Introduction: Marginalia on Mahler today

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Does Mahler matter? A history in which eighty years of screen culture and emotion commerce have interrogated, reprocessed and cashed in vast areas of Mahlerian idiolect as patois, narcotizing a society his music was to have transformed and mobilized,[1] presents a curious problem. If unorthodoxy rather than consensus is any measure of import, how is it possible or even desirable to abstract the once difficult from a repertoire in order to de-popularize it, to reclaim the margins for the formerly marginalized, even to 'rescue the history of an unfavoured [Mahler] from oblivion',[2] and yet to resist the attenuation and certain retreat into the cloistered self-interest of the initiated that assimilation into collective consciousness brings? As performance and recording gluts continue to familiarize and congeal the de-familiarizing in a game of technical and technological catch-up followed by domination, Mahler's capacity to offend historical consciences and aesthetic sensibilities now *in absentia*, and in the age of Uri Caine when the previously exterior and disjunct claim centrality and conciliation, is seriously diminished. Where then lies the musical space he so violently transgressed,[3] the sense of music history with which he toyed ironically, bitterly and comically? One who apparently resisted embourgoisement so resolutely, becomes deeply ritualized within it. The once hazardous Mahlerian experience is insulated and inimitable, glimpsed uncertainly through misted flights of imagination, submerging in the 'death' which, as sister to 'fashion and manners', characterizes the 'huge performing market in our time',[4] itself uneasily encumbered by canonic interpretative legacies.[5] While the machinery of the biographical panopticon inevitably sculpts monoliths from natural disorder, cultural musicology bathes in interpretative relativity in the conviction that, above all with Mahler, it is 'impossible to listen only to the music'.[6] Control and assumed intelligibility result from both, though problems of method and critique veering between unmediated documentary and determinist selectivity, and between absolutism and absence of judgment, are invasive. Socio-cultural and critical-historical control of Mahler thus serves and reanimates itself in a de-sensitizing hermeneutic-economic circle, evident, for example, in the archetypal narrative threads shared by several recent media appreciations[7] – the price of a limitless routine of consumption may well be as heavy as the

ludicrous idea of embargoes would be (and has been) grotesquely fascistic. Is this ideological bankruptcy, a fate that accrues from commodification masquerading as the final 'understanding' predicted by Mahler himself,[8] a fate worse than death?

If death is indeed the one universal precondition of canonization, the lingering aftermath of such sanctification is vulnerable to stagnation in the blind comfort of consuetude unless its hagiographical conditions are challenged. Like some political opponent who dies in office, Mahler was rapidly declared a saint in 1912 by his personal friend, but compositional Other, Schoenberg, who began to construct monuments, dedicating his *Harmonielehre* (1911) to the composer and celebrating with convoluted logic his own theological conversion at the altar of Mahler's thematic (non-/quasi-) banality.[9] Repaying personal and professional debts (monetary loans and testimonials) may or may not have been the incentive for Schoenberg's attempted 'validation' of Mahler's stature and technique within the suspiciously neat historical teleology constructed in his writings,[10] but to read that through external pressures a martyred Mahler had lost faith in his work, acknowledged his 'error' and become 'resigned', and to be taken systematically through the panoply of biting critical accusations to which he had frequently been subjected (inartistic means, poor voice-leading, inability to achieve true greatness, sentimentality, banality, lack of inventiveness, unoriginality, potpourri structures – though, significantly, passing over the Jewish question) suggests special pleading and might have seemed something of a poisoned chalice for Mahler's habilitation.[11] Whatever the true extent of Schoenberg's wider critical influence at this time – and Strauss's securing of the Third Symphony's 1902 première had surely been the greater proselytizing feat – the incurably romanticized, if not sentimentalized, foundations of a deeply threnodic Mahler brand, fusing music with personal circumstance and fuelled by Walter's first performances of *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony, were laid here – a brand in which pervasive undercurrents of latter-day humanist faith mysticism would find palliation. Indeed Schoenberg appears sincere, if perilously uncontrolled, when confessing effusive emotional empathy with Mahler's music,[12] but a rationalist breach perhaps inevitably cordons this off from analysis. Still today, for Jens Malte Fischer the silo of emotion is nothing less than a psychological deficiency to be overcome for the sake of enlightenment: 'Those who have a merely emotional relationship with Mahler's music through the overpowering intoxication of its sound will be trapped in a position of subjugation, and will never be able to advance to a relationship of dedicated understanding'.[13] The temptation to reply that it is *only* or *primarily* from emotional investment with the sensual that other kinds of understanding of Mahler may flow is qualified by the

implications of this introduction's first observations, and by the acknowledgment that Western musical scholarship is quick to suppress experiential immediacy and finds its relationships with more established forms of discourse difficult to articulate.

Nevertheless, if Schoenberg was misguided about the absence of surrogate Mahlerian idioms from cinema, he was right to allude – albeit with condescension – to the 'melodramatic horror-play' in his account.[14] In dramatizing the internal disorder of apparently stable bourgeois frameworks through episodic narrative and sensational exaggeration of emotion, the 'competing logic' or 'second voice' of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cross-generic melodramatic mode thrived both on a troubled politico-cultural inclusiveness conjoining grandiose with banal, high with low, and on a morally heightened utopian-dystopian dialectic of garish, externalized psychological pictograms. This cocktail of Grand Guignol addressing the chaotic 'post-sacred era'[15] of early modernism may not be so far removed from the physiognomics of Mahler's symphonic 'imaginary theatre',[16] with its recasting of the music-language relation through abstraction of vocality and weighted gestures of ineffability, and its attempt to recover meaning in obstacles, delays, problematic closure, juxtaposition, gaps, detours, scenic spatiality and virtuosically poised dialectics of extreme action/pathos, inanity/sublimity and desolation/rapture. Could this at least partially explain why a mercantile, secularized West has, despite itself, alighted with greater intensity on Mahler at certain points in the intellectual vagrancy of its twentieth-century politico-cultural history – for instance, in the euphoric-depressive post-war 1920s and more radicalized, dangerous, economically insecure 1960s–1970s? Moreover could this link, if Adorno allows,[17] absolve reticence to passion and to consideration of the 'purposely ideological',[18] while illuminating forgotten paths of critical integrity in Mahler reception?

In a study of the inner workings of the Hollywood industry, David Thomson notes the 'dramatic effect exerted through time' shared by film and a work such as Mahler's Ninth Symphony: 'there are structural affinities, in theme, reiteration, transition; in hesitation, silence, stillness and ending'. It may be that the contemporaneous early silents of D. W. Griffith deal in 'vastly diminished and inferior notions of life' and compare unfavourably with the 'exquisite, majestic, tragic, accepting' Symphony,[19] but these creative forms – respectively positioned at the beginnings and ends of their generic histories – are nevertheless kindred agencies dissolving or tensioning through their particular materials boundaries between dreams and realities or abundance and scarcity of hope: holding out the promise of happy endings or of 'victory to the losers'.[20] Continual listening-again, re-attending, and understanding in the true sense of an ongoing

dialogic *process* of 'standing in the midst of' rather than an achieved monologic *state* of containment, may avert the dystopia painted at the beginning of this introduction. Revaluation may claim Mahler's music as neither deconsecrated nor beyond good and evil, neither blandly democratized nor ideologically blinkered, but as existentially constitutive and intensely Manichean, infiltrating and disquieting an increasingly broad range of cultural, political and individualized spaces in a language whose very structural-expressive rivenness is an essential condition for restoration, as its will to integration is for the broken voice: a complex 'short circuit' between different musics, historically and psychologically inflected 'like an empire nearing its end', and, 'in its ability to do many things at once . . . like the music of madness'.[21]

As editor of this volume I similarly invite readers to contemplate its contents in the spirit of ends and beginnings, as both summational and initiatory, as taking the opportunity during the time approaching the centenary of Mahler's own ending to assess, re-assess and provide a valuable base for renewal – for re-exploring the senses in which Mahler's art and our confrontation with it may continue to matter.

PART ONE

Cultural contexts

1 Socio-political landscapes: reception and biography

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I

In 1904 the Prussian Ambassador to the Grand Duchy of Weimar sent an anxious report to his masters at Wilhelm II's court in Berlin. It concerned the promotion of 'modern' artists like Gaugin and Rodin by the Director of Weimar's Grand Ducal Museum for Arts and Crafts, the homosexual connoisseur, soldier and diplomat, Count Harry Kessler. For the Ambassador, Kessler's modernism (something which inspired 'the known aversion of His Majesty the Emperor and King') was comprehensible only as a form of sedition on the part of 'intriguers' with partisan interests; 'an artistic opposition', he concluded, 'can, at times, easily lead to a political [one]'.[1] It is small wonder that in 1918 this same Kessler, otherwise known to music history as co-librettist with Hofmannsthal for Richard Strauss's ballet *Josephslegende*, would adopt striking language in the exercise of his later war-time position (following harrowing active service) as Cultural Attaché to the German embassy in Switzerland: 'The propaganda war has become through the engagement of the Americans more vehement and complicated. They have more money, we have the craftiness of our Jews, which I put into motion, and our more precise work. Every moment in life, every individual, becomes the battlefield of enemy parties. Nothing escapes politics.'[2]

Although he had died in 1911, Mahler was still very much a force in this complex cultural-political landscape, one that connects the ostensible stability of old imperial Europe to the chaos and dissolution of all such stability in the First World War. Indeed, one of the events in Kessler's German-liberal propaganda war in January 1918 was to be a high-profile Zurich performance of the Second Symphony under the baton of Mahler's (Jewish) former friend and acolyte Oskar Fried. Kessler's recent biographer, Laird M. Easton, reminds us that Trotsky had just abandoned negotiation in favour of world revolution – something that was a subject of lively debate, to judge from Kessler's diary entry, at the reception following the Mahler performance (it was held in Paul Cassirer's hotel suite, whose rooms had once been used by Goethe):

> The Van Goghs and Cézannes in Goethe's rooms, the peculiarly mixed, cosmopolitan party, almost as before the war, the time, the moment when

> Trotsky seeks to turn the Russian Revolution into a world revolution, where the conflict at home between the military and the civilian authority becomes threatening, the echo of the monstrous Last Judgement depiction of Mahler, this jumble of so many different feelings, experiences, forebodings, people, has something dreamlike, fantastic about it.[3]

Placing the musical experience amidst worldly events and anxieties, this account also evokes much of what we think of as the expressive character of the Mahler we have made our own. To our ears, his symphonies embrace portents and threats, contradictions and consolations, and have an ability both to express and induce experiences of dreamlike escape and alienation. One could almost be forgiven for thinking that Kessler chose that particular symphony less for propaganda purposes than for its expression and reflection of the anxieties and dreams of sensitive Europeans like himself at that world-changing time. Yet to make that point is also to invoke what were then already well-worn cultural-political questions about musical meaning. Many musicians, theoreticians and critics in Mahler's own world (he occasionally and judiciously echoed their views) could have been expected to raise an eyebrow at the suggestion that music might express anything beyond its essential nature as 'music', whatever that might be. Certainly the tradition of German idealism, filtered through the many-coloured lenses of romanticism, would have supported a belief in the ability, even duty, of Great Art to 'transcend' the everyday world of history and politics. Schopenhauer had famously proclaimed that 'alongside world history there goes, guiltless and unstained by blood [*nicht blutbefleckt*], the history of philosophy, science and the arts' – a statement that graced the score and libretto of Hans Pfitzner's 1917 opera *Palestrina*, another work performed in Switzerland as part of Kessler's 'propaganda war' on behalf of Germany.[4]

That Pfitzner, also a former acquaintance of Mahler's, would soon be engaged in angry critical polemics about the dangers of 'futurism' and the threat posed by 'cultural bolsheviks' and Jews (already marked out by Kessler for their 'craftiness'),[5] echoes the suspicions of the Prussian Ambassador in Weimar and the perception of Kessler that 'Nothing escapes politics'. By the 1920s, tensions that had marked the reception of his music during Mahler's lifetime were ever more explicitly politicized and polarized in a Europe soon to witness the rise of fascism. On the one hand he was a composer whose ethnic origins supposedly prevented him from achieving the Germanic 'greatness' to which his symphonies aspired; on the other his achievement was construed, in perhaps no less partisan a fashion, as consisting in his modern, ironizing approach to that very 'greatness' of aspiration. Biographical readings of his life, no less than critical analyses of his symphonies, could be political in the sense that

they might be involved variously with exercising or more critically examining forms of 'power' and the way he related to or represented them: the power of the normal, for example, that puts 'abnormal', foreign or Jewish artists in their place – or the power that underpins the most innocent-seeming pastoral fantasies that musically idealize a rural world unequally divided between aristocrats and the grateful peasants who till their land for small earthly reward.

Launched into a culture that claimed to prize the 'absolute' and non-referential qualities of symphonic excellence, it was the prodigality of the ways in which Mahler's symphonies proved susceptible of interpretation that fuelled shocked or admiring readings of their meaning. Critics and historians sought support for those readings in facts, influences and affiliations. Some of Mahler's earliest friends and proponents inevitably sought to idealize him, seeking contextual and biographical evidence for their picture of his development as mirroring that of other manifestly 'great' composers of the past. They often emphasized the spiritual and the transcendent in his music, seeing his life as a surmounting of obstacles placed in his way by imperial laws, anti-Semitism, the economic and educational inequalities of class rivalries and aspirations, or by personal pride and national identity (possessed or sought). His more articulate enemies, like the conservative Viennese critic Robert Hirschfeld, saw in all such things precisely the features of the worldly landscape in which Mahler had grown up; from that perspective his *failure* to 'transcend' them irrevocably and negatively marked his works.[6]

Yet where Hirschfeld heard in every note of Mahler's symphonies an anarchic threat to bourgeois values, the Russian critic Iwan Sollertinski – inheritor of that very Revolution that had so exercised the minds of Kessler and his colleagues in 1918 while listening to the Second Symphony – would in 1932 celebrate Mahler quite explicitly as 'the last outstanding petit-bourgeois [*kleinbürgerlich*] symphonist':

> In this sense, the problem of Gustav Mahler – understood socio-philosophically – is the problem of the death of European symphonism, in Beethoven's sense of that term; more than that, it is the problem of the fundamental impossibility of the existence of a symphonism in imperialist Europe . . . History condemned [Mahler] to become the last tragic representative of the Beethoven tradition.
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> The bourgeois symphonism of the West was dying.
>
> The new symphonic culture will be created by the proletariat and – under its leadership – by its allies in the petit-bourgeois intelligentsia and the peasantry.[7]

The suspicion that both Hirschfeld and Sollertinsky might have been hearing the same things in Mahler's symphonies but interpreting them

differently according to their own socio-political agendas and affiliations, might lead us to be more wary of their and others' explanations as to *why* Mahler was the way he was and to seek our own forms of possibly alternative corroboration. Questions about how his upbringing might have shaped him are intimately linked to the ways in which we seek to answer other questions about his music. What *did* he mean to express in the 'Resurrection' Symphony's Last Judgement Finale? What *were* the politics of the first movement of the Third – associated in his lifetime with workers' marches as much as with those of the military? Did Mahler's world-view change after the traumas of 1907 that seem to have prompted the dark and often elegiac visions of the last works?

In the knowledge that our own choice of historical 'facts' might be no less biased, selecting strategic vantage points from which to view the socio-political landscape in which Mahler grew up and became what he did, my catalogue will explicitly correlate 'history' with interpretation – looking where possible for what have been generally accepted as key problems concerning Mahler's creative and intellectual choices. In all cases these are critical and interpretative in nature and rooted in specific strategies and events in individual symphonies. Even over-arching issues like that concerning Mahler's specifically Jewish identity and experience demand critical attention to detailed musical manners and moments as much as to a wider 'contextual' account of laws and attitudes affecting and oppressing European Jews in the nineteenth century. Recent Israeli problems with the German texts of works like the Second Symphony – sung in Hebrew under Bernstein in 1967 – and jazz-musician Uri Caine's brilliant recompositions and paraphrases of Mahler movements, heighten and celebrate the 'Jewishness' long detected in them by Bernstein and others. All this can serve to emphasize how musicians, critics and audiences, no less than the composers they perform, write about or listen to, support and demonstrate Kessler's bitterly experienced politicization of the landscape of the ordinary.[8]

Mirroring the world (Landscape 1)

Let me propose that we might regard Mahler's symphonies as both reflecting and reconstructing the socio-political landscape of the historical world in which they were created. The important question is how the former 'mediated' the latter. We must be more specific: how might a work like the First Symphony be read in this way? Clearly there is a level on which the opening seems literally to 'paint a landscape', but if we use some of the techniques of musicologist and art-historian Richard Leppert, we might note how the naturalistic 'dawn landscape' evocation of the string harmonics is further defined, or 'set off' by the calls of *pianissimo* clarinets

(mimicking distant trumpets or horns?) and actual off-stage trumpets that appear to be approaching from the far distance: evidence of human beings in the landscape; an organized and perhaps wealthy-estate-sponsored hunting party.[9] Such motifs had long been used to define pastoral romantic countryside in music. Yet we, with the conductor-composer, are in the lonely foreground, experiencing a solitary and isolated 'oneness-with-nature' in a discursive space that, in romantic novels, is usually defined as belonging to the 'hero' or 'subject' of the narrative; and of course Mahler's various programmatic and musical allusions further define this as a *German*-romantic space, painted by a German-romantic hero of the kind the composer had constructed in words in his rather stylized youthful love poems, some of which became the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. The second song supplies the main symphonic allegro material of the Symphony's first movement: 'In the morning I walked out into the fields [*Ging heut morgens über's Feld*]'.

It is easy enough to hear a well-worn story in this musical landscape: the story of a romantic artist, alienated from the urban and material world of modernity and power, and 'escaping' into the idyllic world of a fantasized Nature where the shadow of dark chromatic clouds is dispelled by blithely unfolding diatonic lyricism. Even the appropriation of that lyricism by dancing 'folk' in the Scherzo (joined by schmaltzy petit-bourgeois sentimentalists in the second section) fits the classical–'Beethovenian' mould well enough. But what does all this euphonious good-heartedness tell us about the world of Mahler's youth and the way he might have been formed by it? Does its decent romantic Germanness conceal the anxious affirmation of a well-brought-up petit-bourgeois whose hard-working and often hard-pressed family formed part of the German-speaking Jewish community in Bohemian Jihlava (now part of the Czech Republic)?[10] Does its apparent ignorance of 'modern' problems suggest a head in the clouds, or an ambitious eye to the main chance: to the imaginative possession of that very culture of power and distantly hunting-horn players which might have seemed both nearer and more oddly distant when the talented young musician found himself transported to the grand and often anti-Semitic imperial capital in 1875? Like painted landscapes, these musical scenes are intended to be 'read'; they contain the ingredients of narratives that are further clarified in their relation to and interconnectedness with other scenes, other movements.

Both naivety and heroic aspiration resound in the grandiose Finale of the First Symphony, at whose end the hero conductor commands a veritable company of *on*-stage horns to proclaim the hymnic march of *his* appropriated Nature: as if now in possession of the site of his earlier romantic alienation. But the Symphony has one other movement, the