Alma Mahler: Keeper of the Flame?

KEVIN CAREY reports that Michael White finds himself, in spite of his instincts, rather more positive than negative about Alma Mahler’s advocacy of her husband in the half century after his death.

Addressing the GMSUK annual Mahler birthday celebration on July 7th, Michael White began by noting that Alma Mahler has always been a controversial figure, first because of Mahler's injunction that, as his spouse, she should cease composing and, secondly, because opinions differ on the extent to which she served herself rather than her late husband. It was helpful, said White, illustrating his point with reference to Ursula Vaughan Williams and Susana Walton, if a musical widow was much younger than her husband.

When Mahler married Alma she was 22 and he 41 and she survived him by half a century. It is easy to dismiss her efforts but she had two more marriages to considerable figures, Walter Gropius the architect and Franz Werfel the writer not to mention many lovers, erotic and intellectual. Since Alma 'collected' widowhoods of husbands and lovers one would think she would know how to conduct herself but she had no time for rites of passage and did not attend Mahler's funeral. She was hardly persistent in securing performances of Mahler's work but he was blessed with protégés like Walter and Mengelberg; but for most of that half century between his death and Bernstein he was largely a cult figure. Every time it looked as if Mahler was going to break through into the mainstream, something went wrong: early performances
after his death were received badly, often as the result of anti-Semitic bias; the inter-war climate was not friendly to "tormented" music; and then came the Nazis! It was only with Bernstein that Mahler went from cult to mainstream status.

What, asked White, was Alma doing in this half century? Her activity was fragmentary as she was much more interested in her own Mahler legacy: she suppressed over 250 of his 350 letters to her and she falsified many of those she released; and she destroyed almost all of his letters to her; she made dubious interventions in performance practice, notably over the middle movements of the 6th and her explanation of its 'hammer blows'. There is no evidence that her efforts to encourage performances worked, even though she was well connected, even to Schuschnigg and Mussolini.

White concluded with three important observations. First, one could argue in her defence that expectations of her were very low from the outset. Mahler was a poor promoter of his own music, relying on posterity to justify him: "my time will come", so it would have been thankless to do more. In any case, his work had been disposed of in such a way that only his last three completed scores had any economic value. Secondly, Alma was distracted by the other things in her life. She was conscious of being Mahler's widow and surrounded herself with his legacy but more to gratify her cravings than to serve his needs. Thirdly, Alma's salvation as a widow is that the distraction that kept her busy also made her interesting; and because she was interesting there was still some kind of Mahlerian flame fifty years on when circumstances changed and people were desperate to be drawn into Mahler's story. A prime example of this is her relationship with Britten and Pears where she arranged a 1942 premier of Britten's Michelangelo Sonnets; conversely, Britten and Pears enthusiastically included Mahler's work in the post-war Aldeburgh Festivals, notably a 1948 Das Lied with Walter.

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Das Lied

Earlier this year there came to light a recording of Das Lied by Kathleen Ferrier from 1948 with the NYPO under Bruno Walter (with Svanholm as tenor) resulting from two New York performances (various labels including Somm and Pristine). Its beauty exceeds that of the iconic 1952 VPO/Walter performance with Pazac. Technically, being live, there are some minor flaws in the singing and Ferrier had a cold at the time which alters her timbre slightly but this electric performance beats the necessarily dry delivery of a studio recording Ferrier died of cancer shortly afterwards but our current greatest soprano Sarah Connolly has recently escaped this fate and now we have her recording of Das Lied with the Berlin RSO under Jurowski (Pentatone) with Robert Dean Smith as tenor which, in my view, is the best since Ferrier. Like the closing bars of Berg's Violin Concerto the last words of Ewig require crystalline precision and clarity which both singers deliver. The secret, I think, is that singers with exclusively 19th Century repertoire lack the discipline, lent by a familiarity with the baroque which Ferrier and Connolly share. The whole point about these quasi, conflicted Chinese lyrics is that they call for delicacy rather than high emotion. Given performance history over the last 70 years, the playing and Dean Smith's singing are better than the 1948 recording. The only issue is whether Connolly is better than Ferrier. - KC
LESLIE BERGMAN finds the effort of reading Johnson more taxing than rewarding.

Stephen Johnson is well known as a broadcaster, writer and lecturer on music. He has written about a variety of composers, including Mahler, with an acknowledged speciality in Shostakovich, and has, on one occasion, been the guest speaker at the GMSUK Mahler Birthday Dinner.

I ordered this book pretty much as soon as it was published, hoping to read it before the performance of the Eighth by the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester, with whom I am associated, at the Mahler Festival in Amsterdam in May. The book arrived the day after the Festival was cancelled. This "hammerblow" (apologies to GM) consigned the book to the "awaiting reading" section on my bookshelf, only to be liberated by a request to do a review for The Wayfarer.

What is the typical reader of The Wayfarer to expect of a book of over 300 pages on a single Mahler symphony: a daunting academic treatise examined from every possible angle by a musicologist? The subtitle, however, offers a respite. Maybe this is a book I can get through and enjoy, learning some new things about our hero and his Symphony of a Thousand, the world around him when he wrote it and its reception by the public.

What on earth induced Mahler to write something with such demanding orchestration and accompanying logistics and the seemingly unrelated first and second halves?

This book puzzles me. Two-thirds of the way through, the author concludes "The Eighth Story" and moves on to an examination of the 9th, Das Lied von der Erde and the unfinished 10th. The last of these alone occupies 50 pages! So I must admit I skimmed through the last part of the book. Getting to grips with the 8th was daunting enough. Quite possibly I will return to the chapter on the 10th when the GMJO plays this at the Leipzig Festival next year.

The circumstances surrounding the composing of the 8th are intriguing in so far as there is not that much to tell in comparison with the belaboured births of some of Mahler's other symphonies. This symphony was written at lightning speed in a matter of eight weeks! Johnson spins an interesting tale on the weeks leading up to the premiere in Munich in September 1910. In particular he paints a good picture of the frenzied excitement that gripped Munich. Mahler's agent had promoted this premiere (actually repeated on successive nights) with what retrospectively can be seen as probably the first major commercial promotion of a concert.
Billboards were plastered throughout Munich and Mahler postcards and busts (the famous Rodin sculpture) were on sale everywhere. Mahler was elevated beyond his fame as a conductor (more) and composer (less) to that of a cult figure. The local newspaper headlined the event daily and provided accompanying gossip. Rehearsals were sold out. Mahler was cheered as he returned from rehearsals to his hotel. Mahler, who knew something about America, was embarrassed by what he referred to as “a Barnum and Bailey Circus”.

The audience gasped at the huge staging. There seemed to be (and in many cases were) double the usual number of each instrument, plus piano, organ, harmonium, an exotic assemblage of percussion, multiple choruses and eight soloists. This was an epic event. The second part of the symphony was to be “staged”. Nothing like it had appeared in the classical music repertoire before. Johnson gives a sparkling account of this scenario and of the premiere conducted by Mahler (preliminary rehearsals having been conducted by none other than Bruno Walter!)

The concert was attended by nobility, and by almost every cultural icon of the day in the world of music and literature. Klepper attended rehearsals, the young Korngold sat there with his father, Webern and Berg were there, not to mention Zweig and others from the world of literature. The conclusion was greeted not just by rapturous applause but by wave upon wave of cheering humanity - close to 3,500 attended the concert in the sold out Neue Musik-Festhalle.

The author then goes into the work itself. But before that he offers two distractions.

First, a sort of behind the scenes glimpse of what Alma was up to during the weeks preceding and during the rehearsals when she was physically with Gustav but in a virtual world of a tempestuous love affair with Walter Gropius. Letters mailed to Gropius are so explicit that in the electronic format of today they could be considered “cybersex”. A week or so later she was Mahler's wife, basking in the glow of the celebrated composer's triumph. The ultimate femme fatale of her era and/or an unscrupulous, opportunistic and thoroughly immoral woman?

Secondly, we have a lengthy chapter on the historical development of the symphony as a musical format, as a lead-in to why Mahler chose to compose the subject matter of the 8th in symphonic format. It was tough reading, just what I expected in this book. Johnson then gives a detailed exposé of the 8th itself. This is the heart of the book. It is not easy reading. Much of it would not be understood by your average concert-goer. He does, however, explain in reasonably understandable language why the large assemblage is not some sort of Mahler vanity trip but, rather, the work of a skilled composer tackling a huge theme. There then follows an examination of Part 1, Veni, Creator Spiritus, and the adaptation to music of this ancient Latin hymn. So far so good. Part 2, the final scene from Faust by Goethe, is much more of a challenge because of the unfamiliarity in the English speaking world of the works of Goethe (who is the Shakespeare plus of German Literature) as well as the dominant persona of Faust, with no equivalent exemplar in English literature.

Mahler could recite by memory large tracts of Goethe's magnum opus, as could most cultured German-speakers of his day. The seemingly discordant themes of Parts 1 and 2 of the 8th are well drawn together by Johnson in an explanation of why they are symbiotic.

Johnson gives some glimpses of subsequent performances of the 8th, such as a hugely successful one conducted by Webern many years later. A full chapter on the subsequent history of the 8th would have been more interesting and more relevant than the chapter Johnson devotes to Mahler's identity, headlined by the (too) often quoted “Thrice homeless” expression. Johnson attempts to relate the question of Mahler's identity specifically to the 8th. I found this somewhat contrived.

And what of the book's subtitle, Mahler and the World in 1910? I suggest “Mahler and his World in 1910” might have been more apt. The world did not consist only of German-speaking Europe, about which this book is concerned. True, there is a glimpse of France (obsessed with Franco-German rivalry even in the sphere of composition). Johnson cites the incident where Debussy, Dukas and one other walked out of a performance Mahler was conducting in Paris of his 2nd Symphony. When asked why they did this, they allegedly said the music was "too Schubertian" (sic). There is nothing of Britain in the book, a mere glimpse of Mahler's visits to Holland, a short account of his meeting with Sibelius in Finland, a few
sentences about America. Then there is a deservedly lengthy section on the "loved and hated" Vienna. I disagree with Johnson's "small city" analysis. In 1910 Vienna was either the third or fourth largest city in Europe with a population parity with Berlin behind Paris and London. Many historians of the era would, I believe, regard Vienna as the then most cosmopolitan cultural and creative centre of Europe. There are some other factual errors. Mahler would not have had a Bar mitzvah at age 12, but at 13. He would not have heard klezmer music in the synagogue in Iglau; klezmer is folk music not religious music.

In summary, I found this book did not flow easily, with too many distractions from the core subject. Nonetheless I came out of it knowing more about the 8th than I did before. But the effort/reward ratio, so much to read, so little time, did not work for me.

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Darren Niman

The Role of Facebook and Online Video Meetings in the Gustav Mahler Society and other Music Societies

DARREN NIMAN overcomes scepticism to see digital media as part of an overall communications strategy for the Society

For a number of years, among millions of others all over the world in my generation, born in the 1960's, I have been wary, if not downright sceptical, of the role of social media in general and Facebook in particular. At the outset, I have felt that these have replaced traditional methods of communication such as writing a letter or picking up the telephone where one gets a sense of the personality at the other end, a sense of warmth, even coldness in the voice and mood, the inflections in voices and the gist of thought processes.

Emails, texts, posts and tweets can seem all too cold and harsh and, to a certain extent, we would be forgiven for thinking that this is the case. I for one was very reluctant to embrace social media because it had the initial effect of being contrary to the desired effect of "social" media; it was making us become anti-social, driving people apart and causing more loneliness, causing a worsening of mental health and well-being. Instead of people making the effort to talk to one another, people were just talking at one another, just posting up pictures (dare I use that dreaded term selfie?) to show off to the world how happy they were, with end to end smiles with perfect white teeth either on their own or with their partner, on this holiday or that holiday, while not recognising the detrimental effect this would have on their friends or family who may not be as fortunate in career or relationships. But, all things considered, I decided to give it a try and, apart from a lot of rubbish which people post, thought it could be a useful vehicle to promote the Society to the wider world; after all, we all have to move with the times. If other composer societies, orchestras, schools, colleges and universities are using it, why not us?

At this point some years ago I had joined the Committee of the Society in the North and Midlands, and would like to pay tribute and give credit to my friend Penny Young who had started a Facebook page for the group. A time came when I took over the reins of this fledgling concept and developed it, also creating a Facebook Page for the National Society. The idea behind it was that they would both be used to promote the life and work of Mahler from an academic and literary point of view. Human beings have this in-built necessity to talk to each other, to make contact and to establish friendships, regardless of background. Like the walking club I belong to in Manchester, we have people of different backgrounds who have something in common which brings them together. In the events organised by the Society, therefore, I feel strongly - and I suspect most of you will feel the same - that the overall ethos of any organisation is not only presenting events of academic and musical interest but also developing inter-personal relationships which hold us all together.
While not having as many branches as the Elgar Society, the principle that the people are the life-blood of any organisation must be paramount and, therefore, what people need is not only to be informed but entertained. New ideas must be explored and long-held opinions challenged from time to time. We live in a serious world with many challenges and we desperately need fun which is why I have made my contributions interesting but light-hearted as well. We ask Why this? Why that? What if Mahler had done something slightly different here or there? This is a good strategy for being thought-provoking and creating a debate to keep us on our toes and make us think outside the box.

While some of us create posts for the page, we also welcome contributions from visitors and, subject to approval, those posts appear in due course. You can: tell us about forthcoming concerts, new CD/DVD recordings on the market; events coming soon; articles in the press you have seen, or you can ask questions about Mahler, his world and his contemporaries. Or any question at all: it is your forum so have your say. Posts can include photographs and videos. We particularly enjoyed the recent recital in London with Iain Farrington and Professor Michael Trimble on 27th February 2020, and that certainly received a big write-up.

In recent weeks, engagements with the Facebook pages have increased dramatically in the light of connecting with similar Societies all over the world such as New York, Colombo, Vienna, Hamburg etc. and the Mahler Foundation in their Zoom Meeting called "Mahler Hour", comprising some very interesting people including Marina Fistoulari Mahler, the composer's granddaughter who, I may say, is a Facebook Friend; you don't get many people like that. A wonderful lady.

While using our new digital media platform, please do not forget our traditional forms of communication. Once in a while, let's pick up the phone, let's hear a human voice at the end of the line. Let's write a note, send a postcard, drop someone a line. It would so much brighten up the day. The concept of seeing each other on Zoom while maintaining the lockdown social distancing is a novel concept which, I feel, will become established as the second best thing to being there with our friends and colleagues.

So let us explore this concept but for now, thank you very much for listening and we look forward to seeing you on the pages soon. With best wishes from your Editorial Team and above all, until we meet again, Stay Safe!

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or for those of you in the North and Midlands:
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World Premier Recordings

The following is a list of world premier recordings of Mahler Symphonies to complement the facing page:

3: BBC Symphony Orchestra/Boult 1947
6: Vienna Symphony Orchestra/Adler 1952
7: Vienna Symphony Orchestra/Scherchen 1950
10: (constructed Cooke): London Symphony Orchestra/Goldschmidt 1964

Given the length and the forces required, it is not difficult, in spite of Fried, to see why the 3rd had to wait so long for an unlikely premier under Boult.

It is difficult to see, however, why the 6th had to wait so long as there are no obvious difficulties other than the order of the inner movements.

For reasons I have never understood, the 7th is supposed to be difficult to interpret.

And, of course, the 10th had to wait for its completion by Deryck Cooke and friends. It has had further outings with different constructors but the consensus has stayed with Cooke. Some conductors have confined themselves to the "Adagio" only in their Symphony cycles.
Not surprisingly, because so many early Mahler recordings are now out of copyright, they appear singly or packaged on many different labels, frequently popping in and out of company catalogues. This means that some of the items I mention may be temporarily hard to get but all the material I mention is available one way or another on CD. Needless to say, the download range is even wider.

As a starting point, here are the eight recordings, listed chronologically, in the Fulop Mahler Discography, up until 1940:

- Symphony 2: Berlin State Opera Orchestra/Fried 1924
- Symphony 4: Tokyo New Symphony Orchestra/Konoye 1930
- Symphony 2: Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra/Ormandy 1935
- Das Lied von Der Erde: Vienna Philharmonic (VPO)/ Walter 1936
- Symphony 1 (Titan): NBC Symphony Orchestra/Walter 1939
- Das Lied von Der Erde: Concertgebouw/Schuricht 1939
- Symphony 4: Concertgebouw/Mengelberg 1939
- Symphony 1: Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra/Mitropoulos 1940

For a start, three discographical comments. First, Fulop is somewhat sniffy about the 1925 Concertgebouw/Mengelberg premier recording of the *Adagietto* from the 5th which he mentions but does not list; nor, for that matter, does he list the same piece recorded by the VPO with Walter in 1938, prior to his premier recording of the whole work with the New York Philharmonic in 1947. Secondly, as its discovery came after Fulop was published, there is a delicious fragment of Schoenberg conducting the Second Movement from Mahler's 2nd in New York with the Cadillac Symphony Orchestra in 1934, not so much a musical landmark as a treasured curiosity which appears on the same disc as a recently unearthed Van Kempen 4th with the Hilversum Radio Philharmonic Orchestra in 1950 (initially sleeved inside the Fulop but now available on Pristine Audio PASC 466). Thirdly, seven of the eight works listed by Fulop, as I commented at the outset, have had wide distribution but I have no idea whatsoever why the Schuricht has gone underground (Grammofoono 2000, AB78578).

Now some history. Had you planned a recording history for Mahler you would not have anticipated that the premier symphony recording, and two out of eight, would be the 2nd. For a first shot the Fried is very good but the Ormandy is naturally better because of recording quality. Neither would you have predicted that the premier of the 4th would have taken place under an idiosyncratic Japanese aristocrat. The performance, again, isn't bad but there are a couple of very nasty edits and a few bars missing. Walter's *Das Lied*, as we will learn in due course, was the first of scores of Walter recordings of it but he might be even better remembered for the premier recording of the 9th, partly for the superb recording by Fred Gaisberg on two wax machines made just before his retirement and partly for the circumstances in which it was recorded. This was the last time the VPO were together, including Mahler's pupil, Walter, his brother-in-law, Arnold Rosé, who had led the orchestra for 50 years going back to the time of Brahms, and many other of Mahler's friends. After the recording the orchestra broke up: some, including Walter, to America (traced in early recordings by his appearance in New York for the Titan), some to Hitler's concentration camps. For these reasons this would be the one I would keep if my other seven Desert Island Discs were washed away! The Mengelberg 4th, although not a bad performance (better than the Konoye!) is particularly distinguished because it was recorded in Amsterdam in November 1939 after Hitler's invasion of much of Europe and nobody imagined that the neutrality of the Netherlands would be respected.
The best place to start is with the *Issued 78s (1903-40)* box-set (Urlicht UAV 5980) which contains all the works listed in Fulop except for the Schuricht and the Walter 1st, plus the two 5th *Adagiettos*; but it also contains all the other fragments from 78s, including: Mahler's completion of Weber's *Three Pintos* (1903); the first Mahler song (1915 or 1916); Horenstein's first Mahler recording (1928); a Mahler Bach arrangement; Meyrowitz fragments (1930); Sargent conducting *Ruckertlieder* 1938; and bits of *Knaben Wunderhorn* from all kinds of sources. The discs are strictly chronological and as the major pieces have been re-engineered by the estimable Mark Obert-Thorn, you are in safe hands.

If you are inclined to be more interested in slightly more solid and better recorded fare and not so worried about the history, then you might prefer the rather vaguely entitled *Gustav Mahler* (Documents 223511 PC 321) which, again, contains the Mitropoulos 1st, Fried 2nd, Mengelberg 4th, Walter 9th and *Das Lied* plus many of the titbits from the *Issued 78s*; but it also passes the Second World War with Walter’s premier 5th from 1947, Stokowski’s premier 9th from 1950 with the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, Walter’s legendary 1952 *Das Lied* with Ferrier and Pazak (see page 2) and the premier recording of Krenek’s 1952 construction of the *Adagio* from the 10th with Scherchen and the Vienna Symphony Orchestra of the same year.

Fred Gaisberg’s picture of Bruno Walter, taken minutes before his recording of the 9th on January 16th 1938