

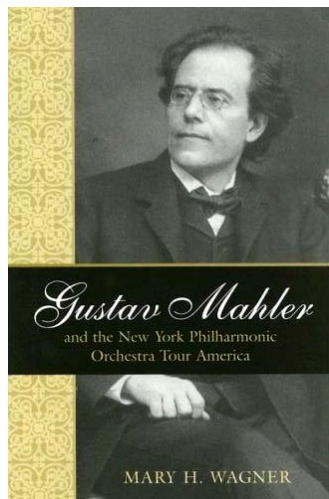
Book Reviews

Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra Tour America

By Mary H. Wagner

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reviewed by Teng-Leong Chew



Many books have explored Mahler's role as an influential composer. In this book, Mary H. Wagner, through her superbly conducted research, elucidates the lesser known aspect of Mahler's last years, not as a composer, but as an immensely successful and commanding conductor in America. Mary Wagner's book documents, in great details, the often overlooked roles played by Mahler in transforming the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. As a result of his short tenure from 1909 to 1911, Mahler catapulted a struggling provincial ensemble into an orchestral powerhouse with utmost artistic recognition and financial stability.

With the expansion and improvement of the railroad system at the turn of the century, the orchestra found a cost effective way of increasing their revenue and reputation by touring. The Philharmonic boasted not only as the largest ensemble on tour at the time – with more than one hundred musicians, but capitalized on Mahler's reputation as famed conductor and composer. These factors had become a successful ingredient for the New York Philharmonic to effectively market the concerts and increase attendance as some of these cities would be hearing a full scale symphony orchestra under a legendary conductor perhaps for the first time in their history.

Through his symphonies, Mahler had helped change the orchestra, pushing the virtuosity and the palette of the orchestra to new heights, and his compositional skills have been explored and analyzed in depth by many accomplished scholars. This book, however, addresses a very important gap in the fields of Mahler and American history, namely Mahler's contributions to the development of the modern American symphony orchestra as a conductor. Mahler and his tours with the New York Philharmonic are seldom covered by literature focusing on American history, culture and music. The records documenting these tours are hardly complete, and worse yet, are scattered across various cities in the country. Zoltan Roman, Henry-Louis de la Grange and Marvin von Deck have explored Mahler's activities in New York, but these seminal works do not emphasize on the tours by the Philharmonic and therefore lack the focus of this book on this particular topic.

Mary Wagner's book dwell specifically with the tours themselves, the historical background that set the stage for bringing Mahler to New York, the planning, process and challenges of touring and the results of these concerts. Wagner's ability to locate, organize, and subsequently present these thousands of newspaper articles, promotional materials and contracts in a coherent and enjoyable read is commendable.

The book is divided into seven chapters in addition to the introduction and the epilogue. The first part of the book consists of three chapters. The first chapter presents the various struggles and hurdles underscoring the need for the New York Philharmonic to reorganize and the multitude of factors causing Mahler to accept the

Philharmonic's invitation to come to New York. The second chapter describes the rationale and the turn-of-the-century conditions for a touring orchestra. This chapter also allocates a sizable segment to Mahler's arrangement of the Bach's *Orchestral Suites*. Readers are encouraged to consult Mary Wagner's article in *Naturlaut* 4(2): pp. 2-7, 2005 for further information about Mahler's arrangement of Bach's *Orchestral Suite*.

The second part of the book consists of the remaining four chapters chronicling the preparation, conditions and reviews from the performance on tour. These include the details of the 1910 tours of New England, the Great Lakes, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Mahler's final tour to New England is covered in the last chapter. One of the most fascinating aspects in Wagner's book can be found in these chapters, wherein readers can get a glimpse of how the local communities reacted to Mahler's performance as well as a better understanding of the level of cultural development in each city. One of the real treasures is inclusion of pictures as well as information pertaining to the size location and description of each concert halls visited by Mahler's touring orchestra, many of which are no longer in existence. There is also an appendix that lists the reconstructed programs for the various tours.

The epilogue is surprisingly short and perhaps does not project as effectively as possible the overall impact of Mahler's role in elevating the level of the New Philharmonic, but more generally what Mahler had done to promote the cultural development in many of the smaller cities he had visited. Perhaps the author presumes that the well-presented data are sufficient to paint a complete picture. One critically important perspective not covered by the book is the impact of these tours on the subsequent cultural development of these cities in the immediate years that followed. Wagner had accomplished a vital important task of identifying numerous critics and musicians who had witnessed Mahler's conducting first hand. A good yardstick to gauge Mahler's influence would be to investigate if and to what extent the musicians and local critics continue to judge future performances against Mahler's own.

Wagner missed an opportunity to probe a rather important aspect of America's reception of Mahler's own work (other than the *Bach Orchestral Suite*). It would significantly add to the already superbly done presentation of Mahler's last years in America. It will strike many readers as peculiar that Mahler's own symphonies were not featured in these tours, despite the fact that some of the cities had shown rather positive reaction to the earlier performances of his works, such as the two performances of the *Fifth Symphony* by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1906. While it may not be hard to postulate the reasons behind the exclusion of Mahler's symphonies in the touring program – Mahler needed works that could draw the largest audience while minimizing the number of rehearsals needed for performance during the tours – it will still be fascinating to examine if Mahler ever considered including his symphonies in the tour and how the Philharmonic's newly formed board of directors might have reacted.

This book should be on the bookshelf of every reader who is interested in gaining an insight into a hitherto poorly-explored aspect of Mahler's last year, devoid of the all-too-familiar cliché of Alma Mahler's infidelity, the ailing heart of the composer, and his famous visit to Sigmund Freud. The image of Mahler presented by the rich collection of historical documents here is a highly driven, experienced, disciplined and visionary orchestra-builder who was determined to elevate the New York Philharmonic to new heights – an image jarringly different from one who was obsessed with the so-called farewell symphonies.

The effort involved in amassing the necessary data to complete this book is tremendous. More importantly, Mary Wagner exhibits an admirable degree of focus and has kept the focus of this book solely on various aspects of the tour, even when certain documents allows her to make unrelated, tangential points. Such discipline is seldom seen in books of this genre and is commendable. Readers will not only be rewarded with a fine documentary of Mahler's tour with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, but will also gain insights into the artistic, financial and administrative challenges faced by the orchestras past and present.