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Auguste Rodin, *Gustav Mahler*, 1909, bronze, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Lotte Walter Lindt in memory of her father, Bruno Walter

Gustav Mahler (1860 – 1911): A Tribute in Art, Music, and Film

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National Gallery of Art

"We cannot see how any of his music can long survive him."

—Henry Krehbiel, *New York Tribune*, May 21, 1911

"My time will come..."

—Gustav Mahler

Interest in the life, times, and music of Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) has been a dominant and persistent theme in modern cultural history at least since the decade of the 1960s. His status is due, in part, to the championing of his music by American conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990). Last year (2010) was the 150th anniversary of Mahler's birth; this year (2011), we commemorate the 100th anniversary of his death on May 18. The study of Mahler—the man and his music—confronts us not only with the unique qualities of his artistic vision and accomplishments but also with one of the most fertile and creative periods and places in Western cultural history: fin-de-siècle Vienna. Mahler's life and times close the door on the nineteenth century. His death prior to the outbreak of the First World War is fitting, for his music anticipates the end of the old European order destroyed by the war and summons us to a new beginning in what can best be described as a twentieth-century age of anxiety—an anxiety prophetically revealed in Mahler's symphonies and songs.

Mahler was at the heart of the revitalization of the arts in late nineteenth-century Vienna. His path crossed with the most important and seminal personalities in Austrian arts, letters, philosophy, and science, including Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Hugo Wolf (1860–1903), Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980),

and Egon Schiele (1890–1918), to name only a few. As composer, conductor, and opera director Mahler overcame innumerable personal and professional obstacles to achieve a formidable reputation and prestige throughout Europe and America. He would go on to encourage and support a new generation of Austrian composers, the so-called Second Viennese School that included, in addition to Schoenberg, Alban Berg (1885–1935) and Anton Webern (1883–1945).

Today Mahler assumes almost mythic proportions fueled not only by the rediscovery and frequent performances (along with in-depth analysis) of his music but also by his emergence as a cult figure in popular culture. His life, music, image, myth, legend, and, most especially, his tempestuous relationship with his wife Alma, continue to find their way overtly or covertly into film, fiction, theater, performance art, comics, and caricature. However distorted and historically suspect these portrayals may be, they nonetheless attest to the continuing hold that Mahler has on our contemporary psyche.

Mahler and Fin-de-Siècle Vienna

“I have to admit I’m Viennese to the core.”

—Gustav Mahler

Gustav Mahler was born in Kaliště in eastern Bohemia (Czech Republic) on July 7, 1860. Shortly after his birth the family moved to Jihlava, where his father produced and sold hard liquor and ultimately opened a tavern. The young Mahler displayed an early talent for music and appeared publicly as a pianist by the age of ten. In 1871, his father sent him to Prague to further his academic studies. In 1875, he entered the Vienna

Conservatory. He graduated in 1878, and during his final two years at the conservatory, Mahler turned his attention to composition and conducting.

Mahler went on to study at Vienna University. He displayed far-ranging interests in art history, philology, and German literature while continuing to pursue a career in music. Leaving the university in 1879, Mahler accepted his first conducting job in Bad Hall, near Linz, in 1880. Thus began a long period of musical apprenticeships in small opera houses and theaters throughout Austria, Germany, and Eastern Europe. Mahler's sights, however, were always on Vienna and a position at the prestigious Vienna Opera House. In February 1897, he converted from Judaism to Catholicism, necessary for the realization of that goal. Shortly after his change of faith, in April 1897, Mahler became a staff conductor in Vienna. By October 1897, he was principal conductor and director of the Vienna Opera. This period, from 1897 until his resignation in 1907, placed Mahler at the heart of Viennese art and culture.

His time as both opera director and conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic was tumultuous. His standards were high, his rehearsal practices demanding, and his interpretations of the works of such revered composers as Beethoven controversial. His own compositions were equally challenging to musicians, critics, and the public. In this regard, Mahler was very much part of the artistic ferment represented in the visual arts by the Vienna Secession led by Gustav Klimt. Mahler's arrival in Vienna in 1897 coincided with Klimt's modernist revolt against the conservative strictures of the Künstlerhaus-Genossenschaft, at that time the oldest surviving artists' society in Austria.

In 1902, Klimt and the artists of the secession dedicated the entire space of the Fourteenth Secession Exhibition to Beethoven. The inspiration for this tribute was the remarkable



Gustav Klimt, *Baby (Cradle)*, 1917/1918, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Otto and Franciska Kallir with the help of the Carol and Edwin Gaines Fullinwider Fund

statue *Beethoven* (1902) by Max Klinger (1857–1920), the sculptor from Leipzig. The statue was to be the exhibition's centerpiece. Klimt contributed his great Beethoven Frieze, a vast cycle of paintings on dry plaster inlaid with various materials running along three walls of the exhibition hall. Mahler conducted a special condensed version of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony that he himself had arranged and revised. Architectural and installation designs by Josef Hoffmann completed the décor. As such, this was a true Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a total art experience in painting, sculpture, architecture, design, and music celebrating the greatest hero of German art and culture: Beethoven.

The Fourteenth Secession Exhibition opened in April 1902, a month after Mahler married Alma Maria Schindler (1879–1964). Alma was the daughter of the landscape painter Emil Jakob Schindler (1842–1892) and the stepdaughter of another painter, Carl Moll (1861–1945), who founded the Vienna Secession along with Klimt. Klimt had known Alma since her childhood, and Mahler first met her in November 1901. Alma, along with her family and friends, enhanced Mahler's lifelong interest in and knowledge of the visual arts.

Mahler's participation in the Fourteenth Secession Exhibition led to a scandal. While the public celebrated the performance, the critics hurled hostile accusations. Mahler's arrangement was deemed over-orchestrated, too painterly, an aberration, representing a kind of revisionist barbarism. He was attacked for his "modernist" interpretation, deemed to be more Mahler than Beethoven.

Neither Klimt in his wall paintings nor Klinger in his monumental polychrome sculpture addressed Beethoven's music. Hoffmann's temple-like setting reinforced Klinger's portrayal of Beethoven as a Zeus-like enthroned god. Klimt produced a series of more personal and ambiguous images that

evoked universal themes of good versus evil, the longing for happiness, the role of the hero, and the solace of poetry and the arts. All of this embedded in a sensual portrayal of embracing naked figures, opulent visual details, and rhythmic linear patterns—similar to a symphony unfolding in three movements across the three walls. A closer examination of Klimt’s knight-hero in the “Longing for Happiness” section revealed what most people recognized as a portrait of a modern-day hero: Gustav Mahler. With this image, Klimt established a creative lineage from Beethoven (the artist-godhead) to Mahler and himself (the heroic artist-warriors).

Mahler: Symphony No. 1 in D Major

“Only when I experience something do I compose, and only when composing do I experience anything.”

—Gustav Mahler

Gustav Mahler expressed himself primarily through the musical form of the symphony. Building on the tradition of Beethoven, he drew upon the vision of symphonic form embodied in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the “Choral” symphony. He expanded both the formal and programmatic aspects of the art, taking the symphony into new realms of emotion, meaning, and sound. For Mahler “a symphony must be like the world, it must embrace everything.” By “symphony” he meant “creating a world with all the technical means available.” The opening measures of the First Symphony—as if emerging from some primordial void—seem to announce this new world. The music charts an ambitious journey for the listener and expands the possibilities of the symphony in modern times. Ironically, Mahler’s vision is

also an elegiac farewell to the symphony. That musical form never again embodied the significance it held for Mahler; only Anton Bruckner (1824–1896), Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) and later, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975), approach the composer's symphonic ambition. Mahler and Sibelius had an opportunity to discuss their views of the symphony during a conducting tour Mahler made to Finland in 1907. It was during this encounter that Mahler defined the symphony as "like the world," an opinion contradicted by Sibelius' more organic approach to the art form.

Mahler's nine symphonies (along with the unfinished tenth) are comparable to the greatest works of Western literature, art, and architecture in their formal and creative ambition. The relationship to architecture is most apt, as the three basic elements that define architecture are evident throughout Mahler's symphonies: function, structure, and beauty. Mahler's music is architectonic in the truest sense of the word: it exists in both space and time. It is both synchronic (existing in the moment with no reference to the past) and diachronic (aware of the continuum of musical language and its shifting nature through time). Few composers of symphonic music build with the complexity of Mahler. The abrupt starts and stops, exaggerated effects of orchestral color and dynamics, dissonant chords, jarring contrasts in mood, humorous asides, and ironic statements can disorient even the most dedicated listener. Like a great architect, however, who knows the stresses and strains that his materials can withstand, Mahler ultimately reconciles all conflicting forces to achieve a unified, freestanding structure of sound and meaning. Especially powerful is the sense of controlled propulsion, a lesson learned from Beethoven but used by Mahler with an uncanny skill. He builds, dismantles, and rebuilds the music even as we listen.

Mahler's scores brim with atypical and personal mark-

ings instructing conductor and musicians to pace themselves, not to arrive too quickly at a given musical moment, to take a step forward, a step back, two steps forward but now with more urgency. The slow, methodical building of musical tensions and climaxes, as well as the almost painful disintegrations of sound (as at the end of the Ninth Symphony) evoke both Mahler the knight-hero as depicted in Klimt's Beethoven Frieze, but also Mahler the prophet of death and herald of the end of the old order. Writing about Mahler as "musical prophet," Leonard Bernstein remarks in *The Unanswered Question* (1976):

What was it that Mahler saw? Three kinds of death. First, his own imminent death of which he was acutely aware. (The opening bars of this Ninth Symphony are an imitation of the arrhythmia of his failing heartbeat.) And second, the death of tonality, which for him meant the death of music itself, music as he knew it and loved it...and finally, his third and most important vision: the death of society, of our Faustian culture.

Mahler's First Symphony begins this long journey of personal discovery. Each Mahler symphony seems to ask basic existential questions, and to seek meaning and answers in a different place: nature, God, childhood, the hero, art, love, death. Mahler was twenty-seven when he completed the First Symphony, written between 1884 and 1888. He conducted the premiere in Budapest on November 20, 1889. As with most Mahler symphonies, the ideas for the work extend far back into the composer's earlier years, and the symphony was revised numerous times later on.

As mentioned above, the opening of the symphony seems to echo the idea of creation itself—a long, sustained "A" introduced by the strings. The note is both eerie and ethereal, a cosmic sound emerging from the void. From this rather

ominous opening, the symphony explores motifs drawn from earlier Mahler songs (*Songs of a Wayfarer*); Austrian folk dance, specifically the *Ländler*; the nursery tune “Frère Jacques, dormez-vous” (written as a funeral march); to the fourth movement, introduced by a cymbal crash, which Mahler described as the ascent from hell to heaven.

The First Symphony premiered in the United States on December 16, 1909, in Carnegie Hall. The Philharmonic Society of New York performed under the direction of Mahler himself, who was at the time music director of the orchestra.

Mahler in Fiction and Film

“...[Mahler’s] consumingly intense personality made the strongest impression upon me.”

—Thomas Mann

Gustav Mahler has lived in fiction and film from the moment of his actual death in 1911 until today. Author Thomas Mann (1875–1955) met him in 1910. He remarked that Mahler was the first truly great man he had ever met in person. After hearing a performance of the Eighth Symphony, Mann wrote to the composer praising him as “the man who, as I believe, expresses the art of our time in its profoundest and most sacred form.”

Much of the world was aware of Mahler’s failing heart and desire to return from America to Europe in April 1911. Newspapers kept a deathwatch on the composer as he landed in Paris and traveled on to Vienna. On May 18, 1911, while vacationing on the island of Brioni in the Adriatic, Mann received news of Mahler’s death. It seemed to many that a great man had just departed the earth. Several days later, on the Lido in Venice, Mann

began to write *Death in Venice*. In describing his protagonist, Gustav von Aschenbach, Mann had Mahler's features in mind:

Gustav von Aschenbach was of a somewhat less than medium height, dark, and clean-shaven. The head seemed a bit too large for the almost dainty physique. The hair brushed back, was thin at the crown but very thick and gray at the temples and framed a high, rugged, scarred-looking forehead. The gold frame of the rimless spectacles cut into the root of a strong, nobly aquiline nose: The mouth was large—now slack, now suddenly narrow and tight—the cheeks sunken and furrowed, the well-shaped chin slightly cleft.

The weight of Mahler's death resonates in Mann's final line from *Death in Venice*: "And before nightfall a shocked and respectful world received the news of his decease."

The film version of *Death in Venice* by the Italian director Luchino Visconti (1906–1976) opened in 1971. Visconti took many liberties with the original Mann novella in his adapted screenplay. Among the most important was to change Aschenbach from a writer to a composer, strengthening the ties to Mahler. Visconti wove Mahler's music, the Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony and excerpts from the Third Symphony, into the soundtrack. Visconti's use of the Adagietto helped create a new audience for Mahler's music in the later twentieth century.

Shortly after the appearance of Visconti's *Death in Venice*, the British director Ken Russell brought Mahler to the screen as well. In *Mahler* (1974), Russell tells Mahler's story through a combination of poignant scenes that ring true, coupled with hallucinatory fantasies that range from the bizarre, to the humorous, to the crass. This film, perhaps more than any other vehicle, may be responsible for popularizing Mahler's image for many who had never heard a note of his music.

More recently is Bruce Beresford's *Bride of the Wind* (2001). Taking its title from the painting by Oskar Kokoschka depicting his tortured relationship with Alma after her husband's death, Beresford's film is less about Mahler and more an exploration of the many famous loves of Alma—from Gustav Klimt to Alexander Zemlinsky (1871–1942) to Mahler, Kokoschka, Walter Gropius (1883–1969) and, finally, Franz Werfel (1890–1945).

Released last year is *Mahler auf der Couch* (*Mahler on the Couch*) (2010), a German/Austrian coproduction directed by Percy Adlon. The film chronicles the historic encounter in 1910 between Mahler and Sigmund Freud when the composer, learning of his wife's affair with Walter Gropius, sought counseling. For a more documentary-like film biography there is *Sterben werd' ich, um zu leben* (*Gustav Mahler: To Live, I Will Die*) (1987)—a German film directed by Wolfgang Lesowsky. Fin-de-siècle Vienna has also figured prominently in such films as *Klimt* (2006) directed by Raoul Ruiz.

The composer's legend continues to grow, as his music sustains us in yet another century. Mahler's love of irony is well served by the fact that for all his ruminations on death and the end of things, his music instills in all who discover it a sense of hope and new beginnings.

