

Gustav Mahler

by Leon Botstein

Why Gustav Mahler?

When Gustav Mahler died in 1911, at the age of 51, few would have predicted that 100 years later his music—nine completed symphonies, the fragment and posthumously completed version of the Tenth, and the many songs, individually and in cycles, particularly the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer), *Das Lied von der Erde* (Song of the Earth), and *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children)—would occupy a place in the world of classical music and the symphonic repertory equal to, if not larger than that of Beethoven, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky. Writing just two years after Mahler's death, the widely read and respected critic Walter Niemann concluded that it was Mahler's fate to have never achieved true greatness. Niemann's colleague Karl Storck defined Mahler as a "problem." Despite Mahler's ambitions, his music would never last.

Yet today Mahler's fame and popularity as a composer rival Bach's and Mozart's. Mahler, the object of commemoration in 2010–11—the twin years that mark the 150th anniversary of his birth and the 100th anniversary of his death—has become the composer whose work and life seem to mirror and express, through music, the predicament of the human condition in modernity.

The explosion of interest in Mahler's music began in earnest after World War II, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although Mahler's music had never entirely disappeared from the repertoire, thanks to the advocacy of his protégé Bruno Walter and other conductors such as Dimitri Mitropoulos, the Mahler revival in performance and recording was pioneered by the American conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein, who saw in Mahler a reflection of himself. During the turbulent 1960s, the sprawling, lush sonorities of Mahler's symphonic writing, the confrontation between fragmentation and a long, dramatic arc, the intensity of the climaxes and the proliferation of familiar sounding themes and musical gestures, many of them directly evocative of the daily world, both of nature and the town square and street, all elicited a sympathetic response in listeners.

But what was decisive for Bernstein and his audiences was the idea that Mahler's music, the songs and the purely instrumental symphonies alike, mirrored our subjective experience of the world. There was an aspect of the psychological confession audible in Mahler. The emotional range of his music—its intensity, intimacy, and scale—offered the listener a temporal framework that permitted the expression of an individual's psychological struggle with expectation, desire, pain, elation, and loss in a fragmented, complex, and terrifying world. In an era caught up in self-absorption and marked by a passion for pop psychology as well as serious self-analysis—in which inherited boundaries between the private and the public became attenuated, rendering sexuality and intimacy primary aspects of politics and public discourse—Mahler's music became a widespread object of enthusiasm, not only for connoisseurs but also young first-time

listeners to classical music. Mahler's popularity extended well beyond Europe and North America into the regions of the world where Western classical music was attracting new audiences: Japan, Korea, China, and South America.

Mahler's reputation was enhanced not merely by its unique synthesis of grandeur and the intimate, its reconciliation of tradition with innovation. The brilliance and variety of sonority in Mahler's music were captivating. Post-World War II recording techniques, particularly the long-playing record and the CD, combined with the advanced electronics of post-World War II sound reproduction to give the birth to the cult of high fidelity. This made Mahler's music accessible to an extremely wide audience whose primary access to music was through listening to recordings at home or in the automobile, often with headphones. For many, listening to Mahler's extended musical essays became a profoundly personal experience. The golden age of recording in the second half of the twentieth century facilitated what has now become a universal, if not fanatical embrace of Mahler's music as the high point of the symphonic tradition in music history.

A composer of such popularity and currency easily becomes the stuff of legend. In the late 19th century, the true character of the lives of the great composers, particularly Mozart and Schubert, became distorted to fit a romantic paradigm of the artist as outsider, a person apart, someone exempted from the expectations of respectability or ordinary happiness. The great composers were alleged to be misunderstood, stricken by poverty, and unappreciated in their times. They were said to be lovelorn and condemned to die in obscurity. The notion of a composer as an isolated individual ahead of his time was a myth made particularly popular by Richard Wagner, who used it to deflect criticism of his own music. His was "music of the future." Negative reaction in the present was proof of greatness.

History tells a different story. Wagner's ideal of the artist, Beethoven, was immensely successful and lionized in his own time. Perhaps Beethoven did wish for a fulfilling love life, but he did everything to make that impossible. Yet he shrewdly courted fame and respectability. His 1827 funeral was the largest public event in Vienna's history. Haydn, too, was a legend in his own time. His world-famous contemporary, Mozart, both earned a great deal of money and spent it. He was buried in a common grave in accordance with the fashion of the times, not because he languished in poverty or obscurity. His death in 1791 was mourned the world over. Although Schubert's death at age 31 seems premature by our standards, the average life expectancy in the late 1820s was only in the mid-30s. He, too, was published and performed, troubled only by the failure to write a truly successful opera.

Since the 19th century, audiences have continued to enjoy myths about their favorite composers. These myths put artists at a safe distance. Artists, after all, engender both fascination and ambivalence. They are permitted everything we are asked to deny ourselves as upstanding citizens, yet precisely because they are bohemian, irresponsible, and eccentric, we also shun and misunderstand them. The audience consoles itself that its own failure to be truly creative and artistic has its positive benefits: sanity, community, and happiness. We do not fawn over artists who appear too normal, such as Felix

Mendelssohn and Richard Strauss, each of whom had functioning marriages and children; both lived stable, elegant lives in comfortable homes.

The fascination with Mahler has been buffeted by a widespread popular impression that his life was marked by inner turmoil and rejection, one of suffering and perpetual outsider status. His childhood is said to have been tortured, and his adult life crippled by a hostile public, vicious music critics, and above all a debilitating marriage to a notorious femme fatale, Alma Mahler, a gifted Viennese beauty who slept with every artist, writer, and composer of stature in Vienna, from Alexander Zemlinsky and Oskar Kokoschka, to Hans Pfitzner and Franz Schreker. After Mahler, she married famed Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius and then Austrian writer Franz Werfel.

This picture of Mahler's life distorts the reality. Bernstein liked to quote Mahler's prediction that "my time will come." It is true that Mahler may have felt underappreciated and misunderstood in his own day. He may have believed that he was a perfect example of the Wagnerian conceit that great composers in modernity cannot be properly appreciated by their contemporaries, despite knowing very well that practically all great composers were profoundly successful in their own day and age, including Wagner himself. Yet myths are frequently based on fragments of truth. While we would like to think of ourselves as having discovered Mahler's greatness long after his death and elevating him to his proper place in history, he died of heart disease in Vienna at the age of 51 a world-famous man. His long and painful trip from New York to his home in Vienna in the spring of 1911 elicited widespread sympathy and concern.

At the time of his death Mahler as a personality was controversial, yet as a composer and conductor he was a celebrity. Mahler had become a major musical figure in Europe. He was feted and his music performed in St. Petersburg in the east, Helsinki in the north, and in Paris in the west. He was also famous in North America, where in the last years of his life he worked as music director of the New York Philharmonic and a star conductor at the Metropolitan Opera. Since 1897 he had been a defining public presence in the cultural and political life of his adopted city, Vienna. His death was reported all over the world. The most successful German-speaking composer of his generation, Richard Strauss, wrote his last large-scale purely orchestral piece, *Eine Alpensinfonie* (An Alpine Symphony), as an eloquent tribute to the memory of Gustav Mahler the composer, his friend and rival.

Between Reality and Myth: Gustav Mahler's Life

The eminent philosopher Hannah Arendt observed that each individual as a private person and citizen must come to terms with his or her "natality": the unchangeable, blunt facts of his or her birth. It was Mahler's lot to have been dealt a complex natality. He was born to Jewish parents on May 7, 1860, in the small village of Kalischt in Bohemia, then consisting of a little more than 500 people, including just a handful of Jewish families. Shortly after Mahler's birth, the family moved to nearby Iglau, which is in Moravia. (Kalischt is now officially Kaliště, and the nearest large town, Iglau, is called Jihlava.

These name changes from German to Czech reflect the shift after 1918 from the Habsburg Empire to an independent Czech political entity).

Mahler was born when the possibility of moving one's residence within the empire was made legally possible, even for Jews. This was a novelty of the political liberalization of the 1860s that followed more than a decade of political reaction after 1848. By birth Mahler was technically Bohemian, but Iglau, where he grew up is just over the Moravian border, making him perhaps more Moravian. But for Mahler, geographical identity is entirely misleading. His primary identity was that of a Jew though his parents were not particularly religious or steeped in the traditions of daily Jewish life and observance. Mahler was born into a German-speaking Jewish home in a region where the majority of its Catholic citizens primarily spoke Czech. Insofar as Yiddish, a structurally German dialect with an extensive Hebrew and Slavic vocabulary, was heard in Mahler's parental home and surroundings, it is reasonable to assume that he grew up in a multi-lingual environment in which he heard a minimum of three languages spoken.

Mahler's family, like many lower middle class Jews in the region, was German-speaking by choice. Jews who had left the urban and rural ghettos of the 18th century were eager to experience social advancement, not only in economic terms, but in terms of culture, which meant adopting the habits and styles of German-speaking urban elites. The elite German culture to be emulated came from Vienna. Vienna in turn symbolized the Habsburg dynasty to which Jews, all over the Empire were particularly loyal. Since the era of Joseph II, the Habsburgs were seen as resistant to nationalism and protective of Jews as loyal subjects. This mind-set became increasingly remarkable and important because Mahler came of age in an era in which radical political anti-Semitism had already made a successful appearance as a counterpart to modern German and Czech nationalism. The year Mahler was born, Richard Wagner, whose music Mahler revered and performed brilliantly, proudly reprinted with his own name his notorious but cunningly persuasive anti-Semitic pamphlet "Das Judenthum in der Musik" ("The Jews in Music"), originally published anonymously in 1850.

Iglau, the town where Mahler spent his first 11 years, was at the time of his birth made up of 17,000 people. It possessed an important textile industry (including factories for cloth making and dyeing), brewers, and paper and glass manufacture. It served as a trading center both towards the east and towards the west. It was the center of a largely rural district in Moravia that encompassed nine small cities and nearly 500 tiny villages. Of its 188,000 inhabitants, 4,480 were Jews. The majority was Czech-speaking and considered themselves of Slavic origin. Given Iglau's commercial and geographic centrality, the life of the town was colorful and echoed with the sounds of everything from a garrison band to traveling entertainers and street musicians. Mahler's music, much like that of his near contemporary, the American composer Charles Ives, persistently explores the experience of memory and nostalgia, particularly regarding childhood. In nearly all of Mahler's works, traces of the everyday world in which he lived, including the urban Iglau and the rural countryside of his childhood, can be located through fragmentary musical evocations.

Bohemia and Moravia were parts of an empire governed by a German-speaking monarchy and an administration based in Vienna. Mahler was born before the Hapsburgs were humiliated in the war with Prussia in 1866, a defeat that led to a structural reform in 1867 that transformed the empire into the so-called dual monarchy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. If that reform had created a triple monarchy and recognized the equality of the Slavic population, particularly the Czechs, the Habsburg monarchy might have survived and World War I averted. Mahler, an acculturated, secularly educated, and highly literate German-speaking Jew from a Czech province who settled in Vienna, represented the truly quintessential and ideal subject of the late 19th-century multi-national monarchy, a cultivated individual without an overriding reductive allegiance to any single religion, nationality, or ethnicity. In the Habsburg monarchy, devotion to a cosmopolitan ideal of learning and art could secure political loyalty.

Much has been made of Mahler's childhood. His mother, Marie, to whom the composer was devoted, was a soap manufacturer's daughter; his father Bernhardt owned a tavern. Moving to Iglau from Kalischt was a reflection of Bernhardt's desire to better his circumstances and status. Bernhardt, who followed his father's footsteps into the liquor business, was said to be harsh and abusive and his marriage to Marie to be troubled. Gustav was the oldest of 14 children, of whom only six survived. He was closest to his sister Justine, born in 1868, who later married one of her older brother's colleagues and friends, the legendary violinist and longtime concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic, Arnold Rose. Mahler's close relationship with his sister would be compromised only by the enmity and contempt directed at her by Mahler's bride, Alma.

Except for a brief sojourn in Prague in 1871, Mahler's formal schooling took place in Iglau. Among aspiring urban Jewish families eager to acquire secular German culture, music education was indispensable. Gustav, who showed early aptitude, made his public debut as a pianist at age 10 in Iglau. By 1873 Mahler was playing serious virtuoso piano music, including Sigismond Thalberg's "Fantasia and Variations on Themes from *Norma*." A career in music appeared plausible and promising. At age 15 Mahler enrolled in the Vienna Conservatory, primarily to study with the legendary piano teacher (and friend of Brahms) Julius Epstein.

The years Mahler studied in Vienna, the second half of the 1870s, were politically and culturally decisive for more than his generation. The physical transformation of the city that began with the creation of the Ringstrasse in the 1850s was well under way. But the financial crash of 1873 brought the liberal boom years of the 1860s to a sudden halt and ushered in an era of stagnation that would last until the mid-1890s. During those two long decades the beginnings of an anti-liberal and anti-capitalist political populism, including outspoken anti-Semitism, began to develop. By the late 1870s the most visible and prominent minority in Vienna were the Jews, who exceeded their proper demographic proportion in terms of enrollment in the Vienna University and the conservatory. Throughout the years Mahler lived in Vienna, the city remained a magnet for people from within the multi-ethnic empire, even in times of financial distress. Vienna was city of newcomers. By 1900 only a small proportion of residents in Vienna had been born in the city.

By 1875 Brahms had established himself as a major cultural influence and a force to be reckoned with in the city's musical life. Vienna boasted a great new opera house, a new concert hall (the Musikverein), piano manufacturers, publishers, innumerable choral societies, a fine orchestra, several concert series, and the most prominent citizen-based association dedicated to music on the continent of Europe, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, an organization that sponsored the conservatory. Brahms had just stepped down as director of the Gesellschaft's concert series the year Mahler arrived as a student. Brahms did not teach, but he sat on the governing board of the Gesellschaft and his allies dominated the conservatory faculty. He and his circle were seen as part of a liberal, tolerant, philo-Semitic elite in the city.

Yet by 1875 Wagner's popularity as prophet of a persuasive progressive vision of the link between art and life had reached new heights. That year Wagner, who had lived in Vienna briefly in the early 1860s, returned to the city in triumph to give a series of concerts and conduct one performance of *Lohengrin* at the Vienna Opera. The students and the faculty at the conservatory became profoundly engaged in the culture wars of the mid-1870s, most of which involved a reaction to Wagner's music and Wagnerian ideas. Among the key beliefs associated with Wagner was German cultural chauvinism. Mahler's classmates and friends were Wagnerian enthusiasts. They included the composers Hugo Wolf and Hans Rott (whose early symphony influenced Mahler and who was a favorite of Anton Bruckner, with whom Mahler did not study at the conservatory) and the conductor Rudolf Krzyzanowski (a friend with whom Mahler produced his first publication, a piano version of Bruckner's Third Symphony).

Mahler distinguished himself quickly, winning prizes his first year in piano performance and composition. His earliest ambition, like others of his generation, was to follow in Wagner's path and compose for the stage. The young Wagnerians in Vienna were partial to Bruckner and were reserved, if not overtly hostile (as Wolf was) toward Brahms. Despite Mahler's relative coolness to Brahms, the older composer did not take offense and later helped bring him back to Vienna, having been impressed with the younger man (in particular a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*) during Mahler's tenure in the 1880s at the opera in Budapest.

In 1877 Mahler, having passed his secondary school examinations, took courses at the Vienna University, focusing on art history, literature, and philosophy, and he made close friends among nonmusicians. Early in his conservatory career his ambitions had turned away from a concert career as pianist to that of a composer. Although he did not win the coveted Beethoven prize at the conservatory in 1878, the year he finished his studies, he did win a first prize in composition for a piano quintet that has unfortunately not survived. He worked on large-scale projects, including *Das klagende Lied* (insert English name), a work for chorus, soloists, and orchestra he completed and later revised, and a never-realized fairy tale opera *Rübezahl* (Rapunzel). During this time, he also played concerts at his boyhood home in Iglau.

By the early 1880s conducting was, at best, a nascent profession. More often than not, those who conducted saw themselves as composers. Even pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow (who conducted in Meiningen and Berlin), someone Mahler admired—a protégé of Liszt, then Wagner’s enthusiastic proponent, and by the 1880s a close associate of Brahms—saw himself as a composer. Throughout the 19th century performing music in public suggested the implicit demand that one present not merely the repertoire of the past, but one’s own compositions and music by contemporaries. To earn enough to live on Mahler began to conduct and taught piano lessons to private pupils. His first experience as a conductor was in 1880 in Bad Hall in upper Austria. He then went on to Laibach, in Slovenia. Mahler was so successful that he was recruited in 1883 to Olmütz, and then to Kassel. By 1887 Mahler had conducted in Prague and Leipzig. In 1888 at age 28 he became the music director of the Hungarian Royal Opera in Budapest. And in 1891 he became conductor at the state theater in Hamburg, a post he relinquished in 1897 to return to Vienna, at age 37, as music director of the Imperial Opera.

As a young conductor Mahler was regarded as hot tempered, dynamic, intense, and uncompromising, intent on seeing through his own ideas, even at the risk of being fired. Between 1880 and 1897 he gained remarkable experience in the opera pit, conducting everything from Wagner and Karl Goldmark to Mozart, Albert Lortzing, Daniel Auber, and Giacomo Meyerbeer. He was 26 when he got his first chance to conduct the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven.

Throughout the 17 years between his first post in Bad Hall and his call to Vienna in 1897 Mahler was determined to make his mark as a composer. In 1887 he agreed to complete Carl Maria von Weber’s unfinished operatic comedy *Die drei Pintos*. Having stumbled the same year upon Ludwig Arnim and Clemens Brentano’s collection of folk poetry, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, Mahler began to set some of its texts to music. Inspired in part by Adam Mickiewicz and to a lesser extent by Jean Paul, Mahler, having experienced difficulty coming to terms with the operatic form, turned his attention to the symphony. He was influenced by a tendency within romanticism, pioneered by Liszt and linked to Beethoven, particularly the Sixth and Ninth Symphonies, toward so-called program music. Liszt’s idea of program music was the symphonic tone poem that integrated the techniques and expectations inherited from the Classical style, those associated with sonata form and the development of themes in long instrumental structures into a narrative framework.

Instrumental music then might tell a story and evoke the mental pictures and emotions engendered by literature or one’s direct experience of the world. Music began to take on aspects of representation, the character of prose, and the suggestion of painterly realism. When Mahler began to sketch his first two symphonies, each had a program, much in the spirit of Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* or Liszt’s *Faust* or *Dante Symphonies*. Mahler turned to the literary texts and tradition to which he would remain loyal his entire career—those of early 19th-century romanticism. The young composer tentatively but courageously titled his first symphony “Titan,” suggestive of the life of a Byronic hero; he called the second “Todtenfeier,” suggestive of the tragedy of the death of the Romantic hero.

The year 1889 was crucial. It was the year of his father's death and Mahler's first symphony, titled at its premiere in Budapest "a symphonic poem," entirely in the spirit of Liszt. Throughout the 1890s, while he was working hard as a conductor, Mahler continued to compose and orchestrate songs, but few of his works were performed. Not until 1895 and 1896 did Mahler see the first two symphonies performed, as well as the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* ("Songs of a Wayfarer") and selections from his Third Symphony. By the time Mahler returned to Vienna, his three symphonies and a host of his songs were known. But his fame rested on his meteoric career as a conductor and his reputation as an innovator and reformer of musical institutions. After arriving in Vienna he made striking changes at the Opera. He darkened the house during performances to ensure proper audience attention. He lowered the pit, giving the opera house a more effective acoustic and the possibility of a scenic illusion reminiscent of Bayreuth. He opened up the cuts in Wagner's works. He recruited new talent and engaged young artists to design productions, Alfred Roller in particular. Inspired by the Viennese Secession and the writings of Adolphe Appia, Roller and Mahler unveiled new productions of operas by Mozart and Wagner, using light, form, and color as symbols, thereby moving away from the illustrative realism of conventional naturalistic scene painting.

By 1900 both Bruckner and Brahms were dead. Mahler quickly filled the vacuum, emerging as a charismatic figure, a larger-than-life personality in Vienna and arguably the city's most powerful and fascinating citizen within the world of music. But the Vienna to which Mahler returned in 1897 was a somewhat different place from the one he had known in the 1870s. In 1897, the racist ideology associated with the anti-Semitic politics of Christian Socialism and the pan-German movement had come to dominate the politics of the city. In order to gain the appointment as director of the Vienna Opera, Mahler converted to Catholicism. But, conversion notwithstanding, he always remained a Jew. He became a target of anti-Semitic attacks. His reforms angered cultural conservatives, some of whom were Jews, such as the critic Robert Hirschfeld. Mahler re-orchestrated late Beethoven, rewrote Mozart and Gluck, and improved on Schumann's instrumentation. He was perceived as arrogant, and there were those who found his music pretentious, ugly, formless, and tiresome. These critics lamented Mahler's misplaced ambitions as a composer and urged him to stick to conducting. Yet while he was at the helm of Vienna's most prestigious cultural institution, Mahler deepened his friendships with and allegiances to the leading composers and performers in Europe, Richard Strauss foremost among them.

At the same time, Mahler gained many friends and supporters in the city in his decade of the Vienna Opera. His love life included liaisons with the singers Anna von Mildenburg and Selma Kurz and a deeply sensitive violinist, Natalie Bauer-Lechner, whose recollections of Mahler have become an indispensable source for his biography. His Viennese friends included Guido Adler, the dean of music historians and a professor at the University, the writer Siegfried Lipiner, members of the Vienna Secession, and a host of prominent journalists, poets, and architects. He traveled in the highest literary and cultural circles.

It is through these elite contacts that he met and married the daughter of one well-known painter (Anton Schindler) and the step-daughter of yet another (Carl Moll): Alma Schindler, a famous beauty and the city's most coveted bride-to-be. The couple first met in November 1901, were engaged by late December, and married in March 1902. They had two children, one of whom died in 1907 at age five; the other, Anna, became an eminent sculptor. The marriage was anything but happy. Mahler insisted that Alma shelve her artistic ambitions. Alma, who had married Mahler for reasons of ego and social advancement, was consistently unfaithful and used her sexuality to terrorize him. A man deeply riddled with self-doubt and ambition and surrounded by controversy, Mahler struggled to retain Alma's affection and even consulted with Sigmund Freud, but with little success. Difficult marriage notwithstanding, Alma successfully exploited her status as the widow of a legendary figure for the rest of her long and colorful life.

Before he left Vienna for America in 1907, Mahler had captivated and inspired a younger generation of artists and intellectuals. This new generation included the composer and conductor Alexander von Zemlinsky, and the composers Franz Schreker, Arnold Schoenberg, and their younger acolytes, which included Alban Berg, Ernst Krenek, Oskar Fried, Egon Wellesz, and Anton von Webern. They saw Mahler's music and his approach to performance as charting a path for modernist innovation. These younger colleagues adored and admired Mahler as an exhilarating new voice and an exemplary human being.

Everyone in Vienna knew of the intrigues in the opera house and between Mahler and the Vienna Philharmonic, where Mahler's demands, approach, and repertoire choices were fiercely contested. He came to represent the modern in music, the analogue to new developments visible in Vienna in painting, architecture, design, and writing. By 1907 Mahler was exhausted from fighting an ever-present, but persistent Viennese conservatism and provincialism. At a concert he publicly defended Schoenberg's much more radically innovative music. Life and work in Vienna became too difficult. When Mahler was offered an astronomically high fee to go to New York City to conduct the Metropolitan Opera, and ultimately the New York Philharmonic, he accepted.

There was an astounding public outcry and protest when Mahler resigned his post at the Opera. Pamphlets predicted that Mahler's departure would mean the end of musical greatness in Vienna. In December 1907, his departure by train to Paris en route to New York was public event attended by Klimt, Roller, Webern, and Berg. Mahler's distinguished successor, the composer-conductor Felix Weingartner, never recovered from the resentment and ridicule he received for having the temerity to think he could fill Mahler's shoes.

Although the conducting and the politics were time consuming and enervating, which restricted his composing to the summer months, and although his marriage was not easy, the years from 1902 to 1907 had been highly productive for Mahler. He completed three new symphonies—numbers Four, Five, and Six—and witnessed performances of the first three symphonies and the songs with orchestra throughout the world, in Boston, London, St. Petersburg, and Amsterdam. By the end of 1909, after the move to New York, he

completed two more large-scale symphonies, the innovative Seventh and the massive Eighth, the so-called *Symphony of a Thousand* whose last movement set the end of Goethe's *Faust* Part II to music. Mahler would live to complete two more masterpieces, *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony, neither of which he lived to hear in concert. He left a fragment of a tenth symphony, including a completed slow movement, at the time of his death.

The slightly more than three years Mahler worked in New York, from 1907 to 1911, were inspiring if a bit lonely, despite the presence of a large German-speaking community in the city. Mahler never put down roots in the New World and returned with Alma to Vienna and the Austrian countryside each summer. But they did make friends in America. As in Vienna, Mahler found both supporters and detractors of his music and his conducting in the critical press. By the end of 1910, Mahler was suffering from what is today a curable cardiac inflammation. He was mortally ill when he set out for Vienna in April 1911 (on a ship whose passengers included the writer and Mahler admirer Stefan Zweig and the pianist and composer Ferruccio Busoni). He died in Vienna on May 18, 1911. Arnold Schoenberg, whose paintings Mahler consistently purchased in order to provide him with money, produced a touching visual account of Mahler's burial in the cemetery in Grinzing on May 22.

Mahler's Music: A Thumbnail Sketch

Mahler's ambitions and achievement as a composer were shaped by his perception of his place and the place of his generation in the history of music. By the time Mahler came of age, he and his contemporaries were painfully aware that they were the heirs of an astounding creative legacy dating back to the Baroque era. First there was the contrapuntal mastery of J. S. Bach. During his American years Mahler made his own modernized arrangement of two Bach orchestral suites. Bach's exemplary creation of a musical fabric using multiple lines working against and alongside one another—the generating of a vertical composite sound out of the interaction of seemingly independent voices—became a consistent source of inspiration in Mahler's music.

Then there was the melodic beauty and expressive eloquence of Mozart. But even more influential was the example of Beethoven, who expanded the range of instrumental composition, particularly in his symphonies. Mahler understood Beethoven through the lens of Wagner's reading of the composer as the first great musical dramatist. Beethoven had fashioned the arc of the symphony, shifting the weight of its impact from the first movement to the last in a four or five movement form. For all composers who followed in Beethoven's shadow, the most powerful examples of this reframing of the symphony were the Fifth and the Ninth Symphonies, where the last movements defined the work without diminishing, but rather fulfilling the high expectations communicated by astonishing opening movements.

Then came the third major inheritance: the music of Wagner. The reason that Mahler did not succeed in writing an opera is because it seemed impossible to compete with Wagner's towering music theatrical achievement, just as it seemed daunting for

composers who came of age while Beethoven was still alive, such as Mendelssohn and Schumann, to write symphonies. Was there anything left to say in opera? Therefore Mahler deeply admired and envied Strauss's successful turn to different subjects (e.g., *Salome*) and his capacity to write modern operas using techniques beyond Wagner developed through the composition of tone poems for orchestra.

For Mahler, Bruckner's instinct to return to the symphonic form using the compositional innovations of Wagner was decisive. Wagner had demonstrated how repetition and intense and unconventional harmonic color could be used to expand musical time and deliver a complex narrative of emotion. Motivated in part by a spiritual sensibility, Bruckner charted new ground and wrote magnificent monumental essays in sonority and lyric beauty. Mahler went a step further and turned to the task of merging two apparently unrelated forms—song and symphony—in order to create a dramatic musical fabric on a Brucknerian scale quite different in character from Bruckner. The song offered the subject, one common in opera: love and death. The symphonic form provided the framework for a complex elaboration of narration and emotional expression that demanded a wide range of sounds, and a rapid alternation between the intimate and the grand gesture, between repose and agitation. The task was a radically realistic one within a profoundly abstract art form: to encode the experience of human life and the external world into instrumental music.

In addition, music by connecting with life had to transform the experience of the everyday. In Mahler's symphonies, sounds of the street, bands, funeral processions, folk melodies, and the lullaby all make their appearance, creating in each work a kaleidoscope of experience through music that forces an internal dialogue of reflection. The composer became the protagonist of a subjective account of the essential struggle of life. The life was that in modern times, human existence marked by the contradictions generated by a receding rural landscape and a burgeoning industrial and urban world.

The keen awareness of being heir to an unbroken tradition of music making from Bach to Bruckner led Mahler to strike out on his own by shaping his voice out of fragments of memory and familiarity. His reserve with respect to the music of Brahms is instructive. Although a member of an older generation Brahms also struggled with the self-consciousness of arriving late, so to speak, after the towering achievements not only of Beethoven but also the generation of the early romantics that followed, including Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Schumann. Brahms found his calling as a composer in the goal of extending the tradition he had inherited. Overcome with a sense of pessimism and a feeling of being just too late, Brahms saw himself as working in the autumn of a cultural tradition, against the tide of history and not at the point of a new dawn. This lent his music a deeply affecting interiority, sadness and nostalgia and its conservative and determined allegiance to an established craft of composition.

Wagner inspired the generation of Mahler and Strauss to reject Brahms's profound modesty in relationship to the past, any sense of the apparent inferiority of the modern in comparison to music's ancients, the classical heritage of musical composition from Bach to Beethoven. Although Strauss, who revered Mozart, was more conservative, ironic,

elusive, and indirect in revealing his subjectivity as a composer than Mahler, he revealed in the possibilities of modernity, particularly before 1914. So too did Mahler, who took from Wagner a belief in the progressive expansion in history of the possibilities of musical expression beyond the limits of inherited practice.

Mahler shared the conviction of the visual artists of his generation, inscribed in Joseph Maria Olbrich's Secession building, completed in Vienna the year Mahler became music director at the Imperial Opera House: "To each age its art and to art its freedom." Mahler did not see himself trapped in an age of cultural decline. In this regard Mahler's experience as a performer of the music of the past deeply influenced his work as a composer. He knew what his audience, the greatly expanded public for music that emerged by the end of the 19th century, responded to. He could anticipate the many meanings the inherited vocabulary of musical rhetoric held for the public. Wagner's innovations in the use of thematic fragments as signifiers and his expansion of harmony seemed to have completed a progressive development of music as a varied and complex language. And Mahler shaped that language his own way, often in open defiance of inherited standards of beauty and coherence. He sought to write music on a large canvas, music that communicated an ethical urgency, one of resistance and truth telling, intended to be more than pleasing entertainment. But an underlying sense of insecurity never left Mahler. It is perceptible in his never ending efforts to revise, edit and improve his own works, even after their publication.

In his First Symphony in D Major (1888) Mahler experimented with pure sound as evocative of nature. The opening bars of the first movement, punctuated by bird calls, suggest a visual landscape. Indeed the first movement was originally described as a reminiscence of youth, replete with suggestions of flowers, fruits, and thorns. The symphony proceeds to tell a story, much like a novel, using familiar folk tunes and memories of village wind bands to communicate the sense of memory, dreams about spring, and the human comedy. The work is indebted to the early romantic literary fantasy worlds of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Jean Paul, but ends with a sense of affirmative triumph.

In the Second and Third Symphonies Mahler expanded his palette of sound by adding solo voices and chorus. The Second Symphony in C Minor (1894) uses texts from Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (with some text added by the composer) and *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. The original title, "Todtenfeier" (Ceremony for the Dead), was taken from the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz. The symphony was ultimately given the subtitle "Resurrection." The work emulates the integration of voices and orchestra found in Beethoven's Ninth, but seeks to create a more spiritual and theatrical drama about life and death. It contains a movement for solo alto and orchestra and ends with a final choral movement, a jubilant assertion of immortality and salvation.

The Third Symphony in D Minor (1896), again uses solo voices (soprano and alto), but only a chorus of women and children with orchestra. The overarching literary inspiration stems from Nietzsche, as did the original subtitle "The Joyful Wisdom" (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*). As in the First Symphony, Mahler's subject is man's relationship to

nature: about summer, and what the flowers and animals, the night, and the morning bells tell us. The work ends with the subject of love and life in heaven, using Nietzsche and a text from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Mahler employs a posthorn, a utilitarian instrument of a bygone era, to connect the worlds of the everyday with those of memory and the imagination. A tam tam signals death. The sense of awe at midnight is followed by a childlike suggestion of heaven. The symphony closes with a massive orchestral elegy, an apotheosis built calmly but eloquently. One senses the ultimate and mysterious synthesis of disparate and mysterious threads that life is.

In the Fourth Symphony in G major (1900–01), Mahler returns to a smaller scale, using sleigh bells in the opening and in the last movement. The symphony ends quietly with a setting of a folk song text that Mahler first composed in 1892. In this symphony, the shortest of the nine, one senses Mahler drifting away from explicit literary and philosophical programs as a structural underpinning for his music. Yet originally the Fourth, which carried the description of a “humoresque,” and was intended to be lighter in spirit than its predecessors, explicitly sought to evoke in a more carefree manner everyday life, charity, the dawn, and a world without sorrow.

In the Second, Third, and Fourth Symphonies Mahler drew on his song writing and on his fascination with early romanticism as expressed by *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. In the Fifth Symphony in C-sharp Minor (1902), Mahler turned in a different direction restricting himself to the purely instrumental forces he had employed in the First. Although he abandoned the use of explicit literary programs, in the background of the Fifth fragments and evocations of his many songs and their meanings are audible sufficiently to suggest some narrative intent. Opening with a funeral procession, the symphony has one of Mahler’s characteristically bizarre, grotesque, and wild scherzos. It also contains a famous fourth movement, an Adagietto, a searing love song. The symphony ends with an intense affirmative fifth movement, a highly contrapuntal and triumphant finale.

The Sixth Symphony in A Minor (1904) is perhaps Mahler’s most confessional and personal work. Written in four movements, its huge orchestra includes cow bells and a large percussion battery. There is no program, but the work was written for his wife Alma. The Sixth is famous for its wide emotional range and intensity and its combination of sinister march rhythms, sardonic dance elements, and direct lyricism. Hammer blows suggest fate and shimmering ethereal sounds, a magical spiritual realm tied to nature. Mahler’s overarching subject is, once again, the terror and pain of love and desire.

Almost as personal is the Seventh Symphony in E Minor (1905). The Seventh is even more daring in architecture and sound than the Sixth. Using a mandolin and guitar, there are two episodes of “night music” among the work’s five movements. Even though the symphony suggests Mahler’s characteristic fascination with nature, dreams, and the imagination, the formal organization of the music is foregrounded. The work gains meaning through music that is detached from a literary or explicit emotional story line. Alma believed Mahler might have been inspired by a Rembrandt painting. In the Seventh, Mahler experiments with discontinuity and fragmentation, using waltz and

landler rhythms. Solo sounds and contrasting ensemble groups enter and exit in an arresting manner throughout the translucent musical argument..

In the Eighth Symphony in E-flat Major (1906–10), Mahler returns to the epic scale of the Second Symphony. He uses a chorus in a grand philosophical and musical statement suggestive of an oratorio or a massive cantata, such as Max Reger’s setting of Psalm 100. The first part sets the hymn “Veni Creator spiritus”; the second, the closing scene from *Faust* Part II. This explicitly dramatic and theatrical work was followed by the last completed symphony, the Ninth in D Major (1908–09), a work that seems to dwell on death and loneliness. It is perhaps Mahler’s most modern work. One contemporary noted that it “annoyed the older generation and delighted the young, provided they had the capacity for fantasy.” It was the Mahler symphony Alban Berg most admired.

In all nine symphonies Mahler alternates between the evidently tragic to the sardonic and the humorous, always punctuating the music with disarming simplicity, lyricism, and intimacy. Taken as a whole, and given the recurrent allusions to the outside world both natural and man-made, Mahler’s symphonic output does actually seem to mirror modern life itself in all its variations and contradictions. Despite the carefully constructed and tightly logical musical architecture in each work, continuity and coherence in Mahler derive as well from an apparent absence of stability. In this way the symphonies succeed in persuading the listener that he or she is experiencing the transposition of a psychological dynamic between inner reality and the external world into music.

In his many songs, Mahler perfected the connection between the subjective construct of meaning and musical gesture. In perfecting the genre of the orchestral song, he proved himself the heir to the song tradition of early 19th century musical romanticism, that of Schubert and Schumann in particular. Each of Mahler’s songs has its own character in which the music deepens and illustrates meanings the particular language of the poetry cannot communicate directly. The song cycles—particularly the settings of Rückert, the *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children, 1901–04), and *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer, completed in 1884 and extensively revised), in which each movement is a self-contained song text—are nearly symphonic in effect. The greatest of these symphonic song cycles is Mahler’s last, *Das Lied von der Erde* (Song of the Earth, 1908–09), consisting of six songs based on texts by the 8th-century Chinese poet Li Tai Po and translated by Hans Bethge for Tenor and Alto. The six sections of this work, considered by many as Mahler’s finest achievement, represent the ecstatic aspects of life and the spiritual experience of alienation, loss, and death: “Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde “ (The Drinking Song of the Sorrow of the Earth), “Der Einsame im Herbst” (Loneliness in Autumn), “Von der Jugend” (Of Youth), “Von der Schönheit” (Of Beauty), “Der Trunkene im Frühling” (Intoxication in Springtime), and “Der Abschied” (Farewell).

But in all of Mahler’s music, the operatic impulse, the dramatic and often even the artifice of the theatrical is always present. The listener is caught up in the musical narration from often abrupt beginnings that suggest the middle of an event, as if a curtain rose for the listener on a prior event, even if only implied. Mahler’s music shocks by

defying expectations through sudden shifts and halts, interruptions, and recollections of fragments, and by the extreme use of instruments at the highest and lowest registers. The daemonic is set side by side with the innocent. A self-conscious sense of beauty is shattered by intentional harshness just as a sense of security is juxtaposed with danger. The near and the far interact against one another. Counterpoint generates both consonance and dissonance so that the stability of both is undermined. All this renders Mahler's music adequate to the experience of modernity.

Mahler's Legacy

After Mahler's death, particularly in the years between the two World Wars, many composers sought not to emulate him, just as Mahler himself sought not to imitate Wagner or Bruckner. In the generation that followed him, composers charted a different path, one using lighter sonorities, smaller ensembles, less repetition. They attempted to reclaim a more formal and abstract musical logic, one less tied to narration and illustration, away from any hint of realism, either interior or exterior. Only Berg attempted to remain true to the intensity of musical expressiveness of Mahler's music. In this sense Berg was Mahler's most direct heir and successor.

Two exceptions to this twentieth century trend can be found, first in the music of Dimitri Shostakovich and second in the work of Jean Sibelius. At the suggestion of Ivan Sollertinsky, a friend of Shostakovich and the first Russian to write a book about Mahler, Shostakovich, shunned by Stalin in the mid-1930s, turned to Mahler's legacy as a symphonist in order to restart his career as a composer. Indeed, the symphonic output of Shostakovich, from the suppressed Fourth Symphony (and the popular Fifth) to the last, the Fifteenth, can be considered direct responses to the example of Mahler. The narrative of Shostakovich's symphonies is different, however. In his case, a surface of external narration, a variant on musical socialist realism, is complicated by a competing and often sardonic and ironic interior dialogue characteristic of Mahler. Sibelius, whom Mahler met while he was in Helsinki (who, like Mahler, went to Vienna to study music) in his own was pursued more directly the Mahlerian ideal of the symphonic form as evocative of both nature and the subjective experience.

But Mahler's most powerful influence on subsequent musical composition came in the second half of the 20th century when modernism in music—the rejection of tonality and the notion of music as a medium blatantly expressive of emotion and experience—ran aground with the public. Beginning in the mid-1970s, particularly in North America and Europe, composers rediscovered Mahler, and through his music the possibilities of tonality, expressiveness and narrative forms. He no longer seemed to represent the end point of late-19th-century romanticism but rather a new point of emancipation from the strictures of twentieth-century modernism. Mahler became the apostle of postmodernism and a new eclecticism in musical style that encompassed minimalism and the simplicity and directness of popular music. The inclusiveness of Mahler's sound world became an inspiration.

To composers and audiences in the late 20th century and the early 21st, Mahler's music has suggested the story telling power of the sound film, with all its epic scale and yet capacity to convey the intimate. The sense that Mahler's music most successfully parallels our ordinary experience of time and emotion but does so without a stage and the visual has helped sustained its popularity. The richness and variety of its gestures and sound have not been dimmed by our contemporary acoustic environment, its relentlessness, its absence of silence, and its terrifying volume and density. A century after Mahler's death, Mahler's music seems of the present and not an artifact of history. Its power is not cloaked under an archaic, old fashioned surface. This is in part due to the debt generations of movie score composers have owed to Mahler, from Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who literally grew up in Mahler's shadow, and Aaron Copland, who was inspired by Mahler's orchestration, to John Williams and Howard Shore.

The magic of Mahler's music is that it succeeds as music alone, requiring nothing but itself to make its point. It never makes for easy or comfortable listening. It is at once inspiring and troubling, disarmingly direct, and elusively philosophical. It is for that reason that Mahler has taken his place alongside Beethoven in the hearts and minds of musicians and listeners in the concert halls of symphony orchestras all over the world.

Suggestions for Further Reading and Listening

Readers will notice that there are no footnotes, but for those who want to inquire further there is a massive four-volume biography by Henry-Louis de La Grange published in English by Oxford University Press. There are also many one-volume biographies in English. Norman Lebrecht has edited a volume called *Mahler Remembered*, and Donald Mitchell has written several fine books on the music of Mahler. Alma Mahler published her own memoir, and Natalie Bauer-Lechner's recollections have also appeared in English. The most challenging interpretation of Mahler's music remains Theodor Adorno's monograph, *Mahler: A Physical Physiognomy*.

Those interested in listening to Mahler's music should take comfort in the fact that any recording available on iTunes or on CD will suffice. Mahler's output as a composer is not massive, so there isn't that much to choose from, and his works are easy to find. More important, however, is that no recording can do justice to Mahler's sound world, so readers are encouraged to attend any performance anywhere that they may be able to get to. There are therefore no recommended recordings.

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