



Book Review by Robert R. Reilly

A MUSICAL MESSIAH?

Gustav Mahler, by Jens Malte Fischer.
Yale University Press, 766 pages, \$50

THE MUSIC OF GUSTAV MAHLER (1860–1911) requires a lot of patience, as does the new biography, *Gustav Mahler*, by Jens Malte Fischer that runs to more than 700 pages. This book, translated from German by Stewart Spencer, contains more about Mahler than you may wish to know. A professor of the history of theater at the University of Munich, Fischer offers us exhaustive detail not only about every aspect of Mahler's life, but about the cultural contexts in which that life was lived. These are undoubtedly valuable, but do we really need to know the exact programs of the concerts he attended and who sang at which operas when he was present? We sometimes even have his seat number. We also discover how much everyone was paid, and the addresses of almost every apartment and house in which Mahler lived (and the rent). Occasionally, we know what he had for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

If you wish to know the background of Mahler's Jewish family going back several generations, you will find it here. Also present are the syllabi from almost every school course he took. We learn of his early exposure to military brass band music in local villages (which helps explain the presence of the numerous marches in his symphonies). There is a very interesting examination of his favorite Romantic reading material, and excerpts from letters reporting on his teenage crushes, which are as hysterical as anything inspired by teenage love, except more so. A very large portion of this book is dedicated to Mahler's professional travails as an opera and orchestral conductor, considered the greatest of his time, when the only lasting significance of his work in these areas is that it impeded him from composing. Nonetheless, this volume is positively laconic—almost a pocket guide—compared to Henry Louis de La Grange's Mahler biography, which runs to more than 4,500 pages in four volumes.

The numbing recitation of myriad details in Fischer's book is not redeemed by a particularly felicitous writing style, though I am unable to judge how the text may read in

the original German. I confess that I almost threw in the towel several times.

BUT I AM GLAD I DID NOT. THERE IS REAL meat in this thorough, methodical, and, at times, plodding book, concerning the meaning Mahler gave to life itself, of which, of course, his music is an expression.



What Fischer has discovered and disclosed concerning Mahler's faith and philosophy is the most important and illuminating aspect of this work. It has opened doors for me. I now listen with new ears. Also, Fischer's explication of the music—with a separate chapter dedicated to each symphony—is superb, brief though it is, and done mostly in layman's language. I am beginning to understand many things that puzzled me about this man and his music.

Mahler wrote on a vast scale, leaving a legacy of nine symphonies, an uncompleted Tenth, and several orchestral song cycles. His music bursts forth torrentially as if the sluice gates to the world of sound were opened for the first

time. To Sibelius, he expressed the belief that "the symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything." And he seems to include everything—marching bands, cowbells, sounds of nature, folk songs, hammer blows, and dances—leaving dazed listeners to wonder whether he oughtn't to have sorted things out a bit more. His works are sonically spectacular, extravagant, phantasmagoric, but also possess moments of serenity, aching tenderness, and heart-stopping beauty.

MAHLER CONVERTED TO CHRISTIANITY in 1897, but he never became an orthodox Christian, anymore than he had been an orthodox Jew. As intoxicated with the divine as Mahler was, conductor Bruno Walter wrote that he "could not call Mahler a believer." Mahler's Second Symphony ends with a monumental setting of Friedrich Klopstock's avowedly Christian *Resurrection Ode*—from which Mahler omitted the mention of Jesus. When the chorus sings "rise again," is it a form of auto-genesis or is there a Savior? Is this resurrection without Christ? What did Mahler really believe? Here is where Fischer is so illuminating in the material he provides.

In an extremely revealing interchange, reported by Fischer, Mahler's close opera collaborator, Alfred Roller, asked Mahler why he did not write a Mass. Mahler considered the proposal and then responded, "but no, there is the Credo in it." And he began to recite the Credo in Latin. "No, I couldn't do it." But during a rehearsal of the Eighth Symphony when Roller was present, Mahler called across to him and exclaimed, "There you are, that's my Mass."

Of what does Mahler's Mass consist? The first part is an overpowering setting of the 9th-century Pentecost hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, attributed to Hrabanus Maurus (c. 780–856). However, the second part of the Symphony sets the final scene of *Faust II*, in which there is no connection whatever between Goethe's creed and that of the Catholic Church. As Fischer points out, the final scene of *Faust* is one "from which 'God' is famously absent." In explicating the final scene of *Faust*,



Mahler, mouthing Goethe, wrote, “Christians speak of ‘eternal bliss,’ and for the sake of my allegory I have made use of this beautiful, sufficiently mythological concept—and the one most accessible to this era of world history.” Therefore, the vague allusions in Mahler’s works, such as in the final movement of the Second Symphony, that redemption is through Christ are only made so as to guide listeners to redemption without Him.

If God does not save man, who does? For Mahler, like his hero Goethe, it is man’s ceaseless striving that saves him. Faust transforms “In the beginning was the Word” at the beginning of the Gospel of St. John into “In the beginning was the Deed.” The active, striving will is all. Goethe, who described himself as a “committed non-Christian,” wrote at the end of *Faust*, “He who strives on and lives to strive / Can earn redemption still.” This form of self-redemption moves the focus from God to man.

It also considerably increases the weight of man’s burden. The stress and strain of this endeavor is clearly evident in Mahler’s works. Mahler’s compositional imitator, Leonard Bernstein, titled his Second Symphony, “The Age of Anxiety.” If you think you are going to be the source of your own salvation, you have plenty to be anxious about. Bearing up under the strain of this undertaking reduced Mahler at times to despair, so clearly heard in the hammer blows at the end of the Sixth Symphony.

MAHLER MAY HAVE BEEN THE LAST Romantic in the sense of celebrating man’s heroic striving. In rejecting the crude materialism and empiricism of his time, while at the same time eschewing the religious, he was almost a throwback to an earlier generation that had not yet had its hopes in man’s prospects for spiritual progress obliterated.

He believed that the whole of nature possessed an immortal soul, including plants and insects. A favorite book was *Nana or the Spiritual Life of Plants*, by Gustav Theodor Fechner. Fischer records an episode in which Mahler consoled a fly he had accidentally swatted. Looking down at his victim, Mahler said, “there, there, don’t fret: you too are immortal!” Not surprisingly, there are also incidents in which Mahler indicated a belief in reincarnation. One of his friends reports him saying,

We shall all return. The whole of existence has meaning only because of this certainty.... What matters is not the individual and his memory and contentment, but only the great movement to-

wards perfection and purification that increases with each incarnation. That is why I have to lead an ethical life in order to spare my ego, if it returns, a part of the journey and make its existence easier for it. That is my moral duty.

He was, then, a pantheist. The whole world was suffused with and animated by the divine. Obviously, pantheism does not comport with either Judaism or Christianity. So it is hard to tell in what way Mahler ever considered himself as belonging to either religion, except as a form of social convention or, in the case of Christianity, of professional necessity for his appointment as director of the Vienna Court Opera. He did not differentiate the divine in terms of religion but only in terms of higher and lower states of being. Thus we find the following designations for the movements of part two of the Third Symphony: “what the flowers in the meadow tell me; what the animals in the forest tell me; what man tells me; what angels tell me; what love tells me.” All of nature spoke to Mahler, and he endeavored to capture its voices. Of the Third Symphony, he said, “it has almost ceased to be music. It is hardly anything but sounds of nature.” Speaking of his Eighth Symphony, Mahler wrote: “try to imagine the whole universe beginning to ring and resound. These are no longer human voices, but planets and suns revolving.”

IN A LETTER TO HIS WIFE, ALMA, HE SPOKE of the complaint by a trumpeter about having his instrument stopped up to high C sharp in the Seventh Symphony. Mahler said: “this made me think deeply about the lot of man, who also cannot understand why he must endure being ‘stopped’ to the piercing agony of his own existence, cannot see what it’s for, and how his screech is to be attuned to the great harmony of the universal symphony of all creation.” Clearly, Mahler saw himself as an instrument of attunement to the universal harmony and in this way considered his vocation sacred. He would lose himself in it. Speaking of his Third Symphony, he said, “Imagine a work so vast that the whole world is mirrored in it—one is, so to speak, an instrument on which the universe plays...in such moments, I no longer belong to myself.” This understanding of his mission also helps one to understand why there is the equivalent of screeching voices in his music, inasmuch as the movement is from disharmony to universal harmony.

Mahler’s mission was uncannily similar to the role Cicero, and the ancient Greeks before

him, assigned to music as a means of reaching a higher state of being. Speaking of the “music of the spheres,” Cicero wrote that “skilled men imitating this harmony on stringed instruments and in singing have gained for themselves a return to this region, as have those who have cultivated their exceptional abilities to search for divine truths.”

Of course, Mahler was not operating in the pagan Rome of Cicero, but toward the end of a long Christian era. In light of this, it is hardly strange that Mahler himself became a kind of Christ figure. He was not a Nietzschean egotist who thought, as an *Übermensch*, he could will the eternal return of all things, so I would not take this notion of his being a musical messiah too far. But there is something in it. In Michael Kennedy’s short biography, *Mahler* (1976), he reports that, “asked what he would like to be ‘when he grew up,’ Gustav replied: ‘A martyr.’” Then there are the harrowing lines that Mahler wrote in the manuscript of the short score for his Tenth Symphony in which he directly quotes from Christ on the cross: “Death! Annunciation! Have mercy! My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Thy will be done.” Even Alma intimated something along these Christ-like lines from her description of Mahler’s death: “two attendants lifted his naked emaciated body. It was a taking down from the cross.”

SO, IS MAHLER’S MUSIC SALVIFIC? Certainly not in either a Christian or a Nietzschean sense, but it succeeds in portraying man’s unquenchable thirst for the eternal as have few composers. Whatever the eccentricities of his metaphysical and philosophical views, Mahler believed that there was some divine spring in which this thirst could be quenched. He strove for it. He tried to make it perceptible. One can at least agree with Dutch composer Alfons Diepenbrock, who said, “His music seems to possess the gift of ‘transforming people’ and of providing a sense of ‘catharsis.’ That is no small achievement.”

Did Mahler leave a legacy? One view of Mahler is that he took music to the breaking point and provided an anguished premonition of the catastrophe that was about to engulf Europe. In this sense he was an end, rather than a beginning. Leonard Bernstein saw him in this way. He wrote: “Mahler’s destiny was to complete the great German symphonic line and then depart, without it being granted him to start a new one.... Mahler was granted the honor of having the last word, uttering the final sigh, letting fall the last living tear, saying the final good-by.”



That makes things very neat, but I do not think it is true. It may have seemed so, because Arnold Schonberg, who truly did try to end the great German symphonic line with his demolition of tonality, came immediately after Mahler, and for close to half a century seemed to triumph. His temporary success obscured the continuation of a symphonic tradition that came straight out of Mahler. This Mahlerian tradition can be most immediately appreciated in the symphonies of Egon Wellesz, Karl Weigl, Karl Amadeus Hartmann, Marcel Tyberg (blatant imitation), and Bernstein himself. Mahler's influence is heard to its greatest advantage in the symphonies of Dmitri Shostakovich and Mieczyslaw Weinberg. That is a substantial bequest.

IN ANY CASE, MAHLER'S MUSIC CERTAINLY speaks to our uncertain times. Perhaps we too have taken upon ourselves the task of our own salvation and feel the same crushing weight of it. Perhaps that is why Mahler is a regular presence in concert halls and his works have reached a state of popularity that would have been unimaginable to him. For instance, there are more than 150 recordings available of the First Symphony alone; and on the ArkivMusic.com site, there are more than 1,200 different Mahler CDs for sale.

With the plethora of offerings, where ought the neophyte listener begin?

Mahler remarked, "Where music is, the Demon must be." He said this as a conductor, by which he meant one must be possessed to play properly, but it applies to his compositions most especially. If a conductor can beat time, Beethoven almost plays itself. Not so Mahler. He needs a visionary conductor. It is the vision that holds his music together, not the notes by themselves. If the conductor cannot keep the music in the tight grip of a vision, it will deflate into a bombastic mess.

Like most people more than 40 years ago, my first encounter with Mahler's music was through Leonard Bernstein's recordings with the New York Philharmonic. I was both excited and repelled by Mahler's neurotic hysteria, a feature Bernstein was famous for emphasizing in his highly dramatic performances. Now, they seem, well, normal. That may be a measure of Bernstein's and Mahler's defining influence on our sensibilities. These recordings have been re-mastered by Sony, still sound spectacular, and are offered in a 12-CD box. If your nerves can take it, start here.

Klaus Tennstedt (1926–1998) was a legendary Mahler conductor, who often told the musicians at the London Philharmonic

Orchestra, "Mahler was a crazy man, this is crazy music." Without reserve, he dove into the inner life of Mahler's music and produced highly charged, majestic performances. His studio recordings of all the symphonies have been gathered in an EMI box at a budget price. I have also come to appreciate particularly the live recordings he made in his last years, most particularly of the Second and Eighth Symphonies, available on BBC Legends and the LPO label. They are an unforgettable experience of spiritual richness. While Tennstedt may not provide the sense of immediacy that Bernstein so effectively achieves, he brings you more deeply into Mahler's vision. There are no Mahler performances that are more mesmerizing or profound. He is my conductor of choice.

RCA has re-released James Levine's Mahler recordings, made between 1974 and 1980, in a 10-CD box that contains all but the Second and Eighth Symphonies. With gorgeous playing from the Chicago, Philadelphia, and Lon-

don Symphony Orchestras, it is a staggering bargain, available on Amazon for \$26.99 or less. If you are hesitant about Mahler or impecunious, or both, this is a safe place to start. In fact, these performances are so good they would make a major addition to any Mahler library.

This past summer was the 100th anniversary of the premiere of the Ninth Symphony, considered by many to be his greatest. So I will close by recommending Herbert von Karajan's live performance with the Berlin Philharmonic, on the Deutsche Grammophon label. It is one of the greatest performances of anything that von Karajan ever conducted.

As you pursue these works, you may have by your side Fischer's insightful book as a reliable guide.

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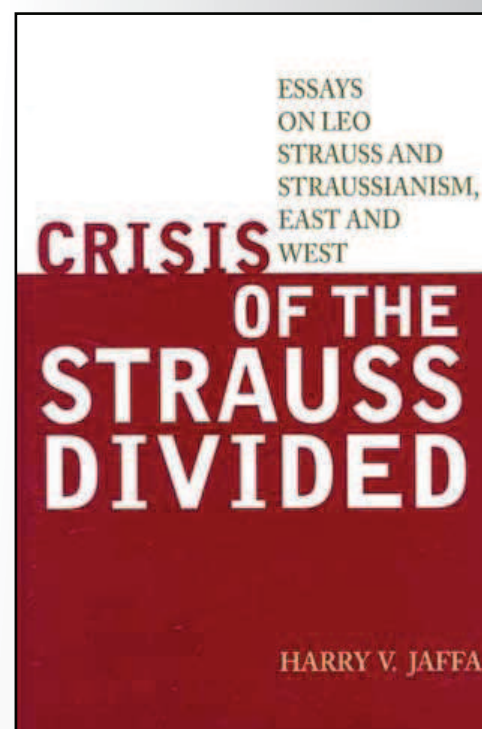
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