

THE WAYFARER

Under the Radar: Mahler's Conductors

ROB COWAN *selects some of his favourite Mahler recordings that have not received as much attention as they should*

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Jascha Horenstein.



Addressing the 2021 Annual General Meeting of the Society, world-renowned discographic expert and fervent Mahlerian, Rob Cowan, began by explaining that while we were all aware of the great Mahler conductors such as Bernstein, Solti and Tennstedt, there were many individual recordings which "fall below the radar" and were worthy of greater attention. The secret of listening to recordings, Rob said, is to approach the music without preconceptions, prepared to let the music speak as it is, rather than reflecting the conductor's personality. Citing Harmoncourt who said he did not like Mahler because he "spilled all his guts out", Rob said that that, rather, was the fault of conductors, and he thought that Harmoncourt would have very much liked the 7th, "full of colour and invention ... a bit of a rag-bag but adorable ... the one that all true Mahlerians like because it is Mahler most being himself, with no holds barred."

Here is Rob's list with his additional comments:

3 III: Chicago SO/Martinon 1967. Following in the Reiner tradition at Chicago, this recording is fresh and direct. Like Mahler himself, Martinon was a composer of symphonies. A serious though highly dynamic musician, it has been said that "when he settles comfortably into an armchair and takes out his pipe Jean Martinon for all the world looks like a prosperous academician".

Martinon was only the seventh conductor to hold the post of the CSO's Music Director since 1891.

5 I: Koln RSO/Hans Rosbaud 1951. "When I get to the end of a Rosbaud recording, all I can say is that everything sounds right ... he never imposes his personality or twists things to reflect the way he feels about the music ... the narrative and the structure and the instrumentation are the principal factors ... rejecting Blake's idea (which certainly suits some situations) that 'the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom' If you pull the music about it becomes tiresome." The majority of Rosbaud's Mahler recordings (1 4 5 6 7 9) are now collected on the SWR Label, named for the orchestra he founded. "I know of no better recording of the 5th, while in the case of the 6th, the most difficult of Mahler's Symphonies because it is the easiest to overstate, is just perfect."

4 IV: Hague Residente Orch/Willem van Otterloo (Theresa Stich-Randall) 2007.

Following in the fine Dutch Mahlerian rostrum tradition of (Mahler's friend) Willem Mengelberg, Eduard Flipse, Eduard van Beinum and anticipating Bernard Haitink, Willem van Otterloo stresses the emotional charge that underpins Mahler's musical message, but without ever distorting it. In the 1940s Toscanini described Theresa Stich-Randall as "the find of the century". A lovely voice.

Das Lied von Der Erde, V *The Drunkard in Spring* (arr. Schoenberg and Rainer Riehn for chamber ensemble): Linos Ensemble (Markus Schafer). "A version I play often. ... We all know the great recordings, but I have chosen this chamber version for the clarity of its revised instrumentation, arranged for The Association of Private Musical Performances.

9 III: Czech PO/Karel Ancerl 1966.

"The other great Mahlerian work written around the time of *Das Lied* again premiered by Bruno Walter. Ancerl, Artistic Director of the CPO from 1950 to 1968, was sent to Theresienstadt, then to Auschwitz and escaped with his life, unlike his family.

He adopts an extremely direct approach to this violent though fastidiously crafted music ... he is never sentimental, driving forward with remorseless energy and passion, a trait that's most marked in the Rondo Burlesque."

Lieder Eines Fahrenen Gesellen III: Boston SO/Munch (Maureen Forrester) 1958. "Charles Munch is a very fine conductor not usually associated with Mahler although he played under Walter. It is a pity he did not record more Mahler, but this Maureen Forrester recording is very fine particularly because of the warmth and evenness of the vocal line, not all that different from Ferrier and Nan Merriman. Bruno Walter trained Forrester in the interpretation of Mahler's works. They were very close."

8 I: ORTF/Bertrand de Billy 2020. "An extremely fresh and exhilarating performance; by the end of the First Movement, you want to reach for the heavens. Since 2002, de Billy has served as Chief Conductor of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra (RSO Wien).



Answering questions, Rob said that he thought that Horenstein was at last getting onto the radar.

If he could only have one conductor in Mahler, he named Rafael Kubelik.



'The Trouble with Mahler'

In his BBC Radio 3 programme, harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani made the following charges against Mahler:

1. I can't remember one of his tunes.
2. His tunes descend into 'kitsch' and 'schmaltz'.
3. His orchestration is bizarre.
4. There are too many questions; nothing resolves.
5. The Symphonies are too long.

However, in discussion with conductor Joshua Weilerstein, the following answers emerged:

1. There are many melodies, particularly the Adagios.
2. Schmaltz or kitsch are the fault of conductors, notably Bernstein in the 5th Adagio, ignoring his detailed markings.
3. His later music is on the cusp of the Romantic and the breakdown of tonality.
4. There are endless questions about the fragility of life where nothing is resolved.
5. This immensely difficult music has to be long because it encompasses everything.

The original idea rested on more than a little exaggeration and Esfahani was at least partly convinced by Weilerstein's explanations. It was all rather gentle and civilised and the argument largely turned on the harpsichordist's aversion to Bernsteinian excess and counter illustrations from Abbado!

All in all, this was the kind of programme that delivered more light than heat in spite of the billing.

BBC Radio 3 Building a Library, 19 June 2021
 Mahler: Das Lied von Der Erde
 Andrew McGregor in conversation with Flora Willson

New Member MARK SINER finds himself in agreement with Flora Willson in choosing Alice Coote.

At the outset Flora noted this was a tough task given there are over 100 existing recordings and reducing these to a handful was no doubt a trial. Indeed, from my own collection (Walter/Ferrier 1952/1948; Solti/Minton 1972; Tennstedt/Baltsa 1982-84; Giulini/Fassbaender 1984) only one was featured. Of the few chosen there were both old well renowned stalwarts and others from more recent times. These were as follows:

Ferrier/Patzak/VPO/Walter, 1952
 Connolly/Dean Smith/Berlin Radio SO/Jurowski, 2020
 Coote/Fritz/Netherlands PO/Albrecht, 2013
 Meier/Heppner/Bavarian RSO/Maazel, 1990
 Ludwig/Wunderlich/Philharmonia Orch./Klemperer, 1967
 Gerhaher/Vogt/Montreal SO/Nagano, 2009
 Groop/Silvasti/Lahti Sinfonia Chamber Ensemble/Vanska, 1994
 Baker/King/Concertgebouw/Haitink, 1975

Although it was not heard, an honourable mention was made of the 1974 version with Alfreda Hodgson and John Mitchinson with Alexander Gibson which was excluded because Flora found Hodgson's singing "too unchangingly gorgeous".

Flora began with examples from the final song, *Der Abschied*, not unreasonably, given it represents over half of the cycle's total duration.



She began, almost inevitably, with Ferrier's iconic 1952 studio recording, followed by the most recent recording of note with Sarah Connolly and finally with Alice Coote. She pointed out that Ferrier as a contralto best fitted Mahler's voice specification; the orchestra here was seen as scary, raw and ethereal. Picking up in the song where Ferrier left off, we moved onto Connolly (interestingly, described as an alto not mezzo soprano) where there was, not unreasonably given the later recording date, more detail coming through from the orchestra. Flora was, less taken with Connolly's "Wagnerian vibrato" style. In the same section Coote was seen to be more woven into the symphonic fabric and I noted there was greater dynamic variation and subtlety of phrasing.

Next Flora reverted to the beginning of the cycle with *Das Trinklied*. We heard excerpts from the tenors Ben Heppner and Fritz Wunderlich: Heppner was described here as "unhurried", and I noted he was heroic and knew when to push and pull back his voice. Wunderlich, for his part, was seen as "open" and his lieder experience was also noted.

Moving on to the second song *Der Einseme*, and from the same recording as Wunderlich, it was noted how beautifully Christa Ludwig (sadly recently departed) expressed her syllables. In comparison, Coote's approach was less heavy, wonderfully expressive, and Flora noted she knew when to hold back. At this point she switched to include a baritone version of this song, pointing out that Mahler had sanctioned the alternative usage, if not being his preferred intention. Baritone de jour Christian Gerhaher was the offering, with his voicing of it having great heft, but to Flora it could not supplant the existing versions with the female voice to the fore. The third song, *Von der Jugend*, was Wunderlich's version again but also an intriguing option featuring Jorma Silvasti in Schoenberg's chamber arrangement of the cycle. Wunderlich's version, I felt, danced along beautifully but Flora felt he was "not as charmingly youthful" as he needed to be. Silvasti certainly met that criterion and Flora noted the lighter, joyful qualities on display. I felt this version was worthy of further investigation as different textures were revealed by using a chamber orchestra arrangement. For the fourth song *Von der Schönheit*, we returned to Ferrier again. I noted that her voice, as the only true contralto on display, really did have added depth when contrasted with all other versions here.

However, Flora did comment, with some justification perhaps, that Ferrier was not always comfortable in this excerpt. In comparison, we had Janet Baker enter the fray, with the comment that she carried us back into tranquillity, and her voice was both “animated and “suave”, the magnificent playing of the Concertgebouw also highlighted.

In the fifth song *Der Trunkene*, and from the same version as Baker, we heard the tenor James King. Flora felt here he needed more contrast. As an alternative we heard from Alice Coote’s partner in crime Burkhard Fritz in the same sample as King and which had more variation to the pacing.



The contributions of Albrecht’s orchestra, the Netherlands Philharmonic, was also highlighted, producing an “underwater” sound with real contrast, and this appealed greatly to Flora.

To conclude her summary, Flora Willson said that while the leading lady contributions will always be key, it was often tenors (who only have 25% of the cycle to sing) who let down the overall recording and that proved paramount in her choice of recommendation. She also looked for true expressive contrast and interpretations that made sense throughout. On this basis her chosen recommendation was Coote/Fritz/Netherlands PO/Albrecht.

My view on the samples selected (woefully short of course given the feature’s time restrictions) was that it was hard not to agree with her choice. I will certainly be investigating it further, along with one or two others with which I was not familiar. From my own collection, I would give a shout out for Ferrier’s live 1948 recording with Bruno Walter again (Somm) where despite the fact she had a cold and also a noisy Carnegie Hall audience to contend with (which also applauds well before the last note expires!) Ferrier is in magnificent voice.

Editor’s Notes:

In spite of the shortness of the time allocation it seemed nothing less than perverse to omit both the 1936 Walter premier and the 1948 live version. I can’t imagine how honourable mention was given to Gibson but no mention of Rosbaud, Horenstein, Ormandy, Tennstedt or Boulez. Given that, in Willson’s own words, the benchmark is the final song where nothing comes close to Ferrier, even in the studio, her partnering tenor must be truly dreadful to rule the recording out but although Patzak is never radiant, he is always clear and accurate. Whatever choice anybody makes, this recording is still one of the greatest of the 20th Century. As for Coote, she is technically very gifted and has a wide range of expressive tone but for me she has a slight metallic undertone, a bit like claret opened a couple of years before its proper time. In any case, Connolly is technically as good as Coote with a much better orchestra, the Berlin RSO being as good on this occasion as in its astounding recordings of the Mahler 10 Adagio under Chailly and its *Four Last Songs* with Isokoski and Janowski, not to mention its startling Zemlinsky; and Dean Smith is by no means shabby.

Editor: When I conveyed my thoughts to Mark he replied as follows:

Have just listened very closely to my Coote version on my reference system. I have to say my sympathies are heavily with Flora! Positives I would highlight include best recording quality of any I have heard. Orchestra at least as good as the more famous options with beautifully snarling brass when called for and characterful woodwind of note. Fritz I found suited the character of pieces very well with no loss of tone in dynamic swells. He has very good experience in Germanic repertoire which no doubt helps. With Coote I can find no hardening/shrillness, at least on my system, and her lieder experience is evident. As for the last Ewig, it is a truly stunning pianissimo. I accept that Coote has less weight at the bottom end than Ludwig or Ferrier but by any normal measure she is still not found wanting. Albrecht I find paces the music beautifully and brings out much detail as far as my ears could judge. So for me, on this one, Flora’s, not Kevin’s view, prevails. This therefore is my modern choice, with Ferrier (1948) just pipping the better recorded Ludwig/Klemperer in older ones, with Ferrier the casting vote there, not recording quality. I will have a close listen to full Connolly version in due course as you (Editor) like it a lot and see how that impacts me. The supporting cast does look good. Next stop though will be the Kleiber version. I don’t have any illusions re recording quality of that version, as bad as Ferrier live on sampling, but Kleiber was a very special conductor in virtually everything he recorded, paltry as the full legacy is.

Adorno on Mahler

GARY A. BALDWIN *concludes his retrospective on Adorno's analysis of Mahler*

The nine completed symphonies all possess some elements of *durchbruch*. Subject to the usual caveats concerning individual preference, I present the following: ("Rehearsal" (R) refers to numbers in the published score and parts; M refers to the measure number in the published score and parts):

1st: Last Movement R51 M609 to R52 "Wieder vorwärts drangend" (Again, drive up, push) "Hochta Krafte" (extreme force); C Major directly up to D Major without preparation.

2nd: Last Movement, Accent beginning with French Horns at M536; upbeat to M672 in the bass voice; ascending to M730-731. Organ entrance at M732.

3rd: Last Movement Adagio; R21 -Violin ascending M198; final ascent M223-224 at R29.M284 arrival-durchbruch at R31 crescendos, pp to ff at M316. D-A-D Tonic/Dominant ostinato to end with tympani, lower strings, bassoon.

4th: Third Movement Adagio; M288 poco Adagio p to "Vorwärts" [Drive up] ff.

5th: Fifth Movement Rondo R31 preparation; descent by trombones and tubas M705 into Brass Choral at R32 *Durchbruch*, Repeated 'Pesante' M726. This *durchbruch* almost appears in the Second Movement where Mahler almost gives it away in his enthusiasm.



6th: Last Movement; there are 3 *durchbruchs* at the 'HAMMER BLOWS': R129 M336; R140 M479; M783 was deleted by Mahler.

7th: First Movement (stylistic schizophrenic) was probably composed last. First *durchbruch* M145-173; second *durchbruch* M228-244; Religious vision M317-329, Mahler's opening to his vision of eternity; third *durchbruch* M338-353. This experimental structure challenges conductor and audience.

8th: Part Two R161 +1 measure, a 'false' *durchbruch* with the children's choir "Er überwacht uns schon" (He is outgrowing us.); *durchbruch* begins at R176 to R186, Doctor Marianus; "Blinket Auf" Chorus: "Komm!" R192 Organ Entrance. The *durchbruch* could be analysed at R176 to the end of the work.

9th 1st Movement: The First *Catastrophe* begins M101 to M108. The first CLIMAX (not *Catastrophe*) is at M201-203. The failure of this CLIMAX to maintain itself leads to a possible *durchbruch* at M234 into D Major. At M307 a Second *Catastrophe* occurs at M314. Adorno says this is the "centre of crisis" and Alban Berg says "Death breaks in!"

10th: Adagio 'catastrophe' M203-209. Three orchestral expansions M203, 204, 206. Full orchestra, nine-note cluster at M208 (C, C#, D, E flat, F, G, G#, A, B).

Adorno suggests that there are some universal characteristics of Mahler's Music:

- * Open-ended melodies
- * The descending 2nd, the falling voice of melancholy
- * The emancipation of individual instruments
- * Trombones in the 3rd
- * Drums in the 1st
- Nachmusik and the Scherzo of the 7th
- * Placement of inordinately long and intense upper voiced lines
- * Against the chaos in the 4th, the image world of childhood
- * Naiveté vs. sophistication
- * Popular songs with high symphonic claims
- * All 'great music' is snatched from madness.

Music is identified by the "inward and the outward" respectively representing the heart, soul, and emotional content and the actual sounds that we hear. Thus, Adorno says that the Symphonies are like opera, with the passion and flow of fulfilment.

Leonard Bernstein in his score of the 6th refers to its operatic features. Mahler made "no concessions to easy listening." Like Bruckner, he had an effortless "freedom of instrumentation" creating monstrous sound effects in the 1st: a harbinger of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* with its chaotic, impetuous, dissonant clashes and the "Infirma section of the 8th

anticipates Webern's Cantatas." Adorno says of the 8th "within all of the positive music ... Mahler may be sending us a message for the future".



There was much to fear, as the 20th century confirmed. The colour of individual instruments playing disconnected tones were transformed into a melody, most evident in the *Scherzo* of the 7th, leading in later years to an emphasis on disintegration where melodic material was constantly broken up and varied, explaining why audiences found the music difficult to follow and understand.

Combining this with Mahler's incessant crossing and overlapping of parts, there was no distinction between musical materials and non-identical materials breaking the ordering process that had characterised Western orchestral music. Thus, from the 6th symphony onwards, Mahler's compositions might be characterised as 'negative' where they should be, as Adorno says, "... listened against because it is exhausting and bewildering to fight for non-existent positive ground." "Negativity," he

continues, "became a purely compositional category" for Mahler.

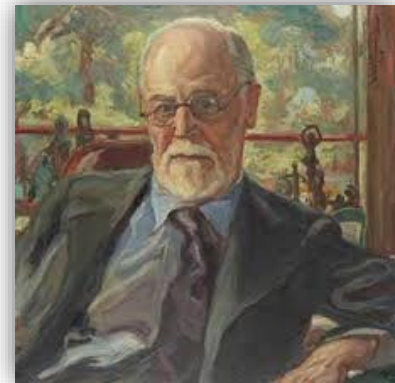
Adorno has much more to say of a philosophical and sociological nature, but this material is not systematically presented and appears deeply embedded in the text in an often perplexing manner, articulated in much the same manner as Mahler's late style, loading recognisable syntactic form with cross references, open-ended thoughts and flirtations with cloudy perceptions. Here is a short summary:

- * Great effects that failed
- * Attempts to achieve the unattainable
- * Humans want to be redeemed
- * Positive light (climaxes) vs. catastrophe
- * Spiritualism
- * Incandescent light (positive) brings back the dead
- * To go beyond present existence
- * High above mediocre norm of the age
- * His ability to 'glorify' the needs of the masses
- * He considered himself an absolute
- * Utopia is expressed through children
- * The song (ballad) becomes symphonic expression
- * His music was the product of isolationism
- * His music was the product of a quest for finding "home."

It seems to be the case that the human-artistic creativity of the genius is somehow linked to 'madness' involving an extreme mental swing from an extraordinary level of lucidity to functioning in 'the real world'.

Many of Mahler's artistic friends from his student days fell out of life in this way but psychoanalysis was in too early a development to have helped.

Freud was only beginning his work in Vienna in the first decade of the 20th Century. Mahler would leave behind his penchant for naturalism (Symphonies 1-4) toward spiritualism in his late style requiring a totally different compositional approach, striving to go beyond mundane experience, which was increasingly difficult for his audiences.



In that aim he was sometimes unsuccessful with great positive climaxes hurled against catastrophic darkness where both elements always existed simultaneously in tense and stress-inducing battle. He thought himself high above the mediocre, believing that he was the absolute messenger to glorify the needs of the masses, an elitism, an artistic concept which was then and still is now difficult to accept.

Mahler's Conductors 3: Otto Klemperer

Otto Klemperer (1885-1973) was born in Breslau to a Prague Ashkenazy father and a Hamburg Sephardic mother. He studied music first in Frankfurt and then with Kwast, whom he followed to various institutions, and Pfitzner in Berlin. In 1905 he met Mahler in the course of conducting the off-stage brass in his 2nd Symphony of which he made a piano arrangement which he presented to Mahler in 1907.



They became close friends and Klemperer became Conductor of the German Opera in Prague on Mahler's recommendation. In 1910 he assisted in the world premiere of the 8th.

During the next 20 years he held a succession of positions with German opera houses culminating in the Berliner Kroll (1927-31) during which he became noted for his performances of contemporary music including Janacek, Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Hindemith.

His conversion to Roman Catholicism did not save him from the Nazi threat and so, via Vienna and Switzerland, he became Music Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic where he increasingly concentrated on the core German repertoire but also continued to champion Schoenberg.

His bipolar disorder and his dislike of US musical conservatism which led it to

under-value the 'Weimar Golden Age', prompted him to seek positions in New York, recommended by Toscanini, and Philadelphia, but he was turned down for both. Respectively in favour of Ormandy and Barbirolli/Rodzinski.

After completing his 1939 Los Angeles season he was diagnosed in Boston with a brain tumour the size of a small orange; the surgery left him partly paralysed and depressed.

He became a US citizen in 1940 at the time when his poor reputation and manic episodes meant that he lacked engagements. From then until 1954 Klemperer was a musical itinerant and almost a stateless person because of his left-wing views but he ultimately secured a German passport.

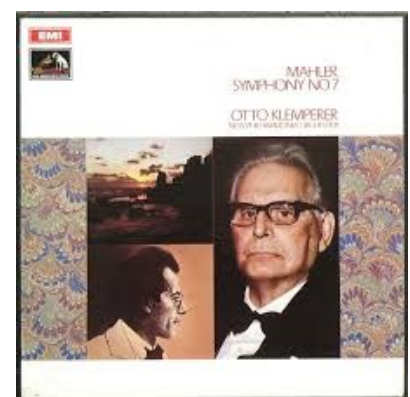
He was saved by the great recording impresario Walter Legge, of EMI Records, who united him with the Philharmonia where he recorded, inter alia, complete Beethoven and Brahms cycles.

Various health problems, including a fall and burns in a self-inflicted fire from smoking damaged his health. Late in life he took Israeli citizenship, retired in 1971 and died in Zurich in 1973.

Like Furtwangler and Walter, he wanted to be remembered first as a composer, but only two of his six symphonies were published.

Klemperer, who, in later years, was known to his admirers as "the Good Doctor", will be best remembered for his 1960s monumental Beethoven Symphony cycle which stood in such stark contrast to von Karajan's polished equivalent, together with the *Missa Solemnis* and *Fidelio*. He also made notable recordings of the late Mozart symphonies and operas.

Sadly, he recorded surprisingly little Mahler (the 4th and 9th) with the exception of the 2nd where there are eight commercial recordings plus numerous broadcasts and live recordings.



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DEREK JONES WRITES

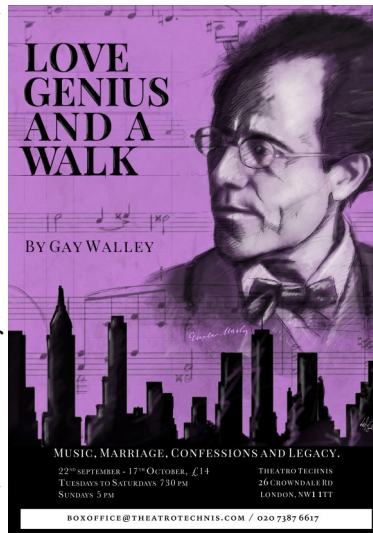
We can finally hold our first live event since the start of the pandemic. We are arranging an Afternoon Tea (from 4 pm) prior to joining the production of the Mahler play *Love Genius and a Walk* at Theatro Technis community theatre in Crowndale Road, Camden NW1 1TT at 7.30 pm on Saturday, 25 September.

We are thrilled that the New York playwright, Gay Walley, and the Director of the London production, Leah Townley, are joining us for tea and will share some insights about the background to the play, highlighting some things to look out for in the production. We may also be able to meet members of the cast in a post-performance gathering.

The Afternoon Tea will be in Magdalen Hall at St. Mary's Church, on Eversholt Street, some 6-10 minutes from the theatre.

We are limited to 35-40 people for the tea so the sooner you book the better. Please contact Derek Jones directly if you wish to join us for this special occasion. The cost of the Afternoon Tea is £20 per person. Tickets for the play are £15 payable on the day. We can accommodate more than 40 for just the theatre performance. Booking deadline Saturday 11th September 2021. We will not be able to guarantee a reservation after this date.

The Afternoon Tea menu will consist of finger sandwiches, crisps, cocktail sausages, dips, scones with clotted cream and jam, cakes, and drinks. It will be provided as a self-service buffet tea.



Love Genius and a Walk is a play about how art and marriage can make odd bedfellows.

Gustav Mahler wants his wife to be his muse, but Alma desires a closeness that he cannot give. In desperation, Mahler turns to the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud for guidance, and both men find that neither of them may be that

clued up about women. At the same time, a modern couple's life mirrors Alma and Gustav's except here she is the artist who works all the time, and their conundrum is a commercially oriented husband whose thoughts on art can be a touch confounding.

The play intertwines relationships between the Mahlers, the Freuds and the Strausses. The two stories twist and turn through the quagmires of love and genius, much of it to the sweeping music of Mahler. The play was nominated for six prizes, including Best Play at the Midtown Festival in New York. The production opens on September 22nd and runs to October 17th 2021.

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