CHAPTER TWO

GUSTAV MAHLER

> The period of his maturity coincides more or less exactly with that of Art Nouveau. . . . But what distances Mahler from his age ... is the almost complete absence of the elements of Art Nouveau in his work. Such elements predominate in Richard Strauss; they are present in the young Schoenberg and can even be found in Reger. But of Mahler the most that could be said is that the exotic aspect of his last works reveal an affinity with Art Nouveau. But that aside he must have sounded retrograde when compared to the standards of what was then thought modern. Neither the slogans nor the formal idiom of Art Nouveau made any impact on his *oeuvre*. The images which inspire it are late Romantic rather than neo-Romantic; they belong to those which people were in rebellion against. But his anachronistic element, this sense of not having quite kept up with developments, became in him a source of strength which went beyond the capacities of the age. *It provided him with a sort of resistance to the process of subjectivization which enabled him to retain a quite spontaneous hold on the model of the great objective symphonic work. Even though this had now become an impossible project it none the less managed to infiltrate his works and imbue them with something of that past collective authority. . .*[1]

Adorno's booklength essay, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* was written well before its 1960 copyright. It was also completed prior to the two shorter pieces contained in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music* (1963).[2] The quotation above is from the piece entitled *Afterthoughts* in *Quasi una Fantasia*, and the final two sentences, which I have put into italics, are very strange, given the general context of Adorno's thought. A phrase like "*spontaneous hold on the model of the great objective symphonic work*" is so startling that even the qualifier in the following sentence, "*this had now become*

1 Theodor Adorno, *Mahler*, in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 98 (italics added).

2 The two pieces referred to in T.W. Adorno's *Quasi una Fantasia* are *Mahler: Centenary Address* (Vienna 1960) and *Afterthoughts* (1961).

an impossible project"[3] suggests a kind of courtroom strategy: that of the clearly inadmissable statement which the jury immediately will be instructed to disregard but is nevertheless not completely forgotten.

Halfway into the second chapter, *Tone*, of the Mahler monograph, Adorno quotes Schoenberg's remark about Mahler's Ninth Symphony:

> '*His Ninth is most strange. In it, the author hardly speaks as an individual any longer. It almost seems as though this work must have a concealed author who used Mahler merely as his spokesman, as his mouthpiece.*'[4]

The observations placed so far in italics, which come close to representing the chronological beginning and end of Adorno's thoughts on Mahler are quite puzzling taken at face value. Mahler, because of a *spontaneous hold* (which is a fundamental illusion--"the dregs of Romanticism") on the *great objective symphonic work* (which has not really existed, since, approximately, the time of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony) managed--oddly enough--by not really composing at all, but instead, by submitting to a kind of dictation process, to become an absolutely central figure in the musical cosmos. The identity of the "concealed author" is perhaps the first place to begin our inquiry.

3 I have italicized both of these quotes.

4 Arnold Schoenberg, *Gustav Mahler*, in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black, 470 (italics added).

In Schoenberg's essay, the notion of the "concealed author" is essentially poetic:

> This symphony is no longer couched in the personal tone. It consists, so to speak, of objective, almost passionless statements of a beauty which becomes perceptible only to one who can dispense with animal warmth and feels at home in spiritual coolness.[5]

At the center of Schoenberg's conjecture is not so much Mahler himself as the notion, so prevalent at the time, of the mystical barrier of the Ninth Symphony:

> It seems that the Ninth is a limit. He who wants to go beyond it must pass away. . . . Perhaps the riddles of this world would be solved, if one of those who knew them were to write a Tenth.[6]

Adorno would have described the remarks above as an example of "the bounds set by Schoenberg's naïveté."[7] But the notion of the "concealed author" occupies the center of his thought as well. He raises, but in general plays down, the issue of Mahler's double life as composer-conductor:

5 *Ibid.*, 470.

6 *Ibid.*, 470.

7 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, ed. Samuel and Shierry Weber, intro. Samuel Weber, with series foreward by Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 161.

> Any fool can detect in his music traces of conductor's music ... *but not the conductor's contribution to the formulations of the composer.* It is the conductor's task to achieve broken, inauthentic objectification at the expense of the spontaneous unity of music and composing subject. The supposedly natural source of the narrow stream of primary musical ideas is put into a more correct perspective by the conductor's knowledge of all of the possibilities from which he may choose. . . . The conductor as composer has an ear not only for the sound but for the practice of the orchestra, the capabilities of the instruments as well as the exertions, weaknesses, exaggerations, and dullnesses that can be turned to his purposes. Borderline and exceptional situations ... extend his language, just as the experience of the orchestra as a living entity ... helps the music to produce itself spontaneously, to keep flowing. Orchestral *praxis*, a hard and unhappy fetter in the commercial sphere, releases Mahler's creative imagination. Underlying even this imagination's transcendental moments may be the primal movement of the conductor driving the orchestra on. . . . Wherever Mahler emphasizes characteristics running against the inclination of the music, his conducting manner must have been transferred to his composition. This makes his pieces less literal, as if they were as they are simply by nature.[8]

The sentimental image of Mahler as divided spirit, half tormented creator and half (equally tormented) *Generalmusikdirektor*, provokes a memorably acid series of observations:

8 Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 30-31 (italics added).

> There is constant prattle about Mahler's music as a mirror of his soul. . . . Wisdom of this sort perorates on Mahler as a 'tragic figure' and, while shedding crocodile tears of gratuitous condescension over his allegedly split self, betrays the rancor that always inhabits gestures of appreciation. . . . The repulsive counterpart to the image of the divided Mahler is that of the composing subject as a blond Siegfried, a balanced, harmonious individual who is supposed, singing like a bird, to shower as much happiness on his listeners as is falsely ascribed to him. The cliché comfortably matches the opposite one of Beethoven titanically grappling, for heaven knows what reason, with himself. . .[9]

It is one of Adorno's central points throughout these essays that the entire role and function of the composer has undergone a drastic change. Partly for reasons of compositional technique, partly for societal reasons, the notion that the composer simply communicates himself directly to the listener, that complexities of figuration or instrumental texture can be thought of as ornamental details, as modifiers, so to speak, is no longer tenable. In the Strauss essay, the idea of the composer as captain of industry, as an individual will acting entirely on its own, "willfully manipulating what by definition ought to be spontaneous," of a superlatively alert "hand behind the magic lantern enjoying a power of artistic organization which ... believes itself to be beyond all danger"[10] was examined. In the Mahler essay, Adorno writes: "The social standpoint of composition has so changed, has so contracted into itself, that it needs a medium interposed between the composer ... and the subject matter, as

9 *Ibid.*, 23-4.

10 *Ibid.*, 15.

in film the director becomes the conveyor of the material, eliminating the traditional author."[11]

In Adorno's essays on Mahler, there is virtually nothing truly negative. Around 1960, the only constructive way to discuss Mahler was to become a spokesperson for his music. These essays are not nearly as exuberant as the Strauss essays in expressing reservations of any kind. Even in his writings on Schoenberg, there is plenty of room for skeptical or even sharply negative content. In the Mahler essays, the phrase "not yet fully emancipated," simply appears, from time to time. Adorno's treatment of his notion of the "concealed author" begins with the observation that the early symphonies often fall short of the highest standards of composition of Mahler's time:

> It is true of Mahler as of almost no other that what exceeds accepted standards also falls slightly short of them. . .[12]

Particularly the first symphonies cannot be entirely reconciled with notions of standard competence or complete control over the material. But this "shortcoming" is the essence of his ability to go "beyond the capacities of the age." As a young man, Mahler allowed himself to be guided by a general idea more or less hovering before him rather than concentrating on completely dominating the materials at hand. Because of this, there are details, particularly the sudden "collapses" which tend to appear clumsy by comparison to Strauss.

11 *Ibid.*, 30.

12 *Ibid.*, 19.

But the latter's extraordinary control, his sense of organization down to the smallest detail, comes at a price. It is often superimposed on the music to the point where Strauss loses his concern with the music's inner logic, his sense of where to go. "Mahler's metaphysical intention is realized in that he is drawn along by the objective forces inherent in his work as if he were his own detached spectator."[13] Sometimes (and this is the highest compliment) "the form forgets itself." This apparent "shortcoming" with regard to complete control of the music is inextricably combined with Mahler's capacity to oversee, to hear the course, the "innate intentions" of his music from a distance. The final section of Adorno's booklength essay is, appropriately, entitled *The Long Gaze*.

In a chapter dealing with theories of the artwork in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno, discussing "a reputable classicist theory defining music as a play of moving forms in sound," which became linked with a view that stressed "the similarity of musical processes with the optical ones that take place in a kaleidoscope" suddenly provides a definition of the notion of "collapse," which is probably clearer than any of those provided in the book on Mahler:

> The fields of collapse in symphonic music, for instance Mahler's, do indeed resemble configurations of a kaleidoscope where a series of images with slight variations all of a sudden comes crashing down, giving rise to a qualitatively new one. What is unique about music, however, is the indeterminate conceptual quality; change and articulation by means typical of music alone are highly determinate.[14]

13 *Ibid.*, 133.

14 T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 282.

The notion of "fields of collapse" is in this instance linked to one of the favorite devices of Viennese Classicism sometimes known as "liquidation technique." Towards the end of a section (for example, the exposition, but also just prior to the return of the first theme in the recapitulation) the most striking characteristics of the preceding material are, through a process of smoothing over, abstracting, or even in some cases, distorting the intervals, systematically effaced in order to clear the way for the new material. It is one of Adorno's central points that Mahler's collapsing passages no longer mediate, but speak for themselves:

> While they are embedded in the overall progression of the form, at the same time they extend through it as something in their own right: negative fulfillment. . . . They are not a transition to something else; they are themselves the goal ... formal entities as characters.[15]

Thus what may seem to be a violation of standards, intentional or not, becomes the very essence of Mahler's ability to go beyond the capacities of the age by "falling short" of the norm. Furthermore, it provides an example of what Adorno means when he compares Mahler's historical position to that of Van Gogh, i.e., "latent modernism."[16]

Closely related to the "collapsing" passages are moments to which Adorno attaches the general term of 'breakthrough.' One of the simplest and

15 Adorno, *Mahler*, 45.

16 *Ibid.*, 134.

most telling instances of this might be found in the sudden entrance of four flutes in unison in the development section of the first movement of the Fourth Symphony.[17] This unison does not merely reinforce the sound, nor is the material new. But it takes on the character of something entering the music from outside it, the sudden appearance of a "dream ocarina,"[18] in Adorno's words. A similar instance is the sudden reappearance six measures before the recapitulation, in the first movement of the first symphony, of the fanfare which in the opening of the movement has always been very soft, marked *in sehr weiter Entfernung*. The sudden *fortissimo* comes as a physical shock, not commensurate with the *crescendo* that is taking place, but once again, coming as something from the outside.

These sudden discontinuities or dislocations of the sound material are at the core of Mahler's expressivity. They reveal a sense of brokenness which Adorno goes so far as to call Mahler's experiential core. This goes well beyond the disharmony between the asthetic subject and reality or *Weltschmerz*, which had been fundamental to the Romantic spirit since Schubert. Adorno compares Mahler's brokeness to that of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Lord Chandos*, who has suddenly lost his sense of the intuitive unity of word and thing. The world has withdrawn from him. These effects are almost always brought about within a traditional syntax, which selectively conservative, even, by the standards of its time. Alienation effects, Adorno observes, are perhaps possible only on

17 *Ibid.*, 53 (it occurs one measure after rehearsal letter 10).

18 *Ibid.*, 56.

relatively familiar ground. Mahler's atmosphere is the illusion of familiarity in which the Other is clothed.[19]

In Mahler's music even the sound itself, normally the most directly sensual of all the dimensions of music is subject to distanciation [*Verfremdung*]. The rounded, full sound, the luxuriation in color so characteristic of the New German School are left behind. Over and over again he is decades ahead of his time, but the ideal of euphony that encourages music to "ruffle its feathers"[20] is almost never present.

In an eloquent passage dealing with the opening of the Fourth Symphony, Adorno remarks of the bells, "they really are fool's bells, which, without saying it, say: none of what you now hear is true."[21] Mahler's fairytale-symphony is as sad as the late works. At the culminating point of the final movement, beneath the soprano's "'*Johannes das Lämmlein auslasset, der Metzger Herodes drauf passet* (John lets out the little lamb, for Herod the butcher to guard)'"[22] the opening measures of the symphony echo softly. The untruth of the beginning quietly has its moment of truth:

19 *Ibid.*, 20.

20 *Ibid.*, 117.

21 *Ibid.*, 56.

22 *Ibid.*, 57.

The dignity of Mahler's musical language lies in the fact that it can be entirely understood and understands itself, but eludes the hand that would grasp what has been understood.[23]

23 *Ibid.*, 25.