

## BOOK REVIEWS

Stephen McClatchie, ed., *The Mahler Family Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). 440 pp. \$65

Throughout his peripatetic career, from the early 1880s until his death in 1911, Gustav Mahler wrote regularly to his parents and five younger siblings. Over 500 of these letters – passed down from Mahler's sister, Justine Rosé, to her son, and donated by his widow to the University of Western Ontario – have been published for the first time in *The Mahler Family Letters*. Though tedious at times, Stephen McClatchie's meticulously edited collection will reward patient readers, and deserves a place alongside other canonical volumes of Mahler's correspondence.<sup>1</sup>

*The Mahler Family Letters* begins with a preface on the letters' provenance and McClatchie's methodology in dating and translating them, followed by a cogent introductory essay about Mahler's immediate family and closest friends. The letters are then presented chronologically, and divided into five chapters, each spanning a significant period in Mahler's conducting career. Each chapter is helpfully preceded by a timeline of major events pertinent to the letters that follow. Throughout the book, McClatchie's scrupulous annotation includes excerpts from letters that Justine wrote to her friend, Ernestine Löhr, which corroborate and expand upon the circumstances surrounding Mahler's letters. The book also contains a dozen photographs of Mahler's family, biographical notes for key figures discussed in the letters, and a detailed index.

While this anthology serves as a valuable addendum – and, in some cases, corrective<sup>2</sup> – to the extensive literature on Mahler's life and work, it does not bring to light any overwhelmingly new information. The book does, however, offer a fascinating and substantive look at the nature of Mahler's seminal relationships: most notably, his relationship to (or sense of) himself, his relationship with Justine, and his relationships with other musicians of his day.

Mahler's complicated self-image is particularly evident from letters written at the high points of his professional life. His first major success occurs in 1888, with his completion of Carl Maria von Weber's unfinished opera *Die drei Pintos*. After the premiere, an elated Mahler writes to his parents: 'from this day on I am a man of *world renown*' (p. 46). Nearly ten years later, when Mahler attains his ultimate career goal, the directorship of the Vienna Hofoper, he tells Justine

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<sup>1</sup> In 1924, Mahler's widow, Alma Mahler-Werfel, published his letters in *Gustav Mahler: Briefe, 1879–1911*, which has since appeared in two updated editions: Knud Martner's *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), and Herta Blaukopf's *Gustav Mahler Briefe* (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay, 1982; rev. 1996). Blaukopf has also compiled Mahler's unknown letters in *Gustav Mahler Unbekannte Briefe* (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay, 1983). Mahler's letters to Alma were published by Henry-Louis de La Grange and Günther Weiß as *Ein Glück ohne Ruh': die Briefe Gustav Mahlers an Alma* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1995). In addition, some of his correspondence with prominent friends and contemporaries has been anthologized; see n. 5.

<sup>2</sup> As McClatchie notes in the introduction, Alma Mahler-Werfel's books on her life with Mahler 'are fascinating and frustrating monuments of self-aggrandisement and self-justification ... riddled with errors, distortions, and self-serving depictions of events' (p. 13).

'I am in *fact* the all-powerful director' (p. 322), and 'the journey to Calvary (the director's chair) has reached its final station. – I have already borne the entire cross of the directorship' (p. 323).

The extravagant, triumphant tone in these letters speaks to a quality found throughout the book: Mahler's view of himself as a tenacious warrior on behalf of his own artistic ambitions and ideals. As he writes to Justine in an undated letter, 'life is truly no joke for a man like me, who has to scrape and tussle through life and, wounded, conquer every foot of ground'.<sup>3</sup> Each conducting engagement is cast as a power struggle, in which Mahler must win over the musicians. In 1897, speaking of the orchestra in Munich, he tells Justine 'they are all now once again on my side!' (p. 303). Of a 1907 stint with the orchestra in St Petersburg, he says to her 'I have them firmly twisted around my little finger' (p. 384).

Mahler's perpetually embattled outlook is inextricably tied to his prized status as an iconoclast. Though he longed for, and eventually gained, acceptance into the highest echelons of the European musical establishment, he also clearly took pleasure in his often adversarial relationship with musicians, audiences and critics. In 1885, on the eve of conducting Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in Prague, the city where the great work was premiered, Mahler proudly writes to his parents: 'The newspapers – mainly the *Tagblatt* – will probably tear me to pieces, for I predict that they will all cry "Oh! Oh! 'Tradition' has gone to the devil!" ... I have been concerned with none of this, and tonight I will calmly follow my *own* path' (p. 24). Elsewhere, he adopts the tone of a mischievous provocateur, writing to Justine at the outset of the 1901 season in Vienna: 'I am already stirring up the waves and the kettle is already cooking and sizzling' (p. 349).

Mahler's relationship with Justine, as it emerges in *The Mahler Family Letters*, is of similar depth and complexity. His letters to her suggest that she by turns fulfilled the roles of child, best friend and spouse in his life. The tone of Mahler's correspondence varies accordingly, as evidenced by three different letters from 1892. For instance, in a characteristically paternalistic vein, Mahler proclaims 'your current *hair style* is decidedly wrong for you – which I hereby declare again most conclusively!' (p. 148). On another occasion, he insists on a degree of intimacy more appropriate to friendship, counselling Justine that 'the best thing to do is sit down and simply pour out your heart to me, as to one of your *girlfriends!*' (p. 159). And in a letter inquiring after Justine's progress in securing summer lodgings for the family, Mahler asks his sister to 'deal with it as a housewife' (p. 155).

Both Mahler and his sister were married in 1902 (he to Alma Schindler, she to Arnold Rosé), a development that introduced new tensions into their relationship. However, the correspondence from the period immediately preceding their respective unions constitutes one of the most touching passages in *The Mahler Family Letters*. Thanks to the fortuitous survival of several important letters from Justine to her brother – McClatchie writes in the introduction that Justine, 'always acutely conscious of her brother's place in history, must have kept copies of them' (p. 13) – the reader is privy to both sides of an exchange in which

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<sup>3</sup> This statement is echoed in a striking remark that Mahler made about his compositions, recorded by Natalie Bauer-Lechner: 'A splendid example for creative people is Jacob, who struggles with God until He blesses him ... God also does not want to bless me; only in frightful struggle over the existence of my works do I wrest it from Him.' Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, trans. Dika Newlin, ed. Peter Franklin (London: Faber, 1980): 76.

Mahler implores his sister for a candid assessment of his new love interest, Alma Schindler. Justine's reply underscores the extent of her devotion to Mahler:

For me, it comes down to a few things that I only repeat again and again: that she is good, and that she loves you, for then you can mould her as you have already moulded me ... I am entirely happy about your behaviour towards me and my affair, [and] that you also feel that we could never become lost to one another and will always remain the truest of friends. For your happiness, your peace, I could sacrifice everything ... Your wife will not be able to help but love you passionately; you already compel everyone to do so, man and woman. (p. 364–5)

The reader also gains valuable insight into Mahler's relationships with his contemporaries in the music world. Two examples, in particular, highlight Mahler's conflicting allegiances to the past and future of music.<sup>4</sup> In a letter from 1890, Mahler glows with pride over Johannes Brahms's praise of his conducting, telling Justine 'from Brahms, this really means something, because he belongs completely to the old school' (p. 94). In contrast, Mahler suggests in an 1894 letter to Justine that his friendship with Richard Strauss<sup>5</sup> – a frequent supporter who Mahler refers to as 'my only friend among the gods' – is limited by Mahler's more modern sensibilities:

I would be lying, however, if I were to say that many points of contact arose between us. – More and more I see that I stand entirely alone among present-day musicians. Our goals diverge. From my point of view, I can only see everywhere either old-classical or New-German pedantry. Hardly has Wagner been recognised and understood when yet again the priests of the only accepted true faith come forth and surround the whole terrain with fortresses against real life, which thus always consists of the fact that one always reshapes the Old (even if it is greater and more significant than the New) and creates it anew out of the necessity of the moment. Strauss in particular is just such a Pope! But, at any rate, a likeable chap, insofar as I could discern. (p. 257)

*The Mahler Family Letters* is not without its drawbacks, the most prominent of which are its pages upon pages of letters dealing with the most mundane, day-to-day matters. As the myriad entries for 'money and siblings' and 'health of' under Mahler's name in the index attest, a considerable portion of the book is given over to the minutiae of family finances and health issues. Mahler is plagued by haemorrhoids ('my intrusive guests'; p. 263) – the condition leads to a near-fatal haemorrhage in February 1901, not mentioned in these letters – and, in his later years, by 'my inseparable friend, a migraine' (p. 296). This is to say nothing of Mahler's preoccupation with his digestion; the subject receives at least passing mention in a majority of these letters.

The dilemma of whether or not to include such trivial information is inherent to the 'collected letters' genre. In opting for completeness, McClatchie may push

<sup>4</sup> In his essay, 'Gustav Mahler: Formation and Transformation', historian Carl Schorske characterizes the dichotomy as follows: 'As conductor, his task was to preserve and invigorate [the classical tradition], a task in which he deeply believed. As composer, he aspired to construct a picture of the world true to his modern experience.' Carl Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 172.

<sup>5</sup> Mahler's correspondence with Richard Strauss is documented in Herta Blaukopf's *Gustav Mahler–Richard Strauss Briefwechsel 1888–1911* (Munich: R. Piper, 1980).

his audience past the tipping point between reading his book and consigning it to the bookshelf (or library) for occasional reference. That said, McClatchie's comprehensive approach seems eminently reasonable, especially given that the book is not unduly long. Moreover, as musicologist Morten Solvik observes on the book's back cover, 'it is precisely the quotidian that communicates with sometimes startling immediacy the life and personality of this remarkable human being'. Indeed, by providing a new window onto Mahler's relationships to himself and others, *The Mahler Family Letters* offers a richly textured and, at times, unexpectedly moving portrait of Mahler.

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David Kopp, *Chromatic Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). 292 pp. \$95

This book belongs to the growing collection of works that takes as its basis historical theories to explain the growing importance of chromaticism in nineteenth-century music. David Kopp's volume is distinguished from those of other contemporary analysts because it not only examines a multitude of theoretical writings from the eighteenth through to the late twentieth century but also uses many of them to devise an analytical system with a well-designed theoretical foundation and a series of practical musical applications.

The book's first chapter introduces two wide-ranging premises. First (and perhaps most important), he proposes that nineteenth-century music rarely conforms to our diatonic analytical models. This is in part due to the four varieties of chromatic mediant: the Lower Flat Mediant (from B $\flat$  major to G $\flat$  major), the Lower Sharp Mediant (B $\flat$  major to G major), the Upper Flat Mediant (B $\flat$  major to D $\flat$  major), and the Upper Sharp Mediant (B $\flat$  major to D major). Despite their regular occurrence in music from the time of Beethoven onward, chromatic mediants do not conform to the fifth-based harmonic theories that inform our current analytical market and thus have 'often been interpreted as a sign of weakness or inferiority in the music itself rather than due to any inappropriateness of the model' (p. 1). Chromatic mediants are a focal point of the chapters that follow, and this study both embraces the analytical quandary and provides an extensive argument for why these elements must become members of our analytical systems. Second, this study hinges on the concept of Function, an often confusing term that roughly equates to harmonic meaning. The opening chapter defines the elements that contribute to the meaning – or function – of a harmonic progression, including a combination of (but not limited to) motion by diatonic semitones, root relationships, preferably by perfect fifth, tritone resolutions, and common tones (p. 7). What makes this discussion important is its claim that chromatic mediants (and chromatic chords of any sort) have functional implications, something that, as Kopp details later in the book, is an issue that nineteenth-century theorists clearly recognized, while many present-day theorists do not.

Chapter 2 provides three examples of chromatic mediant relations in Schubert's music. In the analyses, chromatic mediants are not only chord relationships but also modulatory goals. Included in the chapter are Kopp's perspectives on the works (*Der Musensohn*, *Die Sterne* and the Piano Sonata in B $\flat$ , D. 960), as well