

[On Mahler in New York]

“The imp of the perverse”

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By Joseph Horowitz

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New York City a century ago was a world music capital. The Philharmonic enjoyed a period of unprecedented prosperity and artistic success. Its conductor, Anton Seidl, was not only a European luminary, a protégé of Wagner, but eventually an American citizen; his devotion to America, and to American music, was gratefully supported. The Metropolitan Opera had become a Wagner company unsurpassed in Europe, with a resident ensemble led by Seidl and stocked with Germany's leading singing actors. When Italian and French opera returned in 1891, the Met's "Golden Age" began, with stellar international casts as glamorous and scintillating as the German seasons had been religiously inspirational. In the background was a plethora of daily concerts (the Philharmonic was a part-time band) including, implausibly, a summer symphonic season at Coney Island's Brighton Beach. With little or no rehearsal, Seidl would there conduct fourteen times a week – a feat made possible, he told a reporter, because “no other city in the world” possessed “so many orchestral musicians of the first class.”

A lot of this music-making was exploratory: the latest works of important living composers, or “Music of the Future” by composers recently deceased. The 1895 Brighton Beach season, for example, included 156 Wagner performances, 50 of works by Liszt, 46 by Saint-Saens, and 37 by Grieg; oldtimers like Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Haydn each received 15 performances or fewer. Nowhere abroad was newer music more eagerly purviewed. The city's most celebrated musical personality, in fact, was (imagine such a thing today) a composer: Antonin Dvorak, who directed the National Conservatory on East Seventeenth Street from 1892 to 1895. The great concert event of these years was the premiere of Dvorak's “New World” Symphony, by Seidl and the Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall in 1893. Midway through, following the slow movement, the packed house erupted in a volley of applause only silenced by Dvorak's reluctant bows from a second tier box. According to an account in the *New York Herald*:

A murmur sweeps through the hall. “Dvorak! Dvorak!” is the word that passes from mouth to mouth. . . .

With hands trembling with emotion Dr. Dvorak waves an acknowledgement of his indebtedness to Anton Seidl, to the orchestra, to the audience, and then disappears into the background while the remainder of the work goes on. . . . At its close the

composer was loudly called for. Again and again he bowed his acknowledgements, and again and again the applause burst forth.

Even after he had left his box and was walking about in the corridor the applause continued. And finally he returned to the gallery railing, and then what a reception he received! The musicians, led by Mr. Seidl, applauded until the place rang again.

In the weeks prior, no fewer than xx articles had described and analyzed Dvorak's new symphony. And this was nothing compared to the detailed and sophisticated exegeses of Wagner's works regularly appearing in newspapers and journals. Of the writers, Henry Krehbiel, William J. Henderson, and James Gibbon Huneker remain names to reckon with. Never before or after did New York enjoy so distinguished a musical press.

Decline set in swiftly after the turn of the century. Dvorak returned to Prague. Seidl died prematurely, at 47, in 1898. The Philharmonic – then organized as a musicians' cooperative – drifted; as of 1909, the number of performing members had dropped to only 37, with the remaining seats filled by substitutes. The Met, in a tailspin of its own, was being run by Heinrich Conried, of whom it was once quipped that he “knew no more about opera than an ordinary chauffeur knows about airplanes.” All this set the stage for the nearly simultaneous arrival of two personalities who would seize and shake both institutions as Seidl had a decade before. One, Arturo Toscanini, achieved his greatest renown in the New World. The other, Gustav Mahler, charted an American conducting career tantalizingly brief and enigmatic.

Mahler arrived first – from Vienna, where he had been director of the Opera since 1897. Mahler's Vienna regime was historic: he removed the claque, closed the doors to latecomers, and opened all the cuts in *Tristan und Isolde*. Aligning himself with the Secessionists, he collaborated with Alfred Roller on stagings that overthrew naturalism with symbolic lighting and simplified scenery. In the pit, he was mercurial; according to Bruno Walter: “His every appearance . . . was preceded by the tenseness with which one looks forward to a sensation. . . . Before the opening of the [last] act, he was invariably received with a hurricane of applause.”

But ten Viennese seasons left Mahler frustrated and embattled. He warred with the singers and believed the orchestra conspired against him. Though he had converted to Catholicism, his Jewish birth remained a topic of ugly controversy. He sought time to compose and a comfortable income for his family.

It was Heinrich Conried who made Mahler an offer he couldn't refuse: three months' work for 75,000 kronen (\$15,000), with all travel and hotel expenses paid. In Vienna, Mahler's salary had been 24,000 kronen plus gratuities and pension. Beginning on January 1, 1908, Mahler conducted 54 performances in the course of three New York operatic seasons. His impact was great. But his four-year contract as “chief conductor” was nullified when Conried, in declining health, was replaced by a far more stable and experienced operatic administrator: La Scala's Giulio Gatti-Casazza. And – more important – with Gatti came his imperious conductor, Arturo Toscanini. In 1908-09, Mahler led xx Met performances to Toscanini's xx. In 1909-10, Mahler appeared at the Met only four times.

Meanwhile, the New York Philharmonic was in the throes of reorganization. The musicians' cooperative, mired in debt and disarray, yielded to a group of philanthropic socialites determined to give New York an orchestra comparable in quality and permanence

to the Boston Symphony, whose New York concerts surpassed all local efforts. The Philharmonic “guarantors,” led by Mrs. George R. Sheldon, pledged to make good any deficits for three years, to expand the season, and to tour the orchestra for the first time. They needed a conductor. Mahler, displaced at the Met, was an obvious choice. And so it was Mahler who presided over the Philharmonic’s transition until illness forced him back to Vienna, where he died in 1911 seven weeks shy of his fifty-first birthday.

Toscanini, only seven years Mahler’s junior, lived on to 1957 to become an American icon. He ruled the Met through 1915. After World War I, he prodded and bullied the Philharmonic to its peak potential as an instrument of virtuosic performance; when he quit, in 1936, it was seriously proposed that the orchestra be disbanded until memories of the Toscanini era faded. Coaxed back to New York by David Sarnoff’s National Broadcasting Company, he became conductor of his own NBC Symphony, whose kinetic renditions of Old World classics put the Philharmonic in the shade. He was regularly proclaimed by Americans “the greatest musician in the world.”

It is more than a curiosity that Toscanini was the only principal conductor of the Philharmonic after Mahler not to conduct a New York Philharmonic Mahler performance – because, over time, the Philharmonic became more enduringly associated with Mahler than with Toscanini. And it is more than an irony that Mahler’s own New York podium tenure only tangentially pertains to his subsequent ascendancy. Rather, the proper order of things musical holds that conductors – even Toscaninis – die and composers live on.

Mahler the famous composer excites interest in Mahler the once famous conductor. What to make of his truncated New York career, and its surprise pendant? This is the subject matter of a new boxed set of 12 CDs containing New York Philharmonic broadcast performances of all Mahler’s symphonies and two of his song cycles and also, in two handsomely produced booklets, nearly 500 pages of essays, clippings, lists, and photographs. Mahler deserves this extravagant tribute, and so does the Philharmonic: no other American orchestra enjoys so meaningful a relationship with so important a composer. But the meanings are conflicted and – unless the decade of Seidl and Dvorak is remembered – obscure.

## II

Of the two branches of Mahler’s American career, the operatic is the less significant and easier to assess. It was an ephemeral triumph.

Two aspects of Mahler’s Metropolitan Opera performances were instantly distinctive – and characterized, generally, both his style of conducting and the music he composed. First, Mahler was dramatic. He treated opera as theater. Even in Wagner, he did not swamp the singers. He shaped musical structures plastically, according to the action. He was a master of ambience. Second, Mahler demanded clarity. Just as he balanced singers and orchestra, he obtained precise balances within the pit. As in his symphonies, he achieved a mosaic of instrumental voices – think of Klimt’s flat, polyphonic canvases – rather than the Romantic cathedral sonority of dominant strings and recessed winds.

Reviews of Mahler’s New York debut, in *Tristan*, already register these trademarks. In later weeks and seasons, Mahler’s Wagner was found worthy of comparison to Seidl’s. (The cruder Wagner style of Alfred Hertz, who conducted Wagner at the Met from 1902 to 19xx,

can be sampled on Lionel Mapleson's gritty cylinder recordings, documenting snatches of Met performances between 1901 and 1904.) Mahler's Mozart, by comparison, was something new. Seidl's Wagnerized *Don Giovanni* had been heavy and mirthless. Subsequently, the opera was a showcase for celebrity vocalists. Mahler's *Don Giovanni* retained these celebrities – Antonio Scotti, Emma Eames, Johanna Gadschi, Marcella Sembrich, Alessandro Bonci, Feodor Chaliapin – but used them in a new way. As W. J. Henderson reported in the *New York Sun* on February 1, 1908:

Mozart's "Don Giovanni" was performed at the Metropolitan Opera House last night in a manner which must have astonished many of the old habitués of the house. For many years this great classic opera has been offered at the Metropolitan as a bargain counter attraction. . . . People have been drawn in crowds to hear six stars at prices usually charged for three. But the mise-en-scène has always been neglected. The acts have been chopped up [and] Mozart's dramatic unity sent into outer darkness. And no attempt has been made to unify the styles and interpretations of the various singers in an organic whole. It has been every singer for herself and the evil one take Mozart. All this has been changed by the artistic influence of one man, and result was that last night's performance moved swiftly, steadily, even relentlessly towards its great climaxes . . .

Henry Krehbiel cavilled that Chaliapin, as Leporello, conceived "all his characters as if they had been dug out of the muck of Gorky's stories of Russian low life." But Mahler's *Marriage of Figaro*, the following season, seemed to Krehbiel an unqualified triumph: "All the vivacious music foamed and sparkled and flashed like champagne." Mahler's *Fidelio*, with Roller's Vienna sets and costumes, again achieved an integrated musical/theatrical experience unprecedented in New York.

These accomplishments were remarkable but transcient. Post-Seidl, post-Mahler, post-Toscanini, the Met rapidly settled into a house for singers, not conductors or stage directors. *Don Giovanni*, Mahler's revelations notwithstanding, was retired for over 20 years. Wagner was dominated by the voices of Kirsten Flagstad and Lauritz Melchior. It was with the Philharmonic that Mahler the conductor more tangibly impacted on the larger sweep of New York's musical life. His attenuated regime was a fulcrum between the orchestra's early prime as a part-time ensemble under Seidl, and its ultimate consolidation as the city's dominant concert organization.

The pace of expansion, dictated by Mrs. Sheldon and the guarantors, was heady. Prior to Mahler, in 1908-09, the Philharmonic gave 18 concerts. Mahler led 46 Philharmonic concerts in 1909-10 and xx in 1910-11 before a substitute, concertmaster Theodore Spiering, had to take his place. Audiences did not, however, grow apace, and many who came arrived late or left early. The orchestra was considered vastly improved – Mahler replaced nearly half the players – but without matching the polish and consistency of Boston's. The final ingredient of this mixed report was Mahler's symphonic interpretations, which proved significantly more controversial than his work in the opera house. In fact, the debate over Mahler's Philharmonic concerts comprises the most interesting part of the story of Mahler in New York – the most revealing of Mahler as man and musician, and of the American milieu in which he had landed.

Mahler arrived in New York a conductor of opera. As with Seidl and Toscanini, the New World offered a new opportunity: to conduct an extensive symphonic repertoire. This opportunity was inherent to America because the concert orchestra – not, as in Europe, the opera house – was the central institution pursuant to a musical high culture. The term “symphony orchestra” is itself an American coinage, dating from 1878. The oldest American orchestra to offer something like fulltime employment in a single venue – the Boston Symphony, founded in 1881 – was unique in its day. Bostonians boasted: “A symphony orchestra pure and simple does not exist in all of Europe. That is to say, that in no city in Germany, Italy, France or Russia is there an orchestra which is made up of players whose only business it is to perform such music as is to be found on programmes of symphonic concerts.” When the Chicago Orchestra (later the Chicago Symphony) was formed in 1891, Chicagoans could claim that Boston and Leipzig were the only cities with orchestras offering more subscription concerts than Chicago’s 40. Other American orchestras with early starts included those of Cincinnati (1895), Pittsburgh (1898), Philadelphia (1900), Minneapolis (1903), and St. Louis (1907) – a proliferation unparalleled abroad.

How this came about illuminates the American musical experience, and the experience of Mahler in New York. A central catalyst was the conductor Theodore Thomas, whose itinerant orchestra brought symphonies by Beethoven and Brahms and trifles like The Linnet Polka (with piccolo players in the shrubbery) – whatever it took – to big cities and backwater towns beginning in 1869. Thomas had arrived in America from Germany as a 10-year-old in 1845. Self-educated, self-reliant – as “Master Theodore Thomas,” the teenage violin prodigy, he travelled on horseback and packed a pistol – he personified a catalogue of American prototypes. No less than the pioneer celebrated by Frederick Jackson Turner, he was sturdy, pragmatic, dominating. An embodiment of Theodore Roosevelt’s “strenuous life,” he hardened his body with icy baths and gymnastics. A forceful and self-possessed administrator, he exuded a competitiveness as fierce as any oil baron’s. He disapproved of eccentricities of dress and manner. He called his concerts “sermons in tones” and attributed “character-building force” and “uplifting influence” to “master works.” His credo – that “a symphony orchestras shows the culture of a community, not opera” – upheld absolute music as purer and nobler than any theater music could be. He disdained popular music as “having more or less the devil in it.”

Thomas’ moralistic fervor connects to Puritanism. A more explicit connection was to the Boston critic John Sullivan Dwight, who as editor of Dwight’s Journal of Music from 1852 to 1881 was a primary shaper of American musical taste. Transplanting the sacred from the church to the concert hall, Dwight argued that music is most “religious” unfettered by text. “Elevating, purifying, love and faith inspiring,” the instrumental works of the great Germanic masters were necessary sources of moral instruction. Like Thomas, Dwight cited Beethoven as a paragon of ethical striving. Like Thomas, he scorned musical entertainment as invalid and corrupt.

These attitudes produced a distinctive style of symphonic performance. Eschewing display, rejecting interpretation, Thomas deferred to the score as holy writ. His sincerity of purpose and powers of discipline produced a polish and precision that amazed such European visitors as Anton Rubinstein, and set standards for America. The impact of Dwight and Thomas explains why the pre-World War I Boston Symphony favored conductors of notable sobriety – Wilhelm Gericke and Karl Muck – and why the mercurial

Arthur Nikisch's brief tenure was found less satisfying. In New York, too, the Thomas Orchestra was a great influence; concurrently, Thomas led the New York Philharmonic beginning in 1877. But by the end of the century New York concert and operatic fare was much less inbred, much more exploratory than that of Brahmin Boston. Thomas seemed an anachronism, a "human metronome," beside Anton Seidl – who in 1891 displaced him at the helm of the Philharmonic.

Like Nikisch in Boston, Seidl represented a new breed. Espousing a freer play of tempo and rubato, faster Allegros, slower Adagios, he was a dramatic subjectivist. And yet Seidl was at the same time every bit the meliorist Thomas was. Wagner, not Beethoven, was his religion. If Thomas was a fundamentalist circuit preacher, Seidl was a high priest; a hypnotic combination of libidinal intensity and sphinx-like composure. His Wagnerized Beethoven challenged conventional wisdom and yet remained comprehensibly aligned with an evolution in performance style paralleling an evolution in music itself: toward romantic extremes of feeling and expression. It was Mahler, conducting Beethoven, who was the non-sequitur. High-strung, vulnerable, he contradicted earlier American embodiments of podium authority. In fact, he seemed to embody no authority higher than his own. He seemed blasphemous.

What did Mahler's New York concert performances sound like? There are no recordings. But there are reviews, hundreds of them, by writers long familiar with the repertoire as rendered by such eminent conductors – all active in New York before Mahler – as Seidl, Nikisch, Toscanini, Muck, Mengelberg, Mottl, Steinbach, Strauss, and Weingartner. [chk] Here, for instance, is the composer/critic Arthur Farwell, in *Musical America*, on a Mahler performance of Schubert's C major Symphony, D. 944, given November 1, 1910:

The great Schubert symphony was the feature of the evening. Mahler gave it a big reading, albeit one characterized by many of the personal touches, not a few of them unsympathetic, which mark all his best work. It is a late date at which to praise this symphony, but now, even more than ever before, one realizes that this is music for high Olympus. . . . It is, withal, spontaneous and naive, and despite the big outlines in which Mahler drew the work, it is with these qualities of spontaneity and naivete that the sophistication of Mahler interfered.

This appeared in the very first bars of the symphony, for the solo horn, where an exaggerated effect of dramatic contrast was given to the different phrases of the first melody. The softer phrases seemed to give forth a promise that perhaps Mahler will permit a more beautiful brass tone in his orchestra than he appeared willing to last year.

Again the second theme of the allegro for the woodwind instruments in thirds, seemed to be accentuated in a degree unbecoming its character. So, also, the lyric beauty of the melody in the andante was somewhat marred by the persistent staccato. However, to many of these little perverse personal elements the great spirit of the symphony shone forth.

The conductor chose a perfect pace for each of the movements, and always gained effective climaxes. He shortened the work by the omission of repeats in the first movement and scherzo, although he wisely granted a repeat of the trio, which is one

of the most heavenly moments in all of Schubert. The trio lacked a little of its celestial quality by a reading slightly over-vigorous.

Despite the fact that the imp of the perverse pursued Mahler throughout his interpretation of the work, it was a most memorable event. It must be said that his readings are always alive at every point.

Reading Farwell, one can readily imagine how much Schubert's symphony could sound like one of Mahler's own. Also, Mahler retouched Schubert's orchestration; of the same performance, Krehbiel complained of "brass ornaments" added by the conductor. Henderson wrote:

. . . the concert-goer cannot help regretting all attempts to bring Schubert "up-to-date." Schubert is going to be up to much later dates than this present year of grace, 1910, but not by force of orchestral main strength . . .

Accepting the conditions as they are, to wit, that Schubert wrote for two horns, two trumpets, and three trombones, why should anyone seek to make this aggregation of brass sound like that employed by Strauss? . . .

It is a pity to treat trombones rudely in a score like that of the C Major Symphony in which the composer used them with so much respect for their character and with so much resource in enlarging their field of expressiveness. . . . Surely it never occurred to Schubert to use stopped trumpets when he desired a pianissimo effect. If he wrote "pianissimo" under his trumpet parts, he probably desired a trumpet pianissimo. . . .

Mahler was by no means the first conductor to retouch symphonies by dead composers. But, at least in New York, no one before had done it so blatantly – whether in pursuit of lucid textures, or in consideration of modern instruments, or for other reasons less scrutable. In the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth, there is a mini-cadenza for solo oboe, inviting a free play of expressive nuance. Mahler's rendering of this passage, in December 1909, astonished Krehbiel:

Mr. Mahler phlebotomized [the cadenza] by giving it to two oboes and beating time for each note – not in the expressive adagio called for by Beethoven, but in a rigid andante. Thus the rhapsodic utterance contemplated by the composer was turned into a mere connecting link between two parts of the movement. Into the cadence of the second subject of the third movement, Mr. Mahler injected a bit of un-Beethovenian color by changing the horn part so that listeners familiar with their Wagner were startled by hearing something very like Hagen's call from "Götterdämmerung" from the instruments which in the score simply sustain a harmony voice in octaves. In the finale Mr. Mahler several times doubled voices (bassoons with cellos) and transposed the piccolo part an octave higher. Here he secured sonority which aided him in building up a thrilling climax, but did not materially disturb Beethoven's color scheme. The question of the artistic righteousness of his act may be left to the decision of musicians.

To Henderson, Mahler's predilection for kaleidoscopes of sound – which he typically pursued by adding or modifying wind and brass parts – was an egocentric intrusion.

This business of probing the depths of Beethoven's scores to find things which the master perversely concealed from the native eye grows apace. We used to think that Beethoven's scoring was tolerably simple and that most of it was purely harmonic or constructed on a rational distribution of the component parts of chords.

But we are rapidly learning that it is quite as contrapuntal as Bach's and that what he foolishly supposed were mere thirds or sixths in chord formations are in reality individual melodic voices which must be brought out by exploring conductors.

To Krehbiel, Mahler's editorial hand broached “a question of what might be called moral aesthetics.”

All this notwithstanding, Mahler's readings were regularly acclaimed for their freshness, intensity, and acuity. No one found him boring. But there was a “moral aesthetic” gap. The critical reception of Mahler's own symphonies – he performed the First, Second, and Fourth in New York – underlines the issues at hand. That Mahler was himself a composer of stature put him on an easy footing even with a Beethoven or Schubert. He interacted creatively, compositionally, with their scores; he felt no impulse to worship on bended knee. But in the opinion of Henderson or Krehbiel, Mahler the composer was not a candidate for the pantheon. When Krehbiel proclaimed him “a prophet of the ugly,” he knew exactly what he objected to. The problem, again, was profanation:

It was a singular paradox in Mahler's artistic nature that while his melodic ideas were of the folksong order his treatment of them was of the most extravagant kind, harmonically and orchestrally. He attempted in argument to reconcile the extremes by insisting that folksong was the vital spark of artistic music, but in his treatment of the simple melodies of his symphonies . . . he was utterly inconsiderate of their essence, robbing them of their characteristics and elaborating them to death.

Mahler's signature juxtaposition of the quotidian and the sublime, flew in the face of attitudes fostered by the likes of Dwight and Thomas, who railed against popular music and raised the symphony onto a high and unsullied altar. The American penchant for sacralization – the European tendency was less extreme – may be faulted as a puritanical excess, or a symptom of insecurity. And the concomitant emphasis on textual fidelity – on objectivity, versus subjective interpretation -- may be partly understood as a defense against claims that only Germans could understand Beethoven. But these American traditions were also strengths, signifying a musical high culture more distinctive and evolved than Europeans, unless they visited, could possibly imagine. As Henderson was moved to write in 1908 in response to exaggerated Viennese accounts of Mahler's financial terms of engagement at the Met:

It is always instructive to read European newspapers on American affairs. It gives us the much needed opportunity to see ourselves as others see us – with their eyes shut. . . . Do we not all reek with malodorous lucre? Are we not a nation of tradesmen? . . .

Doubtless the Viennese observer of American barbarism might find a . . . conviction of our benighted condition in the indisputable fact that the artistic cataclysm which separated Mr. Mahler from the Imperial Opera in the Austrian capital and brought him to this city has not been measured here by the yardstick of European pride. The coming of the new interpreter of German operas was awaited with interest and received with pleasure, but there no was no public excitement.

The stock market was not affected. This comment is made because it would naturally be expected of us in Europe. It would be quit useless to remark in passing that we do not grow excited over the arrival of new interpreters from Europe, for the sufficient reason that we have already heard many of the best Europe has ever known . . .

### III

Worldly New York music critics like Henderson took a reasonable pride in American achievements. They could be hypersensitive towards those who didn't. In Mahler, they encountered a wall of misunderstanding.

Even if it was money that lured him to the United States, Mahler cannot be accused of cynicism or indifference. He diligently learned scores he had never before conducted, even a few – too few – by Americans. In rehearsal, his concertmaster later recalled, he “always worked flat out. Every minute counted. There were no breaks.” He complained to Bruno Walter that the Philharmonic was “a real American orchestra. Untalented and phlegmatic.” (In fact, the Philharmonic Mahler inherited was an inferior American orchestra, judged by the standards of Boston or Chicago, or by its own prior estate.) But Mahler was also seduced by America. “The people here are tremendously unspoilt – all the crudeness and ignorance are – teething troubles,” he wrote to Roller weeks after his Met debut. “Here the dollar does not reign supreme – it's merely easy to earn. Only one thing is respected here: ability and drive!” A day later, in another letter, he advised his father-in-law, Carl Moll: “I am determined that you, too, must one day experience first hand this life which is so extraordinarily exuberant and refreshing for a European. . . . All the stories about America which circulate among us originate with that disgusting type of German you know as well as I do. . . . A truly native American is a high-minded and capable person.”

But these impressions, and others like them, were acquired willy nilly – not from any concentrated effort of exploration or understanding. Compared to Seidl or Dvorak – and this comparison mattered, because it mattered to many who remembered – Mahler exhibited a self-absorption indistinguishable from arrogance. He knew the New World as he encountered it – not, like Dvorak, as an avid student of plantation song and Native American chant; or, like Seidl and Dvorak both, a mentor to the American composer. His offenses were not malicious, merely tactless. In October 1909 – by which time he should have known better – he told Musical America: “The best orchestra in the world today is, to my mind, that of Vienna. Munich, Dresden, Berlin and Paris have splendid organization, but that of Vienna attained under Hans Richter a perfection that I know of nowhere else.” It would have cost him nothing to have mentioned Boston. In the same interview, Mahler announced: “It will be my aim to educate the public, and that education will be made gradually and in a manner which will enable those who may not now have a taste for the best later to appreciate it. . . .

There will be special cycles, such as the Beethoven, for those who love this lofty symphonic music and for the education of my orchestra, and the historical, in which we shall play the music from the time of Bach down to the modern composer.”

When Mahler performed his own First Symphony in December 1909, Krehbiel, who was the Philharmonic’s program annotator, requested permission to reprint a letter in which Mahler described aspects of the work. Mahler responded by prohibiting Krehbiel from writing anything at all about the symphony. Krehbiel responded with a program note reading in part:

In deference to the wish of Mr. Mahler, the annotator of the Philharmonic Society’s programmes refrains from even an outline analysis of the symphony which he is performing for the first time in New York on this occasion, as also from an attempt to suggest what might be or has been set forth as its possible poetical, dramatic, or emotional contents. . . . Mr. Mahler’s conviction, frequently expressed publicly as well as privately, is that it is a hindrance to appreciation to read an analysis which with the help of musical examples lays bare the contents and structure of a composition while it is playing. . . . All writings about music, even those of musicians themselves, he holds to be injurious to musical enjoyment. . . .

Eventually Mahler found himself in conflict not only with members of the press, but with members of the Philharmonic board. First there were disagreements over salary. Then, in January 1911, the guarantors formed a subcommittee to supervise what music Mahler would program. In her memoirs, Alma Mahler described the climatic blow-out, at which “the ladies had many instances to allege of conduct which in their eyes was mistaken. . . . A document was then drawn up in legal form, strictly defining Mahler’s powers. He was so taken aback and so furious that he came back to me trembling in every limb.” Days later, Mahler’s health took a turn for the worse. In May, by which time he was back in Vienna, Alma told an American interviewer that she held the Philharmonic responsible for her husband’s decline: “You cannot imagine what Mr. Mahler has suffered. In Vienna my husband was all powerful. Even the Emperor did not dictate to him, but in New York, to his amazement, he had ten ladies ordering him about like a puppet.” The guarantors, the article continued, denied these accusations, “insisting that [their relations with Mahler] were always agreeable, and that the illness of the conductor came about through his extreme nervousness.”

May 18, Mahler was dead. Vienna gave him a hero’s funeral. In New York, Krehbiel’s 50-inch obituary, in the *Tribune*, ignited a firestorm of controversy. It began:

Gustav Mahler is dead, and his death was made to appear in some newspaper accounts as the tragic conclusion of unhappy experiences in New York. As a matter of fact [he] was a sick man when he came to New York three years ago. His troubles with the administration of the Philharmonic were of his own creation . . . He was paid a sum of money which ought to have seemed to him fabulous from the day on which he came till the day when his labors ended, and the money was given to him ungrudgingly, though the investment was a poor one for the opera company which brought him to America and the concert organization which kept him here. He was

looked upon as a great artist, and possibly he was one, but he failed to convince the people of New York of the fact, and therefore his American career was not a success.

Krehbiel's Mahler obituary has perplexed and offended Mahler's various biographers. He was a pontifical writer, but not normally this intemperate. His exceptional animus towards Mahler cannot be defended – but can be understood. Two grievances permeate his postmortem analysis. The first was that Mahler neglected to appreciate the importance of New York, that “it is a fatuous notion of foreigners that Americans know nothing about music in its highest forms.” Krehbiel's second grievance – a subtext -- was that Mahler neglected to appreciate the importance of Henry Krehbiel. And Krehbiel was very important, the acknowledged “dean” of a critical community that – unlike New York music critics of today – meshed seamlessly with the musical community it reported upon and assessed. Krehbiel's authority was earned. Of his dozen books, two comprise an unsurpassed history of opera in New York before World War I – a history he helped to shape as a leading Wagnerite. Another is an exegesis of African-American folksong. He was a pathbreaking ethnomusicologist before ethnomusicology existed. He was a Beethoven scholar of distinction.

To scan Krehbiel's career is to glean how two relationships conditioned his disappointment in Mahler. Anton Seidl had accepted Krehbiel as one of his few New York intimates. And Seidl was a Mahler antipode: he projected a serene authority; he bonded fraternally with his musicians; he interacted amiably and productively with the ladies of the Seidl Society, which presented his Brooklyn concerts; he embraced America. Concurrently, Krehbiel was Antonin Dvorak's chief mouthpiece and advocate in the press. He supplied Dvorak with plantation songs and Native American chants; he undoubtedly perceived himself as a creative consultant on the “New World” Symphony. Krehbiel was accustomed to his eminence. Mahler sought no advice and cultivated no graces.

■ IV –



Could Mahler, had he lived longer, have adjusted to New York? It matters not, because New York adjusted to him – posthumously.

Both Willem Mengelberg, the Philharmonic's principal conductor through most of the 1920s, and Bruno Walter, a frequent guest and sometime Musical Advisor from 1932 to 1960, had been close associates of Mahler in Europe; both tenaciously espoused Mahler in New York decades before he became a brand-name composer. A third Mahler associate, Otto Klemperer, led highly acclaimed performances [chk] of the Second Symphony with the Philharmonic in 1935. After World War II, Dimitri Mitropoulos, the music director from 1949 to 1958, was a Mahler specialist, as were his successor, Leonard Bernstein, and Bernstein's successor, Pierre Boulez, and Boulez's successor, Zubin Mehta. Mehta's successor, Kurt Masur, is the first Philharmonic music director in half a century whose repertoire does not include at least half the Mahler canon. And the Philharmonic has regularly engaged guest conductors eminent in Mahler. The result has been a surpassing act of advocacy. Mahler predicted that his time would come; he could never have predicted that it would come first in New York.

As the Philharmonic's new set of Mahler CDs is restricted to broadcast Philharmonic performances, there are, alas, no performances by Mengelberg or Klemperer – conductors who dramatically illuminate the extreme, even contradictory polarities of Mahler's aesthetic: the one ensnared, moment to moment, in heights and depths of reverie and turmoil, the other an epic practitioner of *neue Sachlichkeit*. We are also denied a sampling of Bernstein's Mahler -- because, Sedgwick Clark, who carefully chose the performances here included, elected not to include works the Philharmonic has already recorded with a given conductor; this left him with a single eligible Bernstein broadcast, of *Das Lied von der Erde*, the rights to which proved unobtainable. The jewel in the collection, it seems to me, is its oldest member: a 1948 *Das Lied* under Bruno Walter with Kathleene Ferrier and Set Svanholm, a performance gloriously at one with the music; beside it, Walter's numerous American studio recordings seem freeze-dried and sedate.

The nine symphonies are led, respectively, John Barbirolli, Mehta, Boulez, Georg Solti, Klaus Tennsted, Mitropoulos, Rafael Kubelik, Leopold Stokowski, and Barbirolli again; the unfinished Tenth Symphony is conducted by Mitropoulos. *The Songs of a Wayfarer*, with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, is conducted by William Steinberg. It is, on the whole, a distinguished traversal, and well varied in perspective. A wonderful touch is the inclusion of more than two hours of interviews with musicians who knew Mahler or who played under Mahler in New York – an invaluable oral history recorded by the late William Malloch and first broadcast in 1964. There are also brief broadcast commentaries by Walter, Stokowski, and Barbirolli.

The two accompanying booklets, assembled under the supervision of the Philharmonic's archivist, Barbara Haws, are a labor of love. All of Mahler's Philharmonic programs are listed, as are all the Philharmonic's Mahler performances and recordings. There are essays on Mahler's marked scores of Beethoven and Bruckner, as preserved by the Philharmonic, and on Bernstein's marked Mahler scores. As this is a celebratory documentation, other essays propose a notably sanguine take on Mahler's New York career. Alma's denunciation of the guarantors is challenged by accounts stressing their "intelligence, business acumen, political savvy, and cultural sophistication" and underlining that, absent Mrs. Sheldon and her cohorts, "in all likelihood Mahler would not have had the opportunity to build a great orchestra." In the same vein, we are reminded that Mahler was killed by then-incurable endocarditis – "not by sadistic New York committee women."

This last observation comes from the longest essay in the booklets at hand, by Henry-Louis de La Grange. De La Grange is an indispensable Mahler scholar, the author of a multi-volume biography notable for its thoroughness and powers of empathy. Burrowing inside Mahler's head, he finds the New York years happier and more fulfilling than in Alma's account, and in fact identifies Alma's infidelity – her affair with Walter Gropius – as Mahler's most traumatic New York hardship. The risk of this methodology is a perspective on New York as skewed and incomplete as Mahler's own. Rather than learn from Mahler's New York critics, de La Grange prefers to castigate them. Krehbiel shrinks in identity to Mahler's implacable enemy – nothing more or less – and his motives reduce to petulant resentment that he was denied permission to annotate Mahler's First. De la Grange would believe that Krehbiel never wrote a kind word about Mahler afterward – which is far from true. He incorrectly asserts that "most of the other [New York] critics hardly mentioned" Mahler's editorial revisions. He shows no awareness of why Mahler's concert performances should

have proved more controversial than his operatic work. He unwittingly reminds an American reader what it was that upset Krehbiel about Mahler in the first place.

Gustav Mahler was not the man to champion American music, as Seidl had championed Edward MacDowell. He was not the man to compose a “New World” Symphony after the fashion of Dvorak. He was, finally, not really cut out to be music director of an American orchestra, sensitive to the needs of a cultural community, its scribes, audiences, and benefactors. He had greater things to do.