

# THE WAYFARER

## Mahler and Religion

KEVIN CAREY reports that NORMAN LEBRECHT believes that Mahler possessed a strong Jewish identity reflected in his music but not his practice

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Opening his lecture to the Gustav Mahler Society on 26th October 2020, Norman Lebrecht noted that until Beethoven, it was assumed that all composers were practising Christians, not only because of the prevailing orthodoxy but also because composers depended for their living on commissions either from ecclesiastical sources or from the conforming aristocracy. But Beethoven broke new ground by being the first composer to be unshackled from this tradition and although he never made an anti-Christian statement and composed some Christian works, notably the *Missa Solemnis*, we know very little about his religious interiority. For more than a century after his death it was assumed that Mahler believed in God within a Roman Catholic ambit but Lebrecht says that his recent research points in a rather different direction. In 1862 Mahler's parents moved from his birth place in the tiny village of Kaliste to the neighbouring town of Iglau.

Until then, it was forbidden for Jews to live in such a garrison town, but as part of the peace terms negotiated after the Franco/Italian victory over Habsburg Emperor Franz Josef I at Solferino which concluded the Second War of Italian Independence, the Emperor Napoleon III and King Victor Emmanuel of Italy, as part of a package to dilute Imperial hegemony, granted some rights to Jews which were, I think, something of a curiosity, given the way in which the French treated their Jews (vide the Dreyfus Affair 1894-96) and the way in which Mahler was subsequently treated in Vienna. Lebrecht explains that this change meant that the Mahlers could not only achieve greater prosperity by owning an inn in a town rather than a village, but they were also able to establish the worship quorum of 10 required for legitimate Synagogue rites. The newly formed community first bought land for a Jewish Cemetery, then built a school and finally a Synagogue. Mahler's father became the Chair of the Board of Education of the Synagogue - which goes against the lazy assumption that he was irreligious - and, in due course, Mahler's best matriculation mark was in Religious Studies. All the evidence points to religious tolerance between a middle-of-the-road Jewish community, Protestants and Roman Catholics in the town;

### IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Mahler's  
choice of opera (2)

Adorno Mahler  
Revisited

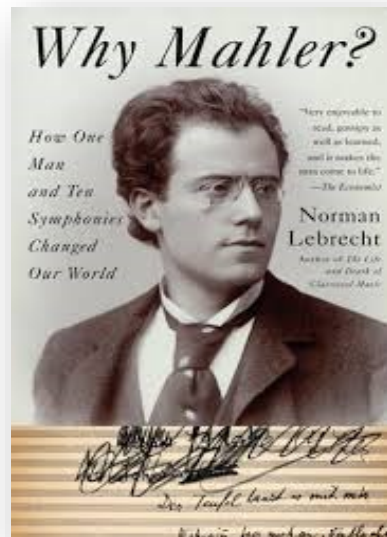
Mahler's conductors  
2: Oskar Fried

Mahler was a friend of the Roman Catholic priest and sometimes sang in his choir; he liked the ritual but there is no evidence of anything more significant than that.

Lebrecht identified three important musical incidents, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of Mahler's life which point to his Jewish identity.

When Mahler fell in love with Marion von Weber, a Jew from Manchester who was married to Captain Carl von Weber, with whom he successfully completed the score of the Three Pintos left incomplete by his grandfather Carl Maria von Weber (an extract of which was the first ever recorded piece (1905) of Mahler-associated music) his passion inspired his 1st Symphony, whose Third Movement contains striking Jewish music, including a lively, though ironical, piece of Klezmer. He also quotes the equivocally Jewish, never quite Christian, Mendelssohn. Just as there were two Mendelssohns, Lebrecht said, perhaps there were two Mahlers but, he says, the evidence points to a much deeper commitment in both to Jewish identity with a superficial Christian veneer. Sadly, or otherwise, Mahler arranged for his elopement but the lady did not turn up for the train!

At the mid-point of his creative life, Mahler opens his 5th Symphony with a motif almost identically quoted by Mendelssohn's Book Five of his Songs without Words (Op 62.3). Mahler went on to become a nominal Roman Catholic - I have only changed my jacket, he said - in order to gain a place at the Vienna State Opera where he rose from fifth in rank to the pinnacle in six



months, but the inner Jewish identity remained. He only entered a Roman Catholic Church once after his baptism, and that was for his marriage to Alma. He specifically stipulated that there should be no priest at his funeral but this was over-ruled. Mahler's Jewish identity was not reflected in conformist practice, not least because he believed in his unmediated relationship with God, dramatically demonstrated in the scores of his final two Symphonies where he inscribes passionate calls on God; and a Jewish motif appears again in the opening of the Final Movement of the 9th (easier identified when it is played at double speed) which bears a strong similarity to the *Kol Nidre* Prayer of Yom Kippur. Lebrecht concluded by summarising his research which indicates that Mahler possessed a strong Jewish identity even if this was not reflected in practice. The sadness was that, when it came to it, the Viennese were much more interested in his race than in his cultural identity. Throughout the first half of the 20th Century, this distinction proved to be critical.

## Vienna 1900

Le Salon de Musique  
Alpha-Classics.com/588

### Tracklist

**Korngold**, Piano Trio, Op.1  
**Zemlinsky**, Clarinet Trio in D minor, Op.3  
**Mahler**, Des Knaben Wunderhorn Kindertotenlieder (excerpts)  
**Berg**, Piano Sonata in B minor, Op.1  
 Four Pieces for Clarinet & Piano, Op.5  
 Adagio from Kammerkonzert  
**Schoenberg**, Chamber Symphony No.1, Op.9

Looking at my CD shelves I see, not unusually, that there are a host of re-enactments of music at home, largely based round Schubert in 1800, so this new house concert is a welcome addition.

Because Mahler was almost entirely concerned with creating his own symphonies, and conducting symphonies and operas, this does not mean he was indifferent to smaller musical genres, particularly as these were somewhat ahead of the symphony in projecting the innovation that would result with Schoenberg's breakthrough into 12-tone. Looked at more than 120 years later, we should be aware that the composers at the time did not see such a break as we tend to now between the tradition, say, of Brahms and Schoenberg; and nobody at the time knew what we know with hindsight.

Other than musicological interest, two things stand out for me: the undoubted brilliance of Korngold, sadly perverted by financial necessity in Hollywood; and the fascinating clarity of line given to the Mahler works by the absence of the voice.

KC

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## Beyond the here and now:

*Rod Garner explores the theology that is expressed in the music of Gustav Mahler*

As he himself confidently predicted more than a century ago, Gustav Mahler's time has come. After decades in which his music was censored, forgotten, or, in some instances, derided as banal, depressing, or lacking inspiration, it is now everywhere. Performances of his symphonies rival those of Beethoven. Between 1990 and 2010, his music has featured on more than 20 film tracks, including the Adagietto from his Fifth Symphony in Luchino Visconti's 1971 film, *Death in Venice*. Books and articles about Mahler and his times, and recordings of his music, proliferate. He is a composer for a post-modern world, whose music speaks to the turbulence of the age, and the deepest questions of the human heart. He is a musician who, in his own estimation, "belonged nowhere"; a Jew who, in 1897, abandoned his Judaism, and converted to Catholicism to assume charge of the Vienna Court Opera; and a man haunted by tragedy, love, and beauty. His mind was rarely still; he walked quickly — "always in full movement like a burning flame" — and he felt everything intensely.

Mahler wanted his music to embrace the whole world and what lay beyond it. To his detractors, such ambition seemed questionable or crazy, and his disarming mood-swings confirmed their suspicions. In marked contrast, however, his symphonies and song cycles — which frequently reduce concert audiences to tears, or to the profound silence more often associated with holy places — tell another story of a genius who, far from being mad, embraced pain and sorrow and made of them astonishing art. Even if we knew little or nothing of Mahler or his

work, only a shrivelled heart could remain indifferent to the Adagietto of his Fifth Symphony, the final movement of his Eighth Symphony, his Rückert song "Lost to this world", and the "Farewell" that ends *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth). Seeking a perspective beyond this life, in his Second "Resurrection" Symphony, Mahler tackled the theme that is common to Judaism and Christianity alike: an ultimate hope beyond death, predicated on the existence of a just and merciful Creator.

The inspiration for the completion of a symphony that had already drained and frustrated him came unexpectedly, when Mahler attended a funeral service in February 1894. After a scripture reading and music by Bach and Brahms, a boys' choir intoned a hymn by the poet Friedrich Klopstock. "Rise again," they sang, "yes, you will rise again, my dust, after a short rest."

Hours later, Mahler was at his desk, pen in hand, knowing that some form of benediction or visitation had enabled him to bring his revelatory work to an electrifying conclusion. It embodied a sound that had come to him "from some other world . . . one is battered to the ground and then raised on angels' wings to the highest heights".

Fighting a severe migraine, Mahler conducted the first performance of the "Resurrection" Symphony on 13 December 1895, in Berlin. The concert brought mixed reactions: some critics found it too noisy and modern, but two conductors rushed to the stage to offer congratulations. Its effect on the audience was palpable, and, for some, emotionally indescribable.

In our own time, Mahler's Second Symphony has lost none of its power and significance. In July 1967, Leonard Bernstein conducted three of its movements in Jerusalem to celebrate Israel's six-day military victory over Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. For Bernstein, the work represented an expression of simple but profound faith "that, despite the ancient cycle of threat and destruction . . . rebirth goes on and good must triumph". When, in 1990, Bernstein died, he was buried with a Mahler score placed over his heart.

At the age of 11, Simon Rattle was taken by his father to hear the symphony for the first time. Recalling the event much later, Sir Simon described it "as a completely transfiguring experience. It was the road to Damascus."



Simon Rattle

After a concert performance in the Vatican in January 2004, Pope John Paul II spoke of its quest for "a sincere reconciliation among all believers in one God" — a prescient remark, that raises a theologically intriguing question: what did Mahler actually intend through this eclectic work, particularly its finale?

It is fairly certain that, despite Mahler's conversion to Catholicism, the Second Symphony does not represent a Christian testimony — in fact, Christ is absent at all points. Mahler's reception into the Church had been a necessary step on his part to counter the anti-Semitism that regarded Jews as "ethically sub-human" and was blighting his career. After his conversion, Mahler never attended mass or confession, never crossed himself, and only once entered a church for religious reasons: to get married.

The prayers that he scrawled on his final score were addressed to God the Father. He remained a monotheist and a Jew. Well versed in the tenets of Judaism, he remembered the early prayers that he had been taught as a boy by Rabbi Unger: texts written five centuries before Christ, which testified to a King who "keeps his faith with those who sleep in the dust". It seems that Mahler was staking everything on God: a God beyond divisive religious doctrines; a merciful God who brings back *all* the dead. In its searing conclusion, "Resurrection" affirms that it is not only the righteous who will rise again. Describing the finale, Mahler wrote: "The glory of God appears. A wondrous light strikes us to Behold: there is no judgement, no sinner, no just man, no great and small; there is no punishment, no 'reward'. An overwhelming love." To listen attentively to this symphony is necessarily to take up Mahler's challenge: to consider again the nature of God, the scope of divine love, and the fullest, truest meaning of resurrection.

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## Mahler's Conductors 1: Bruno Walter - Part 2

KEVIN CAREY *sketches  
Walter's recording history*

Bruno Walter's recording history stretches from 1900 until his death in 1961. He is most widely known from his late recordings with CBS (now Sony) with whom he had a contract from his arrival in the United States in 1938 until his death, acting as a worthy forerunner to Bernstein who recorded on the same label. These late recordings are, naturally, technically superior both to his mono and even earlier 78 RPM discs but, with the exception of his remarkable 1961 recording of Mahler 1, these are generally somewhat relaxed which works reasonably well, for example, in his 1950s late Mozart Symphonies but not in Mahler. His early recordings are now available on CD from a variety of reissue labels, as single discs, in boxes or as downloads but what matters is the engineering quality and so, where possible, always choose Mark Obert-Thorn's engineering. Walter's 1939 premier recording of the 1st with the NBCSO is definitely worth having if you are a completist collector but not otherwise. Having premiered both *Das Lied* (Munich 1911) and the 9th (Vienna 1912), he made their premier recordings with the Vienna Philharmonic (VPO) in 1936 and 1938 respectively. The former with Kerstin Thorborg (contralto) and Charles Kullman (tenor) is of much more historical than musical interest, not least because Thorborg was to make many better recordings but also because the work became forever associated with Kathleen Ferrier (Contralto) whose recording with Julius Patzak (Tenor) and the VPO in 1952 just before her death achieved legendary status but its excellence has been surpassed by the recent issuing of a hitherto obscure live performance with Set Svanholm (tenor) and the New York Philharmonic (NYPO) where, in spite of suffering from a cold, Ferrier produced the recorded performance of her life.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the recording of the 9th by Fred Gaisberg was of even more historical than musical interest. This was not because the playing was bad, quite the reverse, but this January performance turned out to be the swan song of the VPO, led by Mahler's

brother-in-law Arnold Rose, before it was broken up by the Anschluss in March. Once in America, Walter went on to make the premier recordings of the 4th with the NYPO and Desi Halban (soprano) in 1946 and the 5th with the NYPO in 1947. He also made the third ever recording of the 2nd in 1942 with the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, after Oscar Fried's 1924 Berlin and Eugene Ormandy's Minneapolis 1935 recordings. For the record, he made at least nine commercial recordings of the 1st, five of the 2nd, nine of the 4th and eight of *Das Lied*. Strangely, he only recorded the 5th once and only returned to the 9th once. The 1961 1st, 1938 9th and the 1948/1952 *Das Lied* recordings are in a class of their own; but in spite of his many attempts, Szell's 1965 4th with the Cleveland SO and Judith Raskin (sop) still stands alone; Otto Klemperer did much better than Walter in his many recordings of the 2nd; and, strangely, as it came to be the most popular, nobody got to grips with the 5th until Bernstein in 1964 and, even there, I have my doubts, particularly with the lugubrious *Adagietto*. From this it can be seen that he concentrated on a very narrow range, never recording the 3rd, 6th, 7th, 8th and *Adagio* from the 10th. It must be remembered that except for the 9th and *Das Lied* Walter heard

Mahler conducting his own work.

Outside Mahler, Walter recorded a wide variety of 19th Century repertoire from Mozart to Richard



Strauss and I have a particular affection for his *Don Giovanni*, *Marriage of Figaro* and *Fidelio*.

Walter composed until approximately 1910, including two Symphonies, an orchestral fantasia, a String Quartet, Piano Quintet, Piano Trio and many songs.

Walter also left recordings of rehearsals which show him to be a warm, effective communicator, unlike some of his tyrannical contemporaries.

## The Triumph of Youth

*Kevin Carey celebrates the triumphant, Society-sponsored recital by Charlotte Hoather and George Todică featuring their premier performance of Rückertlieder*

There is a tendency with the early works of all composers, but particularly those whose mature works represent a radical development, to look for clues in the former to the latter, often seeing the former's existence entirely in that light. In the case of Mahler such musicological self-indulgence is largely concerned with the rather obvious issue of which bits of the early work appear in which symphony, a task surely for the undergraduate, but what matters much more is the identification of the early signs of radicalism, some of which flowered in later works and some of which did not; but, even more than that, we ought to listen to any work for its own sake. After all, genius though he was, Mahler could hardly have known when he began to write where his gifts might take him. It is impossible to escape the notion of Mahler the revolutionary. Half an hour in the company of his contemporary Hugo Wolf (1860-1903) will make my point better than a thousand words. Yet, in the Hegelian sense, like Bruckner, Mahler's consciousness of his Schubertian heritage made his revolution possible. The key to artistic development is deliberate rule breaking, but you cannot break the rules if you do not know what they are; or, to put it another way, the better you know them the better you break them.



Taking a broad overview of the GMSUK-sponsored recital given by Charlotte Hoather and George Todică, Charlotte's singing was light, transparent and slightly naive, in a nice sort of way (there will be a proper time for musical weight) while George's sense of pulse and weight of attack were admirable; it may sound rather superfluous to say this, but I could hear every word and every note, not least thanks to a very good recording where the balance was just right. Overall, Mahler's triumph of youth was reflected in the enthusiastic and winning performances of this talented and very promising partnership.

They began with *Lieder Und Gesänge* Volume 1 (1880-87) only the third of which, *Hans Und Grethe*, is really identifiably Mahlerian - it was chronologically the first song he thought worth keeping - presenting some sharp musical corners, although the final two Don Juan songs were given a properly mildly-ironic treatment by George.

Next came two Alma Mahler songs. Introducing them, Charlotte recounted Mahler's insistence that she should stop writing in marrying him, but that her songs were revived on the advice of Sigmund Freud as a way of trying to bring them together in 1910. Both *In meines Vaters Garten* and *Laue Sommernacht* were competent enough but they emphasised the huge gulf between the spouses, for whereas Alma's grand, theatrical gestures had very little impact, the tiniest of Mahler's unorthodox inflections was very telling.



These were followed, acknowledging Mahler's debt, by four Schubert songs, D 891, 550, 774 and 118, the first of which was dedicated by Charlotte to the Society's late lamented Chairman Gary Waller who loved Schubert and had introduced her to Mahler. Charlotte sang all four with great style while George applied an admirably steady left hand. I often say that the way to tell a good soprano and pianist is, respectively, to pay attention to their low register and left hand as so often listeners are diverted by what is happening more glamorously at the top of the register and in the right hand.

The recital ended with the couple's premier performance of *Fünf Rückert Lieder* (1901-2) on precisely the 116th anniversary of their first performance on 29 January 1905. The first thing to say is that this provided an instructive contrast with the Society's sponsored recital, reviewed in Vol.19, Issue 2, which also featured these songs with Simon Wallfisch whose baritone was markedly authoritative whereas Charlotte sang with a captivating innocence. Personally I found the lighter tone much more appropriate for the music even though this is firmly middle period Mahler. The highlights of the set were, almost inevitably *Um Mitternacht*, and *Ich Bin Der Welt Abhanden Gekommen* which is surely Mahler's greatest individual song.

In short, a nicely crafted programme with well-judged performances and the welcome prospect of more to come.

## Mahler's Choice of Opera

JOHN SEARIGHT surveys Mahler's choice of operas and finds that it was relatively narrow

Once Mahler had accepted that the likelihood of his earning a comfortable living as a piano teacher or as a composer was, to say the least, slender and that his 'bread and butter' would have to come from conducting, he set his sights at the highest level: second best would just not be acceptable, so quite early in his conducting career, Vienna, with the Court Opera, the orchestra doubling up as the Vienna Philharmonic, became his target.

Having studied at the Vienna Conservatoire and experienced the music scene of the city and having met a number of eminent musicians and composers, including Brahms and Bruckner - and catching a close glimpse of Wagner whose anti-Semitism he never allowed to get in the way of his admiration for his music - how could he resist this dream? He knew that he had to be patient, to learn his trade, not only conducting but also administration, learning to deal with often temperamental singers and musicians, not to mention getting to know as much of the operatic repertoire as possible.

His early posts were something of a rude awakening! In May 1880 he arrived at the little spa town of Hall in upper Austria, known today as Bad Hall. The 'theatre' was little more than a wooden barn, not very well disguised by various external decorations; it could seat approximately 190, had a small gallery and an orchestra pit just large enough for 15 musicians who spent much of the day entertaining those who had come to take the waters! Mahler's tasks included putting out and clearing away the music and music stands and during the interval he had to wheel the Director's baby around the park - whose wife, incidentally, just happened to be the star of the cast! Inevitably, the repertoire consisted of popular pieces from operettas and the like. Mahler was depressed and he wondered what on earth he was doing there but it was only for the summer season and indeed quite a learning curve.



The appointments that followed at Laibach, Olmütz and Kassel led him in the right direction but the first breakthrough came in July 1885 when he took up the post of Assistant to Angelo Neumann, the Director of the German Theatre in Prague. Neumann was a confirmed advocate of Wagner's music, having conducted all of his operas and even organised a Wagner touring company. This Prague appointment resulted in Mahler conducting *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Tannhäuser* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. He was hooked and felt that he was on his way. Prague was followed by Leipzig, Budapest and Hamburg. The world of music was beginning to take note of the young firebrand of a conductor even though his own music continued to be controversial.

Mahler's Vienna target became a genuine possibility when its conductor Wilhelm Jahn began to suffer from failing vision. He rallied his contacts in the music world but first he knew that he would have to convert to Roman Catholicism, the state religion, before becoming a candidate as Jews were ineligible for such a senior post. He was baptised on the 23rd of February 1897. At his farewell concert in Hamburg on the 24th of April he conducted *Fidelio* with Anna von Mildenburg as Leonore, and Beethoven's 3rd. The audience went wild, a succession of presentations of laurel wreaths followed and he thanked all those who had stood by him during his time there. Yet he was under no illusions as to what lay ahead.

Vienna had always been his goal but he would have to face many Challenges, not least from many of the critics. Anti-Semitism was on the rise in the city and his 'conversion' to Catholicism fooled nobody. As he had told the journalist Ludwig Karpath shortly after his Baptism: "I've just changed my coat". In other words, nothing had changed.

With Jahn's sight worsening, Mahler was summoned to meet Josef von Bezecky, the Intendant of the Hofoper, and the following day he signed a contract accepting the post of Conductor at the Vienna Court Opera for a year. In a letter to Karpath he described the situation as a wasps' nest. At least to begin with, life in Vienna would be an almighty struggle but he was prepared to take the bull by the horns and win! He was offered *Don Giovanni* for his debut on the 11th of May although he had suggested *Tannhäuser*. The ailing Jahn received him into the fold with kindness and, knowing Mahler's passion for Wagner, gave him *Lohengrin* instead which he conducted after just one rehearsal. It was an outstanding success. He had won over the musicians, banishing all doubts as to his ability even though, beforehand, there had been rumours of a walk-out. He had conquered Vienna in one fell swoop. As a result, he was assigned *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, *Figaro* and *Zauberflöte* shortly after.

During these early days in Vienna Mahler was fully aware that the operas might not be his choice but he appreciated that the offer was friendly, intended to meet with his approval. He knew that he had to bide his time. His friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner remembered accompanying him to a performance of *Die Meistersinger* under Hans Richter. After which Mahler declared that the revered Richter had conducted the First Act like a master, the Second like a schoolmaster and the Third like a master cobbler. He told Natalie that once he became Director he had every intention of shaking up the Court Opera in every respect, including casting, scenery and costumes.

Facing the inevitability of his failing sight and delighted by the universal acclamation of Mahler's *Lohengrin*, Jahn was grooming Mahler to be his successor.

His next assignment was *The Magic Flute*. Following ten rehearsals, and with his own health deteriorating, it was an outstanding success. He had proved himself before a discerning Vienna with operas by his two favourite composers and had made the point that he was not just a conductor of modern music such as Wagner.

Mahler's health continued to worsen with a throat infection resulting in an abscess that had to be lanced. On medical advice he left Vienna with his sisters Justine and Emma, and Natalie Bauer-Lechner for Kitzbühel to rest and recuperate.

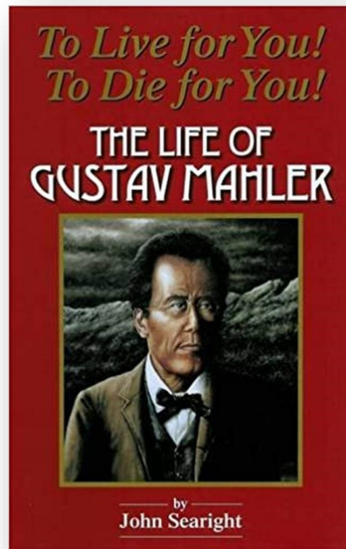
Having received the news that he had been appointed Deputy Director of the Court Opera, Mahler's task, as Jahn's right-hand man, was to confront a variety of tasks, not least Vienna's inundation which meant that many staff, including Richter, could not get to work but given the absence of both his superiors he was able to demonstrate his administrative skills. Richter's gratitude resulted in Mahler being given the forthcoming productions of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*.

Meanwhile, he conducted an acclaimed performance of *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Despite these successes, however, firmly believing that dedication and discipline were essential prerequisites for artistic success, Mahler considered that these foundations had become weakened at the Hofoper and must be restored.

The performances of both *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* confirmed his suspicions.

The Wagner was capped by an astonishing incident which rather summed up the prevailing attitudes at the Hofoper at that time: in the last Act there is an important timpani roll and when Mahler cued nothing happened. The timpanist had gone, replaced by another musician who had missed his entry. Apparently the timpanist had left to catch the last train to his home in the suburb of Brunn and this was not the first time he had done so.

Mahler almost hit the roof but the next morning he learned that the timpanist's salary was nowhere near the amount needed to support his family in Vienna so



Mahler immediately put at the top of his list of priorities an improvement in the salaries of musicians even if it meant economising in other areas; and, needless to say, this raised his standing with the players.

Despite Mahler's reservations, his *Ring Cycle*, with all the traditional cuts restored, was a great success. At the end of *Götterdämmerung* his name was chanted repeatedly. The little man had become a giant of the podium. Yet Mahler was not satisfied, remarking how regrettable it was that great composers had to compose works for "that pigsty, the theatre". Would he ever be satisfied? The answer was emphatically negative.

It was not long before Richter left. Mahler, having achieved a position of almost unlimited power, rolled up his sleeves and set to work reorganising and reforming the Court Opera, regardless of his popularity. He required discipline from staff, singers, musicians and audiences; soloists who had outgrown their usefulness would be removed and new singers brought in; any musicians whose ability or attitude fell below his demanding standards would be replaced; he would accept nothing less than one hundred per cent dedication.

The composer and cellist Franz Schmidt, who joined the orchestra in 1896, later recalled how Mahler's arrival had been "like a catastrophe of the elements", shaking the edifice to its foundations; everything weak had to give way. As a result, many singers and musicians were to pack their bags over the following months, Schmidt remarking that by 1900 he was the senior cellist after just four years. To liven up the repertoire Mahler sought out new operas but they would have to be works of real quality.

New productions for the autumn of 1897 included two of his favourites, *Zar und Zimmermann* by Albert Lortzing and *Dalibor* by Smetana, the latter hailing from his native Bohemia/Moravia. Both productions were a great success. Next, Mahler renovated *Die Zauberflöte*.

The revitalised production, with cuts restored, brought out the opera's fairy tale quality, its simplicity and naïveté. Mahler's Queen of the Night was no mere mortal but a divine mother-figure with billowing black cloak and flowing hair, sheltering all in her nocturnal lap. *Eugene Onegin*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Tannhäuser* and *Der Fliegende Holländer* followed, all with cuts restored and with Mahler's vision permeating every aspect of the productions.

Musicians and singers were forced to adapt to his very individual way of conducting when previously they had been used to time-beaters with which Mahler had no truck. Concentration was of the essence, especially as he would frequently change his tempi which resulted in every performance being a unique, fresh occasion, banishing the staleness that had pervaded the Court Opera over the previous years.

On the 2nd of September 1898 Richter officially stepped down and Mahler was duly appointed to take his place. He was now in control of both the opera house and the concert hall as it was the same orchestra which performed at both venues. The uncut *Ring Cycle* of September 1898, with Anna von Mildenburg as Brünnhilde, was widely praised and became the talk of the city.

Mahler re-thought every work, not just once, but for every performance. He was prepared to be controversial, even to shock. He would delve into the heart of each score and interpret it in the way that he considered the composer would have wished. There were performances of Boieldieu's *La Dame Blanche*, *Der Freischütz* and the first complete Viennese performance of *Tristan und Isolde*. All had the Mahler touch, not just in terms of the music but also in the productions. Out went the traditional, rather staid, sets; in came simplicity and the greater use of lighting to achieve effects.

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**Editor, The Wayfarer**

Kevin Carey

On the 27th of November 1899 Mahler conducted the first uncut Viennese production of *Die Meistersinger* before a packed audience: nobody arrived late and nobody left before the final curtain. The performance was astonishing, marred only by whistling and catcalling from an anti-Mahler group in the gallery, the rest of the audience doing their best to drown it out. The following year Mahler signed up a new star singer from Weimar, Marie Gutheil-Schoder. Coached by Richard Strauss, Mahler placed her in the same category as Anna von Mildenburg. Her voice may not have been as good as Anna's but from a dramatic point of view she was at least her equal; Mahler thought her a genius. He chose one of his favourite works, *Carmen*, for her debut on the 26th of May 1900. He told Natalie that every time he conducted the work he discovered something new in Bizet's superb scoring with its delicacy and clarity and his experimentation created new sounds. He foretold that this was the path music would take rather than the Impressionism of composers such as Claude Debussy for, having attended a performance of the latter's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, he concluded that it was "harmless".

Mahler launched the 1900-1901 season with new productions of Mozart's *Così fan Tutte* and *Die Zauberflöte*, both receiving critical acclaim; in December there was a complete *Ring* and in January a new production of Wagner's *Rienzi*, Mahler again shaking off the dust from its tired predecessor. On the 28th of September 1901 Bruno Walter made his debut at the Hofoper. It was no small-scale work that Mahler gave his new young Assistant for the occasion but Verdi's epic opera *Aida* which, like most of Verdi's work, he regarded as merely commercial. He had been determined that Walter's debut would not only be a hit with the audience but would also hit the headlines. Mahler, sitting in his box, was completely satisfied with Walter's conducting. He could delegate to his young Assistant with confidence. An equally important signing was that of Professor Alfred Roller, a friend of his father-in-law Carl Moll, whose forte was set design and production. He hated the traditional over-blown productions that had become the norm at the Hofoper, especially the treatment of his favourite opera *Tristan und Isolde*. He was convinced that a fresh, simple approach was needed, that a production must visually complement the music, letting the music speak for itself.

A new production of *Tristan* was in the offing, what better work for Roller to make his debut? This new and very important partnership would revolutionise opera production. It was the event of the season at the Hofoper in 1903 to mark the twentieth anniversary of Wagner's death.

The première took place on the 21st of February and it was little short of a sensation. They had worked in tandem to produce stage settings with a completely new concept. In their opinion naturalistic sets had had their day and should be replaced by more atmospheric, thought-provoking designs with a meaning, utilising space and lit in a symbolic way. With this in mind, Mahler managed to get permission for the orchestra pit to be lowered, as it had been at Bayreuth, so that the orchestra lights would not interfere with the stage lighting. The audience was stunned. Visually they had never before experienced anything like it. *Tristan* was followed by a new Roller-Mahler production of *Falstaff* in German which was also widely acclaimed.

**TO BE CONCLUDED  
IN THE JUNE EDITION OF  
THE WAYFARER**

**MAHLER**

**AND THE RUSSIANS**

**Wednesday 14 April 2021**

**7pm on Zoom**

For the first of the Gustav Mahler Society's regular talks in 2021, we welcome the renowned writer, lecturer and broadcaster, David Nice.

Over past years, GMS members have enjoyed David's authoritative Study Days on Mahler & Opera, Mahler's Symphony No.7 and Mahler & Shostakovich. In addition to his regular contributions to the ArtsDesk, where his reviews on a wide range of topics are both profound and thought provoking, David reviews most Mahler releases for the BBC Music Magazine and compared all available versions of Mahler's 7th Symphony for BBC Radio 3's Building a Library.

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