

Mahler and Freud

by Donald Mitchell

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Note: 'This is a script, not an article. It was first broadcast in the B.B.C. Third Programme on 28th March. 1955. I have not attempted to alter the text but have replaced the music example, (extracts from recorded performances of Mahler's symphonies) by detailed references to the relevant scores. Reader sufficiently interested may check the passages concerned. The scores used here are 'study' editions published by: Messrs. Universal Edition (SI, SIII). Messrs. C. F. Peters (SV). Messrs. Bote and Bock (SVII).

If I were asked for a single term which described the characteristic flavor of Mahler's music, and had both emotional and technical relevance, I think I should suggest 'tension' as the most appropriate word. It seems to me that when Mahler is expressing this basic tension - translating it into musical technique - he is at both his most characteristic and most inspired. Tension presupposes some kind of conflict between two opposed poles of thought or feeling, and often in Mahler's music we have just this situation exposed. Sometimes, of course, we have music from Mahler, anguished and turbulent, which does not state the conflict but expresses his reaction to it. Here the premises from which the conflict derives are not revealed but suppressed; from the suppression emerges the characteristic tension. Often, however, Mahler does express - or achieve - his tension through vivid contrast, through the juxtaposition of dissimilar moods, themes, harmonic texture - even whole movements. On these occasions, the conflict is exposed; we feel strongly the pull between two propositions which superficially seem to have little in common. The tension which results is typical of his mature art where continually we are confronted with the unexpected. What seems to be reposeful and straightforward suddenly develops into something agitated and complex. This passage from the nocturnal fourth movement of the seventh symphony is characteristic; the guileless serenade atmosphere is surprisingly disrupted, and the level of tension intensified through the dislocation of the prevailing mood. [SVII 4. p. 176. Fig. 211 to 3 bars before Fig. 216.]

This overwhelming tension in Mahler's music has, of course, been noted before, but its function has been little appreciated. Indeed, for the most part, it has been criticized, offered as evidence of his emotional instability, his stylistic inconsistency; the violent contrasts about which so much of Mahler's music pivots have been interpreted as an inability to maintain his inspiration - hence that view of Mahler's art that utter banality mingles with and deflates noble intentions, that dire lapses in taste inexcusably ruin otherwise impeccable conceptions. On a broader view, this misunderstanding of the nature of his tension has led to derogatory contrasts made between the size of his ideas and the size of his symphonies - not to speak of the strong body of opinion that sees the symphonies as inflated songs. Altogether, Mahler's tension at all levels of expression has been regretted rather than applauded.

If there has been little real understanding of his characteristic tension, there has been much analysis of it, much of it ill-founded, most of it inadequate. Mahler's conflict - sensed alike by friend and foe - has been explained as the result of his activities tragically split between the tyranny of conducting and the urge to compose. It has been suggested that Mahler was born at the wrong moment, on the tide of a musical

fashion that was rapidly running out: his musical efforts to stay the retreating current imposed a strain on his music that it could not withstand. Or there is the art and society viewpoint, that Mahler lived in a disintegrating culture, in the midst of the collapsing Austro-Hungarian empire, and his music therefore faithfully reflects the social tensions of his epoch. Taken to excess, as it has been, this latter analysis almost assumes that history wrote Mahler's symphonies for him; his works become little more than musical commentaries on political events.

Mahler was a man of many talents and many tensions, and it would be rash indeed to suppose that the world in which he lived and his mode of life did not influence his art. Yet it is hard to imagine - it almost goes against plain commonsense - that his music was shaped down to its finest detail by historical environment. On the contrary, acquaintance with his music and the facts of his inner life suggests that his characteristic tension stems from sources much nearer to home, from himself and his early relationship to his family, to his mother especially. His later environment, in the widest sense, may have done nothing to lessen his tension - it may, in fact, have exacerbated it - but it seems likely that the basic tension was a creation of his childhood years, was private and a part of his personality, not public and a part of history, either musical or political.

I may as well say at once that even when one has stumbled on the unconscious forces behind a composer's work, the task of evaluating his music is not suddenly made easy. Music remains good or bad in itself, however far we penetrate a composer's mind. The discussion of a composer's neurosis is only musically relevant in so far as it enables us to see clearly what he did with it in terms of his music. If what may have appeared to be purely arbitrary in the music is shown to spring from deep personal sources, to present a consistent artistic attitude, extended and matured across the years, it may well be that the impression of musical arbitrariness is removed. Certain biographical data may actively assist musical understanding, and since understanding is a necessary stage on the way to evaluation, one can claim that such information is, at the very least, a proper study for musical research.

We are particularly fortunate in the case of Mahler that the kind of information I have in mind comes from a meeting he had in 1910 with none other than Sigmund Freud. The fact that the meeting took place has been known for some time; Mrs. Mahler mentions it in her memoir of her husband and gives a brief account of the interview, based upon what she was told by Mahler.⁸ What has come to light recently is Freud's own account of his conversation with Mahler, made by Freud in a personal communication to the psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte in 1925. Perhaps I may say at this point that it is entirely due to the courtesy and most generous cooperation of Dr. Ernest Jones, Freud's biographer, that I am in possession of this new material.⁹

First a word about the meeting itself. In 1910, Mahler became seriously alarmed about his relationship to his wife. He was advised to consult Freud, wrote, was given an appointment - cancelled it. He cancelled his appointment - significantly - no less than three times. Finally the meeting took place in Leyden, Holland, towards the end of August. The two men met in a hotel, and then, in Dr. Jones' words, "spent four hours strolling through the town and conducting a sort of analysis". The interview over, Freud caught a tram back to the coast, where he was on a holiday, and Mahler returned by night train to the Tyrol.

⁸ See Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, London, 1946, pp.146-7

⁹ See Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*, Vol. II London, 1955, pp. 88-9. Dr. Jones was good enough to provide me with the materials that formed the basis of this broadcast in advance of its publication in the second volume of his immaculate biography. I am happy to pay tribute once more to his generosity.

Apart from what was said, it is impossible not to be intrigued by the very thought of this encounter between two men of exceptional genius. Mahler, of course, was an artist, Freud a scientist. Yet Mahler's incessant seeking after musical truth had something of the selfless passion with which Freud conducted his investigations; and no one, perhaps, either layman or expert, can fail to appreciate the consummate artistry with which Freud expounded his humane science. Perhaps it was this common ground, between psychoanalyst and patient that explains why Mahler, who had never before met with psychoanalysis, surprised Freud by understanding it with remarkable speed. Perhaps Mahler, in his turn, was surprised by Freud's analysis of himself - as partial as it had to be in the peculiar circumstances of the interview. In a letter of 1935 to Theodor Reik, Freud wrote: "In highly interesting expeditions through [Mahler's] life history, we discovered his personal conditions for love, especially his Holy Mary complex (mother fixation)".¹⁰ Mahler, his wife tells us, "refused to acknowledge" this fixation - the denial confirms rather than contradicts Freud's diagnosis - but it seems that the meeting had a positive effect and Mahler's marriage was stabilized for the brief remainder of his life.

It was doubtless during those "highly interesting expeditions through his life history" that Mahler - to quote Dr. Jones - "suddenly said that now he understood why his music had always been prevented from achieving the highest rank through the noblest passages, those inspired by the most profound emotions, being spoilt by the intrusion of some commonplace melody. His father, apparently a brutal person, treated his wife very badly, and when Mahler was a young boy there was a especially painful scene between them. It became quite unbearable to the boy, who rushed away from the house. At that moment, however, a hurdy-gurdy in the street was grinding out the popular Viennese air 'Ach, du lieber Augustin'. In Mahler's opinion the conjunction of high tragedy and light amusement was from then on inextricably fixed in his mind, and the one mood inevitably brought the other with it".

Mahler's confessions strike me as being of genuine musical significance and relevance. It is not possible to deal in this talk with all the questions they raise. We must overlook, for example, Mahler's estimate of his own achievements, remembering that composers are often the worst judges of their own value - what they value in themselves may not be at all what they are valued for by posterity; moreover, we do not know by what standards Mahler judged his own music. He may even, quite sincerely, have wanted to be another kind of composer altogether. In this context, his own comment on "noblest passages ...spoilt by the intrusion of some commonplace melody" is of particular interest. Mahler himself seems to have regretted the conflict, to have viewed it as a disability, to agree, almost, with the views of his own critics. I, on the contrary, as I have already suggested, regard the inevitably ensuing tension as that main spring motivating his most characteristic and striking contributions to the art of music. But this, I feel, is not the moment to discuss whether Mahler was wrong or right about his own art, whether, in fact, the sublime in his music was fatally undermined by the mundane. I believe he was wrong, that he felt insecure about his music, that in a sense he did not even fully understand it himself. It would certainly not be unnatural for an artist in the grip of a violent tension from which he was unable to escape to curse it rather than to praise it, to imagine that to be rid of it would necessary be an improvement. I am inclined to share Ernst Krenek's opinion that "it is possible ... for an innovator not to grasp fully the implication of his venture into the unknown. He may sometimes even be unaware of having opened a new avenue...", that "the disconcerting straightforwardness of Mahler" - "his regression to primitive musical substances" - "is a striking foretoken of the great intellectual crisis which with extraordinary sensitivity he felt looming in the oncoming 20th century".¹¹

But it is not my purpose this evening to attempt a critical evaluation of specific features of Mahler's music. I only hope to show how frequently in his music, though by very various means, he re-enacted his traumatic childhood experience, how the vivid contrast between high tragedy and low farce, sublimated, disguised and transfigured as it often was, emerged as a leading artistic principle in his music, a principle almost always ironic in intent and execution.

Mahler himself confused the issue by crudely over-simplifying it. It would be easy to point to the parallel between his music and his childhood experience if comedy always relieved tragedy, or a commonplace thought succeeded every noble one. But his music, mercifully, is more interesting than that: the trauma assumes complex shapes. However, in his first symphony, in the slow movement, we have a clear instance of the basic conflict at work. The movement is a sombre funeral march. Mahler's use of a round, "Frere Jacques", as the basis of the march is symptomatic of both his ironic intention and of his ability to make old - even mundane - musical material serve new ends by reversing its established meaning. [SI 3 p. 78. Start of movement to Fig. 3.]

Already in the movement's first section, the funereal mood has been interrupted by outbreaks of deliberate parody. In the gloomy recapitulation, the very march itself is juxtaposed with these mundane invasions, not quite hurdy-gurdy music perhaps, but close to it. The result is almost a literal realization of the tragic mood inextricably mingled with the commonplace. [SI 3. p. 89. 2 bars after Fig. 14 to Fig. 17.] Many like examples of this kind of simultaneous expression of seeming opposites could be found in Mahler's early music. As he matured, the gap between his contrasts narrowed. There is a greater degree of thematic and formal integration. One might say that in disciplining his tension, Mahler succeeded in subduing the most strident features of his contrasting materials. The Seventh Symphony's first movement offers an interesting instance. The movement begins with an exalted, mysterious slow introduction. [SVII 1. p. 1. Start of movement to Fig. 3.] This compelling mood is abruptly terminated in a passage in Mahler's favourite march rhythm, which bumps us down to earth - a common function of Mahler's march-inspired motives. [SVIII. p. 5. bar 1 to p. 6, bar 3.] The sudden drop in the level of harmonic tension and the sudden change in the character of the musical invention are, I think, striking. That the march motive grows thematically out of the opening paragraph integrates the contrast but does not lessen its effect. It is rather as if Mahler were expressing the conflict in terms of pure music - demonstrating that even the most far-reaching and profound musical idea can have a commonplace consequent, and one, moreover, which is thematically strictly related. It is, so to speak, still his childhood experience; still the hurdy-gurdy punctures and deflates and makes its ironic comment. But now the experience is lived out at the subtlest artistic level. Even the mundane march motive is occasionally transformed into something sublime. For the most part, however, it ranges the movement as a free agent, as a saboteur, stressing a rough world's impingement upon the eternal. Here, as a final example from this work, the rudely triumphant march cuts across the ecstatic convolutions of the movement's lyrical second subject. [SVIII. p. 69. 2 bars before Fig. 60 to p. 72, double bar.]

Perhaps the most significant musical consequence of Mahler's childhood trauma was this: that his unhappy experience meant that the hurdy-gurdy - the symbol of the commonplace - assumed a quite new weight. Its music became as charged with emotional tension as the tragic incident to which it was related. The conjunction of high tragedy and the commonplace meant that the commonplace itself, in the right context, could be used as a new means of expression; and here Mahler remarkably foreshadowed a main trend in 20th century art, not only in music, but also in the literary and visual arts. Undoubtedly this

¹⁰ See Theodor Reik, *The Haunting Melody*, New York, 1953, pp. 342 ff.

¹¹ See Bruno Walter and Ernst Krenek, *Gustav Mahler*, New York, 1941, pp. 163-4. p.207.

discovery of the potentialities of the commonplace vitally influenced Mahler's idiom. The first movement of his third symphony, a movement of massive proportions, 45-minutes long, symphonically elaborated and organized to a high degree of complexity, largely draws its material from the world of the military band, upon marching songs and military signals. These mundane elements derive their tension from the new context in which they are placed. The movement's development is typical. The commonplace is made to sing a new and unprecedented song. [SIII 1. p. 59. Fig. 43 to p. 72, Fig. 5'1.]

In the third symphony, Mahler, as he had done in the funeral march of the first, obliged the commonplace to serve his own singular purpose - the contrast between means and achieved ends could hardly be stronger. Elsewhere, we have seen how he used the mundane as comment upon nobler conceptions. Mahler, however, was nothing if not thorough in his contradictions, and his attitude to the commonplace itself was often skeptical. In the Fifth Symphony we see this reverse process in action. The work's *scherzo* first offers an unblemished, winning, slow waltz. [SV 3. Figures 6 to 7.] But just as the tragic mood aroused its opposite, so too does even this kind of attractive commonplaceness undergo savage transformation. We do not have tragedy, it is true, but ironic comment on the deficiencies of the commonplace, on its musical unreality, on its inability to meet the realities of a tragic world. If the mundane often succeeds the tragic drama, Mahler seems to say, there is no guarantee that the easeful security of the commonplace is anything more than a deceitful fantasy. [SV 3. 11 bars after Fig. 14 to 5 bars after Fig. 17.]

I hope I have shown some of the ways in which Mahler in his music actively and, I believe, fruitfully reacted to that central event of his childhood which I have discussed. There is little doubt to my mind that it played a main role in the formation of his musical character, in the creation of that tension which is so conspicuous a feature of his art. It was, I think, the basis of his musical conflict and certainly responsible for the remarkable irony of his utterance. If there were another tension of almost equal weight which played a part in determining the nature of his art, I should suggest it was the conflict he witnessed, felt and registered between the old concept of musical beauty and the emerging new. But while not excluding the influence wielded by historical circumstance, I cannot but believe that an analysis of Mahler's personality is the surer guide for those bent on discovering why his genius took the shape it did.

The relationship of psychology to the art of composing has as yet been little investigated. Perhaps, as Hindemith wrote in "A Composer's World", "we are on the verge of entering with our research that innermost field in which the very actions of music take place: the human mind. Thus psychology, supplementing - in due time perhaps replacing - former mathematical, physical and physiological scientiae, will become the science that eventually illuminates the background before which the musical figures move in a state of meaningful clarity".¹²

The Chicago Mahlerites welcome the following new members:

David Auerbach from San Jose, California
Alan Prichard from Loudonville, New York
Conrad Weisert from Chicago, Illinois
Paul Zukas from Oxford, Mississippi

A Member Remembers...

The Rise and Fall of the Indiana University Mahler Group

by Jan Hoepfer

It lasted only two years, and had at most only ten active members, but I still like to think that, in its small way, our weekly IU Mahler Group tweaked the bow ties of the stolid, institutional music school. Here was a scruffy group of students that gathered simply to revel in the music they loved. And the pure enjoyment of music, my music-major friends told me, was all-too-easily forgotten amidst the *sturm und drang* of exams, auditions, and recitals.

I had already cultivated my Mahler obsession for two years by listening to recordings I had found in the library. But by my junior year, I needed more material to feed this obsession, so I brought up the idea of a Mahler listening/discussion group with a music-school friend of mine. Our mission: to gather a weekly group to listen to the entire Mahler oeuvre. All we needed was a room with a killer sound system. In order to request a time-slot for a room at the music school, however, we had to register as a legitimate group. And in order to register as a group, we needed a faculty sponsor. So my friend and I pitched the idea to a Mahler expert at the music school, who agreed to sponsor us and who even came to our meetings quite often. Each week, I did two things: reserve the room, and put up dozens of flyers around the music school advertising our meeting time underneath a big picture of Mahler.

Before long, we had a regular group. Our aim was to go through Mahler's works chronologically, and we started with *Das Klagende Lied*. Of course, we *should* have started with the earlier piano quartet or the early lieder, but we decided we needed to draw people in with something big—a crowd-pleaser. The best thing about listening to Mahler with the group was that we got to turn the music up *loud*, probably ten times louder than the dorms would allow. The exhausted music-school students leaving the practice building during our late-evening meetings must have raised an eyebrow at the racket.

Our group included our faculty sponsor, several horn players, an occasional piano player, a flute player, and a number of non-musicians from my dorm, where I was able to actively recruit. We had grand plans for the group, but I was just happy that we managed to meet regularly. Our biggest events were, of course, the live Mahler concerts, including at least one or two a year by the IU orchestras. (I recall walking home, dazed and oblivious, after a sublime performance of the Ninth my junior year, and getting hit in the head by a Nerf football—out of nowhere!—in my dorm's courtyard.) Our crowning achievement, however, was our trip to Cincinnati to hear Jesus Lopez-Cobos conduct the Third, with Michelle De Young. I'll never forget the gorgeous posthorn solo; the player was in the rotunda-like, neoclassical entrance lobby and the sound echoed celestially into the concert hall through the half-opened back doors. We made the trip in a single day, since Cincinnati is not far from Bloomington, and when we rolled back into town, road-weary and emotionally drained, we all had drowsy smiles of success for achieving our first pilgrimage.

When the Mahler Group disbanded in 1999 at the end of my senior year, we had just made it through the entire Mahler oeuvre (although we didn't do all the versions of the Tenth). It was a satisfying place to throw in my hat. Did the IU Mahler Group stand as a beacon, warning music students against the dangers of losing their passion for music? I harbor no such delusions. Did the group win a vast, youthful following for Mahler's music? Hardly. But the group did show that music majors and non-majors alike could enjoy and examine music together. And it may have reminded others that, after all, we play music because we love it. Besides, it was just plain fun.



¹² See Paul Hindemith, *A Composer's World*, Harvard University Press, 1952, pp.24-5