SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1341

1897 *VIENNA ~ THE MAHLER YEARS* 1907

"It is difficult to speak of the Mahler epoch at the Vienna Opera in the subdued accents of recollection; rather one should extol it in exalted language as a ten year feast to which a great artist invited co-workers and devotees". Bruno Walter

"Repertory theatre seems to me simply to be a mistake. Admittedly Gustav Mahler was able to show that extraordinary festival type performances of works in the repertory are possible. But he imposed this through his own inordinate strength, quite against the tendency of his organization". Alfred Roller

For most music lovers today, Gustav Mahler is amongst the very greatest composers of symphonies and song cycles. Mahler's contemporaries would have been perhaps slightly puzzled by such an assessment, for in his own time his fame rested far more upon his conducting, above all in the opera house. The zenith of his life was the decade of his directorship of the Imperial Opera (Hofoper), Vienna from 1897 to 1907. It would be hard to over-estimate the achievement of those years. Mahler ran the house in every particular, chief conductor, producer, engaging artists, handling contracts. In all this he was responsible to people who were in effect court officials, collectively not that different from a board today.

The Opera functioned throughout the year apart from a summer break, usually offering around 300 performances of at least 50 different works. Thus, during the years of Mahler's directorship there would have been some 3,000 operatic performances. During each of the first three full seasons for which he was in charge he conducted around 100 performances. However, in response to growing pressure of other responsibilities he gradually conducted less. In all he conducted on some 650 occasions in 63 different opera; a workload to sap even the strongest. Delving into pre-1900 operatic history it is impossible to find a parallel, so that Mahler's decade in Vienna perhaps marks the beginning of the era of the conductor as the driving spirit in the opera house. Characteristic of the nineteenth century had been the dominance of the singers, some of the most famous of whom seemed to imply, if they did not actually state it, that conductors were no more than supporting cast. In due course the conductor gave way to the producer and to some of the eccentricities witnessed in contemporary opera.

In Vienna where the Director was supreme, it was Mahler's genius to surround himself with what was far more than a 'supporting cast'. He sought the best singers for the ensemble and insisted, against some opposition, on guest contracts for the peerless Lilli Lehmann to give what he called her 'annual singing lesson' to the company. In addition, he engaged Alfred Roller, one of the greatest stage designers ever to work in opera, and secured as 'second in command' conductor Bruno Walter, then at the outset of his career.

However, this tells the story only at one level. There were arguments within the house, hardly unusual in an operatic organization, and Mahler had occasional problems with the court officials to whom he was accountable. He had huge and lasting support from the opera-going public, but the critics were not always so kind.

Bruno Walter refers to the period prior to his own arrival in Vienna, "(Mahler's) first years passed in overwhelming achievements on his part and enthusiastic and personal interest on the part of the artistic public". He goes on to describe how "the more conservative element among the press and public looked with disfavour upon the uncomfortably new and did not realize that the experiment of today created the law of tomorrow."

Mahler's reception should perhaps also be placed in a wider context. The multi-national Habsburg Empire, of which Vienna was the capital, was creaking towards ultimate catastrophe under pressure from its raft of nationalities and peoples including Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, Czechs and Slovaks. It was an age when national minorities aspired to independent status. Mahler had been born in Bohemia, but his identity was neither Czech nor German, "I am three times without a country: a Bohemian among Austrians, an Austrian among Germans, and a Jew among the peoples of the world".

Jews were in a very different position from that of the other 'subject' peoples of the Habsburg Empire. They could hardly seek their own country in Europe; the Zionist movement was still in its infancy and had only limited support. In practice Jews tended like most Germans in Austria to accept the Habsburg system. But their position was still anomalous. It was generally accepted that a Jew could not be Director of the Hofoper. To obtain the position Mahler converted to Catholicism. This probably did little to change his own feeling of outsider status, whilst in no way appeasing those sections of the nationalist press which were openly anti-semitic. This section indicated its views in no uncertain manner once it became clear that he was likely to be appointed. On the other side Mahler could count on general support from the liberal press with its significant Jewish ownership.

There was in practice a complex interplay between the policies and politics of the press on the one hand, and the line up of music critics on the other. Nonetheless, Mahler was potentially under attack even before his appointment, a situation succinctly expressed by Karl Krauss. Krauss is described by Henry-Louis de la Grange as "the terror of the Vienna establishment" who "managed to pour scorn on almost everything and everyone associated with the Opera". According to Krauss Mahler was clearly determined to "get rid of the old inefficient, management", but he immediately gave "such proof of his effectiveness that some people are already hard at work intriguing against him". It may be worth adding in retrospect that such intrigue around the Opera was a Viennese sport before Mahler arrived and has continued down to the present.

Opera house statistics are not always readily available. There is no published chronology of Mahler's period at the Hofoper and there are some discrepancies in secondary source listings. It would seem that during Mahler's decade in charge there were around ninety new or restudied productions, of which just over a third were of works new to the Hofoper. Some of the latter have inevitably faded into obscurity, but the premières also included works by Tchaikovsky, Offenbach and Puccini. Many of the revivals were new 'looks' at standard Viennese fare; e.g. in 1906 there were new productions of Mozart's major works for his 150th anniversary. On the other hand, Mahler also mounted works long neglected in Vienna: *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Euryanthe* are examples.

An overall assessment of Mahler's achievement needs to focus on three key features: conducting, producing, singing. There are countless sources for those interested; by now more has probably been written on Mahler than on any other composers save for Beethoven and Wagner. The major work is Henry-Louis de la Grange's monumental and magisterial *Gustav Mahler* which has still to appear in its final form in English (all four volumes are available in French). De la Grange gives a complete, detailed accounts of Mahler's compositions and a comprehensive account of his life and achievements in the opera house and the concert hall.

Mahler's conducting made an immediate impact at the Hofoper, even before his appointment as Director. According to critic Josef Reitler, reviewing the very first performance (the work was *Lohengrin*) "under Mahler's baton, everything was transformed at a stroke and raised to a higher level". Interestingly, where Mahler's tempi differed from the traditional he earned applause, sometimes even interrupting the music. At the end of the performance a crowd of young people gathered at the stage door to greet the conductor. Two years later a review of *Die Meistersinger* suggested that Mahler had brought the opera to life "as its composer had intended and wished". Later on Mahler would hardly have approved of applause interrupting music. Part of his contribution was to restore traditional cuts and to prevent latecomers taking their seats until the end of an act. Of course, conducting opera is not just a matter of leading the orchestra. This is well demonstrated by the critical response to Mahler's *Cosi fan Tutte.* The critic Max Kalbeck had "never heard a Mozart ensemble of such quality in his life". The doyen of the Viennese critics, Hanslick did not like the work but felt that the singers were "made for each other".

From the very beginning of his directorship, Mahler put a stamp on all aspects of productions. The appointment of Alfred Roller as chief stage designer was an indication of both Mahler's ambition and his willingness to share public plaudits. Roller's stage designs helped to revolutionize opera production without interfering with the supremacy of the music. De la Grange devotes fourteen pages to the 1904 Mahler-Roller *Fidelio.* He emphasizes, inter alia, skilful use of lighting, the four singers standing perfectly still for the first act quartet, massive scenery to evoke Pizarro's tyranny, a prisoners' scene "reducing the audience to tears".

Max Graf summed up critical reaction, "The score's slightest measure, the libretto's slightest word revealed the work's dramatic soul. Everything combined to support the drama: the sets, the lighting and the costumes. Mahler wanted the stage to dominate and the music to serve it. Most of his innovations were valid. Perhaps the work had been sung by more glorious voices but never had it been so imbued musically and dramatically with life."

Kalbeck praised Mahler for bringing "Beethoven's spiritualised music from its gleaming heavenly heights down through the colourful haze of our atmosphere to the blossoming earth". He felt that in Roller's sets the earth breathed love and the air drank freedom whilst the horizon stretched to eternity.

On the other hand this was Vienna; Hirschfeld, no friend of Mahler, felt that Roller's contribution "attracted too much attention at the music's expense" and that Mahler himself had betrayed the spirit of Beethoven.

We can rely on critics to gain a feeling only for Mahler as conductor and music director, and there are extant plates and photos demonstrating Roller's work. In the case of the singers we have more direct evidence, the sounds of their voices.

It is no exaggeration to claim that no opera house performing right through the year has ever boasted so fine a group of solo singers as Vienna during the Mahler years. In every performance there would be what we would call 'star' singers. Most were under exclusive contract, needing permission to accept other engagements. When Leo Slezak's contract was renegotiated towards the end of the Mahler epoch he gained the 'right' to make two visits a year to the United States, provided they were during the summer. In exchange he had to sing at least sixty times a year in Vienna.

All of the singers in this album can be considered as part of 'Mahler's ensemble' though, two of them, Fritz Schrödter and Wilhelm Hesch, were appointed before he arrived. Mahler insisted that Lilli Lehmann appear annually as a guest, despite the high fees she commanded. Part of the Mahler revolution at the Hofoper was to ease out some of the older, more established singers who could be considered on one view as being 'set in their ways'. Mahler was particularly keen to attract promising new talent. Rather like a modern football manager moving to a bigger club, he took steps to take with him some former protégées, in his case from his time in Hamburg. The most important of these was Anna Mildenburg. The musician Erwin Stein was less impressed by the sheer size of her voice as by "her enormous range of expression. Her piano yielded as much variety of tone as her forte, and she could colour or swell the notes at will".

Other important 'signings' were Selma Kurz and Marie Gutheil-Schoder. Certainly Mahler had a predilection for the 'beautiful female voice'. He once admitted that he could never hear one without falling slightly in love. Self-evidently the male singers were every bit as important to the ensemble, Erik Schmedes, Leo Slezak and Leopold Demuth above all, but Mahler may well have been guilty of some favouritism towards the 'fairer sex'. Allegedly when Demuth asked Mahler what he thought of his interpretation of Wotan, the brusque reply was "once a clerk, always a clerk". De La Grange doubts the detail, but accepts the inference. By way of contrast Gutheil-Schoder remembered losing her place in a performance of *Figaros Hochzeit.* Mahler seemed amused rather than angry and she asked him to explain. It is hard to imagine Mahler giving the same answer in all cases, "Well it was because I took my mind off you for a moment and had to laugh, because I saw that you also at the same moment had lost your place!"

With such a large company of leading singers and a good many prima donnas of both sexes, Mahler also needed to be a good personnel manager. De la Grange recounts Schmedes' jealousy when Slezak burst on the scene, and arguments over roles between Elsa Bland and Lucy Weidt. Mahler gave a simple reply in all such cases, "no one can have the exclusive right to a role in the Hofoper". It is interesting to note that Bland left the company soon after Mahler, although she was later a frequent guest artist. In fact, most of Mahler's ensemble stayed on for many years to the great benefit of the Hofoper. His final major 'signing' was the American contralto Sarah Charles Cahier. Mahler himself was to leave Vienna soon thereafter, but in one sense nothing had changed with the critics. Kauders felt that Cahier's presence alone justified mounting *Samson et Dalila*, never previously performed in Vienna. Kalbeck praised her "singing, acting and vocal agility", whilst Julius Korngold stressed "the noble warmth of her interpretation and the subtlety of her phrasing". Hirschfeld, for whom little had

apparently changed, offered a contrasting view, criticizing her acting and suggesting that her interpretation lacked inner energy.

The generally held view is that Mahler was driven from Vienna by a mixture of press hostility, fuelled by anti-semitism, internal opera house intrigue and his capacity, through his own iron will and inability to compromise, to make enemies. However, it needs to be recognized that a ten-year term as Director in such a hothouse climate was probably as much as anybody could stand. Mahler never shied away from controversy. To the end he enjoyed much popular support, especially from the younger generation. It seems to me that his appetite for the struggle gradually diminished. De la Grange points to his weariness. Mahler "had begun to realize that he would never be able to complete the exemplary reforms that he had begun to introduce". With the benefit of hindsight we can link this to declining health and sheer exhaustion.

Whatever the truth, there is no credit to Vienna in the manner of his going. To end, as this note began, with Bruno Walter, "*The achievements of his art are looked upon today as the unforgotten days of glory of the Vienna Opera, and the pure will to art that carried it to such heights will ever remain a shining example.*"

Professor Stanley Henig

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