

Review of

Seeing Mahler: Music and the Language of Antisemitism in Fin-de Siècle Vienna. By K. M. Knittel. pp. xiii + 201. (Ashgate, Farnham and Burlington, Vt., 2010, £55. ISBN 978-0-7546-6372-0.)

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K. M. Knittel surveys a range of Austro-German reviews, cartoons, and reminiscences of Mahler's music between the years 1899 and 1912 (and of Richard Strauss's music between 1893 and 1905), and identifies within them a semi-submerged, 'normalized' anti-Semitic language that, she claims, otherwise escapes our attention and 'currently obscures and constructs our impressions' of this music (p. 168). I would certainly concur with the first claim, but I am not so sure of the second. In any case, Knittel adduces no evidence for the latter claim, but merely tells us that it is the case. In order to have substantiated her thesis, it would have been necessary to provide widespread examples of scholarly literature, reviews, concert notes, and so on from the last hundred years (Bekker, Specht, Stefan, Mitchell, Floros, Franklin, Revers, Johnson?) that have 'taken over a way of thinking about Mahler and his music from a culture that could not deal with his Jewishness' (p. 168). With one brief exception (to be discussed below), however, she does not do this.

Instead, she provides ample illustration of ways in which several early critics (Hirschfeld, Helm, Graf, Wallaschek, Heuberger, Schoenaich, and others, some of whom were themselves Jewish and 'desperately wanted to show their understanding of the dominant discourse' (p. 8)) adopted the framework, mindset, and vocabulary largely supplied by Wagner's 1850 essay *Das Judentum in der Musik* in order to articulate views on Mahler's music that in fact amounted to veiled emanations from a prevailing socio-cultural consensus on the unassimilability of the Jewish people, whose physical attributes alone were supposedly enough to mark out an irredeemable 'otherness'. (Knittel is careful to point out that racial anti-Semitism prior to the horrors of the mid-twentieth century did not necessarily mean hatred of Jews, but more often simply a belief that Jews were unalterably different, though given this, a more accurate term would seem to be required.) Thus, rather than being 'objective' musical commentary (if such a thing is possible) these critics' charges of, for example, fake naivety, theft from other composers, triviality, ugliness, a lack of true creativity or depth disguised with elaborate surface sound, and an inability to be truly German, were, according to Knittel, conscious or unconscious reactions to 'the idea of Mahler's Jewishness' (p. 67). Such was the broad entrenchment of this cultural paradigm and its associated set of musical characteristics that at times they became detached from their contextual roots and, Knittel suggests, served as a weapon in the critical armoury that could be aimed even at non-Jewish composers such as Strauss. Here the book's argument becomes complex and less easy to sustain, for several reasons.

First, the extent to which the debate on ethnicity and national belonging was entangled with issues of 'absolute' vs. 'programme' music, the generic development of the symphony, the emergence of modernism, and the political inclinations of the critic or the paper for which the critic was writing needed fuller examination than Knittel has given us here. Indeed, her comments on the nature of 'absolute' and 'programme' music are not always convincing (see the 'definition' of the latter on p. 71), and her stance towards the socio-political hinterland of critics appears ambiguous: 'Writers ... will often reveal their cultural beliefs and values more freely as they attempt to ascribe meaning to musical works. ... Rather than seeing this as a liability ... I see it as an opportunity: the historian is granted insight into each critic's underlying belief system' (p. 4); as against: 'The background of the critic is ... immaterial to my study' (p. 9). Secondly, it is not made clear whether a dividing line can ever be determined between when a critic is being (unconsciously) anti-Semitic and when he is not, and if there is such a line, where it might lie. Though undoubtedly this question is immensely difficult to answer, the provisos offered by Knittel (that 'It is not ... my claim that these reviews ... can be read

only in the light of antisemitism; nor that antisemitism accounts for everything within them; nor that every single one of Mahler's reviewers was an antisemite' (p. 168)) do not seem to me to be sufficient, and are indicative of an absolutist vs. relativist quandary, deepened by Mahler's reported amused remark to Alfred Roller towards the end of his Vienna reign that 'the anti-Semitic papers are the only ones who still have any respect for me'. Thirdly, if, as here, no more detailed exploration of these nuances is offered by those closely studying the sources and contexts, and if the tendency to ascribe an anti-Semitic subtext to much of these reviews' musical commentary is therefore encouraged, then we are in danger of becoming blind to, or at least neglecting, valuable ideas (duly historically contextualized like the anti-Semitic strain) that they actually might be expressing about the works concerned. (This is exactly the kind of accusation that Knittel makes about our unawareness of an insidious anti-Semitism.) After all, Mahler *does* use 'distorting' procedures, *does* engage in shock formal and sonic ruptures, *does* call on a folk-music idiom and manipulate it in various ways, *does* mix 'high' and 'low', and so on. What exactly, then, is Knittel suggesting we should make of the coded strategies of explaining away these processes as 'Jewish'? Is she asking us to remove ourselves entirely from this argument, to plunge headlong into it, or simply to acknowledge it and move on? Having valuably unearthed a collective historical prejudice for us, Knittel does not give us a very clear idea of how to deal with it or what to do with it in our own times. Her hopes that it will afford us the liberty to 'take a fresh look at Mahler and his music' (p. 168) and specifically to look for 'new' categories such as timbre and dynamics, seem respectively a little over-optimistic and rather late in the day (has she overlooked the work of Robert Hopkins and John Sheinbaum?). In any case, it is not clear why such categories should be considered exempt from the situation she has been outlining, or how they might allow us to escape existing frameworks. As a way of beginning to address this problem, I would suggest that at the very least the full texts of these and other contemporary reviews need to be made available for wider scrutiny. For too long we have had to be content with selective quotation.

Knittel confesses in her opening acknowledgements that on first encounter she could not understand Adorno. Bravely, then, she devotes most of the final short chapter of her book to his *Mahler: Eine musikalische Physiognomik* and other essays on the composer. But, as with many of the reviews she cites, there is so much more to Adorno's texts than the purview of her discussion allows. Perhaps greater recourse to European scholarship on both Mahler and Adorno might have assisted here (there are certain surprising absences from the bibliography, none more so than closely related studies such as Gerhard Scheit and Wilhelm Svoboda, *Feindbild Gustav Mahler: Zur antisemitischen Abwehr der Moderne in Österreich* (Vienna, 2002), and Jens Malte Fischer, 'Gustav Mahler und das "Judentum in der Musik"', *Merkur* (1997), reprinted in his *Jahrhundertdämmerung: Ansichten eines anderen Fin de siècle* (Vienna, 2000)). For one thing, it would have been instructive to examine more closely Adorno's belief in Mahler's contradictory progressive conservatism (cited on p. 163) in the light of the turn-of-the-century commentaries previously discussed. I was also struck by several fascinating allusions within the cited review excerpts that went unremarked upon, but some of which seem particularly pertinent to the book's topic. Among them: Graf's assertion that the First Symphony 'may be counted on to be understood and felt by the *young generation* of our time' (p. 80, my italics); Vancsa's likening of the first movement of the Third to the pointillist painting of Rysselberghe (p. 81); Hirschfeld's recognition of the 'ingenious satirist' behind the First whose fourth leaps appear throughout 'like buttons on a Swabian skirt' (p. 83); Korngold's unease about the 'realism' of the Third and the Sixth (pp. 86 and 125)—surely this needs to be brought into dialogue with Strauss's aesthetic; and the apparent materialist connotations of the 'hidden machinery' behind the 'constructed face' of Mahler's themes in the Sixth, according to Liebstöckl (p. 107). If for Knittel the all too readily accepted, conditioning anti-Semitic undertone of a century's worth of critique is the elephant in the room in Mahler studies, then there are dozens of other sizeable, and in some cases related, elephants that remain to be acknowledged and investigated (though perhaps the absence of Mahler's penis from Alfred Roller's description of the naked composer would be for some a Freudian can of worms too far (pp. 29–32)).

This book certainly has a valid point to make and makes it well, although it could have done so on a smaller scale as an extended article, with no detriment to the argument (indeed, it calls upon two of Knittel's earlier articles for *19th Century Music*, published in 1995 and 2006). It also makes some very useful observations on reception history and its relation to the *order* in which certain works were first performed in the public arena: this crucially impinges not only on the perceived trajectory of Strauss's and Mahler's reputations via the dissemination of individual works but also on wider aesthetic cross-currents of the 'absolute' and 'programmatic' in the light of waning Brahmsian and Brucknerian hegemony. The characterization, gleaned from the sources, of Strauss's intentional, more 'controlled' modernism as opposed to Mahler's chaotic lack of agency is also a provocative one that gets to the core of the debate, and Knittel's analysis of visual material and perceptions of the 'Jewish body' is persuasive. The ironies of the latter reminded me of the wonderful novel by Czech writer Jiří Weil, *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*, in which a Nazi officer is instructed to remove the statue of Mendelssohn from the roof of the Prague Academy of Music prior to a concert, and, unsure which of the figures is the correct one, has his men remove the one with the largest nose, which turns out to be the statue of Wagner. Not getting things quite right is regrettably an affliction occasionally suffered by Knittel's book too, with its sprinkling of careless errors, from the relatively insignificant such as the repeated misspelling of my own name as one half of a famous circus company, to this: 'Even when the Jew attempts to speak true German, Wagner betrays himself as a Jew by his accented speech' (p. 54)—a slip that suggests intriguing possibilities of cultural and conceptual inversion as subversive as Knittel's evidently unfazed citing of Leon Botstein on '“how marginal journalistic criticism actually is as historical evidence for musical culture”' (p. 3), or her citing of Schnitzler on how, if we did not know better, we would conclude from Strauss's "“erotic exuberant sensuality ... unbridled oriental imagination ... [and] economic exploitation of his talent”' that he was the Jew, and that Mahler, "“a man of mystic ruminations ... chaste Wunderhorn singer ... idealistic”' was the (presumably Aryan) '“perfect type of German artist”' (p. 154).