

## Interview

### Up Close and Personal – Meeting Jason Starr

by Tess Crebbin

Ever since the release in March 2004 of his award-winning documentary “What the Universe tells Me”, New York based producer and director Jason Starr has become a household name to Mahlerites across the globe. His visually stunning film on Mahler’s Third Symphony impresses with spectacular nature shots and original Mahler home-ground footage, insightful interviews with the likes of Henri de la Grange or Thomas Hampson, and an unforgettable posthorn segment. But what is the story behind this extraordinary film that seeks to unravel the mysteries of one of Mahler’s finest works? We talked to Jason Starr to find out.

**TC:** I read your CV and found out that you have actually got a masters degree in music. So that means you actually started out as a composer?

**JS:** I started out as a composer and then got into television purely by accident. I was teaching Music Theory and Composition at a private school in New York and was enjoying it. Then friends came to me who had a film production company that they were expanding. They wanted someone they knew and could trust to help them out on the administrative side. I had no interest in being an administrator but they said that I would have the right of first refusal to do the scores for all their films. So that was very attractive to me.

**TC:** How old were you at that time?

**JS:** Around 24, and so I thought to myself: why not try that?

**TC:** There is a very adventurous story about how you got into producing, once you had joined that company...

**JS:** Part of my job was to review proposals. And I saw how they were written and thought that I could try to do this. So I wrote up my own proposal and presented it to Bravo, a cultural cable network at the time, and to my shock and amazement they gave me a huge check and said: do it.

**TC:** And thus is the inspiring story of your first-ever production. And it was a music film.

**JS:** It was a show that explored the language of string quartet music and it featured the Emerson Quartet. In addition to demonstrations and discussion, they played works by Haydn and Bartok. Another show was on modern dance, featuring Dan Wagner and dancers. And after that I got the bug. So my interest in film and television production is strictly content-oriented. The joy of making films for the sake of making films leaves me dry. I am interested in sharing my enthusiasm for art with other people.

**TC:** Before all of that happened with the proposal and the favorable reaction by the station, what were you going to do with your life? Were you always going to stay a teacher, or were you going to combine some compositions of your own with the teaching activity?

**JS:** I was planning to devote myself to composition. And one of the ways to support myself was the academic route. So I had finished my masters, and I thought I would work for a few more years and then enter into a PhD or a DMA program.

**TC:** Were you considering film music as a career?

**JS:** It was one of the avenues that I considered, yes. But when you are composing film music you are under the limitations of the job. You are not creating music to express your own poetic vision of the world as much as satisfying the dramatic needs for the film. So while it is fun, and even exciting, I don’t know that it is artistically as fulfilling as composing concert music. I think at best a film score is successful because it works for the film, but the real artist in filmmaking is the director and not the composer.

**TC:** When you started out with composing film music, how did that feel?

**JS:** I was just so thrilled to be paid for composing music. After graduating from the conservatory I was faced with a market that had no interest in the kind of music that my colleagues and I had studied and practiced. So to be paid to exercise my craft felt like an honor. I was involved in film music for a very short amount of time, so you are really not talking to a former film composer here. The amount of scores that I have written I can count on one hand.

**TC:** But the intention to become a film composer was there?

**JS:** I don’t know how much of a strategic planner I was at that time. In my mid-twenties, I was just testing the waters. I also had the long-term plan of returning to academia to get a PHD, as I just mentioned, so I was seriously considering the academic route, which also has its rewards.

**TC:** So many different ways of practicing your art. How do you feel art works best?

**JS:** I really believe that art is best when it reaches many, and involves people in a community of feeling. I think that’s a very important aspect of art.

**TC:** That is certainly what Mahler does for us. How did your interest in Mahler first come about?

**JS:** I first heard Mahler when I was a young teenager, around 13 or 14 years old. And I was swept off my feet with the First Symphony. Strangely, I was attracted to what is perhaps the least interesting movement, the Scherzo. It was television that helped me take my experience of loving that music more seriously. I happened to catch a rather unusual program on public television. It showed a student orchestra rehearsing the second movement of that symphony, the Frere Jacques movement, with Eric Leinsdorf directing. Watching these young people rehearse a movement that I had come to discover on my own, when I was still too young to even place Mahler historically or really understand the cultural milieu from which he was coming, significantly broadened my understanding of how meaningful and significant his music is.

**TC:** Why did you choose to make a film about Mahler’s Third, then?

**JS:** The Manhattan School of Music approached me and asked if I would direct a multiple camera videotaping of a performance that they had scheduled at Riverside Church in New York City. I agreed to do that. In discussions with them I requested permission to use the material in some future documentary, should I decide to produce one. They agreed to that. So the project stems not from some choice on my part but rather from a confluence of some happy circumstances. One of the toughest nuts to crack in producing a performance documentary is having the rights to use the footage of the performance. And here I had what I thought was a beautiful performance of that symphony, which I directed and that I could use as source material. That was more than enough to peak my interest in making a documentary about it.

I had already worked with Mahler’s music in a series I had produced over two seasons for PBS, called “Backstage/Lincoln Center”. I produced a segment on the first symphony in advance of a performance of that work by the New York Philharmonic with Kurt Masur conducting. But each show in the series comprised three seven-minute segments and was designed to reach a very broad audience. These limitations meant that I could not explore the work in any depth. This project, “What the Universe Tells Me: Unraveling the Mysteries of Mahler’s Third Symphony”, provided the opportunity to produce the kind of documentary that I had always wanted to make and to make: a film that respected the depth of the artwork and the intelligence of the viewer.

**TC:** This does not always happen in television?

**JS:** There are television series in the United States that do presume upon a high level of intelligence and curiosity when it comes to science and current events. But I have not in recent times seen that in classical music programming. I feel strongly that there needs to be films available to young people and adults that address why art is important and what makes art meaningful and compelling.



incredible act of generosity towards me, and all those who will view the film. But it is also an indication of the depth of his feeling and dedication to Mahler's music.

**TC:** One thing your documentary is certainly going to do is bring about a deeper understanding of that Third symphony to a wide audience.

**JS:** Thank you. Especially music historians are often very reluctant to explore music's meaning. For good reason: it's very risky. You don't want to prejudice people into thinking that this music means specifically this or that idea. If I did that my film it would be a great disservice to the music. What I rather tried to do was illustrate the ideas that Mahler was using to structure the music in the symphony, because it is a rare example of philosophy and music in combination. Ultimately music is to be interpreted by everyone who hears it in his or her own way. And more than any other composer, Mahler requires his audience's participation to complete the meaning of the music.

**TC:** I was intrigued by your choice of Stockard Channing as a narrator. Like many of my generation, I still tend to associate her with the musical *Grease*. What is her interest in Mahler?

**JS:** She loves Mahler. The reason I chose her is that I was reading an interview with her and she was asked what she would be if she had to live her life over again. She replied that she would be a composer. So that was a perfect fit because I was looking for a narrator who had enough musical knowledge to be taken seriously and who could convey the mystery, passion and wonder of the music.

**TC:** That is understandable. It is a deep and passionate subject matter.

**JS:** The ideas that Mahler is dealing with in the Third are deep and significant: that all things are connected; that humans are matter that has become self-aware; that only by living life fully—not insulating ourselves from suffering—can we experience the exaltation of life and the joy of love. These are things that we shouldn't just think about and move on. These notions have great significance in the way that we treat one another and go about living our lives. Few composers delve that deeply.

**TC:** Who wrote the script for your documentary?

**JS:** I wrote it with the aid of a New York Times music critic who edited and polished my words.

**TC:** I especially liked the script that went with the posthorn segment, about life going on when one of us dies.

**JS:** Isn't it amazing that Mahler is posing these contradictions of life in his music? And he leaves us there with it: Take that and deal with it! There is no way around it. We need to face it and then go on from there, but not by ignoring it.

**TC:** True. He is actually throwing things into our face that, especially in our fast-lived modern time, we would rather not think about. It is all about instant gratification and making as much money as possible in the shortest amount of time.

**JS:** That is very true. He knew that something was being lost with modernity. He knew that it was going to be irretrievable but that it was a loss of something immensely valuable. I think it is important to note that he not only preserved what was being lost, but also the emotional recognition of that loss.

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## *In the Next Issue...*

### **Mahlerian Music Not by Mahler by David Ellis**

Mahler's on later composers and music has been extensively studied, particularly in relation to the Second Viennese School, Britten, and (most importantly) Shostakovich. This non-technical article highlights specific pieces of music displaying a marked Mahler influence. This influence falls into two categories: actual quotation or close similarity to a work by Mahler, or an emotional quality similar to that evoked by the music of Mahler (clearly this second category is highly subjective). David Ellis will discuss these Mahlerian influences in the next issue. Composers mentioned include Karłowicz, Foerster, Zemlinsky, Krenek, Rochberg, Gorecki, and John Adams. Because of the details that would be required, discussion of Mahler's influence on Shostakovich's music is beyond the scope of this article

### **FEATURED ESSAY**

#### **Depictions of the Anchorites in Mahler's Eighth Symphony by Salvatore Calomino**

The second part of Mahler's Eighth Symphony, a setting of the final scene from Goethe's *Faust II*, opens with a vivid description of holy anchorites located within vertically staggered clefts of a mountainous gorge. This essay will take as its focus contemporary influences on Goethe which resulted in this visual description of the cosmos at the conclusion to *Faust*. To be considered are Goethe's correspondence with Wilhelm von Humboldt and the latter's travel report of anchoritic fathers near Montserrat, Spain; copperplate engravings of frescoes in the cemetery at Campo Santo, Pisa; and eighteenth-century commentaries on salvation or divine return in the philosophy of Origen and early fathers of the Church. Such combination of contemporary and ancient sources, both visual and philosophical, will be discussed as potential inspiration for Goethe's depiction of holy figures attendant on Faust's "Erlösung." The synthesis of upward movement with dominant Catholic or Marian images contributes additional elements that helped to shape the text in Goethe's final conception. Salvatore Calomino will examine these elements in Mahler's setting of the text in Part Two of his Eighth Symphony, and as a pendant to his setting of the hymn ("Veni Creator Spiritus") in Part One of the work.

#### **The Second Symphony at the Lucerne Music Festival by Teng-Leong Chew**

In the summer of 2003, Claudio Abbado brought together former members of his Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra, sectional leaders of various professional orchestras, as well as members of several chamber groups to perform Mahler's Second Symphony. We will review this special performance marked by extraordinary music-making among friends, and a great Mahlerian conductor at his prime.

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Please send letters and any essay submissions to  
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