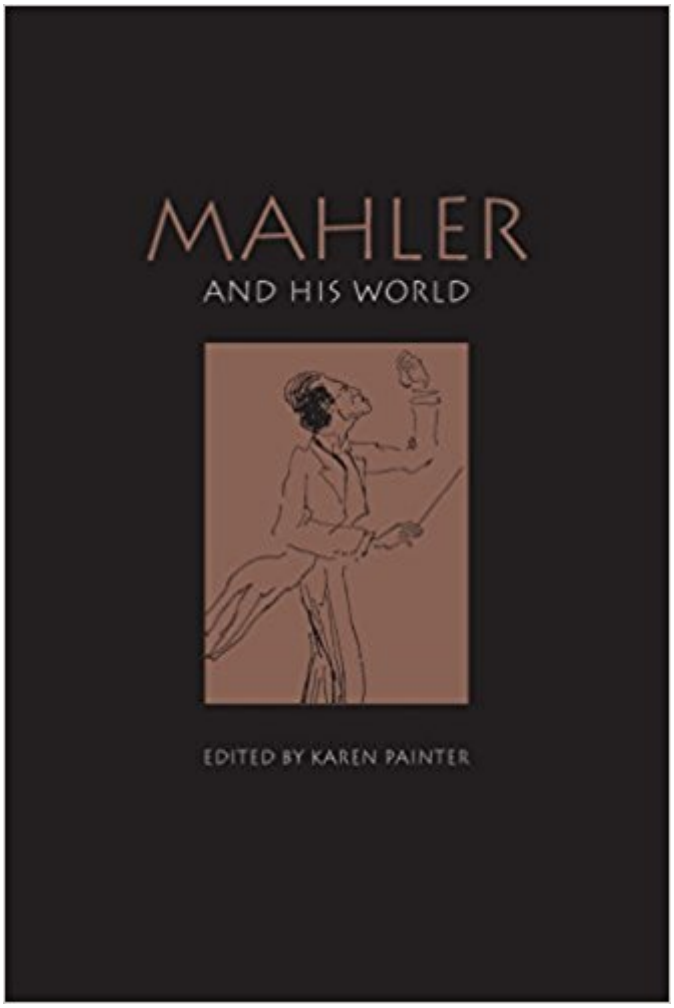
Mahler And His World (The Bard Music Festival)



Synopsis

From the composer’s lifetime to the present day, Gustav Mahler’s music has provoked extreme responses from the public and from experts. Poised between the Romantic tradition he radically renewed and the austere modernism whose exponents he inspired, Mahler was a consummate public persona and yet an impassioned artist who withdrew to his lakeside hut where he composed his vast symphonies and intimate song cycles. His advocates have produced countless studies of the composer’s life and work. But they have focused on analysis internal to the compositions, along with their programmatic contexts. In this volume, musicologists and historians turn outward to examine the broader political, social, and literary changes reflected in Mahler’s music. Peter Franklin takes up questions of gender, Talia Pecker Berio examines the composer’s Jewish identity, and Thomas Peattie, Charles S. Maier, and Karen Painter consider, respectively, contemporary theories of memory, the theatricality of Mahler’s art and fin-de-siÃƒÂ¨cle politics, and the impinging confrontation with mass society. The private world of Gustav Mahler, in his songs and late works, is explored by leading Austrian musicologist Peter Revers and a German counterpart, Camilla Bork, and by the American Mahler expert Stephen Hefling. Mahler’s symphonies challenged Europeans and Americans to experience music in new ways. Before his decision to move to the United States, the composer knew of the enthusiastic response from America’s urban musical audiences. Mahler and His World reproduces reviews of these early performances for the first time, edited by ZoÃƒÂ« Lang. The Mahler controversy that polarized Austrians and Germans also unfolds through a series of documents heretofore unavailable in English, edited by Painter and Bettina Varwig, and the terms of the debate are examined by Leon Botstein in the context of the late-twentieth-century Mahler revival.

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Customer Reviews

This is the 13th volume in an annual series, produced by the Bard Music Festival, that examines the cultural, political, and social contexts in which composers lived and worked. Harvard musicologist Painter begins by placing nine scholarly articles on Mahler into two large groupings: Part 1, "Context and Ideologies," and Part 2, "Analysis and Aesthetics." In the first section, Bard president Leon Botstein, also a noted conductor, provides an excellent, lengthy overview of the history of the critical response to Mahler's music in the 20th century. There are several other noteworthy articles in this section, including Talia Pecker Berio's article on Mahler and Judaism and Painter's own contribution on the legacy of the Eighth Symphony. In Part 2, Peter Bevers's analysis of the Kindertotenlieder and Stephen Hefling's "Aspects of Mahler's Late Style" are standout achievements. The latter is the only essay in the entire collection that requires knowledge of advanced music theory. Parts 3 and 4 deal with press notices of Mahler's work in American and German publications, respectively. Readers will enjoy comparing the relatively na ve comments made by American journalists 100 years ago with those of their more sophisticated colleagues in Germany and Austria. Painter herself, along with colleague Bettina Warvig, has provided excellent translations of the German reviews and obituaries. This is a valuable work for undergraduate and graduate collections.Larry Lipkis, Moravian Coll., Bethlehem, PA Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"The best thing in the [Bard Music] festival could have been enjoyed in the cool quiet of one's study: Ms. Painter's book. . . . The highlight is Mr. Botstein's own essay, a typically virtuosic riff on Theodor W. Adorno's book on Mahler. . . . But the book's other essays--on performance in late-19th-century Central Europe as a political statement on Mahle''s Jewishness, on gender issues and Ms. Painter's own discussion of the mass public gestures in Mahler's big works (especially the 'Symphony of a Thousand) and their connection to socialist cultural policy--are all worth reading. As are the musical analyses and the period reviews."--John Rockwell, The New York Times'"[A] valuable addition to the Mahler library."--BBC Music Magazine

I commend Mr. Zeidler for his excellent review and comments. This book should be read by anyone

interested in Mahler, or in 20th Century music and culture.

What can be better than a journal which comes out of a scholarly gathering?

Published last year (2002) were two significant resources on Gustav Mahler. One of these - a paperback edition of Donald Mitchell's "The Mahler Companion" - has already been appraised by me, and found to be a superb "companion." The other is this Festschrift volume, edited by Karen Painter, the "published" part of the 2002 Bard Music Festival celebrating Mahler.The Mitchell and Painter books are similar in some respects, in that both contain essays by expert Mahlerians incorporating good historical/musicological research. But there are also differences, making the books complementary. Where the Mitchell book is broad, with chapters covering all of Mahler's works, the Painter book is more tightly focused, with fewer essays on a narrower range of topics. Part of the appeal of this Painter book is the inclusion of reprints of a vast array of historic criticism that provides an understanding of how Mahler was perceived and received during his lifetime.Painter's book is worth having for Leon Botstein's lead-off essay ("Whose Gustav Mahler?") alone. A virtuosic work, it earns separate commentary later. But first, briefer comments about some of the book's other strong points.The first section (CONTEXT AND IDEOLOGIES) contains two fascinating essays that are closely related: Charles S. Maier's "Mahler's Theater: The Performative and the Political in Central Europe, 1890-1910" and Karen Painter's "The Aesthetics of Mass Culture: Mahler's Eighth Symphony and Its Legacy." The thrust of the Maier essay leads naturally into the Painter one.Working backwards, there are two well-known facts regarding Mahler's Eighth Symphony. The first is that his Eighth Symphony doesn't fit into any convenient scheme for allocating his symphonies by style and content; the Eighth Symphony is a "sui generis" work, powerful in its effect but somewhat baffling in terms of its rightful place in his symphonic canon. The second is that the premiere of the work, in Munich in 1910, was a highly-promoted event, one of the most significant and certainly one of the best documented musical events of the 20th century.Maier sets the cultural stage that made such a work not only possible but perhaps inevitable as well. It is a fact that music and drama became stages for the "politicization of culture" in the late Habsburg Empire of Mahler's time. This was an empire on the imminent verge of collapse; a manifestation of this imminency was that political parties of every stripe seized upon culture (including music) for their individualistic ends.Mahler was, inevitably, swept up into this politico-cultural maelstrom, both as conductor and as composer. What he performed at the Vienna Court Opera, and when and why, helps to understand both his political leanings (mildly leftist-Socialist) and, at least in part, his

possible motivations for composing hia Eighth Symphony: As a gift to the Austrian people so that they could participate, to his way of thinking, in this "political elevation" of "music as mass culture." And participate they did: Not only was the Munich premiere a cultural phenomenon for its (or any) time, but the work, as political culture, was, for a period, co-opted by both the left and the right. Had Mahler not been Jewish, one can only shudder at how National Socialists might have co-opted the work for their own political ends, a fearsome thought left dangling in Painter's essay.The final section (MAHLER'S GERMAN-LANGUAGE CRITICS) contains many gems translated into English for the first time. Covering his career as composer and conductor, from sources both friendly and hostile, we get a fuller glimpse of how Mahler was assessed in his own time. The reviews (and obituaries as well) come from all four points of the critical compass: favorable and informed, uncritically favorable and thus critically useless, hostile and critically off-target, and hostile but with an informed understanding. This is as evenly balanced as such an anthology could be.The fourth category brings us full circle, to Botstein's bravura (but challenging) essay. He posits that hostile but informed commentary was the "jumping-off" point for Theodor Adorno's writings on Mahler. To borrow from Botstein, Mahler might best be understood through the lens of his most dedicated critics; "informed hostility can reveal more acutely than deferential praise the character and virtues of the music."Botstein's own jumping-off point is a search for an explanation for the enduring interest in Mahler's music. The initial upsurge in interest that began, largely, with Leonard Bernstein very publically championing Mahler, today, nearly a half-century later, shows no sign of slowing, and is in fact increasing, with no obvious end in sight. How, then, to explain the phenomenon?A key Botstein point is that the 1960s brought us more than Bernstein and a renaissance of performances and and a flood of recordings; it also marked the emergence of Adorno's contributions to "Mahlerology" with the publication of his "Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy." By using "negation" (his cramped "negative dialectics") to "invert" the arguments of Mahler's harshest critics, Adorno found not only "fault lines" in their analyses but totally fresh, if idiosyncratic, insights into characterizing Mahler's music.A uniquely Adorno insight (in fact, a chapter in his book) was that Mahler was to composing what Flaubert was to writing, with "Madame Bovary" as an exemplary case. Botstein takes this further by suggesting that the novel as perfected by Flaubert served as a written vessel into which the reader could pour himself proactively, as if a protagonist, and that there are clear parallels to this proactivity when listening to Mahler's music.This is a provocative thought: The listener as active participant. But in a way it was preordained when Mahler eschewed descriptive programs while writing music of some "vernacularity" and ambiguity about that vernacularity. This leaves open the door to our "individuating" our responses to Mahler's music (something which, as Botstein makes clear, is not

possible for the programmatic music of Richard Strauss, an obvious counterexample).A thoughtful and challenging essay, and a very worthwhile book.Bob Zeidler

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