Stuart Feder

**Gustav Mahler — A Life in Crisis**


Helga Coulter

It was a privilege to review this exceptional book, a biography of the composer and conductor Gustav Mahler (1860–1911). Mahler was a complex man, regarded by many as a genius, who lived and worked in an era doomed to die: the fine de siècle, the time of the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire.

Stuart Feder has made Mahler’s music accessible to the reader. Feder makes use of his skills as a psychoanalyst and a musical scholar to write the life in such a way that the music resonates with the emotional events which shaped Mahler life. Feder addresses the question:

> Can music be in some sense autobiographical? Gustav Mahler himself provided a partial answer, when, following the completion of his Second Symphony, he wrote: ‘My whole life is contained in my two symphonies. In them my whole life will become clear’ (p. 7).

In this book Mahler’s music is treated as an artistic expression, a transformation of an internal situation into something that is then available to others for exploration.

The book begins with Freud’s account of a meeting that took place in the summer of 1910, when a frightened and despairing Mahler went to Leiden in Holland to
have a consultation with Freud. It was a very stressful and emotional time for Mahler as his wife Alma, twenty years younger than him, was having an affair with the young architect Gropius. Mahler was gripped with the terror of abandonment and annihilation, a terror which he was psychologically ill equipped to deal with. Although having survived three earlier crises in his life, he was not destined to overcome this marital crisis of 1910. His tenth symphony would remain incomplete. He was dead within a year.

Feder casts Mahler as engaged in a multifaceted psychological romance with death—not only the fear but the fascination. This was consistent with the prevailing spirit at that time in Vienna, where life was infused with a sense of mortality. Gustav Mahler was born in the shadow of death. He was the second of altogether fourteen children, seven of whom died. He had witnessed childhood deaths when he was five, six, eleven, thirteen and nineteen. Casting a shadow overall was the legendary death of Isador, the first born child who died at the age of one of an unspecified accident. Next came Gustav, to replace his brother. By the time he came to Freud for help in 1910, his parents, multiple siblings and companions had died, gone mad, committed suicide or otherwise fallen by the wayside. He suffered not only his wife’s affair but also the death of his oldest daughter Putzi, at the age of five with scarlet fever in 1907, the same year when that Mahler was told of the congenital heart disease which would eventually claim his life.

Mahler’s preoccupation with death in his compositions began with his first, a ‘Polka withIntroductory Funeral March’, written when he was five or six years old. It continued with ‘Das klagende Lied’, the ‘Funeral March’ of the First Symphony; as well as the ‘Todtenfei’ of the Second, ‘Die Kindertotenlieder’ and ‘Das Lied von der Erde’. Of the latter Mahler said that it was the most personal thing that he had created. This composition was actually his ninth symphony, but his morbid fears prevented him from giving the symphony a number that neither Beethoven nor Bruckner had survived!

Mahler’s music is powerful. Graf, the father of the Little Hans in Freud’s case history, wrote of Mahler’s symphonies that:

They are huge symphonic mystery plays, starting from earth and climbing to heaven, where choruses of angels and the light of the Almighty hail the newcomer, while in the depth Death plays on a strident violin and hell screams. (p. 224)

The composer is depicted in this book as a complex and difficult personality, omnipotent and at times arrogant, creative and also childlike. Thomas Mann’s impression of his encounter with Mahler, at the premiere of the eighth symphony in 1910, was that ‘It was certainly the first time in my life that I had the impression of
meeting a truly great man’ (p. 249). Mahler was also fragile and vulnerable, and at
the time when he consulted Freud in Leinden, unable to bear the strains of the ter-
rors of abandonment and annihilation that he felt over Alma’s affair with Gropius.

The last piece of music Mahler conducted was ‘Berceuse Elegiaque’ by Busoni, the
‘Cradlesong at the Grave of My Mother’. There could not have been a more fitting
prelude to the end that followed three months later.

For me, Feder’s biography was a riveting read. Feder deals sensitively with Mahler’s
struggles to overcome his various life crises and with the music these crises gener-
ated as well as that which was generated out of the composer’s experience of enjoy-
ment. I learned that the soaring second theme of the first movement of Mahler’s
sixth symphony was intended as a representation of Alma, perhaps reflecting his
feelings of bursting with joy in the beginning of their relationship, a time when life
seemed stronger than death. Feder’s book is a rich and beautiful account of Mahl-
er’s complex and difficult life, of his music as well as of the times his life was lived.
At the same time, it is also a very moving story of the human spirit, its achieve-
ments, and its inevitable limitations.

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