

Arnold Schoenberg's Debt to Mahler

by Dika Newlin



The superficial observer, unfamiliar with the Viennese musical scene, would be indeed hard put to it, confronted with one of Schoenberg's twelve-tone scores and Mahler's First Symphony, to determine what influence the older composer might have had on the younger. And yet the influence of Mahler is ever-present in Schoenberg. Indeed, to me, it seems increasingly impossible to understand Schoenberg without understanding Mahler. If the works

of Schoenberg are seldom heard and even more seldom understood, it at least in part because the great tradition of music-making in Vienna – a tradition of which Mahler was among the most outstanding latter-day representatives – has not really been understood.

To one who knows the proud and independent nature of Schoenberg, it is by no means surprising that he did not, at first, succumb to Mahler's influence willingly. He and young Alma Maria Schindler – later to become Alma Mahler – were fellow pupils of Alexander von Zemlinsky. Often that saw each other at the Sunday evening musical gatherings of Frau Conrat, the friend of Brahms; it was on one of these occasions that Alma asked young Schoenberg if he were going to hear the Vienna Philharmonic's performance of Mahler's Fourth Symphony¹. "Why should I bother?" replied Schoenberg – or words to that effect. "Mahler already couldn't do anything in his First and I suppose the Fourth is the same, only more so!"

But Schoenberg could not hold out forever against Mahler; fundamentally he did not wish to. His relationship with Mahler seems to be characterized throughout by that curious ambivalence of love and hate which, in a similar way, always characterized the attitude of the Viennese intellectuals towards Vienna². That Mahler should sooner or later exert a profound influence on Schoenberg seems inevitable, given the special position which Mahler occupied in Viennese musical life from 1879 onward. The mighty spiritual influence which the powerful director of the Vienna Court Opera exerted through his performances, not on musical circles alone, but on every aspect of intellectual life, is hardly conceivable to those who did not undergo it during Mahler's regime. Performances of Gluck, Mozart, Weber – and Wagner – became celebrations in a new temple of art. And the young Schoenberg, though his firm grounding in the practice of chamber music prevented him from falling into the epigonous *al fresco* music-making of so many of his contemporaries, was, like his entire generation, under the thrall of Wagner. When he was twenty-five he had heard all Wagner's operas between twenty and thirty times each. *Tristan* was so familiar to him and to his friends that they evolved a game to be played during its performances; the winner was the one who could find the most "new melodies" in Wagner's highly plastic inner voices. Elsewhere I have discussed the significance of this highly analytical method of listening for Schoenberg's technique of composition. Does it tell us something important about Mahler's conducting?³ It was not the broader outlines and the most obvious melodies alone that were important to Mahler the conductor; every inner part had to have its own life, its own plastic form. This concern for the clarity of each individual

¹ January 12, 1902.

² This feeling about Vienna finds characteristic expression, appropriately enough, in a letter from Schoenberg to Mahler wherein Schoenberg uses the highly significant phrase "our hated and loved Vienna."

³ Of course I am not forgetting that Schoenberg must have heard, in his youth, many Wagner performances which were not under the direction of Mahler. But it is scarcely conceivable that Mahler's dynamic concept of the Wagner scores – which, be it remembered, he insisted upon presenting in their uncut form, as his predecessors had feared to do – can have failed to accentuate the influence of Wagner upon Schoenberg.

voice, ever-present in Mahler's compositional consciousness as well, led him to exercise the utmost care in the indication of the various dynamic levels in his scores. At one and the same moment, one instrument might be playing *piano*, a second *mezzo forte*, and a third *fortissimo*. (But Schoenberg, though his fine ear would delight in distinguishing Wagner's inner voices in a beautifully articulated Mahler performance, did not like these nervous paroxysms of the most varied simultaneous dynamics on the printed page. He preferred to reduce the dynamics of a given vertical combination to a single common denominator, and to indicate the relative emphasis of the different voices by means of his symbols H- and N- or P and S)⁴.

It was through Arnold Rosé, Mahler's brother-in-law and the concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic, that Mahler and Schoenberg first came into friendly contact. Mahler, visiting one of Rosé's rehearsals of *Verklärte Nacht* in 1903, was impressed by what he saw and heard, and realized that young Schoenberg was a force to be reckoned with. Then, Zemlinsky brought Schoenberg to visit Mahler household, and a rather lopsided friendship, with many ups and downs, developed among the three composers. Mahler regarded "Eisele und Beisele", as he called his two talented juniors, with a mixture of affection and exasperation, while Schoenberg wavered between admiration of Mahler's mastery and irritation at his frequently condescending manner. At one time, Schoenberg was occupying a garret in Vienna and was much disturbed while composing by the constant pealing of church bells which dinned into his eyrie from all sides. He complained about this situation in Mahler's presence, but Mahler responded *sehr von ober herab*, "Oh, that doesn't matter; just put the church bells into your next symphony!" Schoenberg was much annoyed, but bided his time until chance furnished him with the opportunity for the perfect *riposte*. Mahler, about to go away for the summer, remarked that he supposed the birds singing all around his *Komponierhäuschen* would make life miserable for him as usual. Schoenberg promptly retorted, "Well, just put the birds into your next symphony!"⁵

But the casual bickering could not conceal the fact that Schoenberg's relationship with Mahler was becoming closer and warmer. The friendship was further cemented by Mahler's hiring Zemlinsky to conduct at the Vienna Opera in 1906. It was during the summer of that year that Schoenberg, who was just finishing his first *Kammersymphonie*, found time to write to Mahler, "Nothing could please me more than you saying that we had come closer together." And, during the following concert-season in Vienna, Mahler found ample opportunity to defend the cause of the younger composer. The famous tale of Mahler's rising up in wrath to quell the opposition on the occasion of the Rosé's premiere of Schoenberg's First String Quartet in Vienna (February 5, 1907) has been too often told to need further repetition here, but its implications do need further elucidation. Mahler's bold defense of Schoenberg certainly did not mean that he completely understood what Schoenberg was trying to do. In fact, with characteristic intellectual honesty, he admitted that Schoenberg's concept of music often surpassed his comprehension. Of this very First Quartet, he said to Schoenberg, "I'm accustomed to reading thirty-voiced orchestral scores – and the four voices of your quartet give me at least twice as much trouble!" And, after a performance of the *Kammersymphonie* which he had noisily applauded in defiance of the anti-Schoenberg faction, he frankly said that he did not understand this music; but he had the courage to blame his deficiency on his own ear, not on the unfamiliar sonorities. There is no doubt that his public defense of Schoenberg was, in spite of his private mental reservation, utterly sincere. In Schoenberg he recognized a man of his own kind, an intransigent spirit in whom respect for the noblest traditions of music was combined with the courage to break away from outworn conventions. Schoenberg's well-nigh frightening sincerity and directness inspired in Mahler a confidence which was not dependent on understanding alone, but on the emotional response to a kindred soul. Schoenberg, unavoidably on the defensive in these critical years of his development, yet felt this confidence of Mahler's and responded completely under the spell of his mentor; he begs Mahler to pardon him for his one-time contrariness which had so often forced him into contradiction for its own sake. That forgiveness had long since been

⁴ *Hauptstimme* and *Nebenstimme*: principal and subordinate voices.

⁵ Of course Mahler had already done so in his *First* and *Second*!

granted. Mahler, during his last illness, often thought of Schoenberg and begged Alma and her stepfather, Carl Moll, to stand by him always. The fund for the support of young composers, which was established as a result of this forethought of Mahler's, frequently benefited Schoenberg. How fitting that this last gesture of Mahler's helping hand should have been reciprocated by Schoenberg's supreme act of devotion, the dedication of the *Harmonielehre* to Mahler's memory!

The friendship between Schoenberg and Mahler is a matter of record; but it is more important for our purposes to assess the specifically *Musical* influences of Mahler on Schoenberg. What are these and where may they be found?

Let us consider first the knotty question of *tonality*. Schoenberg's identification with the process whereby individualized tonalities are fused into the larger system of "pantonicity" (a term which he prefers to the incorrect "atonality") is universally known. Less well known, perhaps, is the fact that Schoenberg himself credits Mahler with playing a significant part in the preliminary stages of this process. To be specific, it was Mahler who first introduced into the symphony a concept which I have called "progressive tonality". The classical symphony either began and ended in the same key or, if beginning in minor, frequently ended in the parallel major. Bruckner was quite satisfied with this principle of his forebears;⁶ Mahler, however, was not. In his First Symphony he applies his new principle to one movement only. The song-cycle on which the symphony is based, *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, began in D minor and ended in F minor. Mahler now transfers this idea to the Finale of the symphony, which begins in F minor and ends in D major. But the principle must now be extended to the entire symphony instead of being limited to a single movement. This happens in the Second Symphony, which begins in C minor and ends in E flat major. Of course, this is not a very striking modulation, for the relative major is as closely related to the minor as the classical parallel major would have been. Mahler finds his way to a more radical application of the principle in his succeeding symphonies, with the exception of the Third, Sixth and Eighth. The Fourth Symphony moves from G major to E major, the Fifth from C sharp minor to D major, the Seventh from B minor to C major, the Ninth from D major to D flat major, and *Das Lied von der Erde* from A minor to C major. Mahler follows the classic pattern of ending a minor symphony in a major key (the tragic Sixth is the only one of his symphonies in which he did not do this). He seems to have a particular fondness for the tonal progression of a half-step from beginning to end of a symphony, a preference which he evinces in the Fifth, Seventh, and Ninth Symphonies. In the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies the half-step is ascending (C sharp-D, B-C); this ascending motion gives these symphonies a certain forward impulsion, which is synonymous with an optimistic approach to life. The impression is strengthened by the fact that in each of these cases the beginning key is minor and the ending key is major, as well as by the busy and energetic tone of the Finales. On the contrary, the descending half-step in the Ninth Symphony (D to D flat) seems to strengthen the feeling of resignation which imbues that work.

What has this to do with Schoenberg's dissolution – or expansion – of tonality? That question is answered if we turn to Schoenberg's Second String Quartet, the first work in which he completely transcends the limits of the tonal system. The significant thing here is that Schoenberg composed the first three movements in clearly defined keys with key signatures – F sharp minor, D minor, E flat minor – and did not enter the realm of "pantonicity" until the Finale. Beginning a work of symphonic proportions "tonally" and ending it "atonally" is surely the next step beyond beginning it in one key and ending it in another very distant one. In the preceding paragraph, I indicated that the concept of progressive tonality in Mahler has something to do with expressing the emotional climate, as it were, of each individual symphony. For Mahler, each symphony was a world in itself, which had to be constructed according to its own laws; as this applied to form, it applied to tonal progression also. Now, the progression from "tonality" to "atonality" is closely involved with the emotional content of Schoenberg's Second String Quartet, especially insofar as this is expressed in the text of the last movement. Attention has been drawn before now to the relationship

between the idea of the Stefan George poem which Schoenberg chose, "*Ich fühle Luft von anderen Planeten*," and the concept of a new musical world in which the old laws of tonality are transcended.

This very Second Quartet of Schoenberg's seems to be the meeting place of a number of different trends, all of which may be traced, in one way or another, to the influence of Mahler. I mentioned the *text* of the last movement. The use of the soprano voice in the third and fourth movements of this quartet may surely be attributed to the influence of Mahler's symphonies. It was, of course, quite typical of Schoenberg to introduce an innovation instead of slavishly copying the older composer, as some other less independent spirit might have done. Instead of composing another "choral symphony" more or less successfully, Schoenberg chose to introduce the human voice into a new genre, that of the string quartet; thus he continued that tradition of innovation in chamber music which he had begun with the *Verklärte Nacht*, the first symphonic poem for chamber ensemble. He did not, however, repeat this particular experiment a second time, although his preoccupation with the infinite expressive possibilities of the human voice is well known.

In the Second Quartet, there also arises that problem of "quotation" which plays so prominent a role in Mahler's work. All students of Mahler are familiar with his practice of self-quotation, which also extends to the quotation of familiar extraneous motives. (The most famous example of this latter development is the third movement of the First Symphony, with its all-pervasive *Frère Jacques* motive.) What is not always realized is that such quotation, either of one's own work or of other familiar themes, is in its essence *operatic*. Classic instances of this are the citations of *Una cosa rara*, and *The Marriage of Figaro* in *Don Giovanni*, and of *Tristan* in *Die Meistersinger*. Every such quotation in an "abstract" work of music represents an expansion into dramatic field. Hence, when we consider Mahler's lifelong preoccupation with opera – even though he never composed a dramatic work in his maturity – it is by no means surprising that the use of such quotations became basic in his concept of the symphony. From him, this idea passed to his great Viennese successors – both music dramatists – Schoenberg and Berg (but not to Berg's great co-disciple Webern, whose musical nature was to lead him along paths far removed from opera). Berg used such quotation more often than Schoenberg; we might cite his quotation from *Tristan* in the *Lyric Suite* from string quartet, and his use of Bach chorale *Es ist genug* in his Violin Concerto, as well as numerous quotations (both from his own works and from others') in his two operas *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*. However, it is Schoenberg's use of such material which primarily concerns us here. The most characteristic example of it is precisely in the *Scherzo* of the Second Quartet, where *Ach, du lieber Augustin* makes an unexpected appearance. I have always felt that this idea was, at least indirectly, suggested to Schoenberg by a particular movement of Mahler – the above-mentioned third movement of the First Symphony, that very symphony Schoenberg had long ago considered a prime example of Mahler's incompetence! I have often heard Schoenberg discuss this movement in terms of the deepest admiration; he likes to characterize it as the first consciously wrought expression of *irony* in music. One might be tempted to apply a similar interpretation, then to the *Scherzo* of Schoenberg's quartet – a movement which is, perhaps coincidentally, also in D minor; but the composer specifically repudiates such an interpretation. To Schoenberg, the words "*Alles ist hin*," so characteristic of the old Viennese song, were utterly ironic or satirical, but had a real and deep emotional significance⁷.

Finally, in assessing the influence of Mahler upon Schoenberg, we must approach the problem of *Orchestration*. This has two entirely different aspects. On the one hand, Mahler's celebrated *Monumental-instrumentation* certainly affected the orchestration of Schoenberg's greatest essay in the monumental style, the *GurreLieder*. It is true that the original conception of the *GurreLieder* antedates Schoenberg's conversion to belief in Mahler; on the other hand, the entire period of its instrumentation covers those years when Mahler's influence on Schoenberg was steadily increasing. This monumental orchestral style, whether in Mahler or in Schoenberg, is characterized by a willingness to introduce any and every effect necessary for the complete expression

⁶ Obviously the ending of the Ninth Symphony in a different key is a special case, akin to that of Schubert's *Unfinished*.

⁷ In connection with this concept of quotation we might also cite Schoenberg's use of the Beethoven victory motif in the *Ode to Napoleon*.

of the musical idea, even if it requires the use of instruments never before heard in a conventional orchestra. In this sense, Mahler's cowbells in the Sixth Symphony are the pendant to Schoenberg's heavy iron chains in the *Gurre-Lieder*. Thus we see that both Schoenberg and Mahler escape from the limitations of the conventional ready-made large orchestra which must serve for the expression of every sort of idea or emotion. While the monumental orchestra is sometimes considered to be inflexible in its modes of expression, this is obviously not true if it permits the addition of special instruments for special purposes. This process will eventually lead to the creation of a *specialized* ensemble for each new composition according to its particular musical needs. It is to Schoenberg and his disciples that we owe the most stimulating developments of this idea, which is a logical outgrowth of Mahler's feeling that each symphony is a separate world with its own laws of construction. Nor is Schoenberg's use of chamber-music combinations for this purpose in any sense a repudiation of the Mahlerian tradition – this in spite of the fact that Mahler was not a composer of chamber music in the ordinary sense. Works like the *Kindertotenlieder* certainly have the character of chamber music; and, even in Mahler's most fully orchestrated scores, many passages may be found in which unusual combinations of solo instruments play together with the utmost finesse. It is form the influence of passages such as these, combined with that of such works of Brahms as the Horn Trio and the Clarinet Quintet, that music like Schoenberg's two Chamber Symphonies and Berg's Chamber Concerto is derived.

Unavoidably, an essay of this character can only scratch the surface of the subject which it purports to discuss. However, if it induces in those readers who already know and love Mahler a new interest in becoming better acquainted with the works of his supreme spiritual disciple Schoenberg, it will have served its purpose.

This essay was published in *Chord and Discord*, Vol. 2, No. 5, pp 21–26, 1948. It is reproduced in *Naturlaut* with the kind permission of Mr. Charles Eble of the American Bruckner Society. Born in Portland, Oregon, Nov. 22, 1923, Dika Newlin took private lessons with Roger Sessions and Arnold Schoenberg when she was a student at University of California in Los Angeles. She taught at several American colleges and universities and eventually established the Department of Music at Drew University. While she is an important composer, her writings on music have been valuable because of their importance to the study of twelve-tone music. Among these, one finds a significant analytical study *Bruckner-Mahler-Schoenberg* (1947) and the translation of Schoenberg's seminal text *Style and Idea* (1951). Dika Newlin also edited an important Schoenberg memoir, *Schoenberg Remembered: Diaries and Recollections, 1938-76*.

Letter to the Editor

♪ Congratulations on producing another good issue of *Naturlaut*. It is a superb benefit of membership!

Unfortunately the debut of my name in the newsletter has me citing the reverse of my personal opinion. My good friend Hilliard Levinson (*Naturlaut*, Vol. 2, No. 4: p. 16, 2004) says that I "strongly" believe that the "Das Lied" expresses the masculine sentiments regarding loss, grief and despair, and are best conveyed by a man. For good or ill, I am in no position to have that opinion, because I am not a man, and I am certainly not Mahler. What I do believe is that a man may well feel kinship with the emotions Mahler expressed, and that for him a man may well be his preferred interpreter. Certainly Hill has expressed that personal view, which of course I support for him.

What I believe for myself is that Mahler expressed a universal emotion that can be conveyed by a singer of either sex. Musically, I prefer a contralto, for contrast between the voices. Unless the tenor and baritone are happen to have markedly differing vocal timbres, there is great danger of boredom in a long work like *Das Lied von der Erde*. Hill confesses that he usually listens to *Der Abschied* alone, and of course that is a different experience from listening to the whole work. I happen to like the sweep of the poetry in a series.

Not only that: I have long been fond of the recording by Kathleen Ferrier. No doubt there is in her own tragic end something that can make her listeners feel that she was singing her personal "*Abschied*"; perhaps she was, and perhaps it even communicates itself through her 51-year-old recording. But more than that, she had what seems to me the right voice for the work. For the tenor role I vote for Fritz Wunderlich. It makes for a busy time, switching CDs as one goes through the work; but that's what I do – while my friend Hill can rest comfortably with Fischer-Diskau, and with my absent blessings!

Barbara Peterson



In the Next Issue...

Mahler / Mahlered / Mahlered: Images of Mahler in Popular Culture

Images of Mahler have been part of popular culture, since his lifetime, when he was depicted in cartoons that either took jabs at his compositions or called attention his sometimes unpopular choices as a conductor. Yet soon after his death, Mahler was made into an icon by well-meaning friends, like Arnold Schoenberg, or colleagues like Thomas Mann, who appropriated Mahler's visage for a fictional character. These attempts to pay homage to Mahler have a bearing on the way Mahler was treated in the late twentieth century, when Luchino Visconti misread elements of Mahler's life into his film adaptation of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* and, several years later, Ken Russell's film called *Mahler* interpreted the composer's life in an idiosyncratic way. Film images like these helped to establish Mahler as a cultural icon, which has since been used in drama and popular fiction. Mahler is so much a part of popular culture that it is even possible to find Mahler's name invoked in the comic strip *Peanuts*, where it becomes a verb associated with enduring a symphony concert. James Zychowicz will review in this article this phenomenon in Mahler reception and discuss the underlying significance of Mahler's image in popular culture.

FEATURED ESSAY

The Conductor Gustav Mahler – A Psychological Study

In an attempt to scientifically analyze the art of orchestral conducting in light of modern psychology, Dr. Ernst J. M. Lert has decided to take a close look at Gustav Mahler as a conductor. Why Gustav Mahler? Mahler's published correspondence is a source of evidence, a veritable revelation of his approach toward music. His compositions, his method of scoring are inconvertible facts illuminating Mahler's mentality as conductor. In addition, Mahler's career as a conductor reached its peak just when the European mentality was passing through the crises between Victorian bourgeois-individualism and twentieth century mass-mindedness. Even though he has been hailed repeatedly as one of the greatest conductors in his time, Mahler the conductor is unknown to the present generation. We will present this article written in the 1930s by a psychologist who had witnessed Mahler's conducting style and his interpretation of others' works, in light of recent debates about present conductors should interpret Mahler's own symphonies.

The Identity of the Original Chinese Poem adapted for *Von der Jugend*

Mahler adapted seven poems from Hans Bethge's "*Die chinesische Flöte - Nachdichtungen chinesischer Lyrik*" to set his epic symphonic song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde*. The poems were originally and loosely translated from the Chinese anthology into French through the collaboration of Judith Gautier and D'Hervey-Saint-Denys. Hans Bethge then translated the French volume into German. This multi-step translation process has inevitably resulted in numerous literary discrepancies that make the effort of tracing the original identity of the poems rather challenging. Despite the difficulty, all the Chinese poems have been identified except one – *Le Pavillon de Porcelaine* (The Porcelain Pavilion), adapted for the third movement of *Das Lied von der Erde, Von der Jugend*. Teng-Leong Chew will discuss in this essay the original identity of "The Porcelain Pavilion", and the textual problems that have thus far hindered the efforts in pinpointing the source of the poem.