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VIEWS AND REVIEWS

ROUSSEAU began his "Confessions" with the assertion that he was setting forth on an "enterprise" without precedent, and with the prophecy that it would never have its equal. He wanted to show to the world a man - himself - "in all the truth of nature." The world has not ceased to marvel at the self-revelation, or self-exhibition, of this man. But both his assertion and his prophecy were false.

As a writer of unvarnished memoirs, Rousseau had at least one forerunner: Benvenuto Cellini; and the succession of bio- or autobiographical exhibitionism of the last century and a half is directly traceable to Rousseau's example. Among musicians, the only one of the Cellini-Rousseau type was Richard Wagner. He might have written another great classic of the *genre*; but "Mein Leben", which could have as well been called "Mein Kampf", is incomplete and often inaccurate - sometimes deliberately so. Complete candor was impossible. It shrank before the staying hand of Cosima, amanuensis. The prudish adultress started early with the exercise of her censorship. Prudery distorts "the truth of nature". In woman it is a pardonable trait.

A woman, nevertheless, has given us the frankest, most outspoken account of a musician's grandeur and misery that we have seen. It is the life of Gustav Mahler written by his widow, Alma Maria (now the wife of Franz Werfel, poet and novelist), including a large selection of letters from and to Mahler (Albert]Allert de Lange, Amsterdam, 1940; 472 pp.). ¹ It is difficult to say which is the more absorbing: Frau Alma's narrative and the extracts from her diaries, or the correspondence. The whole forms a unique record, not only of a strange and complex personality, but of a vanished musical and intellectual era in Europe and America. No matter what one may think of Mahler, as a composer, there can be no doubt that this book, searching the remotest corners of his mind and heart - both of them exceptional - , must rank among the most remarkable documents of its kind. Whether all judgments, all opinions of the author are accurate is not to the point. Her sincerity, her truthfulness, her courage are as convincing as they are admirable.

The autobiographies of Cellini, Rousseau, and Wagner were published posthumously. Frau Mahler, too, in her preface, tells us that this life of her first husband, this story of their married years, was intended for publication after her death. But world conditions made her alter her resolve. One of Vienna's main streets, named after Gustav Mahler, is now the *Meistersingerstrasse*. The superb bust of Mahler by Rodin, a gift of Frau Mahler to the Vienna Opera, where Mahler reigned so long as director, has disappeared. Mahler's symphonies, which had at last gained recognition in Germany and Austria, will no longer be heard there. The chances of their being performed elsewhere are slim and depend upon the devotion of such Mahler disciples as Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer. The memories of what Mahler achieved in America are cherished by a dwindling group of the older generation.

Mahler, the Jew who became enwrapped in Catholic mysticism, followed in the footsteps of Ahasverus. Tracked out not only during his lifetime, he was pursued after death. The Wandering Jew, chased across the face of this earth, he has assumed symbolical stature. From Amsterdam, in October 1904, after the warmly acclaimed performance of his second and fourth Symphonies, he wrote to his wife that here, in the Netherlands, he believed to have really found his "musical home" for which he was looking and longing. There, where Richard Strauss was so much "en vogue", he

had beaten his only rival "by a yard". There, where Willem Mengelberg promised to be his most ardent apostle, musical culture was "stupendous". And "how these Dutch can listen!" Here, too, his "life" was published just before the Invader, who had tried to extinguish Mahler's work and memory in Germany and Austria, could destroy this living testimony of a great outcast in the frenzy of ruthless war. Irony and tragedy can go no farther. But the testimony survives.

Probably the greatest inner conflict of Mahler's was this consciousness of his Semitic descent and his ambition to write "Christian" music - whatever that may be. Perhaps some of the difficulties that he experienced in his marriage sprang from a similar discord, imagined and unnecessary. He could not have found a more understanding wife. Frau Mahler tells of a visit that she and her husband paid one night after dinner, as the guests of Mr. and Mrs. Rudolph Schirmer, to the Chinatown of New York. Mahler was deeply impressed with what he saw. Watching these furtive Orientals move silently and mysteriously about, he exclaimed: "It is difficult for me to believe that these are my brethren." From hushed and dim Chinatown, the party proceeded to the noisy and glaring quarter of the Jews. There barter and bustle went on undiminished at night as in day time. Frau Alma asked her husband: "Are these our brethren?" And "he shook his head in despair."

From Lemberg (the later Lvov), to which Mahler had gone for the performance of one of his works, he wrote to his wife in 1903: "The funniest are the Polish Jews, who run about here as do the dogs elsewhere. It is most amusing to watch them! My God, and I am supposed to be related to them?! How idiotic any racial theories seem to me, in the face of such evidence, I cannot tell you." Later he leaned towards the belief that there are no differences of race, only differences of caste or mentality.

Mahler, with all the nobility of his soul, was an intellectual *nouveau riche*. As such he was uncertain, unseeing, uncritical, and yet uncompromising. Musician and artist to his finger-tips, ready to give encouragement to anyone who seemed to be striving for new forms of beauty and perfection, he was hopelessly old-fashioned in his own musical romanticism, shot through with sentimentality and banality. Oddly, he was blind to the modest but pure flame - his own wife's talents and aspirations - that burned unheeded and untended under his very eyes. Alma Maria Schindler, before she met Mahler, had been a pupil in composition of Alexander Zemlinsky, an excellent teacher, now domiciled in our midst. She had written songs. Mahler ignored them - until it was too late. "What have I done?" he exclaimed in 1910 after one of several matrimonial crises. "These songs are good. Simply splendid! I demand that you work them over, that we publish them. I shall not rest until you resume work. God, how narrow I have been!"

None of which prevented Mahler, throughout his married life, from depending on his wife for the copying of all of his scores, which she did with the utmost neatness and accuracy. At the same time Frau Alma became something of a collaborator, intimately familiar with each of her husband's newly created works. When she dared to express a musical opinion, she was not always sure that it would be gratefully, or even politely received. The first work of his, freshly completed, that Mahler played to his wife was the Fifth Symphony. Frau Alma writes: "When he had finished, I told him all that I immediately loved in this beautiful work, but I also voiced my scruples in regard to the final chorale. This churchly, uninteresting chorale! He objected, said: 'But Bruckner!' Whereupon I: 'He could, but not you!'" We see in a flash the opposing forces which formed this "union".

Mahler's egocentric nature knew no bounds. And yet he could be generous. He was one of the first who helped Arnold Schoenberg to gain a hearing in Vienna, defending the innovator against the insults of loudly hissing reactionaries. He enjoyed discussions with the keen and often paradoxical Schoenberg. He would also close his door to him, if the paradoxes outraged him. Schoenberg and Zemlinsky were "regular" guests in Mahler's home at Vienna, debating at length, over innumerable glasses of beer, innumerable subjects. On one occasion, when Mahler could bear no longer with Schoenberg's dizzy arguments, he shouted angrily: "Stop with your beer-talk (*Bierschwefel*)!" Whereupon Schoenberg: "Well, is it my fault if we get no wine to drink?" These were convivial, stimulating meetings of the intellectual élite in the Vienna of a glorious past. Mahler's interest in Schoenberg never flagged. The last two letters in Frau Alma's book are Schoenberg's, dated August 2 and 3, 1910, respectively. In the first Schoenberg asks for a loan of "from 300 to 400 gulden"; in the second he acknowledges the receipt of 800 kronen. During the last days of unclouded consciousness, before his end on May 18, 1911, Mahler was worrying about Schoenberg's future. He said "When I go, he has no one left." That fear was unfounded.

It cannot possibly be the aim of this review to give an adequate idea of the wealth of material contained in this book. Much less is it our intention to try to assign his proper niche to Mahler, the composer. What Frau Alma makes abundantly clear - and often pathetically - is the holy hire with which the composer Mahler was consumed, the conviction he had of his mission. We hear at length of the various performances (and first performances) of Mahler's works; we are steeped in the atmosphere of the pre-(1914) war music festivals in various cities of Europe; we see the big-shots and the small-fry of the musical fraternity disport themselves in various degrees of unbrotherly love; we are allowed to peer behind the curtains of rivalry and intrigue; we find old suspicions confirmed and an occasional doubt dispelled.

It would take several pages in which to recount Frau Alma's tales of Richard Strauss alone. They are told without malice, but also without any attempt at improving the likeness. Strauss was, first and last, the business man; his wife, Pauline, no less bent on enriching the family exchequer, was an impossible termagant. At the first performance of Strauss's opera *Feuersnot* in Vienna, Pauline Strauss sat in Mrs. Mahler's box at the Imperial Opera House. She kept up a loud commentary of invective: no one could possibly care for this "fabrication"; people pretended they liked what could not possibly please them; there was not one original note in the whole score, everything "stolen" from Wagner down to Schillings. And after the performance, when Strauss asked his wife: "Well, Pauksel, what do you say to my success?" she jumped at him like a wild cat: "You thief, you dare come under my eyes? I'm not going with you, you are too rotten." Such scenes would seem incredible if others and similar ones were not well authenticated. At the supper which followed the performance, Strauss sat next to Mrs. Mahler, and said (in his Bavarian dialect): My wife is pretty much of a nag, but, you know, I need that." His conversation dealt chiefly with money, and his sole concern was to learn from Mahler what royalties he might expect if the success should prove great or only fair. One must read Frau Alma's account of the music festival at Strassburg, in May 1905, at which Mahler appeared as conductor (all-Beethoven program) and as composer (his Fifth Symphony), to get the full measure of Strauss's uncontrollable temperament or temper. It is a piece of vivid reporting and a capital character sketch.

But Strauss is only one of the many figures that pass before the reader's eyes in life-like look and speech. Of especial interest are the pages of Frau Alma's diary devoted to Charpentier and to the

première of his *Louise* at the Opera in Vienna, in the Spring of 1903. Mahler loved the work. He had prepared it carefully. But Charpentier, upon arriving in Vienna, changed the whole *mise-en-scène*, and Mahler admitted that it was for the better. In 1939, Frau Alma saw Charpentier in Paris. "He has remained the same. He is as young as his *Louise*, which is as fresh as on the first day."

Then there are stories about Hugo Wolf, Bruckner, Gerhard Hauptmann, Carl Goldmark, Pfitzner, Jean Sibelius, Frank Wedekind, Alfred Roller, Max Reinhardt, Thomas Mann, and practically everyone who belonged to the "vanguard" of a generation ago. To American readers, of particular interest are the chapters dealing with Mahler's stay in New York, first at the Metropolitan, then as conductor of the Philharmonic Orchestra. Mahler loved America, he enjoyed working with the stars of the Metropolitan - with Sembrich, Caruso, Scotti, and the rest -, then with an orchestra wholly submissive to his slightest wishes and intentions, not indifferent or antagonistic as the Vienna *Philharmoniker* had been. But his joy was not unalloyed. Toscanini appeared on the scene; he demanded the right to re-study *Tristan* which Mahler had prepared with infinite love and pains. Mahler was deeply offended. Mahler had declined, and wisely, to become Conried's successor. The New York Philharmonic gave him ample breathing space. But then ill health set in, and before three years were over the end had come.

There is no room to go into details about Mahler's youth, his parents and grandparents, his brothers and sisters. But what Frau Alma tells of them, in unsparing frankness, often attains the heights of a family epic. Nor can we speak now of Mahler's singular courtship, of his letters to his wife, of the tragic death of their first child, of the man's eccentric manners, of his kindness, of his egotism, of his sophistication and naïveté. He walked to his wedding in the Karlskirche alone in the rain with his rubbers on, while the bride - then an expectant mother - with her mother and his sister drove to the church in a carriage. Mahler's sister Justine, at the same time, became the wife of the *Konzertmeister* Arnold Rosé. Until Mahler's marriage, it had been she who had considered the famous brother (another brother had shot himself, a third one had to flee to America) as a sort of private property, or goose that lays the golden egg. To her newly acquired sister-in-law she said of Gustav spitefully: "I had him young, you get him old." The relations between the two households were never very cordial. When Justine came to see her dying brother, he did not recognize her and he asked: "Who is this strange woman?" The subconscious spoke.

Mahler's table manners were as original as they were perturbing at times. On one occasion, when Richard Strauss beckoned Mahler to take a seat next to his wife, Pauline, she exclaimed: "But only if you don't fidget; I can't stand that." Mahler was not handsome, but he had a singularly noble and expressive face. His death mask is sublime.

During his earlier years as conductor, especially in Budapest and Hamburg, the fair sex had plagued him not a little. Talk of his "affairs" was rampant. Yet he was afraid of young Alma Maria's beauty and virginity. He would have preferred it had she been a widow or had she had a lover. Still, she conquered him with her charms, and with her brilliant intellect, though she never - except toward the end of their ten years together - could feel that, in spite of his love for her, he understood or fully valued her. In his passion he was selfish, unobserving.

In Mahler's letters we come upon curious statements. Thus in one to his wife (written in 1904): "I have gone through nearly all of Brahms. Well, I must say, what a tiny little man, with a rather narrow chest. Good God, when, compared with him, one has felt the storm-wind blowing from the

lungs of Richard Wagner! " And in the following letter: "Now I stick to Beethoven and Wagner - and nothing else!" There are two interesting letters from Cosima Wagner to Mahler, the "Hofoperndirektor" of Vienna against whose appointment to the position she, as a good anti-Semite, had put in an objection. This did not prevent her afterwards from pleading with Mahler in behalf of her son Siegfried's operas. These two letters, in their imperial style, make rather amusing reading now.

Nothing in this review can afford the reader a true idea of what this remarkable book contains. It is to be hoped that an edition in English will be forthcoming before long. Such a translation will gain by an exhaustive index, which is sadly wanting in the German original.

In conclusion we should like to quote from a letter written by Arnold Schoenberg to Mahler on December 12, 1904, translating the passage as well as we can:

To tell you approximately of the impression that your Symphony has made on me, I must not speak as one musician to another, but as man to man. For I have seen your soul, naked, stark naked. It lay before me like a wild, mysterious landscape with gruesome abysses and chasms, and next to them serene, lovely, sunny meadows, idyllic places of rest. I felt you as if you were a piece of Nature with all her terror and destruction, and with her transfiguring, calming rainbow. What does it matter if afterwards, upon learning of your "program", I found that it hardly fitted my feelings? What does it matter whether I am a good or a bad reader of signs with respect of those feelings which an experience had awakened in me? Must I correctly understand, where I have experienced, felt? And I believe that I did feel your symphony. I felt the struggle for illusions; I felt the pain of the disillusioned; I saw benign and malign forces wrestling with each other; I saw a human being in tormenting emotion struggling for inner harmony; I sensed the presence of a human being, a drama, *truth*, the most reckless truth!

That was Gustav Mahler, and thus he appears throughout the pages of this recklessly truthful book.

C.[arl] E.[ngel] [Editor]

¹ A volume of "Gustav Mahler Briefe" was published by Alma Maria Mahler in 1924. These letters cover a period from 1879 until 1911.