Mahler’s moment

I: After Mahler: influence or intertext?

if you weren’t you, who would you like to be?
Paul McCartney Gustav Mahler
Alfred Jarry John Coltrane
Charlie Mingus Claude Debussy
Wordsworth Monet Bach and Blake

Adrian Henri, ‘Me’¹

Henri’s poem, first published in 1967, can be read as a litany or genealogy.² It confers iconic status on a conglomeration of artists. The opening of this list of a few of the Liverpudlian poet’s favourite things grants especially high status to Mahler by provocatively pairing him with McCartney, the hometown popular hero and by the poem’s year of publication one of the world’s most famous musicians. It is a poem which, as Bernice Martin has noted, mixes categories and tastes with no care for chronology, but most crucially carries the ‘weight of implicit knowledge; all those names have to trigger a shared memory and understanding of multiple traditions’. It is also in several ways a ‘parasitic’ poem: its apparent ‘anti-structure’ depends upon poetic traditions of metre and rhythm; its wilfully scatty inventory recalls biblical verses of begetting.³ Up front, the poem projects McCartney and Mahler as on-trend alter egos for the modern, artistically aspirant subject.

Many would warm to Henri’s homage. It is widely appreciated that Mahler’s music raises aesthetic, expressive, technical and political issues that are subsequently extended, interrogated, transformed and challenged in fascinating and diverse ways in the work of a broad range of composers.⁴

² See Bernice Martin, A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 95. Henri’s complete poem is a list (totalling over eighty names) dominated by white males.
³ Ibid., 96.
Our understanding of these issues and their significance for music of the past one hundred years remains, however, partial. An important critical task remains to be done. This book seeks to do some of this critical work through examining three composer case studies: Benjamin Britten, Kurt Weill and Hans Werner Henze. In particular, it interprets their work in the light of Mahler’s complex engagement with romantic notions of redemption or fulfillment.

The proposition that the music of Mahler was greatly admired by Britten, Weill and Henze is neither provocative nor revelatory. They each frequently expressed their appreciation of Mahler’s achievement and described its personal significance for their artistic outlook. This has predictably led to ascriptions of direct or indirect influence. The critical literature on these three composers is littered with descriptions of their music as more or less explicitly ‘Mahlerian’, or ‘post-Mahlerian’. And yet the interpretative potential of exploring their music in the

5 In Lisa Brooks Robinson’s thesis Mahler and Postmodern Intertextuality, unpublished PhD, Yale University (1994) works by Lukas Foss, George Rochberg, Luciano Berio and Alfred Schnittke are discussed as case studies demonstrating how aspects of Mahler’s music – stylistic pluralism, including juxtaposition of high and low materials, irony, allusion – were attractive to composers working within the ‘postmodern aesthetic’. Robinson emphasizes that this is just one aspect of Mahler’s impact on twentieth-century music. Hermann Danuser’s study of the post-1960 reception of Mahler is couched in oppositional notions – regression/progression; late romanticism/new music; nostalgia/advanced art – which he argues are present in Mahler’s music: Gustav Mahler und seine Zeit (Laaber-Verlag, 1991). Hans Keller concluded that ‘the diagnosis, however tentative, cannot be avoided that it was in fact Mahler, rather than the more revolutionary Schoenberg, who was the widest influence on twentieth-century music – just because he was less of a revolutionary’. The Unpopularity of Mahler’s Popularity, in Christopher Wintle (ed.), Essays on Music (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 69–70. See also Leon Botstein, Whose Mahler? Reception, Interpretation and History, in Karen Painter (ed.), Mahler and His World (Princeton University Press, 2002), 1–53.

6 To exemplify the proliferation of such comments, and to take just Britten, the ‘Messalina’ section of Our Hunting Fathers (1936) is described as Mahlerian by both Philip Rupprecht, Britten’s Musical Language (Cambridge University Press, 2001), and Donald Mitchell, ‘What do we know about Britten Now’, in Christopher Palmer (ed.), The Britten Companion (London: Faber, 1984), 31. Arved Ashby’s ‘Britten as Symphonist’, in Mervyn Cooke (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Britten (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 217–32, offers many subtle but passing comments on both ‘Mahlerian’ and ‘non-Mahlerian’ aspects. For Eric Roseberry, the War Requiem (1961) suggests a Mahlerian ‘embracing of the world’, and the treatment of climax in the ‘Libera me’ is comparable with Mahler’s apocalyptic visions in the Sixth and Ninth Symphonies; ‘A debt repaid? Some Observations on Shostakovich and his Late Period Reception of Britten’, in David Fanning (ed.), Shostakovich Studies (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 229–53. The promisingly titled Philip Reed (ed.), On Mahler and Britten (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995) is divided between essays on these two composers with no sustained attempt to bring the two together beyond passing comparative comment. Many essays both here and elsewhere point to thematic or expressive similarities between the composers’ works without getting beyond surface allusions or parallelisms.
context of Mahler’s work remains underdeveloped. To address this through positioning these composers with regard to Mahler’s negotiation with versions of redemption and transcendence from the romantic tradition may seem to be an unexpected strategy. But the music of Britten, Weill and Henze is part of a narrative thread in the story of twentieth-century music which tells of repertory which is non-conformist and anti-dogmatic and yet also firmly entwined with traditions elsewhere considered outworn, irrelevant or ideologically suspect. Their music overtly raises the issue of tradition – sometimes to celebrate it, sometimes to recalibrate it. It has become a commonplace of criticism (rightly) to align aspects of their work with notions of anti-romanticism, neoclassicism, new objectivity or realism, but they repeatedly displayed profound concern for how music might evoke – through both affirmation and negation – a redemptive or transcendent mode that so preoccupied the Romantics but which seemed, to many of their contemporaries, to be indisputably redundant, dismissible or disreputable. This aspect of their work remains under-explored. It is especially interesting that their initial admiration for Mahler’s music was in each case notably dissonant with the prevailing zeitgeist: Britten in 1930s England, Weill in Germany of the 1920s and Henze in Germany and Italy in the 1950s. Each occupied an acutely felt position as cultural and social outsider and explored the resistance of the individual to subjugating social forces through expressions of alienation, assimilation and reconciliation. In a century of cataclysm and horror, in which the utopian–dystopian polarity became extreme, the music of Britten, Weill and Henze frequently seems to inhabit a precarious position between cultural entrenchments. Mahler’s music struck such a profound chord with these composers because of the powerful way in which it raised and intensified dystopian and utopian complexes and probed the possibility of fulfilment or redemption, an ambition manifest in ambiguous tonal, temporal and formal processes. In all these ways, it is valid and valuable to explore their music as being ‘after Mahler’.

‘After Mahler’: this unavoidably raises the spectres of epigonism and mannerism (the perpetuation of a once vigorous artistic style beyond its ‘normal’ lifespan). Whether such relationships are signified by the suffix ‘esque’ or by the prefix ‘post’ the implications are, as I have stated elsewhere, ‘ambiguous, suggesting either stylish evocation of a prestigious predecessor or the perilous dangers of pale imitation’. The implied ‘borrowing’ or ‘emulation’ may at best suggest ‘homage or compliment, but at worst might be viewed as parasitical, a weak imitation which actually drains the
artistic life out of the revered source of inspiration. The impression can all too readily evoke latecomers furtively sweeping up discarded materials after the glory and brilliance of the Lord Mayor’s show has long passed by. The idea of influence, once a respected topic of study (with perhaps the classic twentieth-century text being T.S. Eliot’s famous essay on “Tradition and the Individual Talent”), is now highly problematic. Studies which focus on the relationship of an artist, or group of artists, to a single, immediate predecessor of high cultural status have perhaps been recently avoided because this critical strategy is felt to be suspiciously reductive or in danger of lapsing into discredited ideology. Such pitfalls can be avoided by challenging conventional notions of artistic influence. With musicology’s rather belated and uncertain flirtation with Harold Bloom’s once influential idea of the anxiety of influence now some time past and theories of intertextuality well established in the discipline, the time seems ripe for studies which identify and interrogate points of comparison between the work of an artist or artists and that of a venerated antecedent and develop these to inform critical interpretation and analysis.

For Michael Baxandall the traditional notion of influence is ‘a curse of art criticism’. He argues that we need to turn the conventional critical direction on its head: ‘If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than that Y did something to X. But in the consideration of good pictures and paintings the second is always the more lively reality.’ Baxandall continues:

If we think of Y rather than X as the agent the vocabulary is much richer and more attractively diversified: draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, engage...

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Baxandall’s example is Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1906–7) and its relationship to the work of Cézanne (who died in the autumn of 1906), in particular to the series of *Baigneuses* canvasses (c. 1900). Picasso’s creative engagement with Cézanne’s works explored their contribution within a particular notion of, or story within, the history and techniques of modern painting. In Cézanne’s *Baigneuses*, Picasso identified both an artistic problem which he decided to address or tackle and a ‘resource’, a place to find and adapt techniques or ‘tools for solving problems’. Baxandall exhorts that ‘to sum all this up as Cézanne influencing Picasso would be false: it would blur the differences in type of reference, and it would take the actively purposeful element out of Picasso’s behaviour to Cézanne’. Picasso was highly selective, approaching Cézanne’s work from a markedly particular, ‘tendentious’ angle, and through this ‘rewrote’ Cézanne’s place in art history. The consequence is that ‘we will never see Cézanne undistorted by what, in Cézanne, painting after Cézanne has made productive in our tradition.’

Even where the rhetoric of traditional criticism remains more intact, there has been a concern to avoid creating a passive portrait of the younger artist. The keynote essay in the catalogue of an exhibition exploring the relationship of Picasso to the work of a range of modern British artists (Duncan Grant, Wyndham Lewis, Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore, Francis Bacon, Graham Sutherland and David Hockney) posed it not as a ‘question of influence as a passive acceptance but of study and appropriation as a conscious strategy in each artist’s practice’. And yet, as the art critic of *The Observer* noted, such a ‘comparison is frequently cruel’, and too often is one which ‘ends up shrinking the art’. Comparative studies of this kind can all too often be doubly reductive. They reduce the complexity of the possible

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11 Ibid., 61–62.
meaning and intertextual character of the work and reduce the place of the artist to a singular, dominant and unequal relationship. They also remain too often informed by lingering anxieties over supposed originality. In his widely read essay ‘On Originality’, the late Edward Said, that famous scholar of lateness, wrote that ‘the writer thinks less of writing originally, and more of rewriting’. All art is to some degree a form of palimpsest or type of afterthought. As the author and critic Jonathan Lethem has more recently commented, ‘it has become apparent that appropriation, mimicry, quotation, allusion, and sublimated collaboration consist of a sine qua non of the creative act’. Lethem urges us to get over modernism’s ‘contamination anxiety’ and celebrate the ‘ecstasy of influence’ and the ‘strange beauty of second use’.

The influence of the traditional notion of influence on critical work has recently come under the most scathing scrutiny from Lawrence Kramer. For Kramer, influence is ineluctably tied up with romantic hang-ups over notions of the ‘great work’, genius, maturation, originality and progress. It places a ‘dreadful constraint on intertextual potential’ because ‘the richness of cultural production’ is ‘condensed into a single controlling and limiting antecedent’. Kramer argues, furthermore, that any hope of developing a new, improved theory of influence is doomed for, unlike the ‘plural, heterogeneous relations’ which inform theories of intertextuality, it would necessarily be restricted to the study of a younger artist ‘seeking to transcend the tutelage of the older’. The notion of influence which Kramer rejects is not one to which this study adheres. But there is deliberate intertextual constraint. Its aim is to generate interpretations of Britten, Weill and Henze through focusing discussion of their musical materials and procedures around certain structural, aesthetic and expressive characteristics of Mahler’s output. These characteristics, which are identified in the final part of this introductory chapter, relate to the music of Britten, Weill and Henze as prominent parts of its ‘cultural memory’. They do so sometimes overtly, sometimes latently, and often in ambiguous, ambivalent ways. As Kramer has put it, the ‘presence of the past in the presentness of the musical work can be heard in the form of oddly familiar, uncanny figures, as ghosts in the material’. Kramer reads the ‘Freund Hein spielt auf’ violin solo of the second movement of Mahler’s Fourth Symphony as a ‘trope for the curiously memorial function of all composed, all written music, the mere

performance of which according to the score constitutes an attempt to reanimate something always already fleeting, disappearing, lost, dead. All such music is memorial; all such music is necromantic. Even where it mourns, it forms an attempt to transcend or undo mourning.’ Kramer focuses on the ‘revenant’, that is, a ‘skeleton, a ghost, a phantom, one who haunts, who returns, who walks again’. Such figures may be ‘genial’ or ‘ghastly’:

The spectre of death – realized by Schubert, whose revenants, snatches of song transplanted to instrumental works, are all imbued with the melancholy of absent voice and nearly all topically laden with themes of loss: a beautiful world now vanished; the solitude of the wanderer for whom the world has no beauty left; the meeting of Death and the Maiden. These revenants seem to summon up a melancholy latent in all forms of citation, even self-citation.17

It would be equally insightful to substitute Mahler for Schubert in Kramer’s paragraph.

Mahler’s music has long been heard to raise questions concerning the value, relationship and meaning of reminiscences, quotations, musical reuse, recycling and allusion.18 It technically develops and expressively intensifies the allusive qualities that are a characteristic aspect of romantic musical compositional practice and reception. In a study of this practice, Christopher Alan Reynolds notes how compositional allusions may be assimilative or contrastive. They are materials invoked in forms of artistic play which may involve transformation, elevation, concealment, contradiction or irony. The significance and effect, Reynolds rightly asserts, is profoundly conditioned by the manner in which an allusion is ‘framed’ or ‘presented’. Merely spotting allusions to past or borrowed material in a game of musical ‘snap’ is a pastime of little import. Allusions need to be recognized as significantly relating to artistic and critical engagements with notions including creativity, meaning, subjective identity, politics and tradition.19 Allusions alert listeners to the possibility of more embedded or subtle intertextual associations; they might tell of the relation of a work to a version or rendering of history. Identifying and exploring these cultural or

17 Lawrence Kramer, Musical Meaning: Towards a Critical History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 261; from whom the term ‘cultural memory’ is also borrowed (see p. 265.)


historical themes can provide context for a central topical focus and ensure a move beyond myopic allusion spotting, which, as John Daverio warns in the final pages of his study of intertextual relationships between the music of Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, can lead to restrictive emphasis on striking moments at the expense of the larger interpretative and historical picture.20

At the broadest level, allusion to things past can raise intertwined notions of historicism and modernism. The work of Walter Frisch has been especially important in unpacking this ambiguity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German repertory. In an essay on Brahms, he argues that ‘historicism really becomes indistinguishable from [Brahms’s] . . . own style’.21 In a study of Reger, Frisch includes ‘late Mahler’ as part of a privileged repertory that characteristically led to a focus on ‘chromaticism and atonality as the barometers of emergent modernism’ in Austro-German music between the death of Wagner and the start of the First World War. By contrast, Frisch raises the importance of ‘historicist modernism’ in music from around 1900, which had a ‘deep and sophisticated engagement with music of the past’, in a manner which must be differentiated from later neoclassicism, and in which the music of Brahms played a crucial role.22 The differentiation Frisch demands between the attitude towards the past exhibited by pre-war historicist-modernists and the neoclassicists who flourished from the 1920s points up the requirement for critical subtlety. But his characterization of Mahler, even if limited to ‘late’ Mahler, is too one-dimensional. In a widely read essay, Carl Dahlhaus distinguished various forms of historicism through evoking notions of inclusion and exclusion, nature and history, and the naïve and sentimental, all of which are particularly apposite to Mahler, Britten, Weill and Henze. Tradition can be sustained yet critiqued artistically through controlled estrangement. Such critical work reveals what was ‘natural’ to be historical, and raises the problem of assimilation. An artistic project of restoration seeks to renew contact with a tradition after an interruption; such restorations are by their very nature reflective (unlike traditions which can be unreflective, naïve), as they are based on

Conservatism, unlike restoration, seeks to preserve traditions that are considered to be current but ‘endangered’. It is nonetheless reflective, latently polemical. Conservatism turns into overt historicism when the presentness of the past and that material’s very ‘pastness’ is subjected to scrutiny. This position contrasts with the naïve traditionalist who, Dahlhaus explains, clings to the ‘metaphysics’ of a timeless, unchanging and abstract notion of beauty. The Schillerian sentimental leanings of historicism facilitate the appreciation of ‘past things for being past, in a form of recollection that figures as an essential feature of the present moment. The remote is perceived as such but experienced as near; the foreign is recognized as alien yet also felt to be familiar.23 The complex, shifting tone of Mahler’s music, across and within works, at various times evokes all these variant forms of historicism, in part depending on what tradition is evoked. Mahler’s historicism embraced the tensions between assimilation and alienation, obligation and freedom, conservation and restoration, naïvety and sentimentality.24

As Arnold Whittall has pointed out, an important aspect of the mid-twentieth-century ‘rediscovery’ of Mahler was that his music sounded new yet ‘familiar’ because of its ‘evident relationship with traditional genres and aesthetic codes’. Composers such as Britten ‘who were most highly regarded for their ability to combine individualism and accessibility . . . were often perceived as having Mahlerian traits’. Furthermore, in a century of ‘angst’, scepticism and even anarchy, Mahler’s music was often heard to evoke ‘the vulnerability of faith and hope in a time of continuing political uncertainty, complemented by the possibility of a triumphant reassertion of control’. It did this as a form of ‘Art’ music (with all the romantic, transcendent baggage attached to that capitalized term still in tow, if on an extendable leash) which engaged with tradition ‘as sacred, or as corrupt, or as something to be acknowledged with scepticism, even irony; and if, in the interests of accessibility, it welcomes a close relation to tradition, because it believes tradition remains open to individual reinterpretation, then these elemental states of joy and sorrow so palpably present in Mahler are likely to remain the principal sites of creative

activity’. Whittall calls this ‘moderate music’ (as a contrast to radical avant-gardism), repertory which is pervaded by generic and topical evocations ‘in which pessimism and Utopianism might intersect’.25

II: Mahler, romanticism and redemption in an age of scepticism

In an essay written for the BBC celebrations of the centenary of Mahler’s birth, Deryck Cooke declared that Mahler ‘was a romantic, and therefore suspect; but he was a romantic with a difference, which complicates matters considerably’. This romantic difference or complication Cooke identifies with Mahler’s lateness: ‘first of all he was a late romantic’, the ‘late romantic who speaks most clearly to our age’. For Cooke, Mahler spoke to the twentieth century because he combined the idealist, revolutionary freedom of the early Romantics with the resignation, laments and temptations of the retreat into an imaginary idyll of the late Romantics: ‘he was intensely preoccupied with this discrepancy between aspiration and weakness’.26

More recently, Morten Solvik argued that Mahler harboured a ‘tortured soul that maintained a tenuous balance between idealism and nihilism’, manifest in the contrast between redemptive symphonic conclusions such as the Second, Third and Eighth Symphonies and the ‘anti-heroic’ endings of the Sixth and Ninth. Mahler’s music repeatedly suggests an ideal world and a unity of inner and outer realms, ‘but the transcendental vision’ was ‘highly problematic’: it is ‘rife with conflict and unsettling questions’. In an age of scepticism, Mahler’s agnostic idealism is ‘hard won’ and not as anachronistic as it may seem, for many of Mahler’s generation ‘maintained a transcendental streak in their thinking’.27 Ultimately, Mahler was no nihilist. He retained a visionary aspect in a time of widespread unbelief. Mahler was also, in the religious sense, no fundamentalist. For Cooke, ‘Mahler’s inner conflict was the eternal one between innocence and experience, idealism and realism, affirmation and denial . . . But there was more to it than romanticism. What affronts the idealist – the cruelty, vulgarity,