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GUSTAV MAHLER

An Introduction to his Music

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MAHLER AS MAN AND ARTIST

THE belated recognition of Mahler as one of the great symphonists is among the most remarkable features of our post-war musical life. To understand why it was so long delayed, we must get a clear historical perspective. Mahler, born in 1860, belonged to the generation of Sibelius and Richard Strauss; but he died in 1911, aged only fifty, whereas Strauss died in 1949, aged eighty-five, and Sibelius in 1957, aged ninety-one.

During their long lives, these two composers saw their music overcome early opposition to its 'modernity' and enter the normal concert repertory. Sibelius, the independent, is recognized in this country as an outstanding figure in twentieth-century music; this is largely due to the persistent advocacy of conductors, notably Bantock, Wood and Beecham, for in countries where his music has found no conductor-advocate, musical opinion has never caught up with him. Strauss, the last great romantic, is recognized everywhere as a leading composer of the twentieth century; the advocate largely responsible for this was he himself, though his music was soon taken up by conductors the world over. Thus Strauss and Sibelius have been familiar for half a century, and are now inevitably suffering from the swing of fashion: in an age which has repudiated its immediate predecessors, they are being written off by the characteristic contemporary musician – rather prematurely, one feels.

The case of Mahler is entirely different. In many ways more forward-looking then either Strauss or Sibelius, he encountered much stronger opposition; nevertheless, he was winning his cause as a composer with his own baton, when death cut off his promised development into a twentieth-century figure. His music was eventually accepted in Vienna, due to the advocacy of his disciple Bruno Walter; in Holland and Belgium it is extremely popular – a legacy of the Mahler festivals given by Willem Mengelberg; and in America, since Bruno Walter settled there, it has won favour. But elsewhere,

until recently, it found no persistent advocate, and consequently no recognition.

In England, Sir Henry Wood presented four of the symphonies before 1914, but this small seed did not take root. The war intervened, and Mahler became a forgotten 'lesser romantic'. In the twenties, the critics, full of the new English school and the new anti-romantic reaction, began to attack Wagner and Strauss; they could hardly damage the reputation of these composers, but they did prevent any further Germanic romantics from being accepted. When the enthusiasm of a conductor (usually Wood) brought a Mahler symphony to performance, the press mainly voiced the spirit of the age, dismissing the work with contempt. Understandably, few concert promoters cared to engage huge forces to perform works too unpopular to guarantee an adequate box-office return – yet how could they become popular unless they were frequently performed? Mahler's name disappeared into musical dictionaries, usually heading an ill-informed, derogatory article.

This situation persisted until the end of the last war. But since then, Mahler's music has become more generally available, thanks to the BBC, the recording companies, the growing advocacy of conductors, and the open-minded attitude of a new generation of critics; and it has captured the public imagination, drawing full houses and receiving prolonged ovations. Of whom does this public consist? Largely of ordinary music-lovers, who enjoy great music, whether by Bach, Mahler or Stravinsky, once they have the chance to discover it; and of young musicians who, unaffected by the dated polemics of anti-romanticism, are prepared to judge a 'romantic' composer on his merits. This growing recognition of Mahler's stature is also moving forward in Germany and Spain, and beginning even in France and Italy. Mahler, widely scoffed at in his own day, declared, firm in the conviction of his genius: 'My time will come'. It seems that it *has* come – a hundred years after his birth, and nearly fifty years after his death.

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A contributory factor has been the favourable attitude of certain modern composers. Some, like Schoenberg, Berg and Britten, have expressed unstinted admiration; but others have given only qualified approval, admitting Mahler's status as an important historical figure. Aaron Copland, for example, in *Our New Music* (1941), sees clearly the paradox that of all the romantics, this arch-romantic 'had most to give to the music of the future'. He says: 'Two facets of his musicianship were years in advance of his time. One was the curiously contrapuntal fabric of the musical texture, the other, more obvious, his strikingly original instrumentation. Viewed properly, these two elements are really connected. It was because his music was so contrapuntally conceived . . . that his instrumentation possesses that sharply-etched and clarified sonority that may be heard again in the music of later composers. . . . Unusual combinations of instruments, sudden unexpected juxtapositions of sonorities,