THE COMPOSER AND THE MUSIC HISTORIAN

AN INTRODUCTION

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The friendship between Gustav Mahler and Guido Adler offers a refreshing example of the mutually beneficial interaction that can exist between a composer and a music historian in spite of some natural but nonetheless basic differences in outlook and perspective. The relationship between the two men is explored in this volume from two complementary views. Adler’s own well-known study, a classic of the early Mahler literature, presents a vivid and highly compressed summing-up of the composer’s character and achievements. My supplementary essay traces through surviving letters and documents the course of their friendship, which endured for more than thirty years.

These two views reflect the differing character of older and more recent studies of Mahler. In his own time Mahler won his share of successes as a performer and composer, but his activity in both spheres was highly controversial. His attitudes sometimes aroused deep animosities, and his powerful position as Director of the Vienna Court Opera from 1897 to 1907 invited attacks that were not infrequently intensified by anti-Semitism. Thus the earlier books about Mahler, notably those of Paul Stefan (first edition published in 1910),¹ Richard Specht (1913) and to a lesser extent Adler (1914), often have a somewhat polemical cast. All were concerned with making Mahler’s creative goals clear to the public at large, and only secondarily with presenting biographical detail or the complex particulars surrounding the composition of a specific work. Their researches, although undertaken with care, made no pretense at exhaustiveness. Mahler’s own sometimes ambiguous and inaccurate statements about his works, his life and his beliefs were generally taken at face value. Many personal overtones and undertones also resulted from direct experiences with Mahler and his music.

In 1920, after the hiatus created by the First World War, the struggle for a wider acceptance of the composer’s works resumed

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with Willem Mengelberg’s great Mahler festival in Amsterdam. During the period between the two wars, a handful of major new volumes appeared on Mahler. The most important were Paul Bekker’s study of the symphonies (1921), Natalie Bauer-Lechner’s reminiscences of the composer (published posthumously in an abridged form in 1923), Alma Mahler’s edition of her husband’s letters (1924) and Bruno Walter’s sensitive fusion of personal and musical portraits (1936). Finally, after a new tide of anti-Jewish persecution had ended performances of Mahler’s works in his homeland, Alma Mahler’s Gustav Mahler: Erinnerungen und Briefe (1940) appeared in Holland. With this remarkable volume, the earlier body of literature about Mahler, largely the work of people who knew him directly, was essentially completed.

After the Second World War a gradual change took place in the attitudes of both the general public (especially its younger members) and a significant number of professional musicians. Performances of Mahler’s works slowly grew in frequency, then burgeoned rapidly in the 1960s. By the end of that decade virtually all of the symphonies had entered the standard repertoire, and no fewer than four conductors had undertaken to record the entire cycle (now another generation has already begun to follow in their footsteps). In one of those intriguing reversals of taste that occasionally crop up in the history of music, Mahler had suddenly become a popular composer.

Coinciding with, and partly anticipating, this new acceptance, the literature about Mahler began to change in character. Inspired by their own responses to his music and by the dedicated work of earlier advocates, many younger musicians from all parts of Europe and America who grew up during the Second World War and in the years that immediately followed had become convinced that Mahler was a major composer, in spite of the strictures of some of their elders. The need to defend his musical position receded. The resulting shift in perspective was perhaps first clearly apparent in Donald Mitchell’s Gustav Mahler, The Early Years, published in 1958. Recognizing the merits of previous studies, Mitchell explored the compositions in greater depth and raised questions about the contradictions found in published material. His approach pointed to the need for a full-scale re-examination of sources and a new search for documents of all types. The appearance of the first volume of the complete edition
of Mahler's works in 1962 also drew attention to a wide variety of problems associated with the manuscripts and editions of the music. And during the 1960s an astonishing variety of documents began to reappear. Numerous unpublished letters were discovered; the forgotten 'Blumine' movement of the First Symphony was found, performed and published; the deleted first part of the cantata Das klagende Lied was made accessible; the libretto of the early opera Rübezahl was located and studied; the 'sketches' for the Tenth Symphony were shown to be a complete working draft that could be effectively realized.

In more recent years the fruits of new detailed biographical and musical research have appeared in a wealth of specialized articles and books, notably the long-awaited first volume of the large-scale work of Henry-Louis de La Grange (1973); the biography by Kurt Blaukopf (1969); and the Mahler: A Documentary Study (1976) of the same author, which provides a valuable and well-chosen cross-section of older, and more recently located, materials connected with the composer. With regard to the music itself, Donald Mitchell's Gustav Mahler, The Wunderhorn Years (1975) and the two-volume study by Constantin Floros (1977) offer both new information and new perspectives from which Mahler's works may be viewed. The 1979 colloquium devoted to Mahler in Vienna, the papers from which are soon to be published; the accompanying June issue of Österreichische Musikzeitschrift; and the superb exhibition mounted in Düsseldorf that same year, with an outstanding catalogue by Rudolf Stephan, may be seen as representative of the most recent, very lively, activity associated with the composer. And much further work is planned or in progress. Quite literally, hundreds of letters await publication and many facets of Mahler's life are receiving renewed scrutiny. In connection with the music, a catalogue of the composer's autographs, as well as a thematic catalogue with details of the various published texts, is in preparation, and more specific attention is already being given to various aspects of the compositions themselves in such works as Colin Matthews' doctoral thesis 'Mahler at Work' (1977), the study of the Ninth Symphony by Peter Andraschke (1976) and Norman Del Mar's work on the Sixth Symphony (1980).

This accumulation of new information about Mahler has produced what may at first seem a curious reaction. It has sharp-
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ened our appreciation of his early advocates and confirmed in many respects the perceptiveness of their basic portraits. They did not always have reliable factual information at their disposal but they grasped and conveyed essential matters with remarkable understanding. Additional research has provided a mass of new, often fascinating, detail and has clarified many specific matters. But this detail adds surprisingly little to one's fundamental conception of the man and his music.

Guido Adler has drawn a sharply-etched picture of Mahler's character as reflected in his work as a composer and conductor. Although this view is inevitably somewhat partisan, it does not gloss over some of the less attractive sides of its subject. Most importantly, it is founded on an understanding of the practical idealism that permeated so much of Mahler's work. The result is a much less overtly subjective portrait of the composer than might be expected. Recognizing the emotional intensity of Mahler's character, Adler did not underestimate his friend's conscious awareness of his actions, his skill as a strategist (note the constant military analogies) or his humor. Recognizing likewise the associative backgrounds of Mahler's compositions, Adler also understood that they justified themselves first and foremost as music, not as philosophical disquisitions.

Adler's view of Mahler has much in common with that of both Paul Stefan and Richard Specht. They all perceived his profound idealism, his struggles to achieve the highest artistic goals regardless of the personal cost and his sense of the contradictory aspects of humanity united in an all-encompassing divine whole. They also saw the enormous impact that Mahler had on Viennese musical life through his standards as a performer, the freshness of his re-creations of familiar scores and his openness to the new musical styles then emerging.

Yet there are subtle differences in Adler's perspective. He was an older man who had seen the full course of Mahler's career from his student days until his death and as a close friend knew the differences between the private and the public individual. Although he neatly countered some of the most frequent criticisms of Mahler and his works, he tended to avoid open polemics. His personal contacts with Mahler also permitted him to underline a few points unknown to other writers. But as a trained music historian, Adler kept his own personality in the background and
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concentrated on the achievements of his subject as a composer and performer. His assessments of both areas have proved remarkably durable and his work is still an excellent introduction to Mahler.

One encounters a real contrast when one compares this view with that of other contemporaries, such as Ferdinand Pfohl, whose impressions and reminiscences of Mahler’s years in Hamburg were uncovered a few years ago by Knud Martner. While Pfohl’s work is ostensibly an attempt to counteract a supposed canonization of Mahler by Schoenberg, the author actually goes much further. He pictures Mahler as a man who lacked true creative ability, whose works were the result of sheer will and his determination to make himself a composer. Moreover, while Mahler’s skills are sporadically acknowledged or praised, Pfohl’s anecdotes are designed to suggest a naive boor who was not above sacrificing his friends and his beliefs to his ambitions. In Pfohl, who had been originally a sympathetic supporter of Mahler, one senses the bitterness of a man who feels that he has been used and whose views in later years are tinged with anti-Semitism. But however little credence one may give to certain of the basic implications of this oddly obtuse account of Mahler, one must recognize that its views are quite representative of those of a considerable number of the composer’s contemporaries. Indeed Pfohl’s opinions are mild in comparison with those expressed in some of the Viennese newspapers of Mahler’s day. But it was to attitudes such as these that Guido Adler, Paul Stefan and Richard Specht addressed themselves.

The present translation of Adler’s essay – the first in English – is the offshoot of the study of the relationship between the composer and the historian that constitutes the second half of this volume. The core of this study is the group of documents connected with Mahler found among Adler’s papers in the Library of the University of Georgia. These include letters of Mahler, his wife and others who played a part in his career; all of Adler’s occasional pieces connected with the composer, as well as a variety of miscellaneous documents; and the original manuscript of Adler’s essay together with some of the notes accumulated in the course of its preparation. Although these sources are meager for certain periods in the friendship between Mahler and Adler, they clarify a number of aspects of the relationship and provide solid evidence
of the help that Adler gave Mahler at several critical points in his life. They also confirm the antagonism between Adler and Alma Mahler during the years immediately preceding and following the composer's death. In this connection Mahler's biographers have begun only recently to approach Frau Mahler's description of her husband's activities and friendships with some caution. She knew, for example, but failed to mention, that Mahler could have remained in Vienna in a different post after he left the Court Opera in 1907. Adler, on the other hand, had been actively involved in arranging this position for Mahler, and saw his wife's demands for material comforts as the basis of the composer's decision to undertake the remunerative but exhausting series of visits to the United States. One must also be wary of this view, but knowledge of the fact that Mahler could have continued to work in Vienna draws attention once more to his conscious choice between alternatives. His love for Alma, I believe, was unquestionably the dominating factor of the last years of his life, and he chose to risk his own life for her.

Mahler's letters to Adler suggest the easy familiarity that existed between them and put some of the differences in their views and opinions in a clearer perspective. Since both Natalie Bauer-Lechner and Alma Mahler reported several instances in which Mahler expressed his irritation with Adler, the latter's own diffidence in writing of his personal associations with the composer left him in an anomalous position. Any serious investigation of Adler's own personality and work will reveal that he was far from the conservative fuddy-duddy suggested by Alma Mahler, but elements of this interpretation still seem to persist without the questioning that they deserve.

Mahler and Adler certainly disagreed about a number of matters, but their differences were natural elements within a genuine friendship and must be seen in this context and not as detached anecdotes. Adler was a professional music historian and his rationalistic concern for method and system in his approach to the history of music found little response in Mahler's creative and intuitive character; but, as paradoxical as it may seem, it is this very concern that underlies the growth in imaginative understanding of a wider range of music from the past and present that has developed in this century. As broad as Mahler's musical sympathies were, ranging from his childhood love of folk and
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military music through his mature knowledge of the works of his contemporaries, some natural limits are apparent. His devotion to Bach is well known and firmly documented. But, like many of his contemporaries, he seems to have had little feeling for, or understanding of, the composers of the earlier Baroque, Renaissance and Medieval periods (although one does find occasionally parallels in his music with some stylistic features of these periods). Adler’s interests extended from non-Western cultures through all of the periods of Western music, and his methodology encouraged an awareness of the distinctive features of different earlier and more modern styles that has enormously broadened the range of music accessible to modern audiences and helped to extend our ability to understand idioms other than those of the late Baroque, Classic and Romantic eras in their own terms.

Mahler’s view of the history of music, judging from the all-too-limited material available, still seems to have been bound to some extent by evolutionary notions that equated a growth in expression and the means of expression with a growth in the complexity of musical language and the need to communicate with ever-growing masses of people. Yet, when in a letter of 1895 he raises the critical question, ‘But then, was Bach inferior to Beethoven, or Wagner?’, he begs off with the suggestion that his correspondent ‘had better contact someone who can, in one glance, give you an over-all impression of the whole spiritual history of humanity’. Perhaps additional material will be located eventually that will shed more light on how Mahler might have resolved this crucial issue. At present it appears that he was, quite naturally, too preoccupied with the music of his own time and with those traditions that formed its immediate foundations (from Bach forward) to explore more remote musical territory. The bond between Mahler and Adler rested not on any shared view of music’s past, but on a common youthful background, equal devotion to music as one of the finest manifestations of the human spirit and a shared love of many of the great composers within the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Austrian and German traditions, especially Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner.

Since Adler’s name may be unfamiliar to the general reader today, it is useful to recall that in his own time he was a well-known and influential figure in Viennese musical life. For more than fifty years he was a leader in the field of European musi-
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cology. He is cited most frequently as the founder and general editor of the Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich (Monuments of Music in Austria), a pioneer historical series devoted to the publication of major works connected with the history of music in Austria. But this occupation was only one facet of a wide variety of activities that included the writing of books and articles on an extraordinarily broad range of topics; a teaching career that made the Musikhistorisches Institut of the University of Vienna one of the major centers of European musical research; and public pursuits that drew attention to Austria’s musical heritage, especially through festivals commemorating its major composers.

Adler’s efforts in the direction of developing more systematic (‘scientific’) foundations for the study of his field as a whole resulted in two books, Der Stil in der Musik (1911) and Methode der Musikgeschichte (1919), in which he sought to identify and categorize the different areas that form essential components of musical research. Both works have had a strong impact on the development of twentieth-century approaches to music history. If these methodological studies do not always escape a certain dryness, they do raise questions of fundamental importance, and Adler’s applications of his own methods show a breadth of interest and awareness, coupled with an individual perceptiveness, that is still noteworthy, as the essay on Mahler attests. With the help of many of the best scholars of his day, he also prepared one of the most highly regarded modern music-histories, the Handbuch der Musikgeschichte (first edition 1924), a work distinguished among other qualities for its extensive treatment of modern music. Severe in his estimate of his own creative powers, Adler remained sympathetic to the gifts of others. Many composers – most notably Anton Webern – were his students in music history, and he enjoyed numerous contacts with others, including Bruckner (who was one of his teachers), Brahms, Richard Strauss and Schoenberg, to mention only the more well-known.

Although many tributes were paid to Adler by students, colleagues and friends on such occasions as his sixtieth, seventieth and eightieth birthdays, personal glimpses of the man are rare. Perhaps the finest portrait is found in the memorial article by Carl Engel published in The Musical Quarterly shortly after Adler’s death in 1941. Engel had known Adler well, and in a few pages creates a lively evocation of their encounters. He draws attention
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to both the humorous and serious sides of the man in the following passage, and suggests some of those qualities that were essential elements of Adler's friendship with Mahler.

Adler's home in Vienna, Lannerstrasse No. 9, was in the so-called 'cottage' section of the city (the word 'cottage' in Vienna was pronounced as if it were French). A cottage was a detached house of at least two stories, with more or less grounds. The large window of Adler's study looked out on his garden, with shade trees in which birds kept busily singing. His desk was near the window; the grand piano, covered with books and music, stood in a corner; an étagère with ferns and flower-pots carried the garden into the room; last but not least there was the sofa for his siesta to which he clung as rigorously as to his afternoon Jause – coffee and cake – indispensable to every true Viennese.

In late years, when for two successive seasons I passed several weeks with Adler in Hofgastein, the Jause assumed the character of a daily ritual. Any meal with him, even the simplest, required long deliberation in the ordering and not a little persuasiveness in the partaking of it. He believed in having beer precede the wine, an Austrian custom. But he had the waiter bring him a 'beer-warmer' (an iron rod removed from a pot of boiling water and stuck into the beer glass). At first this salutary but barbaric practice horrified me. I never imitated it. Adler was an eminently frugal person. He shunned excesses of all kinds, and deplored them in others. But he had what is called a 'healthy appetite.' He might make a concession and eat a fattened goose liver 'Polish style' – deigning to commend the cuisine – but his favorite dishes were 'national,' from boiled beef with horse-radish and Kaiserschmarren to pigs-knuckles, and back again.

Whether it was the main dining rooms of the 'Grand Hotel' and the 'Bristol' in Vienna, or the little café Bachmeyer in Hofgastein, Adler's entrance was the signal for head-waiters to bow to the Herr Hofrat with ceremonial deference, or for the prettiest Kellnerin to bestow on the old gentleman her most winning smile. He accepted such homage with charming bonhomie, and not infrequently with a bon mot. He loved to elicit laughter when in company.

His serious moods, the unburdening of his mind, the opening of his heart, were formidable things left for moments of strictest intimacy, or for walks through the Gastein valley. Then one became aware of his deep religiousness, of his veneration of nature, of great art, great literature, great music. To the giants of the past he looked up as to heroes even if he found their shining armor bent and bruised in places; with any current zeroworship he had little patience. But he took the liveliest interest in such musical innovators as Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg. He had Schoenberg participate in the editing of one of the Austrian 'Denkmäler' volumes. Some of the students in his musicological seminar later distinguished themselves as 'advanced' composers.

One could but envy Adler's liberality, his rectitude, his uncompromising
honesty, his unaffected modesty. His knowledge of human foibles was uncanny. It made him not only the most sympathetic and tolerant of friends and mentors, but also the kindest, the most touchingly affectionate. He held a lofty conception of family ties and family obligations. However hesitatingly he might embark on some delicate subject, he was sure to end up in perfect and, if necessary, brutal frankness. But the last impression one carried away from any argument with him, was his desire to help, to clarify an idea, to further a cause. He was unselfishness personified.  

Adler’s study of Mahler was undertaken at the request of Anton Bettelheim, the editor of an annual series that presented extended articles on recently deceased figures. The essay was completed in October 1913 and published the following year. Revised slightly in 1915, it was reissued in book form by Universal Edition in 1916. A so-called ‘second edition’, which was in fact an unaltered reprint, appeared in 1921.

As Adler anticipated, some of the factual details of his work have proved to be its least durable component. In the present translation I have tried, by drawing upon Adler’s original notes, to identify his sources as fully as possible. In the case of outright errors, resulting from slips on the part of the author, lack of information or faulty sources, I have corrected the text and indicated the changes made in my notes. In disputed matters, and in situations in which additional material affects Adler’s conclusions, I have sought to provide the pertinent facts in the accompanying annotations. In general, even in cases where Adler’s views may now seem most debatable, I have limited myself to indicating differing interpretations. A translation should not, in my view, serve as a platform for the opinions of the translator. Like the early biographers of Mozart and Haydn, I believe Adler merits as straightforward a presentation as possible. One may sometimes disagree but one should always listen.

No music could be included in the original work but, in order to make some of the specific points of Adler’s discussion of Mahler’s works more immediately comprehensible, a number of examples have been added. These are naturally limited to rather brief passages but I do not believe that the reader will find any difficulties in locating the more extended sections of works cited in the available scores. The chronological table has been completely revised, without editorial comment, in the light of the most recent research. It retains, however, its original highly condensed char-