Introduction

Mahler: Centenary Commentaries on Musical Meaning

Jeremy Barham
University of Surrey

This edition of *Nineteenth-Century Music Review,* commemorating the centenary year of Mahler's death, is devoted to reassessing theories and practices in the critical understanding of his music and its signifying properties. It offers revisory responses to questions of interpretation that have persistently surrounded the composer's output and activities since the time of their first public dissemination, shaping and reconfiguring over a century of reception-historical frameworks. Mapping critical stances or methodological premises on to continuing developments in recent musicological discourse, the contributions explore, critique and rethink grammars and dispositions of Mahlerian inquiry through their contextual-analytical substructures and interpretative readings of the music – whether historical, socio-cultural, aesthetic, philosophical, literary or structural in orientation.

Julian Johnson offers reassessment of the idea of the broken, fragmented, modernist voice of Mahler, taking his cue from Adorno's well-known critique. Concerned with Mahler's promise but denial of subjective integrity, his desire for, but problematizing of, unity and closure, his self-conscious artificiality alongside a deep-seated sincerity, and the diversity of his symphonic 'voices', Johnson here pursues the less well-charted territory of rupture in the very sound fabric of Mahler's music. He locates this as a material aspect of the musical voice, counter-intuitive to certain prevailing tendencies in the reception of the ultra-lyrical and expressive Mahler, but nevertheless a fundamental indicator of the possibility and presence of the 'aphonic' in the midst of the symphonic – a condition of musical utterance prior to higher-level considerations of form and genre. Johnson places these Mahlerian musical strategies in the novel context of literary networks embracing Joyce, Beckett and Fritz Mauthner, the Jewish, Bohemian-born author of *Beiträge zu eine Kritik der Sprache*, whose principal theme was to explore the inadequacy of language through language-use itself. Mauthner's preoccupation with the 'unsayable' challenges the functions of language, suggesting a condition of speechlessness to which the operations in Mahler's music frequently seem to be aspiring, in order that such loss of voice may be acknowledged, even cherished, and new modes of utterance contemplated, re-constituted and attempted.

John Williamson rethinks the issue of fragments, an increasingly important structural feature of the later works of Mahler, specifically in relation to the final movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, and more widely in terms of the composer's contextualization within the culture of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, a recurrent theme in Mahler studies of which the essay offers a timely reassessment. Williamson begins

by examining the concurrence of putatively exotic and traditionally Western (pentatonic and chromatic) pitch collections in the work, as an instance of a historically marked preoccupation among several of Mahler's contemporaries. In 'Der Abschied' the recourse to pentatonicism is countered by a melodic style filled with Western conventions of turn, appoggiatura, mordent and the antique *nota cambiata*, the last of which emerges as a particularly pliable means of creating melodic tension, extension and cohesion. As such, Williamson suggests that Mahler's adherence to older, Western means of the structural integration of fragments should not be neglected in a critical framework that has generally favoured notions of modernist, exoticist alienating techniques. Refining and ultimately diverging from Adorno's contextualizing comments, Williamson considers the type of cultural landscape evoked by *Das Lied von der Erde*. Calling initially on Raff's Symphony no. 7 'In den Alpen', Williamson rethinks connections between Mahler and New German examples of symphonic nature or mountain music. With reference to Goethe, Tieck and Heine he reassesses 'Der Abschied''s fragmentary commentary on the romantic wanderer topos. In light of the Schorskean paradigmatic account of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, Williamson's essay questions the historical and critical discourse of modernism itself, just as Mahler's work occupies a crucial and hesitant position at the intersection of various fragmentary cultural and structural points of origin in the glow and afterglow of romanticism.

Ryan Kangas re-evaluates the critical dialectic of simplicity/genuineness/ authenticity v. sophistication/artificiality/inauthenticity that has surrounded the reception of Mahler's Fourth Symphony since its first performance in 1901. He dissects and analyses afresh the trope of nostalgia in order to provide a more detailed and rigorous application of its meaning for the work than has hitherto been the case. Nostalgia is seen to create or embody psychological divisions where perceived absence and longed-for presence rebel particularly against the inevitability of time's passing. Though inadequate, memory is the primary means of reconnecting with what is no more. But the attempt to reconnect with a past takes place from a present which entirely determines the nature and meaning of what is recollected. In other words, past and present are symbiotically related. More than that, as nostalgic utterance, certain aspects of the music in Mahler's Fourth acknowledge a return to a non-existent past, a past that never truly was. Kangas finds an analogue to this state of affairs in the classic work of '(im)memory', Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Calling on a diverse network of further cultural referents embracing James Pierpont, Dostoyevsky, Walter Benjamin, and Andreas Huyssen, Kangas makes the case that the complex of evocative semantic associations sparked by Mahler's use of sleigh bells in the opening and closing movements of the Symphony both invokes and threatens ideas of childhood and the utopian quest for lost paradises.

Robert Samuels explores literary analogues and their structural homologies in Mahler's symphonic processes. He traces the composer's development in terms of a threefold engagement with narrative organization and inspiration: the 'finale problem' of the First Symphony and the idea of the transformational journey in the works of Jean Paul; redemptive narrative in Dostoyevsky and the middle-period symphonies; and problems of time, memory and endings in the Ninth Symphony, Musil and Proust. The unfolding of Samuels's discussion itself reveals a narrative of intellectual relationships, leading from Mahler's early historical backward glances to the literary world of the turn of the nineteenth century, through his identification with the novel of the 'mature' nineteenth century, to

the contemporaneity and prospective nature of his affinities with a burgeoning cultural modernism.

Jeremy Barham offers a linguistic-conceptual critique of methodological and philosophical ambiguities in Adorno's approach to Mahler, demonstrating how the process of translation, and the vocabulary used to interpret these ambiguities, determine or blur conceptual frames of critique and understanding. He locates the fundamental paradox of Adorno's approach in its attempt simultaneously to maintain discourses of epistemological commensurability and hermeneutic incommensurability. This, together with Adorno's prioritizing of the authorial production of the 'object' over the contingency of reception as determinant of meaning, prompts Barham to enlist the pragmatist philosophy of Richard Rorty and aspects of translation theory in order to address the world of Mahlerian meaning beyond that embraced by Adorno: namely, the 50 years of the music's usage in screen works since the 1960s – its post-Adornian 'counterlife' (a term adopted from novelist Philip Roth).

As a Rortyan 'colligation of hitherto unrelated texts', screen use of Mahler's music invites a re-descriptive process that can account for the 'overt' and 'covert' acts of translation whereby such texts shift discourse worlds, are recontextualized, and encourage a 'reweaving' of our 'fabric of belief' in relation to music and the moving image, and individual Mahler and screen works. Examples are discussed that invoke, subvert or pay no heed to the legacy of Visconti's *Death in Venice*. Screen appropriation of the Mahlerian 'moment' suggests differing levels of re-description, from pre-composed music assuming the nature and techniques of a conventional underscore, through the fetishizing of the synecdochal fragment, to the engendering of desire for the original whole. The article concludes by considering two examples of more radical semantic re-configuring in which Mahler's music is closely implicated in overtly sexual and socio-political contexts.