



Mahler and Freud: Understanding Mahler

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In the summer of 1910, Mahler's life was in crisis. His wife Alma was having a passionate affair with the architect Walter Gropius [\[1\]](#).

Mahler was exhausted and sick. From 1907, he had been suffering from a heart condition, which Alma described as a 'virtual death sentence.' He was still haunted by the death of his young daughter, Maria from scarlet fever in August 1907. Mahler was constantly dwelling on the past: his troubled upbringing, his feeling of being an outsider, religion, and death. He was also wearied by a lack of public understanding of his music and battered by the politics and workload of being the world's leading conductor. These tensions, which were essential ingredients and topics for his music, were wrecking his marriage and Alma suggested that he consult Sigmund Freud.

Mahler sent Freud a letter asking for a consultation, which was duly arranged. Mahler cancelled three times, finally agreeing to meet Freud in Leiden in Holland whilst both were on their summer holidays. Mahler was writing his 10th Symphony and left his summerhouse in Toblach to travel to Holland where Freud was on holiday with his family. The two met at a hotel so Mahler was not to sit back on Freud's famous consulting couch! Instead, the two went for a four-hour walk. Despite both living in Vienna, this was their only meeting.

Freud was impressed with Mahler's understanding of psychoanalysis. This should come as no surprise as Mahler was extremely well read and his music displays an incredible self-awareness: an understanding of his own mind, emotions and how these relate to the world around him. Both men were from the same cultural environment, and both were Jewish. Mahler and Freud were ground-breaking, internationally renowned figures in their respective fields and both understood what it meant to be an outsider in an increasingly anti-Semitic world. Both were family men yet had complicated relationships with women. Both were self-obsessed.

Here the similarities end. Freud was no great lover of music and famously only ever enjoyed Mozart's Zauberflöte. Music was Mahler's life.

Perhaps the reason why Mahler cancelled his initial meetings with Freud was that he felt he knew his own mind and as a leading conductor, was used to being a strong leader. As a public figure, his emotions were unleashed in his conducting and composition: his life revolved around music. He had to be disciplined, self-critical and focused to be a great musician - he had no need for external analysis. Mahler's domestic life was organized around him and his work but his obsession with work was a factor that had contributed to a crisis in his marriage.

Another contributing factor was that Gustav Mahler was much older than his wife. Gustav Mahler met Alma Schindler [\[2\]](#) in November 1901. Alma was a promising composer studying with Alexander von Zemlinsky [\[3\]](#). Beautiful, clever, and young, Gustav Mahler was besotted. Mahler was one of the most famous musicians in Vienna as Music Director of the Vienna Court Opera and although twenty years her senior and with reservations from both families, he married Alma on 9th March 1902. Although they were clearly deeply in love, Alma soon became fundamental to organizing a domestic life that could enable Gustav to compose and conduct: her own aspirations to be a composer were put on hold to focus her energies on her husband.

All these conflicting elements conspired together to overwhelm Mahler and the summer of 1910 was breaking point. Mahler discussed these elements with Freud, and he came away feeling much better. Alma Mahler describes in her book *Gustav Mahler - Memories and Letters* how her husband realized that he had lived his life as 'a neurotic' and decided to consult Freud. She also describes how the meeting calmed him down [\[4\]](#).

Another account, relayed by Freud to his disciple, Maria Bonaparte, illuminates Mahler's music. Freud recalled that Mahler had discussed an incident from his childhood during their walk. Mahler recalled a fierce argument between his father and mother and ran from their house into the street, where a man playing a popular Viennese air on a hurdy-gurdy, transfixed him. Mahler felt that this incident had prevented him from writing a truly great melody or theme as he always felt the need of undermining his melodies with 'common' elements such as folk, Jewish, and military music. He blamed this incident for turning his music into parody. Perhaps this tells us something of Mahler's own insecurity about his music, which is so much about him and his relationship to the world. But it is this mixture of high tragedy combined with these ironic references that have in part led some to see Mahler's music as kitsch, bringing the common place into art.

Take for example, the third movement of the First Symphony 'The Titan.' Here Mahler uses the nursery rhyme *Frère Jacques* as the opening theme. Instead of being in its usual major key, the nursery rhyme is heard in D minor. To emphasise the gloominess of the opening, Mahler uses instruments with a dark timbre: a solo double bass, a bassoon, and a tuba. With the oscillating ostinato in the timpani and harp - the nursery rhyme has been turned into a funeral dirge.

In Austria, *Frère Jacques* - a call to matins for a sleepy monk - is entitled *Brüder Martin* [\[5\]](#) and can be interpreted as satire about Martin Luther torn between his Catholic religion and his radical protestant ideas.

Mahler is using this music ironically: he converted to Catholicism to conform although he was Jewish. This is affirmed later in the movement where the music is overtly Jewish and uses Klezmer style writing in the clarinet. There is a conflict between these different types of music, and this is integral to the music rather than surface kitsch or pastiche.

This movement has many layers and is more than just a funeral march. Mahler is fusing together and juxtaposing different musical elements and styles to create a parody that is both serious and ironic.

After the meeting with Freud, Alma stopped seeing Walter Gropius (or at least kept her liaisons very secretive) and Mahler encouraged and praised her compositions. His annotations in the manuscript of the unfinished 10th Symphony are an open love letter to Alma and the meeting seems to have reminded Gustav of why he loved his wife. Freud had helped stabilize their relationship until Mahler's death in 1911.

After Mahler's death, Alma was to eventually marry Walter Gropius and was to have a daughter; Manon Gropius who like Maria Mahler was to die tragically young. Manon was to become the muse and dedicatee of the Alban Berg Violin Concerto (1935) dedicated 'To the memory of an Angel.' Ironically, Freud also forgot to bill Mahler for his consultation and was to somewhat tactlessly, send the bill to Alma in 1911, a few weeks after Mahler had died on 18th May 1911.

It was Mahler's early life that was to have a decisive influence on his musical outlook. Born in 1860, he was raised in Bohemia the second of fourteen children. Death was a common feature of his early years. Gustav was one of fourteen Mahler children of whom only 6 were to survive into adulthood. His early years were spent in an atmosphere rich music of different types: folk song, military bands, popular, art music and Jewish music. All these elements he absorbed and incorporated into his later compositions. His talents as a pianist were recognized as a teenager and he was sent to Vienna to study at the conservatory in 1875 eventually switching to composition.

The Piano Quartet in A minor of 1876 was a work he wrote whilst a student - his only surviving piece of chamber music. The work shows the influence of the German Romantics - Bruckner, Schumann, Brahms, Weber and Wagner. The first movement is the only complete movement - only a further 25 bars exist of a scherzo [\[6\]](#).

The movement is in ternary sonata form and has a clear and uncomplicated structure. The exposition begins with a brooding introduction, that has two main themes: the first, an ominous melody in the left hand of the piano and second, a theme in the strings which has Mahler's fingerprint: a perfect fourth followed by a scale. The music is compact and tightly constructed. The development whips the opening theme up into frenzy with many virtuosic passages in the piano. The recapitulation unusually includes a violin cadenza, which is highly chromatic and sounds like gypsy music in the context of the rest of the movement: an early example of

Mahler using the 'commonplace' in high art. There are fingerprints that are recognizably Mahler's, but this is a work of an adolescent rather than a master.

Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen was Mahler's first great work. Composed in 1884, Mahler was in love with a singer Johanna Richter and the texts of these songs are based on his favorite collection of poems, Das Knaben Wunderhorn. 'Songs of a Wayfarer' or 'songs of a Traveling Journeyman' were emblematic of Mahler's life at the stage: a peripatetic conductor working in the regional opera houses of Bad Hall, Laibach, Olmütz, Vienna and Kassel and an aspiring composer. He was a musician of growing stature rather than a master at the height of his powers.

These four songs are rich with allusions to folk song and the music of the second and fourth songs find their way into the First Symphony which he began to compose in 1884: Mahler was to make many revisions to the First Symphony [7] including discarding the slow movement Blumine [8] in favour of the movement based on Frère Jacques described above. The second song, Ging heut' Morgen übers Feld - is joyful and full of wonder at the beauty of nature. This song provides the main theme for the first movement of the symphony and includes Mahler's trademark of a perfect fourth followed by a scale, which together with the staccato articulation, gives the music its rustic yet joyful character.

The ending section of the fourth song - Die zwei blauen Augen provides the most magical moments of the First Symphonies' slow movement. Here the composer is in transfigured ecstasy, and this serves to intensify the parody of the rest of the movement. Like the First Symphony, Mahler was to make extensive revisions to Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen - many of them made as the result of conducting and performing his compositions. This endless revising as if work was always in progress was his approach in his own compositions as well as those of other composers and is an interesting study in itself.

For Mahler, interpretation was an organic process rather than one set in aspic. The cult of fidelity to the text or Werktreue was not part of Mahler's aesthetic - to him music was a living breathing language that was constantly developing even if a composer was from a different era. His interpretations and revisions in Schumann and Beethoven Symphonies bear testimony to this outlook.

Mahler lived and worked in an age that was not affected and influenced by recording, which was one of the contributing factors to the museum-piece culture that classical music developed in the 20th century. The only recordings that survive of Mahler are the Welter-Mignon piano rolls, which provide tantalizing glimpses of his artistry. One of these is from Lieder eines fahrenden Gesselen - Ging heut' Morgen übers Feld and demonstrates a briskness of tempo, light and breezy articulation and long delicate phrases that are not often heard in more recent interpretations. Mahler plays the piano in an orchestral way and clearly delineates the different thematic characters and timbres through his playing. There is also a piano roll of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, which again is the opposite of ponderousness.

Mahler established himself as a leading conductor and from 1897 to 1907, was the Music Director of the Vienna Court Opera and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra - particularly acclaimed for his interpretations of Mozart and Wagner operas. He was a stickler for detail both artistic and administrative and had a huge workload. Composition was left for the summer months when he would leave Vienna and spend several months at his summerhouse [\[9\]](#). From 1907-1910 he was the music director of the New York Philharmonic and conducted at the Metropolitan Opera. Despite the conducting workload, Mahler had over 260 performances of his symphonies during his lifetime which confirms he was a much more widely performed composer during his lifetime than is often suggested.

The arrangement of the Mahler's famous Adagietto by Otto Wittenbecher for Violin and Piano provides evidence. Published in 1914 by Peters Edition, this is obviously intended for a wide audience of professionals and amateurs and indeed the great Austrian violinist, Fritz Kriesler performed this version. These arrangements were like 'singles' that could be played and heard widely. Indeed, the Adagietto was first performed in the Proms in 1909. Henry Wood programmed the movement considering the complete symphony to be too long and rambling for the Proms audience. It was to be a further 30 years before the complete symphony received its UK premiere. The Adagietto reached a worldwide audience from being used in Luchino Visconti's 1971 film *Death in Venice* starring Dirk Bogarde

The Adagietto marks a turning point both in Mahler's life and in the narrative of the Fifth Symphony. The Symphony opens with a sombre funeral march and the music that follows is turbulent and agitated. The Adagietto is a song without words - a love song to Alma, whom he met whilst writing the symphony. The Adagietto is a pivotal moment in the symphony and acts as a fulcrum between tragedy and triumph. Whilst it stands alone as a movement, in the context of the symphony it functions as a slow introduction to the epic rondo-finale that ends the symphony - the two movements seamlessly join together. The Fifth provides us with an example of Mahler's obsession with the structure of the whole work - his symphonies are like an epic journey. Indeed, when he met Jean Sibelius [\[10\]](#) whilst conducting in Helsinki in 1907, he commented that the Symphony should 'contain the whole world.'

Mahler saw himself as being ahead of his time and misunderstood: 'My time will come,' he famously wrote to Alma. He had champions in the early 20th century notably Willem Mengelberg, Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer who all assisted Mahler. Mahler's music was banned by the Nazi's as degenerate, and it was not until the 1960's that he began to become the universal figure he is today - with as many recordings of his symphonies as Beethoven.

Whilst the music in today's programme focuses on his early 'Wunderhorn' period and touches his middle-period with the Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony, all the topics that dominate his ten symphonies and song cycles are there: love, nature, religion, tragedy, ecstasy, triumph, irony, parody - indeed a whole world of expression. When you listen to Mahler, you get an overwhelming sense of his personality, beliefs, torments,

and obsessions. His compositions are his therapy and they are fundamentally about his situation and his relationship to the world.

Perhaps Mahler's initial reluctance to see Freud was to do with his own realization that his personal conflicts were channeled so successfully into his compositions. This understanding of himself, subjectively putting himself into his music and then being to objectively look at and revise his scores removes the need for psychoanalysis. What this view overlooks are Mahler's insecurity and intense, conflicted personality, which at times overwhelmed him, particularly when he was working hard. It is this, which makes his music fascinating and drives his inspiration.

It is too obvious just to focus on the emotional and personal aspects of his music as these are the things we can immediately relate too and guide us when listening to his music. It is easy to forget the huge technical resources Mahler acquired - particularly when you compare the Piano Quartet with say the Ninth Symphony or Das Lied von der Erde which were both written at the end of his life.

His experience as a conductor enabled him to find novel ways of orchestrating his music, creating sounds that trace the emotional extremes of his music. This makes his work even more distinctive. An innate understanding of form - so clear from the Welter-Minion piano rolls - and his ability to organize complex and often conflicting materials enabled him to write large spans of music and create epic symphonies that are truly radical in their form and design. Yet, it is the fact that we are never aware of this technique when listening to Mahler's music that is the ultimate sign of his genius - what we hear and respond too are the gamut of emotions.

His music is about tension and resolution and has parallels to what Freud was trying to achieve through psychoanalysis. Mahler uses everything he knows and hears from the common place through to the sublime to intensify the feeling of resolution when this comes in his music. It is this range of resources that is so radical and places him at the forefront of the arts in the 20th century akin to Freud who is trying to understand the individual and provide resolution through gathering together the individual's experience of life and making sense of it.

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References and Further Reading

[1] Walter Gropius (1883-1969) - One of the most influential architects of the 20th century and founder of the Bauhaus movement.

[2] Alma Schindler (1879-1964) - Wife of Gustav Mahler. She later married the architect, Walter Gropius and Franz Werfel, the poet and writer. Gustav Mahler - Memories and Letters is Alma's biography of her life with the composer containing many letters and reminiscences. It has often been criticized for being biased and representing a view that is favourable to her. Her songs show Alma to be a composer of considerable skill and promise.

[3] Alexander von Zemlinsky (1871-1943) - Composer, conductor and teacher. Taught Arnold Schoenberg and from 1900-1901, taught and fell in love with Alma Mahler.

[4] Gustav Mahler - Memories and Letters pp 146-147 talk about the meeting with Freud. The tone typifies Alma's blameless approach in the book, making out the problems in their marriage were all her husbands.

[5] Some scholars have suggested that Bruder Martin may have been sung in a minor key in Austria - but this in itself could also be ironic.

[6] The Russian composer Alfred Schnittke (1934-1988) completed the Piano Quartet Scherzo sketch in 1988 and he uses fragments of this movement in his Concerto Grosso No.4 and Symphony No.5.

[7] There are performing scores with revisions from 1888, 1889, 1893, 1894, 1896, 1898 and a two piano version from 1906. All have changes of orchestration, articulation, dynamics that are significant to the interpretation of the work and show work in progress as Mahler performed the symphony

[8] Blumine was rediscovered by the scholar Donald Mitchell in 1966 and given its first modern performance by Benjamin Britten at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1967. The movement is like an intermezzo and is light and charming. It has none of the ironic tensions of the movement that replaced it. Heard in the context of the symphony, it is like an oasis of calm whereas the Frere Jacques is predominantly somber, dark and full of underlying tension.

[9] Mahler had several summerhouses notably in Maiernigg and Toblach. In both places, he composed in a hut isolated from his family but surrounded by nature.

[10] There are interesting letters to Alma about this meeting where Mahler describes Sibelius as 'extremely sympathetic.'

Gustav Mahler Memories and Letters - Alma Mahler, London, 1947.

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Gustav Mahler - Henry-Louis de La Grange (Vols 1-IV) Paris, 1979-2009

The Cambridge Companion to Mahler - Edited Jeremy Barham, Cambridge, 2007

Mahler Remembered - Norman Lebrecht (ed,) London, 1987

The Mahler Companion - Donald Mitchell and Andrew Nicholson (eds,) Oxford, 2002