

Mahler and Arts

Mahler/Mahlered/Mahlered: Images of Mahler in Popular Culture

by James L. Zychowicz

Images of Gustav Mahler have become as prominent in popular culture as his music is in the concert hall and recording catalogs, and through such images audiences who might not otherwise encounter his music at least recognize his name. The visual recognition accorded to Mahler exists for only a few other composers, such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner. In a sense, this kind of familiarity with Mahler has fulfilled the composer's hope that his time would come,¹ a statement that concerns Mahler's musical legacy, rather than anything connected to his physical image. Yet in ways that the composer could not imagine, his music and persona have become intrinsically connected to the late twentieth century. In fact, one critic has described this era as a "generation of Mahlerians"² for its familiarity, if not identification, with Mahler's works. Such eponymous fame did not emerge suddenly, since Mahler himself has been an icon of varying significance in popular culture for years. As an image found in cartoons, fiction, film, television, drama and musical theater, his face and personality occur in some of the more unexpected places and are subjected to various interpretations.

As a public and prominent figure in the musical culture of his time, Mahler was the subject of cartoons during his life. Some of the cartoons that appeared during Mahler's lifetime offer a perspective on how he was perceived by his contemporaries.³ Of the more memorable cartoons, several show Mahler as an eccentric composer-conductor, who used combinations of instruments in excess, and suggest a bemused public. Other cartoons take issue with his Jewish background in ways that are difficult to imagine in the decades after the Holocaust.⁴ In either case, the cartoons serve as evidence of his popular appeal, but as images per se, suggest a stressed, sometimes determined man. If cartoonists exaggerated the perceived flaws of Mahler's character, they also reflected the intensive involvement with music that Mahler conveyed to his audiences.

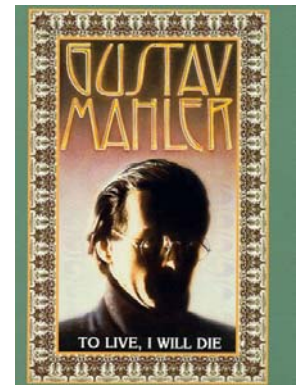
In contrast to the cartoons that date from Mahler's lifetime, the creator of the comic-strip "Peanuts," Charles Schulz, epitomized Mahler in a single panel for long, demanding, perhaps tiresome, symphonies to tolerate and, hopefully, to survive. In a panel published in 1986 Charlie Brown sees his friend Peppermint Patty in an almost catatonic state, Marcie explains that her friend had been to a concert, where she was "Mahlered" and appears dazed from apparently enduring a grueling performance of some music by the composer. Even here the reference to Mahler seems pejorative, since the expression uses the composer's name as a weak, rather than a strong verb. Such usage of the composer's name is not without interest, since it clearly suggests Mahler's name to be known outside the ranks of the musically literate and by a more general audience. The image is an exaggeration,

especially when tied to a cartoon character whose attention span cannot fathom reading an entire book, and while it conveys to the public a false impression about Mahler's music, it also suggests a level of cultural acceptance rarely encountered in a popular comic strip.

Other images of Mahler in popular culture show anything but the strong, resolute individual that Mahler must have been to succeed as a conductor par excellence. In various depictions, Mahler is, instead, the dying composer awaiting his own demise, the paranoid obsessed with death, and the sexually weak male dominated by strong women like Cosima Wagner or Alma Mahler. In those fictional portraits Mahler's works are not triumphant and affirming, but self-indulgent; and his accomplishments as a performer do not match the generally positive acclaim that the press accorded Mahler's conducting.



Cover image for the DVD release of Ken Russell's film *Mahler*.



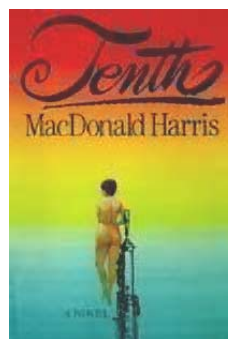
Cover image for Wolfgang Lesowsky's film *Sterbe Ich um zu Leben*. Mahler's visage is more clearly represented here than in the promotional art for Russell's *Mahler*.



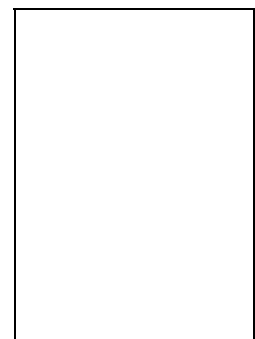
Cover images for Lucchino Visconti's film *Death in Venice*



Cover image for Bruce Beresford's film *Bride of the Wind*, which recalls some of the artwork of Klimt.



Book cover for *Tenth* by MacDonald Harris.



1. As quoted by Kurt Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler oder Der Zeitgenosse der Zukunft*, revised ed. (Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 1989), p. 203; English translation, Mahler, translated by Inge Godwin (New York: Limelight Editions), p. 189. The translation is based on the first edition (Vienna: Verlag Fritz Molden, 1969).

2. In his article on Anton Webern, "He Wrote the Book on Brevity," *The New York Times* 8 February 1995, Edward Rothstein states that "we have become a generation of Mahlerians." The statement is best understood in its context: Milton Babbitt and Morton Feldman learned from Webern. Count Basie probably never heard of him, but there are kindred touches in a piano style that reduces and vivifies. Brazil's popular musicians know the power of absence, too. Mahler, of course, did not. And we have become a generation of Mahlerians.

3. Several topical cartoons are reproduced by Kurt Blaukopf and Herta Blaukopf, eds., *Mahler: His Life, Work and World* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992). For some representative examples, see p. 83, p. 151, p. 197, and p. 199.

4. For one interpretation of these contemporary cartoons and caricatures, see K. M. Knittel, "Ein hypermoderner Dirigent: Mahler and Anti-Semitism in Fin-de-siècle Vienna", *19th Century Music* 18 (Spring, 1995):257-76. Edward F. Kravitt explores further aspects of this subject in "Mahler, Victim of the 'New' Anti-Semitism," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 127 (2002):72-94.

From Esteemed Conductor to Musical Saint

The Mahler who emerges in firsthand accounts and other documents is a brilliant and determined conductor who took risks to counter careless and sloppy performance, rather than give into the willfulness or laziness of his musicians. From the various accounts of those work performed with him, Mahler must have been a powerful force on the podium. One of the more poignant anecdotes about his demeanor in rehearsal has the singer Elise Elizza, who once sang the role of one of the three ladies in Mozart's *Zauberflöte*. She complained when Mahler had her rehearse the phrase "Stirb, Ungeheuer!" again and again. As she repeated the phrase, Elizza directed the epithet of "Die, you monster!" at the conductor himself, and Mahler responded by suggesting to the singer that she was finally getting into character.⁵ While the Elizza's story may have grown in the telling, it points to an image of Mahler, which is substantiated in other primary sources, as a conductor who was concerned with making performances work effectively, not just going through the motions of performing works in repertoire.

In shaping his opera productions, Mahler appears to have been strong and determined, even though his demanding musical standards could be regarded by some as excessive. One prominent singer who worked with Mahler, Marie Gutheil-Schoder, summarized his approach cogently when she stated that

His formula for working, if one can call it that, was very simple: he did not impose a domineering conception on either the work or the artists, he left options open for individuals to develop without prejudice. His absolute authority was based not on childish tyranny but on personal, unconditional devotion to a work filled with suggestive power...⁶

Others attested to a similar devotion to the music,⁷ and firsthand accounts of some of the performers who worked with Mahler during his tenure in New York reflects the way in which he drew musicality from his ensemble through an almost unceasing search for perfection from his performers and himself.

Yet the public image of Mahler as a strong character began to give way to that of a weak and, perhaps, neurotic individual decades ago, when Alma Mahler portrayed him in her memoirs as more dependent in order to show herself in a better light than others might have accorded her. She is not exclusively to blame for this, since other, apparently well-meaning individuals paved the way to perceiving Mahler in this manner. When Arnold Schoenberg lionized Mahler in a eulogy he gave in 1912, he began by stating: Gustav Mahler was a saint.⁸ Such an auspicious beginning suggests something more than the usual treatment of a musician, who might be referred to as a genius, the voice of his generation or, if a personal reference were allowed, one's mentor. To begin his lecture by calling Mahler a "saint" sets the stage for an unconventional tribute, and through this rhetorical device suggests a mystical acceptance of the composer that goes beyond an appreciation for the musical or artistic values. As Schoenberg went on, he used language that echoes some of St. Paul's Christological rhetoric in the New Testament:

Rarely has anyone been so badly treated by the world; nobody, perhaps, worse. He stood so high that even the best men often let him down, because even the best did not reach his height. Because in even the best there is yet so much impurity that they

5. This anecdote is told by Egon Gartenberg, *Mahler: The Man and His Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1978), p. 83 and is recounted by Henry-Louis de la Grange, *Gustav Mahler, vol. 2: Vienna: The Years of Challenge (1897-1904)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 63.

6. Quoted by Norman Lebrecht, *Mahler Remembered* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 117.

7. See Lebrecht, *Mahler Remembered*, for other reminiscences, including excerpts from those by Leo Slezak (pp. 118-23), Lilli Lehmann (pp. 214-15), and Sergei Rachmaninoff (pp. 237-39).

8. Arnold Schoenberg, "Gustav Mahler: In Memoriam", pp. 447-48 in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, edited by Leonard Stein, translated by Leo Black (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1975), p. 447. The essay originally appeared in *Der Merker*, 1 March 1912.

could not breathe in that uttermost region of purity that was already Mahler's abode on earth...⁹

Schoenberg's encomium continues for several more paragraphs, and it was certainly intended to counter the less sympathetic statements about Mahler then circulating. The rhetoric of Mahler being treated "by the world" also suggests the phraseology at the opening of the Gospel of John.¹⁰ Nowhere does Schoenberg state the motivation for this speech, but it is clear that he was trying to create an image of the composer as an almost divinely imbued figure to replace the Mahler whom Schoenberg's colleagues knew. By doing this, Schoenberg devalued the human characteristics in his "saintly" Mahler to place the composer above other musicians, who would remain, in contrast, merely human. Having replaced extreme fault with extravagant virtue, Schoenberg mythologized Mahler and removed him from reality. He essentially used rhetoric to transform the Mahler, whom he had known personally, into a figure of music history, who would become an icon as his reputation evolved in the twentieth century.

If Schoenberg erred in creating his image of Mahler, it was in his excessive and uncritical praise, which was as destructive as it was helpful in establishing the composer's posthumous reputation. In a longer essay that Schoenberg wrote the same year,¹¹ he even stated that "It seems to me almost petty that I should speak of the conductor Mahler in the same breath as the composer."¹² This comment is counterintuitive, since, at the time Schoenberg made it, Mahler's remarkable performances were still recalled by the general public; while not entirely unknown, Mahler's music was not as familiar as it became in the late twentieth century, when no one who heard Mahler conduct is still alive. In making this statement, though, Schoenberg preaches more than analyzes, and his comments continue to be more mystical than insightful.

By creating image of Mahler the saint, Schoenberg situated him beyond mortal grasp and essentially robbed the composer of his humanity. In fact, Schoenberg's 1910 painting of Mahler¹³ graphically shows this, with its depiction of the composer as a disembodied head. This differs from the way he painted other composers, such as Alban Berg and Alexander von Zemlinsky. Schoenberg's portrait of Mahler resembles one of his own self-portraits the "Grünes Selbstporträt,"¹⁴ which also dates from 1910. The similarities between the latter two paintings show a link, which may be connected to the fact that they were painted at approximately the same time in Schoenberg's life, and represent, perhaps, Schoenberg's own connection with the composer.

More important, Schoenberg's veritable declaration about Mahler's place in the musical culture of his time is crucial for assessments that would occur in later generations, especially the 1960s, when the legendary Mahler revival occurred. Schoenberg's decisive statements

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 447-48. This passage is reminiscent of Ephesians 1:20-23, but it is not a parody of it. See *The New English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

10. Cf. *The New English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), John 1: 10-11. The specific passage reads: He [Jesus Christ] was in the world; but the world, though it owed its being to him, did not recognize him. He entered his own realm, and his own would not receive him...

11. Arnold Schoenberg, "Gustav Mahler," pp. 449-72 in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, edited by Leonard Stein, translated by Leo Black (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1975). Schoenberg gave the lecture on 13 October 1912; he revised and partially translated it in 1948, and the essay appeared in print in the 1950 edition of *Style and Idea*, edited by Dika Newlin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 464.

13. Arnold Schoenberg, "Gustav Mahler, 1910 (painting)," University of Southern California, Los Angeles, Schoenberg Archive (last accessed on 15 June 2004). <http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/schoenberg/painting/idportraithtms/ritter100.htm>

14. Arnold Schoenberg, "Grünes Selbstporträt [Green self-portrait], 1910 (painting)," University of Southern California, Los Angeles, Schoenberg Archive (last accessed on 15 June 2004.) <http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/schoenberg/painting/selfportraithtms/ritter3.htm>

soon after Mahler's death contributed to his posthumous reputation more quickly than if Schoenberg had remained silent and chosen not to decapitate Mahler the man in order to create Mahler the genius. In paying tribute to his mentor, Schoenberg established a new context for Mahler by placing him, without equivocation, in the ranks of the "very great men"¹⁵ – composers like Ludwig van Beethoven and Richard Wagner – at a time when the critics were still divided about Mahler's legacy as a composer. In a sense, Schoenberg's praise validated the image of Mahler as Mozart, just as Auguste Rodin had used Mahler's face as the model for his sculpture of Mozart.¹⁶

Pursuing Mahler's Visage

If Rodin found inspiration in immortalizing Mahler's face in the bust of Mozart late in his career, it is also useful to consider the earlier caricature of Mahler that Gustav Klimt had used in his Beethoven-Frieze, which placed Mahler in the context of Beethoven and his world.¹⁷ Among the phantasmagoric images in Klimt's panels is an armored knight bearing a sword, whose face resembles that of Mahler. This attempt to bring Mahler into a work of the Secession is certainly topical, since Mahler was at the time the principal conductor, music director and artistic director of the Hofoper in Vienna and was also known as one of the foremost interpreters of Beethoven, the subject, after all, of the Frieze. Mahler was also associated with championing modernism in the premieres he brought to the Hofoper and also in his association with younger composers, like Schoenberg. It would not be unusual for Klimt to pay Mahler tribute in the Beethoven-Frieze, which also serves as a self-reference when Mahler conducted an arrangement of "An die Freude," the "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, during the exhibition that included the Frieze.

Such an appropriation of the composer's image occurs elsewhere, and it seems symptomatic of the way contemporaries treated Mahler and, in a sense, perpetuated his image for future generations. Thomas Mann attempted to depict Mahler's face when he described the physical appearance of Gustav Aschenbach in the novella *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*).¹⁸ Mann began the story in July 1911, several months after Mahler's death the previous May. Except for a clipping of the obituary, Mann's working notes do not contain any comments about Mahler, but the author's later correspondence includes a direct reference to Mahler in his description of Aschenbach's face.¹⁹ In a letter date 18 March 1921, almost a decade after he completed *Der Tod in Venedig*, Mann explained to the artist Wolfgang Born, who was then creating illustrations for an edition of the novella, his intention in using Mahler's first name for that of his protagonist:

... In the early summer of 1911 the news of Gustav Mahler's death played into the conception of my story. I was able to make his acquaintance earlier in Munich [at the premiere Mahler's Eighth Symphony] and his consumingly intense personality made the strongest impression upon me. From the island Brioni, where I was staying at the time of his death, I followed the bulletins in the Viennese press, written as if for a prince, concerning his last hours. And while later this shock mingled with the impressions and ideas out of which the novella grew, I gave my hero [Gustav Aschenbach], who had succumbed to orgiastic dissolution, not only the first name of the great musician, but also in his physical

15. *Ibid.*, p. 458.

16. Rodin used Mahler as the model for the bust entitled "Mozart," which he began in 1909 (Musée Rodin (Paris). See also Danièle Gutmann, "The Mahler Busts of Auguste Rodin," *News about Mahler Research*, 8 (February 1981):4-9.

17. An excellent discussion of the Beethoven-Frieze, along with reproductions of the panels, may be found in Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Klimt: Beethoven* (Geneva: Editions Skira, 1986). The panel which includes Klimt's portrait of Mahler may be found on p. 32.

18. See the text and commentary found in Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, a Norton Critical Edition, translated and edited by Clayton Koelb (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1994).

19. Mann to Wolfgang Born, 18 March 1921, quoted in Koelb, ed., *Death in Venice*, p. 99. This is confirmed by Mann's wife Katia, in Katia Mann, *Unwritten Memories*, ed. by Elisabeth Plessen and Michael Mann, translated by Hunter and Hildegarde Hannum (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), pp. 64-65.

description, Mahler's visage. Still, I wanted to be certain that in the case of such a casual and hidden correlation one would not be able to talk at all about recognition on the part of the readership. Even in your case as the illustrator no one spoke about it. For you neither knew Mahler personally, not had I confided anything about that secret personal correlation to you. . . .²⁰

While the association of the Mahler's first name with the fictional protagonist of *Der Tod in Venedig* may suggest on the surface some kind of psychological connections, Mann's expressed intention in using his memory of Mahler's face in the novella serves as tribute to the composer rather than an attempt to assign the characterization of Aschenbach to Mahler. Any literary interpretation of Aschenbach has more to do with Mann than with Mahler, but the association between the character and the composer is taken up and further complicated by Luchino Visconti (1906-76) in his film of *Death in Venice*, released in 1971.²¹ In adapting the novella into the film Visconti depicted Gustav Aschenbach as a composer, and in so doing altered Mann's original intention in *Death in Venice* to have Aschenbach depicted as a writer.

Beyond making the connection by using the first name of Gustav, Visconti reinforced the association by using Mahler's music when discussing the works of Aschenbach. The *Adagio* from Mahler's Fifth Symphony pervades the film, and a character in the film criticizes a passage from Mahler's Fourth Symphony as though it were a work by the fictional Aschenbach. At this point Visconti names Mahler as Aschenbach through music when he has the composer's alter-ego Alfred declare that it is your music as the Aschenbach character plays "*Das himmlische Leben*". As if to confirm the identity of his protagonist, Visconti used various flashbacks that suggest episodes in Mahler's life, and further blur the image of the real-life Mahler with the story of Aschenbach, ultimately distorting both. At another level, it is difficult to believe that Visconti had any grasp of Mahler's music from the way he presented it in the film. The dialogues between the characters Gustav and Alfred refer to a moral music in abstract forms that seems to conflict with Aschenbach's more sensual personality. While it may fit the screenplay to have Alfred and Gustav discuss it, the kind of music these characters describe would fit more Thomas Mann's fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn of the novel *Doktor Faustus*²² rather than Gustav Mahler. This image alone suggests a purposeful misunderstanding of Mahler's music, as a rhetorical device; such misprision, as the critic Harold Bloom describes it, sometimes serves as a conscious misinterpretation:

Poetic Influence [Bloom's capitalization] – when it involves two strong, authentic poets, – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation...²³

Despite these issues of misreading, Visconti's adaptation of *Death in Venice* endures as a monumental film of its time. It is an important part of Mahler's reception history because of its overt use of the composer's music and persona in a major international film. Many who might have never heard Mahler's music would have become familiar with it through Visconti's film *Death in Venice*.

Mahler as the Subject of Films

The artistic license that Visconti took in his cinematic interpretation of *Death in Venice* extends to selective connections with Mahler, rather than extensive biographical details. Mahler did not die in Venice; neither was his career in the kind of artistic stagnation depicted in Visconti's film; further, no evidence exists to suggest homosexual

20. Thomas Mann, *Briefe 1889-1936* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1962), pp. 184-86

21. See Henry Bacon, *Visconti: Explorations of Beauty and Decay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 256-57 (listing); and pp. 155-71 (discussion).

22. See Bacon, p. 163. Bacon holds that Aschenbach's colleague Alfred bears a connection to Schoenberg and traces some of the dialogue between Aschenbach and Alfred to passages in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*.

23. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 30. Bloom calls this kind of misreading "clinamen" (poetic misprision) as described on p. 14.

attention on his part to anyone. Yet the depiction of Mahler's life in Ken Russell's film *Mahler* (1974) differs from Visconti's *Death in Venice* for various reasons. This film is one of several fanciful biographies of composers that Russell made at this time, such as *The Music Lovers* and *Lisztomania*, and thus it should not be considered an isolated effort on the part of the director. In contrast to the transposition of Mahler's identity onto that of Aschenbach in Visconti's *Death in Venice* as a means of interpreting Mann's novella, Russell's film makes no secret of attempting to present an interpretation of the composer's life. Framed as a retrospective trip back to Vienna at the end of Mahler's life, the structure involves a series of flashbacks that extend from Mahler's childhood through his youth and maturity.

Through his use of fantasy episodes, cross-cutting and flashbacks, Russell combines images with Mahler's music to suggest something of the composer's life. In addition, some episodes of Russell's invention serve as foils to suggest Mahler's relationship with women, starting with the opening scene where a mummified figure struggles to escape from a sort of cocoon to emerge as a woman. In the dialogue that follows, Russell's Mahler talks about this as a dream, and the character of Alma suggests that it is Mahler's idea of her own suppressed persona. While this has no basis in fact, it is one way to interpret the couple's complex relationship.

Another striking episode is the fantasy that Russell creates for Mahler when he is being considered as conductor at the Vienna Hofoper. Mahler imagines himself being put through various trials by a leather-clad Cosima Wagner (who wears a *Stahlhelm* suggestive of uniforms in the Third Reich), while he himself is dressed like the Wagnerian character Siegfried. Mahler succeeds in all the tests that Cosima presents, but the triumphant duet with anti-Semitic lyrics to the tune of the famous "Ride of the Valkyries" pushes the borders of taste. It is a crude image that serves no one well, and hardly underscores the poignant scene where Mahler tells his family about converting to Catholicism to give himself an advantage for the prestigious conducting post in Vienna.

It is difficult to ascribe directorial motives, but it would seem likely that Russell's perspective on the relationship between Gustav and Alma stems from Alma's biography. Russell's Mahler is a weak man, both physically and emotionally. In this respect Ken Russell surpasses anything found in Alma's memoirs and, instead, conceives Mahler in the image of Mann's Aschenbach. He even takes this comparison a step further with a visual allusion to Visconti's *Death in Venice*. In a fleeting, but clear image, Mahler is depicted peering at a youth in a sailor suit, who swings himself around a column in the same way that Visconti's Tazio lingers near Aschenbach in the other film. This blurs further the two fictional characters enough to make one wonder at the reasons for such distorted portrayals of Mahler in popular culture.

Rather than criticize Ken Russell's *Mahler* scene by scene to show where he deviates from biographical detail, it is more useful to observe the director's treatment of Mahler's music, which conveys something about Russell's estimation of the composer. In terms of cinematography, Russell's combination of music with visuals is artful, and this aspect of the film is remarkable for its effective blending of visual images with sound. In one memorable scene, Alma is shown making every sound in the countryside quiet so that Gustav can compose in piece; not a word is uttered, but accompanied, instead with music from Scherzo of the First Symphony. Even there, it is clear that Russell is manipulating the music for his own purposes, rather than using the images to enhance the music.

With the score of his film taken almost entirely from Mahler's music, Russell, like Visconti, used sound to corroborate – or, perhaps anchor (because of the fantasy episodes) – his interpretation of the composer. Those who know the music would recall him and should then validate the identity of the protagonist as Mahler. Unlike Visconti, Russell selected fragments from Mahler's entire output, which is extremely disconcerting. To hear part of the Fourth Symphony, and then an excerpt from another work betrays the artistic integrity of music that was not intended as a film score. Like the Mahler he depicts in this film, Russell treats the music as though it were too weak to stand on its own, and he reduces one of the most important elements of Mahler's life – his music – into nothing more than sonic wallpaper. The impact

of Mahler's music would be different in this film if Russell treated it as sparingly as Peter Shaffer had handled Mozart's music in the original script for the play *Amadeus*.²⁴

What Russell chose to do – or not to pursue – elicits a different result, since the film uses musical passages to underscore biographical episodes. The rhythmic clinking of glasses metamorphoses into the Scherzo of the First Symphony; or the first movement of the Third Symphony becomes the soundtrack of Mahler's dream about Alma as a chrysalis. In either case, Mahler's music is heard throughout the film. The result is an individual portrait of Mahler that may not coincide with other visions of the composer. Even then, the persona that the actor Robert Powell gave to Russell's Mahler is not captured in the glimpse of Mahler presented in some posters (and the cover art for the DVD release), where he is shown in a black-brimmed hat sometimes associated with Sephardic Jews, rather than dressed to match the image of the conductor, as presented elsewhere in the film.

Yet if accuracy is desired, an attempt was made to create more of a documentary about Mahler by the Austrian director Wolfgang Lesowsky in the 1987 film *Sterbe ich um zu leben*.²⁵ Despite Lesowsky's apparent intention to create a cinematic biography, some sensational elements crept into the result, and they seem out of place in a work that is otherwise faithful to the details of Mahler's life. Such scenes are relatively few in Lesowsky's film, which sets it apart from the more fantastic interpretations by Visconti and Russell. The perspective Lesowsky chose in letting the various women who were part of Mahler's life narrate part of the film is eminently laudable in its aim. The portrait of Mahler that Alma imparted in her writings is clearly not the same image of the composer that Natalie Bauer-Lechner created in her memoirs. Yet by giving voice to these women, as well as others, Lesowsky contributed a sense of a documentary to his film, a technique that worked well in Warren Beatty's film *Reds*, probably because the voices interviewed in the latter were actual witnesses. Even though Lesowsky's witnesses are actors, the director used those characters to suggest a narrative purporting to relate Mahler's life from the perspective of those who knew the composer. This may have worked well if it were borne out consistently, but the addition of the fantasy sequence where Mahler faces a dominatrix introduces a different approach, and it weakens the image of the composer developed elsewhere in the film. As with Russell, scenes like this seem to be included for the sake of sensationalism, and the impression is, at best, voyeuristic.

In addition to these images, the Mahler that Bruce Beresford depicted in his "biopic" about Alma Mahler in *Bride of the Wind* (2001) is remarkably self-assured and confident. While some critics criticized Jonathan Pryce's portrayal of Mahler in this film as wooden – and this criticism is leveled against much of the acting in the film – the result is satisfying for its lack of neurotic detail. The image of Mahler in this film is closer to the one that Alma perpetuated as the weak man in contrast to her own strong persona. This is shown in the intimate scene where Mahler has failed at being the notorious womanizer, and Alma invites him back to bed where one might assume, from the swell of the music, that he eventually succeeded. Here the actor Jonathan Pryce contributes a sense of assuredness and compassion to his characterization of the composer in a film that some criticize for its stock images of the men around Alma.²⁶

24. In Schaffer's conception of *Amadeus* for the stage, all the dialogue about Mozart dissolves into a single musical selection that stuns not only the character of Salieri, but the audience itself, because it of the strategic placement of that excerpt in the drama.

25. This film was released in 1996 in English on DVD as *Gustav Mahler: To Live, I Will Die*.

26. See Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 22 June 2001, also accessed on 13 January 2004 at http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/2001. In commenting on the actress who portrayed Alma Mahler, Dana Wynter, Ebert states: "If Wynter is not good as Alma Mahler, the other actors seem equally uneasy – even the usually assured [Jonathan] Pryce and [Vincent] Perez [who played Oskar Kokoschka] ..." Yet in comparison with other actors who have played Gustav Mahler, Pryce seems convincing, and the assurance that he brings to the role is welcome.

Mahler with Lanford Wilson, Woody Allen and Others

Mahler's increasingly strong position in the repertoire made his music an emblem of currency in several dramatic works. Thus, from the perspective of such popular acceptance, the composer is "Gustav (my time will come) Mahler" of Lanford Wilson's *Fifth of July*,²⁷ and the composer is best known in that play for swimming naked. Mahler is also a charter member of the mythical "Academy of the Overrated" in Woody's Allen's screenplay for his 1980 film *Manhattan*.²⁸ In that reference, Allen puts Mahler in the same class as the equally overrated Carl Jung, Norman Mailer, and Isak Dinesen – later in the film, he includes Mozart in the same category. Despite the sarcasm, Woody Allen's reference to Mahler shows a currency that other composers rarely achieve. Stephen Sondheim even refers to Mahler in his 1970 musical *Company*. In the number, "The Ladies Who Lunch", the character Joanne enumerates a piece of Mahler along with a matinee and a Pinter play in her list of things that interest those in her set. This toast is as much a damnation of Mahler for being something in vogue, as it is solid confirmation of Mahler's arrival on the popular and chic horizon. Mahler's presence in *Company* is remarkable for its perceptive take on the composer's relatively newfound fame.

In contrast to these passing references to the composer, Mahler was the subject of the play *Mahler's Conversion* by Ronald Harwood, which was premiered in London during 2001.²⁹ The focus of this play, as stated on the jacket copy, is the way in which the composer "rejects his Jewish background and his friends with devastating consequences." The blurb continues with a short description of Mahler's career up to 1897 when

... in order to be granted the prestigious position of Director of The [article capitalized] Vienna Court Opera, Mahler decided to convert to Catholicism. In time, however, as his world collapsed, he came to believe he was being made to pay a dreadful price for this ruthless ambition.

This interpretation of Mahler's conversion is, at times, melodramatic and plays, in part, on sympathies that more properly belong to the late twentieth century than the turn of the last century. The crises related to conversion as portrayed in this work may be constructed from elements of Mahler's career, but such a turning point is not recorded in the documentary sources, including those of Natalie Bauer-Lechner, Anna von Mildenburg, and Alma Mahler, the latter two functioning as personas in Harwood's play. Those characters are joined by Siegfried Lipiner, Father Swider, and Sigmund Freud, and it is telling that the last two characters are played by the same actor. That is, the Catholic priest of the first act becomes the psychoanalyst of the second.

The first act takes place in 1897 in Hamburg, when Mahler has applied for the position at the Hofoper in Vienna and is pondering a conversion to Catholicism. His thoughts emerge in a series of conversations that culminate in Mahler seeking out the priest and proceeding with the baptism at the end of the act. Yet the second act of *Mahler's Conversion* has a looser structure in a temporal framework that extends from Fall 1897 to Mahler's death in 1911. It begins with Mahler's meeting Alma Schindler and marrying her; in short order Mahler's friends (from the first act) become estranged, and Mahler himself consults Sigmund Freud. In his meeting with Freud Mahler eventually discusses his concerns with converting to Catholicism, and ultimately his relationship with Alma is handled expeditiously. That dénouement is followed by a short scene that functions around the text of the song "Der Tamboursg'sell," a work that Harwood's Alma had described earlier in the act as particularly unappealing to her. The play ends at Mahler's deathbed, where Harwood gives his final words as "My time will come."³⁰

27. Lanford Wilson, *5th of July* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 18.

28. Woody Allen, "Manhattan", pp. 181-276 in *Four Films of Woody Allen* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 193.

29. Ronald Harwood, *Mahler's Conversion* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001). The details of the premiere, including cast, may be found among the unnumbered pages preceding the text of the play. Harwood is, perhaps, best known for his play *The Dresser* (1980).

30. Harwood, p. 86.

Mahler's Conversion may be regarded as a well-considered meditation on the religious and political forces that the composer faced. As with other dramatic interpretations of Mahler's life, some events must necessarily be telegraphed, but even here, it pushes the bounds of the plausible when Father Swider (the priest who baptizes Mahler in this play) just happens to bring his own setting of the "Veni creator spiritus" for Mahler to review, and this suggests a connection to the Eighth Symphony ostensibly at a time when Mahler had not yet started the Fourth.³¹

At bottom, though, Harwood's characterization of Mahler is offers another interpretation of the composer by a talented playwright. It is useful to see the depiction of Mahler as a spiritual pilgrim, as occurs in the first act, and this kind of portrayal has some striking resonances with biographical detail. Yet as with any interpretation, it is important not to judge the dramatic license that Harwood took with the facts of Mahler's life and expect a documentary. It is best understood in context and from the perspective conveyed by its title, *Mahler's Conversion*.

Some Images of Mahler in Fiction

Beyond Thomas Mann's association of the composer's face with the character Gustav Aschenbach in the novella *Death in Venice*, images of Mahler have also appeared in recent fiction, and one of the more intriguing examples of his legacy occurs in the novel *Tenth* by MacDonald Harris.³² As in Viconti's *Death in Venice*, the connection between Gustav Mahler and Thomas Mann emerges also in this story about the purported completion of Adrian Leverkühn's unfinished Tenth Symphony. Those familiar with Mann's *Doktor Faustus* may encounter a non sequitur here, since the fictional composer's Tenth Symphony does not occur at all in Mann's novel.³³ That did not matter to MacDonald Harris, who explains the matter glibly³⁴ and proceeds to his story of a composer's unfinished manuscript, the efforts of the family to prevent its completion, and the passionate love affair between the composer's daughter and the musicologist who wants to complete the work so that the world can know its beauty.

Because the parallels that exist with Deryck Cooke's completion and performance of Mahler's Tenth and any relationship he might have had with the composer's family, this novel may be of interest to those who know Mahler's music. At the opening of the novel *Tenth*, the musicologist makes direct reference to Mahler and his works, as if to place the fictional Adrian Leverkühn in the context of an actual a composer of similar status. This detail suggests a stronger connection between the apparent sequel and Mann's *Doktor Faustus*. Yet for those who know Mahler's works, it is difficult to avoid confusing some of the themes of this novel with the reality of a composer who left an apparently major unfinished work and which members of his family were reluctant to sanction for completion. It is difficult to compare the novel *Tenth* with the works of Thomas Mann, since its straightforward narrative sets it apart from the multi-level structure of *Doktor Faustus*. In placing the exigencies of an unfinished musical work at the core of the narrative, Heiney created a story that contains elements reminiscent of the situation with Mahler's own Tenth Symphony, and that may be the key to understanding the novel. In a sense this work of popular fiction is doubly a *roman à clef* to suggest a highly romanticized retelling of how Mahler's unfinished symphony was completed.

31. Harwood, p. 38.

32. MacDonald Harris is the pseudonym of Donald Heiney (1921-93).

33. For an overview of Mann's novel, see "Doctor Faustus" by Susan von Rohr Scaff, pp. 168-84 in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*, ed. by Ritchie Robertson (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Beyond von Rohr Scaff's discussion of the musical elements of this novel (pp. 175-80), the full-length study by Gunilla Bergsten, *Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus: The Sources and Structure of the Novel*, translated by Krishna Winston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), is particularly useful in understanding the various contexts in which this novel functions.

34. MacDonald Harris, *Tenth* (New York: Atheneum, 1984), pp. 31-32.

A similar blurring between reality and fiction is essential to Bernard Malamud's short story entitled "Alma Redeemed."³⁵ Despite the name of Alma in the title, Gustav Mahler is an unremitting presence in this story which, again, is based on these real personalities. Written relatively late in Malamud's career, this story is related to another about Virginia Woolf. These "fictive biographies" or "biographed stories" are conscious attempts by the author to explore the extraordinary details of those women's lives.³⁶ Through the medium of fiction, Malamud commented on the details of Alma's life without the constraints of formal biography. He created Alma as though she were a character of his own imagination. As Ken Russell had done in his film *Mahler*, Malamud selected some biographical details for his story, which benefits from a clear auctorial focus. "Alma Redeemed" is a thumbnail version of her life and it is striking that Malamud draws on Gustav's persona as a ghost that haunts her to the grave. If Alma is here redeemed, Gustav is also presented sympathetically, all within the context of Malamud's fiction.

As to other recent literature, Mahler emerges curiously as a cultural icon in Judy Gahagan's story "Did Gustav Mahler Ski?," which is part of a collection of fiction with the same name.³⁷ This first person narrative has nothing to do with the composer's life; instead, it concerns the author's trip to Toblach and her impressions at various sites Mahler frequented. For Gahagan, Mahler's presence is more symbolic than realistic, and the image of Mahler composing serves as a focal point for the author's meditation on inner values. In this work, Mahler has become the embodiment of artistic fulfillment, and the question of his skiing is rhetorical. This treatment of Mahler makes him as symbolic of postmodern values as Thomas Mann's Aschenbach was for those at the fin-de-siècle. Not the esthete that typifies Aschenbach, Mahler is more urbane and sage. He would not have attempted to ski, since his journeys were more inward, like those of the author Gahagan. This portrayal is easier to accept than some of the ones that preceded it, yet it shows Mahler in a different light. By portraying him as a kind of sage presence, Gahagan can ascribe to Mahler almost everything that she finds to be good about the culture. This depiction can lead to a faulty valuation of the composer as a musical Everyman, which sometimes emerges in popular biographies of Mahler. In this context Gahagan's depiction of Mahler has come full circle from the visage of Mahler in Aschenbach to the Aschenbach-like treatment of Mahler by Gahagan.

Multiple Images, Multiples Mahlers

Taken individually, the various images of Mahler hardly represent the composer accurately, and it is possible to find fault with the portrayals of Mahler in popular culture. Yet these images are best regarded as part of a continuum of interpretation which, in turn, helps us to understand our own perceptions of the composer. The values we bring into our explorations of Mahler's life and work are not solely the result of our individual investigations, but are influenced, in varying degrees, by culture. As with any composer, popular images of Mahler offer interpretations of his life that do not occur elsewhere. They are difficult to account for when it comes to traditional biography and offer, instead, a barometer of popular appeal. At the same time, sensitivity to these images is critical to understanding the reception of the composer and his music.

In popular culture, images of Mahler reveal a disparity between truth and fiction that also suggests a continual misunderstanding (or misreading) of the composer which is somehow related to the influence he exerts. It is important not to perpetuate misleading or false images, but to use the myths and images as a kind of shorthand to convey the larger meanings we hope to impart. Above all, we need to think carefully about the images of Mahler as vehicles that express to some degree various understandings of the music and the creative force behind it. Images like those created by Luchino Visconti, Ken Russell,

35. Bernard Malamud, "Alma Redeemed", pp. 619-29 in *The Complete Stories*, edited by Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997). The story was originally published in *Commentary*, July 1984.

36. See Robert Giroux's *Introduction to Malamud's Complete Stories*, p. xiii.

37. Judy Gahagan, "Did Gustav Mahler Ski?" pp. 7-21 in *Did Gustav Mahler Ski?: Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1991).

and others are potent symbols that reflect ways in which Mahler continues to affect culture through his persona and music.

A Selected List of Mahler's Images in Popular Culture

Film

- Bride of the Wind*, directed by Bruce Beresford. Paramount: DVD, ASIN: B00005Q2YS. Theatrical release, January, 2001.
- Death in Venice*, directed by Luchino Visconti. Warner Home Video: DVD, ASIN: B0000WN118. Theatrical release, June, 1971.
- Mahler*, directed by Ken Russell. Image Entertainment: DVD, ASIN: 6305131090. Theatrical release, February, 1975.
- Sterbe Ich um zu Leben*, directed by Wolfgang Lesowsky. (Released in 1996 in English as *Gustav Mahler: To Live, I Will Die*). Image Entertainment: DVD, ASIN: B00000JMP5. Theatrical release January, 1987.

Drama

- Harwood, Ronald. *Mahler's Conversion*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001

Fiction

- Gahagan, Judy. "Did Gustav Mahler Ski?" Pp. 7-21 in *Did Gustav Mahler Ski?: Stories*. New York: New Directions, 1991.
- Harris, MacDonald (Donald Heiney). *Tenth*. New York: Atheneum, 1984.
- Malamud, Bernard. "Alma Redeemed", pp. 619-29 in *The Complete Stories*, edited by Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. "Alma Redeemed" was originally published in *Commentary* (July 1984).

Upcoming Trip

Colorado MahlerFest XVIII

The Chicago Mahlerites will organize a trip to Boulder, Colorado for the 2005 MahlerFest. We plan to arrive at Denver International Airport on Thursday January 13, 2005 (late morning/early afternoon), and get to Boulder by the airport shuttle or rental car (recommended if you want to drive around the Rocky Mountain National Park or do some sight-seeing). The weather at Boulder is significantly more pleasant in January than in Chicago.

There will be chamber music program on featuring *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* and Alma Mahler songs on Friday. The Colorado MahlerFest Orchestra will have open rehearsal sessions on a daily basis during that time, and there will be accompanying lectures, all of which designed to culminate in the actual performance of Mahler's Ninth Symphony on Saturday and Sunday (January 15-16). The Ninth Symphony will be preceded by Brahms's *Tragic Overture*. *Naturlaut* has published many reports on MahlerFest. There is no place like it, where one can fully immerse oneself in the complete Mahlerian experience, and meet enthusiasts and experts alike at breakfast and dinner table, especially considering the music of Mahler the Alpinist at the foothill of the mighty Rocky Mountains.

Stan Ruttenberg, President of MahlerFest, will present an article in the December issue about the seventeen-year history of the Mahler Festival. We hope you can join us in this most unique Mahlerian event.

More details of the MahlerFest XVIII will be provided as soon as they are available. Please do plan ahead.