# MAHLER IN CONTEXT

*Mahler in Context* explores the institutions, artists, thinkers, cultural movements, sociopolitical conditions, and personal relationships that shaped Mahler's creative output. Focusing on the contexts surrounding the artist, the collection provides a sense of the complex cross-currents against which Mahler was reacting as conductor, composer, and human being. Topics explored include his youth and training, performing career, creative activity, spiritual and philosophical influences, and reception after his death. Together, this collection of specially commissioned essays offers a wide-ranging investigation of the ecology surrounding Mahler as a composer and a fuller appreciation of the topics that occupied his mind as he conceived his works. Readers will benefit from engagement with lesser known dimensions of Mahler's life. Through this broader contextual approach, this book will serve as a valuable and unique resource for students, scholars, and a general readership.

CHARLES YOUMANS, Professor of Musicology at Penn State University, is the author of *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition* (2005) and *Mahler and Strauss: In Dialogue* (2016). He is editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss* (2010) and has written nine chapters on Strauss's tone poems for the *Richard Strauss-Handbuch* (Metzler/Bärenreiter, 2014).

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# MAHLER IN CONTEXT

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*In memory of James Marquez (1932–2013)*

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# *Preface and Acknowledgments*

Placing a composer in context is a Mahlerian idea. Contemplating himself, Mahler found that external conditions determined his identity. "I am thrice homeless: a Bohemian among Austrians, an Austrian among Germans, and a Jew throughout the world" (*ML*, 109). Performing other people's music, he turned the tables; now he was the context, imposing a bold interpretive vision and even reorchestrating classics (most famously Beethoven's Ninth). And in his own works Mahler thematized the interaction of text and context, through a widely noted (and often criticized) fondness for quotation, allusion, reminiscence, homage, transformation, modernization, and strong reception, which paradoxically made him at once derivative and forward-thinking.

He came by these tendencies honestly. A gymnasium education – completed with substantial effort two years *after* he left Iglau for the Vienna Conservatory – attuned him to the complexities of interpretation. On one hand, the humanistic tradition directed his mind forcefully toward the past, that is, to classical culture, revered authority figures, and ostensibly stable meanings. On the other, the rousing chaos of incipient modernism encouraged young thinkers to question anything and everything, with transformative results that became apparent as a generation of iconoclasts reached maturity. "And ancestors, long to their graves confined / Are yet as close to me as my own hair," Hofmannsthal would write in 1895.[1] Innovation and tradition were two sides of the same coin in fin-de-siècle Europe.

Perhaps this symbiosis explains why Bach and Goethe were the only artists represented in the tiny libraries of Mahler's composing huts. Bach created music by putting old materials into new contexts. The cantatas,

[1] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "On Mutability," *Stanzas in Terza Rima*, in J. D. McClatchy, *The Whole Difference: Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 26.

which Mahler came to know through his subscription to the Bach Gesellschaft edition, revealed the power of assertive reinterpretation: of a Lutheran chorale, a stylized dance, a form devised by Vivaldi. Fresh settings lent these artifacts deeper significance and, with it, richer identities.

Goethe, Mahler's lodestar, spent his life in close observation of anything and everything, in the belief that value, and therefore meaning, depended on the observer's interest. This individual responsibility to strive, to realize oneself through fresh experiences and continuous becoming, would define Mahler's worldview. Emblematically, Natalie Bauer-Lechner recalled that her first conversation with Mahler, during his student years, concerned *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. What did they discuss? We cannot know, but one way or another they pondered the individual's struggle to make sense of the world, a theme that pervades the book. The problem is summed up toward the novel's end by the Abbé, who, representing the conservatism of Mahler's educational background, anticipates bitterly but perceptively the future of "meaning" as an idea:

> Nowadays most people treat finished works of art as if they were soft clay. The finished marble shall modify its shape according to their inclinations, their opinions and whims, the firmly established building expand or contract . . . [E]verything is relative, they say, and so the only things that are not relative are nonsense and bad taste, which, in the end, predominate as absolutes.[2]

Contingency, styled here as a symptom of decay, would over the next century become an inescapable fact. Yet already in 1795 Goethe recognized that the boundary between work and reader might be an illusion.

If Mahler did not fully grasp the emergent critique of absolute truth – though the presence of Kant's writings in the hut, as the only non-art, suggests that he did – the situation would soon be spelled out for him by Nietzsche. The philosopher's attacks on the idealist pantheon (Plato, Jesus, Schopenhauer, and Wagner) cannot but have troubled the composer of the "Resurrection" Symphony and Part II of Goethe's *Faust*. Indeed, aside from his setting of the "Midnight Song" from *Also sprach Zarathustra* (in the Third Symphony), Mahler remained conspicuously silent on the philosopher's rift with Wagner and the antimetaphysical texts it precipitated. But any experienced listener knows that his apotheoses are balanced

[2] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, ed. and trans. Eric A. Blackall, in cooperation with Victor Lange (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 351 (translation emended).

by scenes of resignation: after the Fifth Symphony comes the Sixth; after the Eighth, *Das Lied von der Erde*. In his creative work, the eternal and the secure are fantasies. And that conviction, disguised though it often was by magnificently staged hopes, made him a faithful witness of his moment in intellectual history.

All of this is to say that the only Mahler is a Mahler in context. "There is no outside-text," Derrida famously observed. Text and context are one; people, like works, must be read through the conditions in which they exist. Mahler's music regularly embodies this idea – for example, in passages to be played "in the far distance" or "like a sound of nature," where the object blends with the experience of perceiving it. Likewise, his infamous predilection for referentiality asks listeners to notice their contribution to the process of interpretation, as when Alma remarked of the Fourth, "I think Haydn has done that better." The judgment surely stung, but the comparative impulse honored the composer's invitation to draw meaning from an encounter.

We can study his life in the same way. The five parts of this book represent experiments in that sort of thinking: broad themes that loosely organize a variety of perspectives. The categories of inquiry are straightforward enough. In Mahler's world, what factors shaped a musician's development? How was music realized practically? To what ends, and by what means, did creation take place? What significance did art have physically, intellectually, and psychologically? To whom did this music and its creator matter in the end? Within each part, the choice of topics is meant to provide a diversity of viewpoints, though of course other choices are conceivable and deserve to be explored.

The range of scholarly approaches is likewise as broad as could be managed. With an international roster of contributors, differences are to be expected in methodology, writing style, organization, and so on, and I have not smoothed those over. An alternate and equally viable book could have been produced by distributing these topics differently among the same scholars, who stand at the forefront of current research on Mahler. In some cases, the reader will notice divergent opinions on certain works, individuals, and issues; here again I have left the heterogeneity in place rather than imposing a simplistic conformity.

My first word of thanks must go to the contributors, thirty-one in all, a splendid group of scholars representing seven countries and a diverse range of institutions and approaches. A book of this sort would not be possible without the enthusiastic participation of relevant experts, and a host of the world's leading Mahler specialists are here, along with some intrepid

authorities from outside the subdiscipline who embraced the challenge of writing on a vitally important composer tangentially related to their own work. I am deeply grateful to everyone involved. The intellectual expertise, collaborative spirit, and determined efficiency that these colleagues brought to the project was nothing less than inspiring.

All of us owe a debt to Henry-Louis de La Grange, Donald Mitchell, and Stephen E. Hefling, whose work paved the way for the current happy state of Mahler research. International cooperation and good will, a hallmark of the Mahlerian scholarly community, was facilitated in this volume by Juliane Schicker, whose sensitive, readable translations are a model of that demanding art. I am extraordinarily thankful as well for the editorial assistance of my graduate advisee Celeste Belknap, whose keen intellect and careful attention to detail improved every chapter.

In the spring of 2019, I taught a course in which early versions of many chapters served as the text, and I wish to acknowledge the useful and candid feedback of those students: Sarah Adsit, Charlie Alves, Dylan Crosson, Michael Divino, Sarah Files, Nick Kazmierczak, Gage Kroljic, Sarah Neff, Maggie Nostrand, Caroline Senko, Victoria Senko, Jenny Tokarek, Sean Toso, and Kristen Zak. The Penn State School of Music, now under the capable stewardship of Director David Frego, continues to be a pleasant and fruitful environment in which to work; this is due above all to my dear colleagues in music history and theory. For the kind favor of permission to use copyrighted images, I would like to thank Universal Edition and the Sony Corporation. Paul Sommerfeld, Music Reference Specialist at the Library of Conference, kindly provided information about the Music Division's Arnold Schoenberg Collection. For the invitation to edit this volume, I want express my genuine gratitude to the brilliantly able and unfailingly genial Kate Brett, who with her assistant Eilidh Burrett made the process easier than I could have imagined possible. My heartfelt thanks go also to Stephanie Sakson, a skillful and perceptive copyeditor, and to Niranjana Harikrishnan, who managed the project with welcome efficiency. And finally, I want to close, as always, by thanking Nancy, Frances, and Hannah, whose love and support mean everything.

# *Abbreviations*

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|---|---|
| *GMB2* | *Gustav Mahler Briefe*, 2nd ed., ed. Herta Blaukopf (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1996) |
| *HLG1* | Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973) |
| *HLG2* | Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler, vol. 2: Vienna: The Years of Challenge (1897–1904)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) |
| *HLG3* | Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler, vol. 3: Vienna: Triumph and Disillusion (1904–1907)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) |
| *HLG4* | Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler, vol. 4: A New Life Cut Short (1907–1911)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) |
| *ML* | Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Knud Martner, trans. Basil Creighton (London: Cardinal, 1990) |
| *NBLE* | Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, ed. Peter Franklin, trans. Dika Newlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) |
| *SLGM* | Alma Mahler and Knud Martner, eds., *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, trans. Eithne Wilkins, Ernst Kaiser, and Bill Hopkins (London: Faber and Faber, 1979). For each quotation from Mahler's correspondence, both *GMB2* and *SLGM* are cited. Some translations have been amended. |