

# THE WAYFARER

## In Lockdown with Mahler

ULRICH MÜLLER-SEDGWICK *explains how he came to 'diagnose' Mahler with ADHD and wonders whether he was a cocaine user*

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

In Lockdown with Mahler 1-5

Mahler's Conductors 1: Bruno Walter 5-6

January 2021 Recital 7

Obituary: Terry Barfoot 8

Officers, Committee & Contacts 8

### In the next edition:

Norman Lebrecht and Canon Rod Garner on Mahler and religion

John Searight on Mahler's choice of operas

Kevin Carey concludes his survey of Bruno Walter

On the way from Frankfurt airport to visit my elderly parents I attended a concert of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra with Gustavo Dudamel and Golda Schultz in Mahler's 4th in the Alte Oper concert hall. My father had an emergency operation from which he would not recover and I told him about the concert just before he woke up for a final time before he died. This was the start of my intensive journey with Mahler's music, research into his biography and an understanding of the creative process that allowed him to compose the most exceptional works of art. I have documented this journey in loving memory of my father (Helmut Müller 1935-2018).

When we cleared my parents' house, among the few items from their estate that I brought to my new home in London were Alma Mahler's *Memoires and Letters*, Macdonald & Co, London, 1990), Jens Malte Fischer's *Gustav Mahler* (2013) and Rafael Kubelik's Mahler cycle with the Bavarian RSO to which I listened while transporting items from their old home to their new. My 10-year-old son enjoyed what he called a "Mahlerthon". This reminded me of performances of Mahler's 2nd in the Berliner Philharmonie and of Mahler's 7th at the Mahler-Fest in Kassel, which I attended with my father. I remembered him talking about Gustav's love of Alma and a visit to the Komponier-Häuschen in Steinbach am Attersee. I had attended one of the few secondary schools in Bavaria specialising in music which



became one of my special subjects. As a student, I owned a vinyl box-set of the Bernstein (largely NYPO) Mahler cycle. For more than 30 years I forgot about Mahler whilst studying medicine, getting married, having children and moving to Leipzig, where I trained as a psychiatrist, worked in research and then moved to Cambridge. I got divorced, lived for a while in Budapest (where I regularly visited the opera), joined an amateur orchestra as violist, married my lovely English wife (a nurse and Wagner enthusiast) and moved to North London where I currently run a specialist service for adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). I bought more CDs, including Rattle's Mahler cycle, found the concert listings on the GMSUK website and attended some great concerts before the virus intervened.

It was moving when the Berlin Philharmonic with Kirill Petrenko played a chamber version of Mahler 4 live in perfect physical distance in front of empty seats, apart from one occupied by the German president. The world of live music has changed, perhaps for good.

A year after my first Mahlerthon, I now have more than 30 books on my Mahler bookshelf. I have been reading, almost obsessively, on lockdown evenings and weekends, through thousands of pages of Mahleriana while listening to his music. I found many Mahler cycles free on YouTube. I noticed that I had followed Mahler's footsteps on his arduous road to Vienna when I visited Ljubljana, Kassel, Prague, Leipzig, Budapest and Hamburg over the last decade. I learned from Henry-Louis de La Grange that Mahler's "biography is an analytic tool" to understand his compositions and worked my way through his 4-volume magnum opus:

1. *The Arduous Road to Vienna 1860-97* (2020);
2. *Vienna: The Years of Challenge 1897-1904* (1995);
3. *Vienna; Triumph and Disillusion 1904-7* (1999);
4. *A New Life Cut Short 1907-11* (2008).

While learning to be a tele-psychiatrist, I read that the opera in Hamburg was locked-up during a cholera epidemic and Mahler was in a lockdown of his own in 1892, which led to his first sexual encounter in Berchtesgaden with his confidante and note-taker Natalie Bauer-Lechner. When I read the Mahler books of Norman Lebrecht (*Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed the World*, Faber & Faber, London, 2010),

Robin O'Neill: *The Mahler Family: In the Rise & Fall of the Third Reich*, Memoirs, (2015) and Stephen Johnson (*The Eighth: Mahler and the World in 1910*, Faber & Faber, London, 2020), I noted the Mahler expertise in and around London.



What, then, did I discover about Mahler during my lockdown? Throughout his lifetime Mahler struggled with health problems and was diagnosed with migraine, recurrent throat infections (tonsillitis), haemorrhoids (irritable bowel syndrome), arrhythmia (atrial fibrillation) and the fateful bacterial endocarditis that was diagnosed but could not be treated. There is also a debate as to whether he also suffered from chorea minor which might explain his restless leg and cheek sucking as motor tics. Psychiatrists like myself tend to give names to clusters of behaviours and emotions often observed in our patients. Mahler, both as a child and grown-up musician, with a personality and behaviours portrayed in so many documents of his contemporaries and detailed biographies, does remind me of some of the highly intelligent patients that I see in my Adult ADHD Clinic. These observations led me to the conclusion that Mahler's "creative restlessness" (as I like to call it) could be explained

by a combination of ADHD and giftedness, conceptualised as "twice exceptionality" in the educational literature. ADHD is a neuro-developmental condition, like autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia. It is the most prevalent mental health condition in children, characterised by attention deficits, hyperactivity, impulsive behaviour and emotional instability and it persists into adulthood in 2/3 of cases (either with all or with residual symptoms). In Mahler's time there was no concept of ADHD; leading psychiatrists like Emil Kraepelin (1856-1926) would diagnose hyperactive symptoms as "manic disposition" or "constitutional excitement", but I think that Mahler showed many of the inattentive and hyperactive-impulsive symptoms that modern psychiatry conceptualises as ADHD.

Let me illustrate from my reading: "One day, father Mahler took little Gustav with him to the woods but, suddenly reminded of some forgotten chore, he decided to hurry back home. Seating the child on a tree-stump, he said: Stay here and wait. I'll be back very soon.' Meanwhile, visitors had arrived at the house and, in the excitement, he completely forgot about Gustav until it was almost sunset. Apprehensively, he now ran back to the woods only to find the boy still sitting just as he had left him a few hours earlier." (Gabriel Engel: *Gustav Mahler Song Symphonist*, New York, 1932 p41). "At school, Mahler was easily distracted and absent-minded – one of his secondary-school teachers called him 'quicksilver personified'. He was often immersed in his own thoughts, pensive and lost to the world, drawing down on him the censure of his teachers." (Theodor Fischer, tr. in J. M. Fischer: *Gustav Mahler*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2011 p32). "Mahler was a sensitive child gifted with a lively imagination, a clear propensity for music and considerable talent as a pianist. At the grammar school that he attended in

Iglau he clearly failed to live up to his father's expectations and struck observers as being dreamy and lacking in concentration" (Fischer 2011 p39).

"While winning another first prize for the piano, he performed poorly in counterpoint, arriving late for the examination that he was required to resit, failing to complete the exercise and being unable to submit any course work, a failure that he had attempted to cover up by submitting what his examiners dismissed as the 'first part of a fictitious piece', with the result that they refused to allow him to compete for the composition prize. It was around this time, too, that Mahler failed his school-leaving examination in Iglau, passing it only at the second attempt." (Fischer 2011 p70).

"One evening, for example, he is said to have incurred a soprano's wrath by accidentally stepping on her train when following her onto the stage; and on another occasion, while accompanying a no-doubt mediocre Polish violinist, he suddenly forgot where he was and started to daydream. The unfortunate soloist had to beat time with his foot in order to bring the pianist back to earth." (de La Grange, 2020 p131).

"His behaviour is erratic, marked by breaches of discipline alternating with obsequious remorse. In a fit of frustration and self-loathing, he resigns from the Conservatory, and then begs to be reinstated." (O'Reilly 2013 p47).

"I have seen him sometimes standing motionless in the middle of a room, poised on one leg, one hand on a hip and the index finger of the other stuck against a cheek, his head bowed, the back of his other foot hooked in the hollow of his knee, eyes fixed on the floor. He could stand like that for several minutes, lost in his thoughts." (Ernst Roller, tr. in O'Reilly 2013 p99).

"Every day his father exploded over the untidiness of Gustav's room – the one and only place where tidiness was demanded of him; and yet every day Gustav forgot all about it until the next explosion burst about his ears. It was quite beyond him to bear this one trifling command in mind." (O'Reilly 2013 p52).

"He is extremely forgetful and absent-minded, because inwardly preoccupied and distracted. In fact, he used to be much more

so. The strangest things would happen to him! The most extreme instance occurred in his youth, while drinking black coffee at a party. Without thinking, he stirred the cup with his cigarette instead of his spoon and then, imagining that he had smoke in his mouth, blew coffee across the table right into his hostess's face!

Innumerable tales of this kind are told of him... If he goes out in the morning without being looked over, he often comes back at noon with

the white traces of tooth-powder or shaving-soap still on his mouth or cheeks. Sometimes he even forgets to comb his hair and runs around all day like a Struwwelpeter. However, this happens only when he's travelling; at home, he washes daily from head to foot, including his hair."

(N. Bauer-Lechner: *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, Faber & Faber, London, 1980 p81-82).

"The sacrifice of his personal life to his music was an essential part of Mahler's ethic. Inevitably, he despised the conventions of a society to which he considered he did not really belong, and at times neglected the conventions of friendship, passing his closest friends in the street without noticing them, or, on one occasion, in the midst of a conversation with a musician, leaping from the street into a tram without even finishing his sentence." (de La Grange 1999 p457).

"Even as an adolescent, then, he already displayed one of the hallmarks of genius: the ability to achieve a great deal in a short space of time." (de La Grange 2020 p8). "I mean to say, he had a certain fidgety way about him that could easily lead to misunderstandings. But first of all, that has become less noticeable on the whole."

(Joseph Seemüller in conversation with Hans Rott, tr. in: de La Grange 2020 p155).

"When he was not on holiday during the summer, Mahler would keep in shape by walking long distances every day: whether in Budapest, Hamburg or Vienna, he went virtually everywhere on foot, while outside build-up areas he would stride along at such a brisk pace that few of his companions could keep up with him; neither jogging nor walking, more like speed-walking." (Fischer 2011 p4).



Alma about Gustav in her diary: "I must say, I liked him immensely, though he's dreadfully restless. He stormed about the room like a savage. The fellow is made entirely of oxygen. When you come close to him, you get burnt." (*Gustav Mahler: Letters to his Wife*, London, Faber & Faber, 2004 p35).



And in her *Memories*: "Mahler was in the habit of scraping the labels off wine and beer bottles during a meal, and so Berliner told the waiter to have this done beforehand. Mahler took up one bottle after another and put it down again in surprise; and then, catching Berliner's eye, he saw that he was at the bottom of it and was thoroughly put out. He did not recover from his temper for the rest of the evening." (Alma Mahler 1990 p138).

When he was excited, he bit his fingernails excessively and – somewhat less visible – his cheek, sucking it between his teeth (sometimes with such vigour that the internal part of his cheek started bleeding). A sign or alarm indicating internal turmoil and the build-up of anger were his 'zic-zac-venes' (as Natalie called them), two prominent veins on his temples that became more prominent with angry excitement." (H.-G. Klemm: *Beethoven, Wagner, Mahler*, Darmstadt, 2012 p92).

"The suicide letter, far from expressing a death wish, contains the birth pains of a new composer,

becomes mature Mahler. Seldom in the history of art is the transition from pupa to chrysalis so graphically revealed. [...] Mahler never again considers killing himself, neither in bereavement nor in the most hurtful betrayal. From now on, he takes strengths from adversity. [...] Mahler's attitude to life is clinically sane. He addresses the most harrowing of personal tragedies, the death of a child, with heart-rending grief and creative resilience, extracting from his darkness a *Song of the Earth* that affirms the essence of human condition. He loves life, no matter how badly it treats him." (Lebrecht 2010 p17-18). "The main interest of this crisis, from the point of view of posterity, is that it gave rise to a period of feverish creativity on Mahler's part – marking a pattern what would be repeated throughout his life, culminating in the *Finale of the Tenth Symphony*." (de La Grange 2020 p144).

"Mahler may have experienced emotions and impulses that would have unbalanced other people, he may also have been prone to those typical bipolar 'mixed' emotional states, so tellingly expressed by William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'Excess sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps'; but there are no records of Mahler's ever being seriously incapacitated by his extremes of feeling. [...] even in this extreme crisis of the summer of 1910, Mahler was still able to keep on working on his *Tenth Symphony*, and to bring it to something like completion." (Johnson 2020 p237).

In summary, there is no doubt that Gustav Mahler was a musical prodigy who became a successful conductor and extremely creative composer of highly complex and emotional symphonies and orchestral songs.

Mahler was a daydreaming child, untidy at home and under-performing at school and conservatory. His life was haunted by the early deaths of several siblings, his parents and his daughter Maria, but he demonstrated resilience and sublimation throughout his life.

Mahler compensated for the loveless marriage of his parents with real and imagined love stories until he embarked on a co-dependent relationship with his wife Alma, who managed his household, organised his social life and edited the final versions of his compositions. I agree with other biographers such as Fischer, Johnson, de La Grange and Lebrecht that his emotional instability would not meet modern criteria for a diagnosis of bipolar affective disorder. Short periods of depression kindled his creative energy which I have observed in my most creative ADHD patients.

Mahler's adult life was characterised by frequent absentmindedness, distractibility, hyperactivity and impulsive behaviour, resulting in awkward social situations, conflicts with colleagues, defiance of authority and frequent changes of his job.

His restless creativity can be explained by the combination of giftedness and ADHD that has been described in other such highly creative artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso and Leonard Bernstein.

We all know the phenomenon of the musical 'ear worm' when we can't get rid of a melody from a radio advert or one of Mahler's beautiful melodies.

The difference between us and a composer like Mahler is that he had music in his mind that he had just created, previously unheard music must have been playing in his mind all the time, and he was able to write it down in a stream of consciousness.

It was precisely his ADHD that gave him the energy and hyper-focus to write down symphonic sagas, Alpine landscapes and a whole musical universe, musical mind-wandering turned into everlasting compositions. From the perspective of an adult ADHD psychiatrist, it looks to me that Mahler had good insight and learned to cope with (or not care about) his ADHD symptoms so that he could make the best out of the "positive aspects" of his suspected condition.

Is this the key to the good outcome of his life, apart from his far too early death?

Mahler was a light smoker and coffee drinker; but did he self-medicate his attention deficits with other stimulants?

Did he share Sigmund Freud's interest in cocaine and use his frequent journeys to the Netherlands to stock up on this stimulant medication that was produced and sold legally by the Nederlksche Cocainefabriek (NCL) in Amsterdam, the world leading producer of medicinal cocaine in the early 20th century?

Was it the coaching by the three significant women in his life, Justine, Natalie and Alma? Or did his musical education and the strict schedule of frequent performances give him the routine and structure that allowed him to thrive and create?



Freud&Mahler,  
Edward Sorel 1992

*I would be grateful for any feedback and comments that I will gladly consider when preparing a research version of this paper containing an in-depth discussion of my hypothesis and detailed references.*

ULRICH MÜLLER-SEDGWICK

## Mahler's Conductors 1: Bruno Walter

KEVIN CAREY *outlines the life of the most important interpreter and advocate for Mahler*

Bruno Walter (1876-1962), conductor, composer and pianist, was one of the greatest conductors of the 20th Century who was not only the first conductor after Mahler to conduct his works but was also his greatest interpreter and, in spite of the claims of Bernstein, the person who had most influence in respect of Mahler's reception.

Born Schlesinger in Berlin into a middle-class Jewish family, he began his musical education at the age of eight at the Stern Conservatory, making his first public appearance as a pianist a

year later, when performing a concerto movement with the Berlin Philharmonic (BPO) and then a full concerto at the age of ten. He studied composition with Robert Radecke at Stern and continued composing until c1910, leaving three symphonies and works in all major genres except opera. His musical life changed in 1889 when he heard Hans von Bulow conducting the BPO: "It decided my future. Now I knew what I was meant for. No musical activity but that of an orchestral conductor could be considered by me any longer." He made his conducting debut in 1894 with the Cologne Opera but within a year he left to be the Hamburg Opera Chorus

Director where he first met Mahler.

In 1896 he was Chorus Director at Breslau on the recommendation of Mahler when, through the intermediation of Mahler, he changed his name from "Silesian" to Walter. He said he found the ordeal "terrible" but Mahler and his sisters insisted. A year later he became Chief Conductor at Pressburg (now Bratislava) but, again, his tenure only lasted a year; he found the town "dull and provincial" and so moved to lead the Riga Opera.

He converted to (unspecified though probably Roman Catholic) Christianity; two years later he moved to what is now Timisoara in Romania but in 1900 he gained his first important post as

Royal Prussian Conductor at the Berlin Staatsoper unter den Linden, succeeding Franz Schalk, working with, among others, Richard Strauss. He premiered Pfitzner's *Der Arme Heinrich* and they became lifelong friends. In 1901 Walter accepted Mahler's offer to be his Assistant at Vienna's Court Opera, debuting in Verdi's *Aida* and in 1907 he conducted the Vienna Philharmonic's (VPO) Nicolai Concert. In 1910 he rehearsed the soloists for Mahler's 2nd after which his conducting took him all over Europe. When Mahler died on May 18th, 1911 Walter was at his bedside. He conducted the premier of *Das Lied* in Munich on November 20th, 1911, a work with which, above all others, he was associated; the second half of that concert was Mahler's 2nd. He then conducted the premiere of the 9th with the VPO on June 20th, 1912. Although Walter became an Austrian citizen in 1911, he moved to Munich in 1913 where his contribution to Wagner performance was notable.

To give some idea of his activity between the two World Wars: in 1923 Walter travelled to the USA working in New York, Detroit, Minnesota and Boston and, back in Europe, he worked in Leipzig, Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna, London and Milan. From 1929-33 he was Principal Conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus but his appointment terminated with the rise of Hitler who, in speeches against the predominance of Jewish conductors, had mentioned



Walter more than once: "The alias Schlesinger". When the Nazis purged Jewish conductors in January 1933, Walter was in New York and he returned for rehearsals with the Gewandhaus but the concerts were stopped by the Chief of Police "In the name of the Saxon Ministry of the Interior". Next, he was scheduled to conduct in Berlin but that, too, was cancelled when violence in the hall was threatened; that concert was conducted by Richard Strauss which Walter deeply resented, although this did not stop him conducting Strauss after the War.

For the next five years Austria became his centre of operations, conducting the VPO and, in 1936, becoming Director of the State Opera in Mahler's line; he was Permanent Guest Conductor of the Concertgebouw from 1934-39 which enabled him to share his Mahlerian performing tradition with Mengelberg who had also learned directly from Mahler. When the Nazi Anschluss struck Austria in 1938, Walter - improbably, naively - was conducting in Amsterdam.



His elder daughter, Lotte, was arrested but he managed to free her and he found safe havens for his brother and sister in Scandinavia. His daughter Gretel was murdered by her husband who then killed himself out of jealousy for the bass Enzo Pinza at which Walter's wife Elsa Korneck, a shadowy figure whom he had married c1900, fell into an unrecoverable depression, dying c1945.

In November 1938 he left for the United States via Paris and worked there with many orchestras, being offered the Directorship of the New York Philharmonic (NYPO) in 1942 which he only accepted in 1947.

After the Second World War he was a world figure, contributing particularly to the Edinburgh and Salzburg Festivals. He died in Los Angeles of a heart attack in 1962, survived by his daughter Lotte.

*To be continued in the  
next issue*

## Die Liebe weckt die Lieder! Love awakens the songs!

We are delighted to announce that on Friday 29<sup>th</sup> January Charlotte Hoather and George Todica will present an online song recital comprising works by Gustav Mahler, Alma Mahler and Franz Schubert. The duo requested this particular date as they will perform Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder* song cycle which received its world premiere performance conducted by Mahler himself on that same date 116 years ago, (29<sup>th</sup> January 1905), at a concert in Brahms-Saal of Vienna Musikverein. These songs depict intimate moments and private reflections on love, leading the duo to select additional lieder which explore how the imagination of poets and composers alike were stimulated by the desires of love in all of its shades.

Charlotte and George have been collaborating as a duo since 2013, when they were selected to participate in the Kathleen Ferrier Bursary Competition and won the Audience Prize. Since then they have performed together across the UK and on international stages in Belgium, Italy, Norway and Romania. As an 'art-song' duo they have released three albums *Canzoni D'Amore* (2015), *Down the Rabbit Hole* (2017) and *Haugtussa* (2017). In 2018, Charlotte completed a dissertation at the Royal College of Music focusing on Women in Music. In addition, she presented a lecture recital featuring compositions by Alma Mahler in a reflection on the changes for female composers through the ages. During the Spring Lockdown this year, Charlotte and George presented 16 weekly balcony concerts for their neighbours and online friends to try to lift spirits and bring their local community together. The concerts were received with tremendous support and love. As a result they served as inspiration for their upcoming album "*Songs from our Balcony*", which was exclusively recorded at their home during the lockdown period. All of these albums are available for purchase in a digital format at <http://www.charlotte-hoather.com/music>.

Charlotte and George are looking forward to performing for the Society  
and to launching the Society's musical events for 2021.



**FRIDAY, 29 JANUARY 2021**

**ONLINE SONG RECITAL**

**GUSTAV MAHLER**  
**Ruckert Lieder, on the 116th**  
**anniversary of its first performance**  
**on**  
**29 January 1905.**

**Plus works by**

**ALMA MAHLER**  
**FRANZ SCHUBERT**

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### Obituary: Terry Barfoot

I first met Terry when I joined one of his residential courses in Winchester in 2016. Although I only knew him for the last few years of his life, I nevertheless feel very fortunate to have been able to get to know him through several shared experiences. The two-day Winchester event featured Mahler's 6th followed by his 3rd - in that order to ensure that nobody missed their train for distraction - Terry's wry sense of humour at work. A Beethoven weekend in similar format once again advanced my musical knowledge as I knew by then that Terry presented at a level I could appreciate and absorb; I had quickly joined his loyal and appreciative clientele. One of many off-the-ball conversations was this time about how one could possibly conduct when totally deaf. I was particularly pleased when Terry accepted the Society's invitation to address "Mahler and Russia" two years ago. The catalyst was an unfortunate previous attempt where technical problems prevented Terry having any sound reproduction. I just had a sense from Terry that he felt there was some unfinished business that he would like to rectify and this is exactly what he did. With lots of supplementary material we enjoyed a full study day. Terry was certainly a friend of the Society and I do feel that I have also lost a friend who will be missed by us all. **Robert Ross**



Terry Barfoot, a good friend of the Society, presented several popular study days on aspects of Mahler and his compositions to members and friends at the Austrian Cultural Forum and, more recently, the Lancaster Hall Hotel. He died on 12 August 2020 after many months of suffering. Terry had a wide-ranging and passionate

interest in classical music which he communicated in his lectures, pre-performance talks and programme notes for concerts. My first meeting with Terry was in the 1990s at a study day he arranged for combined choirs preparing Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* for a concert in Winchester Cathedral. Terry analysed the Mass and its background in his enviable easy-going style to a large and enthusiastic audience. At that time, he was teaching in the music department of Southsea College in Hampshire, a profession he had to abandon owing to the success of his entrepreneurial project, Arts in Residence. This was designed to offer relaxing long weekends in attractive country houses or stylish hotels, studying the life and works of the many composers of whom he displayed prodigious knowledge. These "music holidays" rapidly gained a large and loyal following. Many of them were devoted to Mahler; I enjoyed particularly a stimulating weekend on The *Wunderhorn* Symphonies. As demand for such events grew, Terry devised mid-week and longer courses, visiting chateaux in France and venturing to Austria, Germany and Finland where the great composers had lived and worked. I attended one of his last events in Bournemouth: Terry had booked the whole hotel and the course attracted over 80 people. Terry's popularity was based on his meticulous programming and on his attention to detail, ensuring that his guests enjoyed every comfort; and they kept coming back. Terry's comprehensive knowledge of his subjects, his fluency and his organisational talents, will be sadly missed by his many friends and loving family. **Catherine Dobson**

Terry also received a very fine summary Obituary in *The Guardian's* Other Lives column. **Editor**