

An Affinity with Gustav Mahler



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作者介绍:

This begins strangely. 'The main purpose of this book,' publisher D.V. Knox-Richards writes in the Acknowledgements, 'apart from promoting the world of Gustav Mahler, is to try to take out the stuffiness which we have seen in several publications about the composer. Any book about the life and work of composers needs to be approached in a way that readers can understand, and not be blinded by the science of those who come from "upper class" backgrounds whose writings are barely comprehensible.' Which certainly seems to put a few people firmly in their places. Just what a comment like this is meant to achieve I have no idea. And what a pity Mr. Knox-Richards didn't have the courage to name those "upper class" people whose work so clearly offends him. Certainly leading off a book ostensibly designed to widen the appreciation of a great artist does itself no favours by an attack on others who are only trying to do the same. As we will see, anyone reading this book will come to need those very authors if they are to develop an affinity with Gustav Mahler.

No Bibliography in this book therefore, and no index either. Mind you, this is not the kind of book for which an index is appropriate containing as it does a series of fourteen

personal essays by people apparently from various walks of life (though presumably not "upper class") mixing enthusiasm and involvement in the music of Mahler with some quite deep analysis. I say "apparently" because there is no clear indication for readers as to who these people are, other than experienced music lovers who clearly know and love their Mahler. Any personal details must be picked up from the pieces themselves. Clive Bates, for example, writes engagingly about the Eighth Symphony from the point of view of a chorister who has sung in twenty performances of that work and I enjoyed his chapter as he clearly knows and loves the work. The revelation that he once saw comedian Frankie Howerd in the audience for one performance was an unexpected gem. Most chapters are centred on one work but there is also a Mahlerian travelogue by Stanley Wilson and a quite well informed piece on Mahler's medical history by Dr. H. Max White. Interspersed with the main pieces are some short thoughts on Mahler - in effect micros of the macro articles - by well-known personalities mainly, though not exclusively, from the world of the arts and music. These have been chosen well from Georg Solti to Baroness Blackstone to Arnold Wesker, among others. I especially agree with the young British conductor Daniel Harding's observation: "I cannot think of many composers whose music is as uncomfortable and unsettling as Mahler's - and the current trend to smooth off the edges is extremely disturbing." Less welcome is the image that has been created on page 93 of Mahler apparently crucified on a Calgary cross, complete with a crown of thorns on his head. I think this will be offensive to many Christians and Jews.

This is not a book to be read through at one sitting, though. The approach of each writer is different each time so inevitably it is a bit of an uneven read. For example, Andrew Fairley rambles rather through too many good ideas in his chapter on the Fifth and could have done with some judicious editing. Some of the writers, like Peter Franklin on the First Symphony, give an engaging amount of personal recollection as to how they came to Mahler's music as well as history and analysis of the work allocated. Others, like Paul Gudgin on the Third, offer only straightforward description of the work with little personal involvement. Ian Mathias-Baker uses the Ninth as a case study for his view on how music in general can convey meaning and anyone looking for a more basic introduction to that work, as they find in Sarah Perrin's splendid chapter on *Das Lied Von Der Erde*, for example, will be disappointed. Perrin's account of how she, an accountant by profession, came to Mahler's music and that late masterpiece in particular is the best chapter in the book. An example of how enthusiasts can often have something to teach even the professionals. Earlier Kieran Cooper shows an admirable scepticism regarding the testimony of Alma Mahler where others in the book are more trusting of the lady. There is also overlap. You cannot consider one Mahler work in isolation so you will find some details being repeated. But there is also a case or two of writers contradicting each other on factual grounds. Mahler's health is an example. One chapter tells you wrongly that Mahler received a terminal heart diagnosis in 1907. Another tells you, correctly, that he didn't. Perhaps an Editor's footnote in the former case would have been a good idea.

So read the book piecemeal as you come to listen to each work and, preferably, on the occasions of your very first acquaintance with that work. Because I believe it is to the first-time listener that this book would be most suitable. People who have never heard a note of Mahler's music often ask me what it is I find so fascinating about his life and work and I would happily recommend this book to them. The overwhelming impression you receive is of how an affinity with the music of Mahler can indeed change the course of your life and affect your way of looking at the world. It was a feature article in the *Sunday Times* magazine in the late 1960s that first made me want to seek out Mahler's music before I had heard a note of it. I can see this book fulfilling just that function even though later on those same new listeners would without

question need to move on to other books by authors who probably would not find favour with Mr. Knox-Richards.

It's hard to imagine reading this book more than once but it would be a good first step in a Mahler odyssey prior to books by Mitchell, de La Grange, Cooke, Blaukopf and Floros. There is no substitute for enthusiasm and the enthusiasm of these writers certainly sent me back to the works they describe.

Tony Duggan

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