Mahler and Russia

In his address to the Society's Spring Meeting DAVID NICE finds a close connection in the symphonic literature between Mahler, Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Schnittke: "It is interesting to note not only what Mahler did for Russia but what Russia did for Mahler'.

In 1877 Mahler sent his Piano Quartet to a piano competition in St Petersburg but the score was lost; an inauspicious beginning, said David Nice, not much improved by his first encounter with Tchaikovsky in 1888 in Leipzig when the Russian was not very impressed with Mahler the conductor, a situation which was totally reversed in 1891 in Hamburg when Tchaikovsky was so impressed with Mahler's conducting that he handed over his baton for the German premier of Eugene Onegin, characterising Mahler as "not the usual mediocrity". Ironically, Mahler, at least at the time, disliked the opera, describing it as mediocre rubbish and much preferred the Queen of Spades. In spite of conducting it six times in New York Mahler did not much care either for the Pathetique which he characterised as "Humbug, sand in the eyes, ... when you take a closer look very little remains ... meaningless sequences of chords". Nonetheless, David then proceeded to compare aspects of Mahler's 1st with Tchaikovsky's 6th bearing in mind that the former was first performed before the latter; but as with many instances, comparisons reveal coincidences but also possible subconscious influence. In this pairing there is at least a temperamental connection. The Pathetique also concludes with the first slow movement in the Romantic era which surely influenced Mahler's 3rd, 9th and 10th.

Mahler premiered the Queen of Spades in Vienna in 1902, describing it as the composer's "most mature and artistically solid ... of (his) works." David then went on to compare the opera with aspects of Mahler's 4th, again a matter of temperament rather than influence.

Mahler first visited Russian in 1892 for three concerts of German music which were well received, although he was adversely compared with contemporaries such as Nikisch; on a second visit in 1907 he conducted his own music including the Russian Premier of the 5th a year after Fried had brought the 2nd (of which he made the first recording in 1924).

David drew our attention to the similarity of the beginning of the 3rd Movement of the 2nd and the last of Prokofiev's 10 Pieces, Op 12 but that, too, turned out not to be an ideal relationship as the Russian thought...
that the 7th was "like kissing a still-born child".

Until 1936 and the beginning of the purges, there was a close relationship between Russian and Germanic music, exemplified by Lenin's meeting with Fried in 1922. The list of conductors in Russia conducting Mahler in Leningrad and Moscow included Unger, Steinberg, Coates, Walter, Klemperer, Zemlinsky, Rosenstock, Tallich, Horenstein and, notably, Mravinsky, although Walter withdrew from a performance of the 4th when he was asked to alter the libretto of the Final Movement which he refused to do, explaining that, in any case, it was not specifically religious but symbolic.

Finally, Mahler 4, reports Walter, could not be performed because of the words about heaven, angels, Saint Peter, Saints, even though he explained the words were symbolic. The lynchpin of this international connection was the thriving Bruckner/Mahler Society founded and led by Ivan Sollertinsky who spoke 20 languages, knew all the two composers' Symphonies by heart and who wrote the first book on Mahler in Russian in 1932, remarking on his Chaplinesque humour and his grotesque portrayal of the capitalist inferno.

Sollertinsky was a great friend of Shostakovich, who was turning away from large choral celebratory works with his early Symphonies, where the 4th, his "first great masterpiece", bears notable comparison with Mahler in its "anti Mahler Mahler" colouring, notably in David's comparison of its Final Movement both with Mahler's Zwei Blauen Aguen and the the Purgatorio Movement from the 10th, a comparison impossible to make until the Symphony's official premier under Khruhchev in the early 1960s as it had been withdrawn in 1936 before its scheduled performance following the severe Pravda attack on Lady Macbeth of Miejsk. During the Sollertinsky period, Mahler's unfinished 10th was clearly under discussion, such that in 1942 it was suggested that Shostakovich should complete it, but he declined on the grounds that he did not have the capability although he did arrange the 2nd scherzo Movement for two pianos.

Mahler largely disappeared with the advent of Soviet Social Realism until the Centenary of his birth in 1960 but Shostakovich never forgot him, ranking Das Lied as one of the three greatest works of the 20th Century, along with Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms and the Britten War Requiem. To illustrate, David compared with opening of Das Lied with the 3rd Movement of Shostakovich's 10th. I only wish David had had the time to discuss Mahler's ghost, along with many others, in Shostakovich's valedictory 15th.

The only Russian successor in this tradition, David said, could be Alfred Schnittke, who had identified Mahler as being capable of bringing the deepest layers of his compositional structure to the surface. There are many Mahlerian elements in Schnittke but one of the most interesting is the comparison between the 2nd Movement of Schnittke's 5th with 24 bars of the Mahler Piano Quartet, which is where we began.

**********

In Mahler's mind, if the emotionalism and musical innovations of Tristan made it the greatest music drama of them all, Beethoven's Fidelio held a unique place above all other operas. The Fidelio of 1904 was typical of his determination to do away with tired productions. According to Roller, he had remarked that "what you theatre people call your tradition but convenience and slovenliness". Today, many of the Roller-Mahler ideas would seem to be just common sense. For example, in the scene in the First Act when the prisoners are let out of their cells, they emerge into the sunlight singing "O welche Lust, in freier Leben! Luft den Atem Leicht zu" (Oh what delight to breathe the fresh air ...).

By tradition they had marched onto the stage from left and right forming into a smart semi-circle before singing their chorus but Roller and Mahler thought this ludicrous and so in the new production the dishevelled prisoners staggering, groping their way up from the dungeons, singly or in twos and threes, bewildered and dazzled by the light. In short, the chorus had to act their parts and not form into a neat semi-circle but look dejected, yet temporarily elated. To us this might seem like Common sense but there was uproar. This was the chorus' big number, their turn to shine and dominate the proceedings, not crawl around like suffering worms from the depths.

Costumes, lighting, sets, all had the Roller touch. Mahler switched the Leonore No. 3 overture from the beginning of the opera to a new position before the final scene to give Roller the time to change the sets and to do away
with the otherwise pregnant pause accompanied by chatter and coughs.

The audience loved it, as did most of the press. With Tristan and now Fidelio, the Roller-Mahler partnership and their Secessionist approach had not only brought fresh air to the Hofoper in Vienna but would revolutionise opera production worldwide.

Meanwhile, Mahler had been receiving an increasing number of requests to conduct his Symphonies abroad and his regular absence from the Hofoper inevitably fuelled criticism. He still kept a keen eye on the opera productions which he left in the capable hands of his Assistant Conductors such as Walter but this was playing into his critics' hands who increased their attacks on him not just as Director of the Hofoper but also as a Jew. A young Adolf Hitler was beginning to stir up trouble.

1906, the Mozart Year, saw new productions of three of his operas: Die Entführung aus dem Serail in January, Le Nozze di Figaro at the end of March and Die Zauberflöte at the beginning of June. Pressure continued to mount on Mahler for him to resign. 1907 came, the year of the (supposed - Editor) Three Hammer Blows of Fate’. First, though, came two new productions: Die Walküre and Gluck's lyric tragedy Iphigénie en Aulide in a version revised by Wagner in 1847 and sung in German. The former was another success, the latter sensational. Mahler told his friend Berta Zuckerkandl that he had put his all into this production which might well turn out to be his farewell. Even his critics were left with little alternative but to launch into superlatives.

Then, on the 12th of July, his four-year-old daughter Maria (‘Putzi’) died from diphtheria, having caught scarlet fever from her sister Anna (‘Gucki’).

Shortly after this tragedy Mahler was diagnosed with a heart condition and he knew it was time to leave the wasps' nest of the Hofoper.

From what I have written, it might seem as though the Hofoper under Mahler had a very narrow programme. Not so. I have concentrated on his favourites. Of course there was a broad variety of works including several first performances such as operas by Anton Rubinstein, Siegfried Wagner, Zemlinsky and Richard Strauss. As regards the last, Mahler was determined to stage Salomé which he considered to be a masterpiece. However, despite his efforts, he was unable to overcome objections from the censors.

His farewell to the Hofoper was a performance of Fidelio in the Musikvereinsaal. Some undoubtedly attended to cheer him on his way but many were overwhelmed by the occasion. He was about to leave for New York's Metropolitan Opera at a vastly increased salary.

One could almost say that Mahler was beginning to run out of steam but this was not entirely true. He was in the New World and wanted, as far as possible, to leave the endless squabbles and angst of Vienna behind him.

His main aim was to earn as much as possible to provide for Alma and Anna and for himself in his retirement so that he could concentrate on composing. He did try, however, to persuade the multi-millionaire board to sign Roller but to no avail.

Don Giovanni came next, followed by Die Walküre and Siegfried, and still the plaudits flowed. In a letter to Carl Moll he warned to the gratitude he was receiving in New York but regretted the apparent inability of many to discern the difference between good and bad taste which he put down to an excess of enthusiasm. The last and greatest success of his first season at the Met was Fidelio where, and for the first time, he had been able to influence every aspect of the production. Inevitably questions were asked and some eyebrows raised but praise was generally lavish. The New York Times used words such as "remarkable ... thrilling ... subtle" and said that Mahler was "a great conductor". The same paper declared that he was responsible for bringing a new spirit and beauty to performances at the Met.

His first season in America drew to a close on a very positive note even though he continued to worry ceaselessly about his health.
The prospect of a Mahler-Roller partnership in New York remained a possibility, if only for an occasional production, but Roller's excessive financial demands proved to be a stumbling block. On hearing that Toscanini would be joining the Met for the forthcoming season and that he would be conducting a few performances of Tristan, Mahler made it abundantly clear that under no circumstances would he agree, saying that he had taken great pains with the production the previous season and that musically he regarded it as his spiritual property.

In a letter to Alfred Roller Mahler wrote that he had only good news to send. He mentioned the recently highly acclaimed Figaro and Bartered Bride, and that he was in good health, but that he would nevertheless be leaving the Met at the end of the season in order to concentrate on concerts with the New York Philharmonic.

So ended Mahler's operatic career.

From now on he would concentrate on the newly formed New York Philharmonic, composing and conducting his own works.

To sum up, there is no doubt that Mahler's favourite operas were those by Mozart, Wagner, Beethoven's Fidelio and Smetana's Bartered Bride, and that his final words were "Mozart! ... Mozart! ... Little Mozart! ... Little Mozart!"

---

When I had finished editing the above article, I asked John Searight whether he had any thoughts on the apparent contradiction that while Mahler loved opera so much he did not write any, other than his completion of Weber's Three Pintos, probably motivated by his attraction to his collaborator's wife (see page one). Here is John's reply:

On April 13th 1874 an event occurred that was the most shattering that young Mahler had yet experienced.

Ernst, his thirteen year old brother, just a year younger than he was, and to whom he was especially close, died after a long illness from a heart-complaint. This event, in a way, marked the end of Mahler's childhood, and his determination to succeed in music really took flight.

He began to compose an opera, probably based on the play Herzog Ernst von Schnaben by Johann Uhland, written in 1818. The libretto was by Josef Steiner, a friend of Gustav's. With its altered title, Herzog having been dropped, it was probably an in memoriam to his deceased brother.

Regrettably, when he returned to Steiner's home the following year to resume work on the opera, he discovered that his friend's aunt had had a clear out and, not realising the importance of the papers, had consigned them to a bonfire!
ADORNO: MAHLER REVISITED

GARY A. BALDWIN revisits Adorno's work on Mahler sixty years after its publication

The Adorno treatise of 1960 (German Edition) Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy (English edition; translated in 1992 by Edmund Jephcott) became the avatar for the understanding of Mahler's music. This treatise has challenged most scholars over the years. His opulent use of language, mixed metaphors and levels of understanding are difficult to follow. I have read the small 164-page book four times and only with the third reading was I able to begin to glean some understanding of Adorno's text. I persisted because almost every Mahler publication mentions Adorno's influence without clarifying what he says. Even at the Centenary Festival of Mahler's death in Leipzig in 1911 there was a general view from panellists and audiences alike that his meaning is unclear. Yet he is held high as a resource for the understanding of Mahler's music. This is the reason for this look, sixty years after its first publication and thirty years after its English translation.

Theodor W. Adorno (1903-69.) became a professor at Frankfurt in 1956. He was a German social philosopher, sociologist of music and composer. He studied composition with Berg but chose a career in philosophy rather than music and, as Grove puts it:
"As a musicologist, he harnessed Freudian and Marxist ideologies to the service of avant-garde music."

I have heard that Adorno's analysis does not look at the traditional materials that are usually used in a musical analysis - Melody, Rhythm, Harmony, Development, Formal design, Vertical/horizontal structures, Key identification, Long range patterns of memory and the recapitulation process - but this is not true. Adorno draws upon many of the traditional tools to discuss Mahler but perhaps it is his overall approach without strong chronology and demarcations, jumping from one topic to another, that comes into play, the opposite of, say, Constantin Floros. We are then left trying to keep up.

We are also given his criteria for his analysis with these parameters: the composer's life; political, social, and philosophical background; and moment in musical history. Adorno's treatise is divided into large generic sections, Always with densely layered language and in an anti-systematic framework. Often one has just about grasped his meaning on one point when he has already moved onto another.

The Section Headings, reflecting his philosophical perspective, are:
1. Curtain and Fanfare
2. Tone
3. Characters
4. Novel
5. Variant = Form
6. Dimensions of Technique
7. Decay and Affirmation
8. The Long Gaze.

Certain vocabulary needs to be defined, apart from the musical, and so it helps if you begin to think like a trained Germanic Philosopher with long Russian names, much like medical doctors & pharmacists who are saddled with medications named in Latin:
◊ Physiognomy facial features or expression indicative of character or ethnic origin.
◊ Durchbruch a breakthrough, musical climax; in Mahler, the goal of movement; after its traditional recapitulation cannot restore balance; the music tends to overreach itself.
◊ Weltschmerz world ache, pain, hurt created by the harmonic stresses of the battle between major and minor.
◊ Mannerism events unrelated to the composition's major themes apparently dominating the piece's coherent structure; audiences accustomed to classicism could not grasp the inverse relationship between expressiveness and structure.
◊ Pseudomorphouse an intentionally ill-defined image, a constant shadow created by unclear or obscure material.
◊ Erfullugen descending 2nd, the falling melancholy voice, the closing model for Mahler.
◊ Mahler Variant permanent and perpetual self-correction; works criticise their predecessors.
Henry Louis de La Grange would say of the 6th Symphony, for example, that there were many questions and no answers that could be completely accepted by all and this is the way it has always been. This remains the same with the Adorno treatise.

Before we decipher Adorno's understanding of Mahler the man and his music in the light of my experience and understanding, we must give credit where it is due. Seth Monahan in Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas (OUP 2015) gives the best analysis of the Adorno text as it relates to Mahler.

I will start at the end of Adorno identifying his conclusions and I will then travel from the beginning and highlight what he is trying to say.

Adorno's conclusions are that: throughout his career Mahler's compositional style evolves with a steady progression from Das klagende Lied to the 10th with each work building upon the preceding; the meaning of any work depends on the listener's ability to absorb what has come before; His entire compositional journey hinges on the stress between Major and minor although it remains diatonic; to achieve ever greater expression the compositions move ever further from classic forms; he provides a challenge through the disintegration of patterns and designs; and he moves towards a philosophy or metaphysics through music believing that he can provide the redeeming values of humanity through his music.

This last point, Adorno continues, is where many listeners part company with Mahler, “believing that he is asking too much whereas Mahler believes that his music is a conflagration or battle between light and dark, life and death that, in its most expressive form of incandescent light, it can return death to life, not unlike Christ's Resurrection.

In Mahler's late style, Adorno also concludes that Das Lied von der Erde, the 9th and 10th are characterised by “deliberate negativity” where the search for light is near impossible.

To begin with, citing the 7th Adorno emphasises the close relationship between music and language; and, as he experiments with expressiveness there is an ever less resort to symphonic structures with which his audiences would have been comfortable. The major and minor are equated with “inter-dependent love and grief,” a duality assimilated by contemporary psychology.

Whereas Mahler's contemporaries found the stress too great to understand or bear, 20th Century political catastrophies - nuclear war, terrorism, and genocide - produced a social and cultural swing enabling public acceptance of his music but even today some audiences struggle with the duality inherent in the music.

His time would come, Mahler said, when society would be ready to accept what he had to say. Perhaps the obvious needs to be said: great artworks are never appreciated in their own time. The true artistic phenomenon lives at a level of mental elevation far above the more normative public.
This is why we find great Artists suffering, caught between the highs and the lows. This follows Adorno's reflection that Mahler's music "attained not in spite of disjunction, but only through it." When we hear music and identify it as Mahler, how do we know? There is a musical image or shadow created by "intentional ill-defined" material.

If it is clear and evident it would not have that Mahlerian tone or shadow. Adorno calls this pseudomorphouse.

Mahler's idea of form and organisation, says Adorno, is one of multiplicity and is termed "Ordnung"; it involves "durchbruch, suspension, and erfüllung". The durchbruch is the most dramatic element in Mahler's music and in some fashion, it appears in all his symphonies; it is that unique juncture where something beyond the normal is required to resolve the tension and stress that has preceded it, the point where Mahler speaks in his most forceful, pleading, dramatic voice saying 'Here it is! Take notice! This is what I have to say to you! Remember it!' But success depends on reception, largely denied in his lifetime but transformed by the better understanding of durchbruch.

(To be continued in the September edition with a detailed analysis of each of the Symphonies)

*************

**Mahler's Conductors: 2 Oskar Fried**

Oskar Fried (1871-1941) was born in Berlin, the son of a Jewish shopkeeper. In his early life he was a clown, stable-boy and dog trainer and, like many of his contemporaries such as Schoenberg, he was initially as interested in art as he was in music.

He studied with Humperdinck and Scharwenka. His breakthrough came in 1903 with performances in Berlin and Vienna of The Drunken Song for chorus and orchestra which led to his appointment in 1904 as head of a Berlin chorus. Fried first met Mahler in Vienna in 1905 which led to the second complete performance of the 2nd in Berlin later that year with Mahler present, with Klemperer leading the off-stage band. A year later he introduced Mahler's music to Russia with the 2nd. On 4th February 1913 he conducted the second performance and German premiere of the 9th with the Berlin Philharmonic.

In the Autumn of 1920 in Vienna, he was the first to give a complete Mahler cycle, except for the 8th, together with most of the song cycles. In 1922 he returned to Russia, the first foreign conductor since the 1917 Revolution and was greeted by Lenin.

Surprisingly, in view of the contemporary state of recording equipment but unsurprisingly in view of his conducting career, Fried made the world Premier recording of a Mahler Symphony with the 2nd in 1921.

In 1927, at the invitation of the BBC, he made his UK debut with Delius, Weber, Brahms, and Liszt.

Driven from Germany by the Nazis in 1933 he emigrated to Tbilisi, eventually becoming a Soviet citizen.

His compositions, most of which are no longer performed, largely consist of lieder with some pieces for chorus and orchestra, notably his setting of Verklärte Nacht recently recorded by Chandos.

The most illuminating commentary on Fried appears in Jeremy Barham (Editor): Perspectives on Gustav Mahler in David Pickett's essay Mahler on Record: The Spirit or the Letter and of course there are numerous passages in de La Grange, particularly Vol.3.

Fried was essentially a private man and left little of interest behind when he died other than his few precious recordings. As David Nice shows on Page 1, his contribution to the promotion of Mahler in Russia and then the Soviet Union was significant.

Editor.
CD REVIEW

Mahler: 7th Symphony, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Ivan Fischer, Channel Classics CCSSA 38019.

It probably won't be the last time I say this, but the 7th is best understood as the first great piece of documentary music although not so obvious as, say, Vaughan Williams' London or Antarctic Symphonies. It is clunkily ratiocinative, which causes all the trouble, but that is not the point.

Since Ivan Fischer (not to be confused with the less distinguished Adam in Mahler's 7th) began his Mahler cycle I have grimly resisted buying each release, hoping, in Yorkshire fashion, to buy the box when he has finished at a cut price, but I have given way with his 7th.

Surely, the opening funeral march gives the game away. It is not ethereal but grittily descriptive, speaking, as does most of the rest of the work, of the dross beneath Vienna's ever more flaking gilt. This mood is best given away by Nachtmusik I which juxtaposes a witch-like gaggle of woodwind with a bewitching waltz, an incongruity increased in the Janus Scherzo as nice and nasty as it comes. Nachtmusik II beautifully restores some normality.

The Finale is actually a multi-layered musico-historical send-up always on the verge of toppling under the weight of its own sarcasm.

The only way to pull off anything like a sensible performance is to give the score the detailed attention it requires, much in the way that many of Mahler’s exiled contemporaries lent the necessary precision in Hollywood to music which had to match exactly what was being shown on the screen. Don't wait for the box!

Editor.