

**Mahler, *Heimat* and *Randkultur*: Musical Politics of Centre and Periphery.**

Questions of Mahler's socio-political context and allegiances are immensely complex and often the object of strong disagreement. Thus they are unlikely to be definitively answered in a short study such as this, and perhaps may never be. The best that can be done is to set up a framework for further debate, in which certain opposing views can be scrutinized and examples examined in order to test various hypotheses. For instance, debates about Mahler's socio-political context have tended to ground conclusions in absolute notions of centre and periphery, which are somewhat monolithically aligned with histories of cultural domination and subjugation. Prevailing lineages of socio-political analysis of Mahler's music have thus also encouraged a rather one-dimensional view of the composer as 'socialist' advocate for the 'common man'. By contrast, this essay posits the ever-changing and uncertain nature of Mahler's ethnic, national and religious affinities, as an assimilationist, German-Bohemian Jew living and working in both Prussian- and Austrian-dominated Imperial environments, as well as New-World contexts at different periods of his life. It suggests that Mahler's music problematically reflects a deeper ambivalence of constantly shifting geo-political significance, in which the traditional statically viewed hierarchical relationship between knowing German/Western/aristocratic imperialism and subservient Slavic/Eastern/peasant culture is recast as a complex fluid dialectic, since these socio-cultural 'identities' intertwined, altered and traded on shared qualities: Austro-German imperialism on folk art, slavophilia or pan-slavism on cultural domination, and both on an aspirational yet deeply conservative bourgeois mentality.

### *The socio-political terrain*

Where Adorno and Floros, for example, have addressed Mahler implicitly and more or less unquestioningly as German cultural figure, Karbusický and Rosenzweig (among others) have provided what they would see as a corrective to this imbalance, respectively engaging in ethnographically and socio-critically based ‘Czechification’ of the composer’s life and works. Rosenzweig complains about the trend, which continues today, of music dictionaries lumping Mahler together with German composers under the stamp ‘made in Germany’. Karbusický claims that authors such as Adorno and Eggebrecht, both of whom wrote extensively on Mahler, ignored Slavic and other music traditions or demoted or demoted them to the periphery of their Germano-centric writings of barely disguised nationalistic, exclusionary and excessively rationalized character. He is continually astonished by the way in which the Austrian element of Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Bruckner, Schoenberg, Berg and Webern is dissolved a-historically into *Deutschtum*, within the romantic myth of the special mission of the German nation as it emerged strongly in the early 19th century and was later articulated in Alfred Rosenberg’s remarkable *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1930) which places Germany at the centre of not just Europe but the entire West, and talks of the “Russian Untermenschentum” and the “racial poisoning” of the “Germanic West” by the Czechs.

The picture of German music historiography painted by Karbusický and Rosenzweig is one in which the Moravian, the Czech is merely local music, the music of a *Randkultur*. As exiled Czech and Viennese musicologists respectively, they have obvious axes to grind, none more so than about Mahler: for Karbusický, Floros is denigrated as the leader of the German-national trend in Mahler scholarship, and both wish to reclaim the composer for Bohemian culture and anti-Prussian sentiment; to place him firmly within the history of 19th-century

Czech revivalism, as part of reclaiming an idealized centre for these lands and the larger Habsburg multi-national lineage of socio-political tolerance, plurality and ostensible preservation of Slav culture.

Others, ranging chronologically from Nejedly and Redlich, through Brod, to Schorske, Blaukopf and Botstein have variously attempted to account for Mahler's supposed degrees of unification or dislocation of musical practice along 'oppositional' cultural-historical fault lines of German against Bohemian, German against Austrian, Austro-German against Jewish or generally Eastern against Western artistic traits. One of the problems underlying these debates is the, often unspoken, reliance on the presumed existence of fixed cultural markers of socio-historical phenomena by which such traits can be incontrovertibly identified in Mahler's works. Such an approach again has recourse to an essentialist and reductive notion of political history in which demarcations of race, ethnos, nationhood, religion and dynastic governance are too inflexibly conceived.

Nineteenth-century anti-Semitism, for example, was by no means restricted to gentile German populations, but existed among many non-German groups including Czech-speaking peoples of the Bohemian lands, where it was often mixed together with long-held anti-German sentiment; anti-Semitism, directed particularly towards *Ostjuden*, can also be located amongst so-called assimilated Jews themselves, including Mahler, not only in the Austrian part of the Habsburg empire within which Mahler worked, but also within the German enclaves or *Sprachinseln* of Bohemia and Moravia, where he grew up. Wherever the powers of political, imperialist oppression exerted themselves the urge for socio-cultural assertion of identity was certain to follow, and this very quickly developed along presumed ethnic and national lines of division. Thus the activities of Bismarck, trading on centuries of historical jostling for position, German expansion, distrust and outright hatred, were able to conjure up

at one and the same time largely mythical notions of an originary Germanic essence, an Austrian identity variously integrated with and differentiated from this 'pure' *Deutschtum*, and a nascent Slavic counter-current built on equally mythologizing tendencies. Just as beliefs in a greater Germany escalated in the nineteenth century into an increasingly aggressive pan-Germanism, so, for example, Czech nationalist revivalism was politicized through the racially motivated establishment of organizations such as the Bohemian Forest League (*Böhmerwaldbund*, 1884), the North Moravian League (*Nordmährerbund*, 1884) and the South Mark (*Südmark*, 1889), and Slavophilia entrenched itself as a pan-Slavism built on a largely misunderstood sense of ethnic and historical affinity with Russia, which even some Czechs found spurious. Through perhaps no fault of their own, many of these developments, impelled by time-hardened issues of language, economics, geography and migration, laboured under exaggerated, if not entirely false, notions of racial purity: the vast majority of Europeans could in fact be described as mongrel products of 'diverse and relatively obscure racial and ethnic origins' (Bideleux & Jeffries, 1998 : 113), and attempts at claiming pure ethnic lineages would, and have, generally proved disastrous. One might even say that the course of European history has been defined by the stance of various generations towards self-determination, and the manner in which groups (whether linguistically, geographically, culturally or politically linked) confronted what were at root their own unstable fields of identity which only perhaps after the seventeenth century, at least in the realms of German-Czech relations, began to ossify through the entrenchment of political and economic power bases. The nature of being German and even of being Jewish was being forcibly solidified in partisan ways which transgressed the natural flux of individuality and even of nation states.

*The socio-political Mahler: biography and context*

Given the undeniable ambiguities of Mahler's compositional language, verbal utterances and personal historical context, it is not surprising that he has in many respects been the unwitting victim of such processes of reclamation by various national, ethnic or religious groupings, none of which have escaped the perils of an infinite historical regress in their search for origins. Such attempts have implicitly or explicitly been configured around Mahler's supposed immersion in an intensified, *fin-de-siècle Heimat* culture, although they have been divided on just what kind of homeland Mahler felt the loss of and consequent yearning for. Heimat

In a series of conflicting conditions and stances, Mahler's professed socio-cultural affiliations seem obscure:

1. At the age of about five or six he interrupted the chanting during one of his first visits to the synagogue in his home town of Iglau by singing his favourite song 'At se pinkl házi' ('Let the Knapsack Rock'). This song was probably one of many folksongs sung to him as a young boy by Czech employees of his father. Its text runs as follows:

A wanderer,  
A wayfarer,  
Went from Hungary to Moravia  
And there, in the first inn,  
Danced as if on water.  
He danced like a madman  
And his knapsack rocked with him,  
Whether it rocks or not,

The devil won't take it away.

(Rychetsky: 1989, 729)

The most significant aspect of this song is that far from being of ancient provenance orally

transmitted through the generations, it was in fact composed in the nineteenth century by a Prague organ-grinder, Fr. Hajs. It was appropriated in the Bohemian lands as a familiar Czech greeting: 'Let the knapsack rock' which was answered by 'let it rock', and during the post-1866 Prussian occupation of Prague it was frequently used by soldiers as a rallying cry to generate goodwill amongst a resentful people.

2. Early on Mahler was steeped in Czech surroundings, evidently speaking the language fluently as a child (see Foerster: 1947 and Mahler: 1972, 437), visiting relatives in nearby towns and villages, receiving lessons from Czech musicians, playing Czech folksongs on his accordion, and hearing music of military bands and itinerant Bohemian *Musikanten* (a tradition whose very origins lay in opposition to progressive German cultural domination from the seventeenth century and the consequent relegation of Czech language and culture to the peasantry and a position of servility). Mahler was later to admit, to his biographer Richard Specht, that almost exclusively those impressions he had gained between the ages of four and eleven were fruitful and decisive for his artistic creativity (see Specht: 1913, 165–66).

BUT :

3. Within the social and cultural elitism of the *Sprachinsel* of his youth, German was the language of his aspirational home environment and his schooling, and German 'high culture' the ultimate content of his education: the result of upwardly mobile attachment to a German liberalism predicated on the general neglect of other national groups in the Empire, especially the Czechs with their unique cultural and national traditions (Kieval: 2000, 5).

4. As a young student in Vienna Mahler was closely associated with the pan-German cultural politics advocated by Viktor Adler, Engelbert Pernerstorfer and Heinrich Friedjung which centred on the figures of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wagner, and devoted itself to the political and cultural healing of the 1866 wound. This cultural-political movement led indirectly to the founding of the *Deutschnationaler Verein* by the anti-Semitic and aggressively nationalistic George von Schönerer, whose ultimate aim was to wreck the Habsburg Monarchy and incorporate it into Hohenzollern territory, and who would chant : ‘Ohne Juden, Ohne Rom wird ebaut Germania’s Dom’ (‘We need no Jews, we need no Rome, to build our stately German home’ (Seton-Watson : 235). Thus Mahler proved himself, at least at this stage of his life, to be one of those curious individuals who, as a Jew, appeared politically more Prussian than Austrian, more Hohenzollern than Habsburg, and played a pan-German game that would impede any kind of German-Czech reconciliation: surely the ultimate self-sacrificing act of assimilated Jewry or crypto-Judaism, as it was sometimes referred to.

5. In 1886, while working in the Prague of his native land, he wrote to his future employer in Leipzig of hearing the operas of Smetana (underlined), Glinka and Dvorak at the Bohemian National Theatre [*Narodni Divadlo*], and offered the following decidedly double-edged compliment: ‘I must confess that Smetana in particular strikes me as very remarkable. Even if his operas will certainly never form part of the repertory in Germany, it would be worthwhile presenting such an entirely original and individual composer to audiences as cultivated as those in Leipzig’ (Blaukopf: 1996, 73). Fifteen years later in 1901, his apparent ambivalence had resolved itself in favour of German condescension towards the same work: ‘You can’t

imagine how annoyed I was again today by the imperfection of this work [*Dalibor*] ... He was defeated by his lack of technique and his Czech nationality (which hampered him even more effectively, and deprived him of the culture of the rest of Europe)' (Franklin: 1980, 180). And yet Mahler nonetheless kept *Dalibor* in the repertoire for a further three years until 1904, while in his opening season at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1907 he gave the first American performance of *The Bartered Bride*.

6. In 1893 while working in the Hamburg of the German Empire he had so warmly recognized, he openly acknowledged that the Bohemian music of his childhood found its way into many of his works: 'I've noticed it especially in the "Fischpredigt"' Mahler said, referring to the national sounds of Bohemian street musicians, and suggesting that their appearance was the result of unconscious processes (Franklin: 1980, 33).

7. While in 1894 Mahler's command of the Czech language was good enough for him to make alterations to the libretto of *The Bartered Bride* (Mahler: 1972, 438), ten years later, while in Vienna, in response to Janáček's invitation to attend a performance of *Jenůfa* in Brno he requested a piano reduction with German text 'because I do not speak the Bohemian language' (Blaukopf: 1979, 287).

8. With either political naivety or extreme bravery, during his first year in Vienna (1897) at the centre of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he chose to celebrate the Emperor's name day with the premiere of Smetana's *Dalibor*, albeit in German, and this at a time when the tension between Czech and German speakers in the Empire had intensified. He surely knew that, although Smetana mainly spoke and wrote in German and was criticized by his fellow



countrymen for being too Wagnerian, in Vienna he would be, and was, viewed by many as an extreme nationalist.

9. In Vienna in 1901, echoing his childhood experience of Czech pseudo-folk song, Mahler admitted that the melody 'An dem blauen See' by the Carinthian composer of popular folkloric choral waltzes, Thomas Koschat (1843-1914), had 'crept into the second [*sic*: third] movement' of the Fifth Symphony (Franklin: 1980, 172).

10. Sixty years after the great Czech historian, leader and virtual founder of Bohemian nationalism, Frantisek Palacky, declined the invitation in 1848 from the post-revolution German liberal-nationalist *Vorparlament* to attend its meetings in Frankfurt, with the reply 'I am not a German ... I am a Bohemian of Slavonic blood', Mahler, in interview with German reporters in New York, identified himself too as a Bohemian: 'Ich bin ein Böhme' (Lea: 1979, 291).

11. Similarly in interview in 1911 for the American magazine *The Etude*, Mahler said: 'As the child is, so will the man be. ... So it is in music that the songs which a child assimilates in his youth will determine the musical manhood ... the musical influences which surround the child are those which have the greatest influence upon his afterlife [later life] and also that the melodies which composers evolve in their maturity are but the flowers which bloom from the fields which were sown with the seeds of the folk-song in their childhood' (Mahler: 1911).

15 mins.

In view of all this, it would seem well-nigh impossible to establish with any certainty Mahler's precise ethnic and socio-political disposition, so deeply compromised was his thinking by accretions of cultural and specifically musical experience, learning and taste. For example, in the context of the socialist, *völkisch*, anti-Liberal generational tension in late nineteenth-century Vienna with which he was closely implicated, was his *Deuschtümelei* the same as the chauvinistic type associated with the bourgeoisie of the crumbling Habsburg empire? What does it mean to describe Mahler as Bohemian-Moravian, German, German-Bohemian, Austrian, Austro-German, Austro-Hungarian, or Central-Eastern European? Just how deep did Mahler's famous sense of alienation run : as an assimilationist Jew, he belonged to a minority—but self-appointedly culturally superior—German community located within an historically oppressed and suppressed larger Czech region (itself dominant over the Slovaks). This region was politically a part of German Austria, an empire which in turn had become alienated from the rest of the German world yet was the dominant partner in the bipartite, multi-national Austro-Hungarian empire. The bewildering and intricate energies of identity and belonging engendered by such labyrinthine socio-political contexts do not readily yield to any finality of rational analysis. Most importantly, what musico-cultural role is played by his instrumental, textural, melodic or harmonic so-called borrowings from Bohemian or Slavic folk music, identified with varying degrees of scientific precision by writers such as Batka, Redlich, Komma, Klusen and Karbusický ? Are they to be taken as natural, authentic emblems of national belonging and identity dominant over so-called classic-romantic traditions ; or as objectified 'foreign' elements held up for scrutiny within an imperialist high art stylistic language; or as fully integrated 'yeast in the dough' (Hansen : 1981, 383) of a new inclusive musical idiom giving glimpses into the social condition ?

*The socio-political Mahler: musical language and form*

In the face of such an impasse, perhaps recourse to Mahler's compositional practice may help. I would like to offer two generically, chronologically and stylistically very different examples as possible starting points for the reassessment of the whole notion of socio-political identity in Mahler, and as projected through music generally.

Example 1.

Of his first completed songs, settings of three of his own poems for tenor voice and piano dating from February and March 1880, the deceptive *faux-naïf* folk tone of the yodelling 'Maitanz im Grünen' would on the surface seem the most unproblematic and simplest in its almost Schubertian and pre-Schummanesque musical content. Its performance directions notably include the *echt*-Mahlerian term 'keck' (cheeky or pert) and the earliest reference to the Austrian folk dance whose rhythmic, thematic and structural content became such a fundamental and idiosyncratic means of connecting symphony and song: 'Im Zeitmaß eines Ländlers'. Indeed, transposed from D to F major and with some textual alterations, additional accompanimental chromaticisms, and a sophisticated array of constantly changing performance instructions, it became the song 'Hans und Grethe', the third item in Volume 1 of *Lieder und Gesänge* (later known as *Lieder und Gesänge aus der Jugendzeit*), published in 1892; and this in turn became the inspiration for the 'Kräftig bewegt' second movement of the First Symphony. In the original song, ethnographic sublimation of the kind of folk material he had known since childhood, and which he may well have encountered in and around Iglau, Mahler both honours this music's traditions with bagpipe drones underpinning rustic diatonicism, and subverts them, whether with knowing mediant shifts from D to F (one of Mahler's signature tonal relationships) at moments of textual condescension ('Ah, Hansel,

you haven't got one! [a sweetheart]/Then look for one!' (bars 24–29) and 'Oh look at silly Hans!/How he runs to the dance!' (bars 65–70)), or in a subtle re-engagement with Schumann's world in the final recessive marking 'wie aus der Ferne' (bar 86)—the first of many indications of Mahler's spatial preoccupations. This is clearly not a folk song but rather an image of one, already filtered through the complex intermixture of ethnic and political baggage carried by Mahler from an early age as an assimilationist, German-speaking Bohemian Jew walking through a central-European landscape that was at once deeply in his blood and intellectually alien. It is not surprising therefore that the conflict of nostalgia and faint disdain for the innocence of the round dance is present so early in Mahler, and that this 'simple' song, like the following account of his experience of Bohemia in early 1880s, written by his childhood friend Fritz Löhr, is historically emblematic of burgeoning cultural ambivalence and mobile identities:

There [the vicinity of Iglau] in the height of summer we would go for walks lasting half the day ... to villages where the peasantry was in part Slav ... to where authentic Bohemian musicians set lads and lasses dancing in the open air. ... There was the zest of life, and sorrow too ... all of it veiled by reserve on the faces of the girls, their heads bowed towards their partners' breast, their plump, almost naked limbs exposed by the high whirling of their many-layered bright petticoats, in an almost solemn, ritual encircling. The archaically earthy charms of nature and of nature's children, which Mahler came to know in his youth, prepared the ground for his creative work and never ceased to vitalize his art. (SLGM, p. 393)

## Example 2

There is no doubt that the entire complex issue of Mahler's relationship with his political and cultural surroundings is exacerbated by the fact that he chose to give expression to his artistic impulses in the form of the symphony, or at least works he almost invariably labelled as

symphonies. Had Mahler chosen to write orchestral character pieces, suites, tone poems (notwithstanding *Totenfeier* and the labels he temporarily attached to the First Symphony), the problem would probably have been lessened. For although the historical role of Bohemian and Austrian musicians such as Stamitz, Holzbauer, Wagenseil, Monn, Reutter and Tuma in developing classical symphonism cannot be denied, partly because of the westward diaspora from the Czech lands of these and other composers such as Vanhal, Benda, and Pichl [who appear as a subset of German composers in much German music historiography but as Czech in Czech historiography] to Vienna, Germany, and elsewhere, their huge influence on European music was absorbed within the emergence of what became recognized as the historical category of a uniquely Austro-German, Viennese classicism. In other words, by the time of Mahler's generation symphonic and sonata form practices had long been entrenched both theoretically and practically as the quintessential vehicles of Austro-German musical expression.

I would argue that Mahler's Fifth Symphony was his first true attempt to pay homage to this tradition. The Fourth had led the way with its re-workings of early classical idioms, but the Fifth, written in 1901-2 when he was arguably at the height of his directorial success in Vienna marked a pivotal turn to the pre- and post-Beethoven 9 wordless symphonic context. It was for this reason that by far the most common criticism of the Symphony at its premiere in Cologne was its apparent absurd lack of musical logic which demanded verbal programmatic explanation, and thus distanced the work from hallowed Viennese traditions of autonomous concert music. The critic of the *Neue Musicalische Presse*, Eccarius Sieber, was especially offended by the 'banal Magyar-sounding second theme of the first movement', and its 'affected popular style', which led him to characterize the composer as 'the enemy of the culture of our time'.

In more recent times, the twin poles of the Symphony's reception and analysis may be represented by on the one hand Floros, who continually attempts to reconcile the work (and indeed all of Mahler's Symphonies) with the familiar rigid precepts of the kind of German *Formenlehre* by which Mahler himself would undoubtedly have been taught at the Vienna Conservatoire; and on the other hand Karbusický who, within the ethnographic context of his study, gives detailed treatment of the Scherzo which, with the help of graphic representation of its dynamic contour of energy, he characterizes as an outward display of optimism concealing the profound emotional turmoil of an 'ancient Jewish understanding of the irrevocability of death', a recklessness which enables the members of a 'Heimatlosen Volkes' [homeless people] to cope with this harsh reality (1978 : 2 & 15).

In the light of some of the Symphony's extremely challenging formal procedures, analysis through traditional structural channels seems somewhat redundant, and this is no doubt why the work initially invited vociferous criticism and has subsequently attracted alternative analytical methods such as those focussing on timbre, so-called secondary parameters, allusions to cinematic cross-cutting, and extensions and applications of Adorno's material theory of form (Hopkins, 2005, Michell, 2002, Sheinbaum 2006). These and previous analyses have draw attention to the Symphony's various levels of eventual narrative resolution of keys, of thematic material, and of generalized mood. I would suggest in addition to these resolving narratives, a further one involving the manner in which the function of generically and idiomatically very diverse material is transformed in the work—particularly unrefined, *Volkstümlich* ideas that contemporary turn-of-the-century Austro-German bourgeois audiences may have considered to sit uncomfortably within a symphonic tradition then being spearheaded by Brahms.

In the first two movements, sometimes abruptly, sometimes through brief scenic gestures of

dismissal, we plunge in and out of musical topics, many of which are underpinned by the repetitive tread of fourths with which Mahler began his compositional career in 'Maitanz im Grünen'. Strong juxtaposition takes the place of integration. In the third movement, the much-vaunted (not least by Mahler himself) contrapuntal virtuosity provides a measure of integration at odds with conventional scherzo formats, but obviously cannot paper over all the structural cracks: unrefined waltz material forms the first trio, and pictorial *ranz des vaches*-like horn calls, moments of inertia and re-workings of the waltz material interrupt the polyphonic flow of the so-called second trio. Thereafter some of the material is contrapuntally integrated into the symphonizing procedures, but the pictorial horn calls still interpose and the music is forced to reform itself yet again. The final excess of counterpoint in the coda prefigures but in its brevity and desperation does not adequately represent the resolution of the narrative of juxtaposition and integration. Only in the Rondo-Finale does some kind of resolution of the symphonic exterior and interior identities come about. Rather than presented as an alternative, the musical identity conventionally exterior to the symphonic tradition actually forms the movement's main material, built on rustic-sounding drones; and this is rendered even more lilting and dance-like by its later transformation into triplet rhythms. Now ostensibly 'seriously' worked symphonic writing, characterized by the ultimate contrapuntal test of fugue, is presented as the alternative musical identity. The repetitive fourths shape which appeared to underpin exteriority in previous movements now permeates almost the entire movement in one way or another: whether inscribed by melodic ascents and descents, or apotheosized in fanfare or triumphal chorale material. It is also a central part of the transformation of the Adagietto lyricism into dashing salon and ballroom music (around fig. 29), and this transformative process of outside and inside exchanging places persists until the end of the movement with the coda's reiteration of the opening rustic round-dance material.

Mahler's music tends to resist definitive socio-political readings by thus problematizing the very notion of cultural identity, hierarchy and belonging. What may appear as a typical process of symphonic integration in the Fifth Symphony is recast as a process of reversal or inversion of cultural capital. Mahler presents to us the possibility of mobile identities, of seeing differing perspectives, in a similar way to that in which a nineteenth-century German might have viewed Czech folk song as thoroughly Slavic, while an Eastern European might have considered it thoroughly Germanic. How far Mahler's relativism and proto-postmodernist pluralism stretched is a debatable point. Arguably he was only able to undo the entrenchment of socio-political identity because he (eventually) worked from a privileged position of cultural and artistic authority, and for many of his contemporary critics this smacked of total insincerity, despite Mahler's genuinely under-privileged beginnings. On the other hand perhaps it was only through such a second-order process of exploring and assuming identities that his music may be said to have encoded the age-old historical tragedy and cultural inferiority complexes of Central and Eastern Europe, the early twentieth-century cultural heart of the continent which had always thrived on its complex racial and cultural *impurities* and as a consequence had always been on the 'wrong side of ... history' (Kundera: 1984, 221).



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