orchestral bellow. Following a push–pull of order and chaos, of expression and repression, his Ninth ends in zeal and humanity, as if Beethoven were triumphing over his own demons – the outer world that thinks him malevolent and the secret, inner causes of his seeming so. Yet his Ninth is not just his own victory, but also one for humanity. 'Join in one embrace, you millions,' the chorus sings. 'Share this kiss with all the world.'

Bruckner's admiration for Beethoven was so extreme that, in 1888, he forced his way into the exhumation of his hero's grave in order to hold the composer's skull. He likewise borrowed some of the bones of Beethoven's Ninth for his own Ninth Symphony, including the key of D minor and a reordering of movements that places the Scherzo (typically a third movement) as the second. He was acutely aware of his own mortality when he began working on the symphony in earnest in 1891, amid attacks of pneumonia, heart disease, depression and religious mania. He dedicated the work 'to the beloved God'. It was a move his physician described as a contract with the creator in order to vouchsafe the piece's completion: 'Should he die earlier, then it is God's own fault if He receives an incomplete work.'

In the end, God did receive an incomplete work: Bruckner died while working on the Finale. Bruckner's Ninth isn't the culmination of personal or political struggle. It's instead a sort of musical version of the prayer journals the composer kept, turned up to 11. Even the silences – two deliberate full-orchestral rests in the first movement – are roaring. This is Bruckner's final entry in his spiritual bookkeeping, and he is determined to make everything add up. That comes across in the third movement, which he titled 'Farewell to Life'. The pained opening bars soon resolve into lyrical serenity. As a dyed-in-the-wool Catholic, Bruckner knew that death wasn't an end, it was a homecoming.

Of the three Ninths featured in this year's Proms, the one that manages to stray furthest from the Curse is Dvořák's. Written and premiered in 1893, 'From the New World' was completed over a decade before the Czech composer's death at the age of 62, and shows very little trace of finality. He was just reaching the height of his career, dividing his time between Europe and New York (where he had been made the head of the National Conservatory of Music in America) when the New York Philharmonic commissioned the symphony.

Aware that America was still trying to shape its musical identity, Dvořák used his Ninth to showcase what he had learnt of Black spirituals and Native American songs (as authentically as he had heard either), positioning both as the future of American music. When critics later suggested that Dvořák himself had 'invented' American music, he had to

James Stack/Stills/BBC Studios Productions, Comedy

smirk. 'It seems that I have got them all confused.' He was not creating the 'new world' that became the nickname of his symphony, but rather reporting from it.

Dvořák may have been spared the curse on a technicality: he himself didn't realise that 'From the New World' was his ninth symphony. He lost the score for his First Symphony after he had sent the autograph manuscript to a competition and never received it back. Considering the work permanently gone, he began his subsequent symphonies from No. 1 again, cataloguing 'From the New World' as his eighth. The order was only straightened out long after Dvořák's death, when his scores were properly dated following the discovery of his long-lost First Symphony in a private collection.

Perhaps, also, Dvořák was too pragmatic to believe any musical Rubicon to be impassable. The real curse, as we discover in another of his best-known works, is human nature. That idea comes from *Rusalka*, premiered in 1901. It was his ninth opera. ●

Olivia Giovetti has written about music and culture for the BBC, *Financial Times*, *London Review of Books* and *Washington Post*, and has written programme notes for the New York Philharmonic, Glyndebourne, Edinburgh International Festival and Scottish Opera. She lives in Berlin.

Dvořák Symphony No. 9, 'From the New World'
7 AUGUST

Beethoven Symphony No. 9, 'Choral'
21 AUGUST

Bruckner Symphony No. 9
8 SEPTEMBER

Beyond the Ninth

The composers who triumphed over the Curse.

Richard Haughton/Bridgeman Images

There are more composers who can debunk the Curse of the Ninth than there are who can support it. Both Hans Werner Henze and Peter Maxwell Davies completed 10 symphonies well before their deaths. We could even consider Schnittke as having 10 complete symphonies to his name: Nos. 1–9 (plus his student work now numbered '0'). Mozart completed 41 symphonies over his 35 years.

Much more industrious was Joseph Haydn, who wrote 104 numbered symphonies (his brother Michael was a comparative slouch, managing a meagre 41). As with Mozart, many of Joseph Haydn's late symphonies are his best-known, most notably his 'London' cycle (Nos. 93–104).

The undisputed champion, however, is Finnish conductor-composer Leif Segerstam *(pictured above)*, who died last October with 371 symphonies to his name. A larger-than-life figure in all respects, Segerstam beat the Curse of the Ninth 41 times over, comparing their profusion to that of male reproductive cells. Like sperm, he joked, 'there must be a huge number of them in order for some to survive'.

Many critics have posited that the symphony died with Mahler, but that didn't preclude symphonic efforts in the 20th and 21st centuries. American Alan Hovhaness, a friend of John Cage, wrote 67; the subtitle of his 11th is a subtle nod to Beethoven's Ninth: 'All Men Are Brothers'. Mieczysław Weinberg and Nikolai Myaskovsky, contemporaries of Shostakovich, wrote 25 and 27 symphonies respectively. Havergal Brian, whose massive No. 1 ('The Gothic') was heard at the Proms in 2011, penned 32 – of which 21 were written after he turned 70.

Among the most famous symphonists after 1945 was Shostakovich, whose own Ninth coincided with the end of the Second World War and became a celebration of Soviet victory over the Nazis. 'Musicians will like to play it, and critics will delight in blasting it,' Shostakovich quipped before the work's premiere, and while some critics dismissed the work as childish and unserious, others saw in its playful energy the spirit of Mozart.

Shostakovich's final symphony, the 15th, was premiered in 1972, less than four years before his death, at a time when the form was enjoying a healthy run. His contemporary, Darius Milhaud (a member of the French group of composers known as Les Six) authored 12 between 1939 and 1962. Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos also wrote a dozen, completing the last on his 70th birthday in 1957. Henry Cowell premiered his 20th Symphony in 1965.

The list of female composers with a significant catalogue of symphonies is, not surprisingly, shorter. However, American composer Julia Perry (1924–79, a student in Paris of Nadia Boulanger) wrote 12. Another American, Gloria Coates (1933–2023) completed 16; and Alla Pavlova – born in Soviet Ukraine but now living in New York – currently has 11 to her name.

Olivia Giovetti