

## Featured Essay

### "My Time Will Come When His Is Over": Mahler and Strauss in the Twenty-First Century<sup>1</sup>

by Charles Youmans



A lithograph of Richard Strauss in 1919 by Max Liebermann: An illustration from Elisabeth Schumann's introduction to 'German Song'

For all the recent interest in "post-romanticism" or "early modernism"—an era still demeaned by its labels—Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss remain the period's two historically significant Austro-German composers.<sup>2</sup> Fans of Reger, Pfitzner, Zemlinsky, Schillings, Busoni, d'Albert, Wolf, et al., soldier bravely on, but history renews its verdict, as for example in 2003, when Peter Franklin offered an essay entitled "Richard Strauss and His Contemporaries" in which no contemporary except Mahler received more than a passing mention.<sup>3</sup> The quality of the music must surely be the driving force here, but also, perhaps, an

unspoken judgment that the conflicts and riddles of this troublesome period can be surveyed adequately in these two composers, who themselves foresaw posterity's conclusions.

Granted their status as the two leading musicians of the time, Mahler and Strauss embody a rare phenomenon in the history of Western music: they not only knew each other but liked each other, and they had regular, meaningful contact over a long period (twenty-four years). Haydn and Mozart spent less time together, Bach and Handel never met, while Stravinsky and Schoenberg avoided one another. Mahler and Strauss were friends—not kindred spirits, but fond acquaintances, deeply respectful of one another's artistic talent. Ultimately, though, a genuine intimacy could not form, and this limitation never ceased to puzzle them, as it continues to occupy us today.

Scholarly consideration of the relationship began in earnest only in 1980, with Herta Blaukopf's edition of the Mahler/Strauss correspondence, and even then the relatively small number of significant pieces of information seemed to demand an approach not unlike that forced on biographers of Bach: scholars tell the same stories but spin them differently.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as we all know, historians with a serious interest in one of these composers rarely have devoted

<sup>1</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 31 January 1902. Henry-Louis de La Grange and Günther Weiss, eds., in collaboration with Knud Martner, *Gustav Mahler: Letters to His Wife*, trans. Antony Beaumont (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 100.

<sup>2</sup> For an important recent study of this period see Walter Frisch, *German Modernism: Music and the Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Franklin, "Richard Strauss and His Contemporaries: Critical Perspectives," in *The Richard Strauss Companion*, ed. Mark-Daniel Schmid (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), 31-61.

<sup>4</sup> Available in translations as Herta Blaukopf, ed., *Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss: Correspondence 1888-1911*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

equal attention to the other, so that the rivalry in the scholarly field has become stronger than the original one that it seems to mimic. Arnold Schoenberg spoke for many a future commentator when he declined to contribute to a publication on Strauss's fiftieth birthday, with the words: "I cannot refrain from mentioning that since I have understood Mahler (and I cannot grasp how anyone can do otherwise) I have inwardly rejected Strauss."<sup>5</sup> Judging by Mahler's programming choices in New York, he himself did not inwardly reject Strauss, but in that respect, at least, he failed to inspire his disciples.

The exception that proves the rule of scholarly specialization is Adorno, who could not resist so tempting a dialectic, and whose two treatments of Strauss themselves form a dialectical pair. One cannot properly read the amusing vitriol of the 1964 essay without recalling that in 1924 Adorno had been something of an apologist for Strauss, at least in the sense that he granted the music a capacity for criticism akin to what he found in Mahler: as Strauss "escaped the fate of[...] lyrical form-anarchy, so he was also charmed against the temptation of empty forms, which give the appearance of objectivity and yet possess, at best, the objectivity of the machine."<sup>6</sup> If in the end Adorno followed his idols in performing a ceremonial public renunciation of Strauss, his career as a whole bespeaks the necessity of dealing with both composers in order to understand either.

Blaukopf was surely right to delve deeper into the issue of rivalry in her groundbreaking 1980 essay, subtitled "Rivalry and Friendship."<sup>7</sup> The dual careers of composition and conducting, the distinct forums of reception—public, critical, and personal—the various yardsticks of professional success: all these were separate dimensions of a low-grade antagonism, each with its own evolving character. Realizing that only so much could be accomplished in an initial attempt, Blaukopf invited further study. But with a few promising exceptions, the interim has seen not a deepening sophistication but rather a flagging of interest, most distressingly with respect to what must have been the foundational issue of the rivalry: aesthetics, the composers' notions of what music was and what its purpose might be. When Mahler dismissed the suggestion of a rivalry, he must have meant that neither he nor Strauss was jealous of the other's career, because as we now know, on the level of aesthetics they could never be reconciled. For Mahler at first, and for Strauss after Mahler's death, this difficulty produced a despair that deserves close attention, on its own merits and for what it can tell us about musical aesthetics generally in this still-perplexing historical era.

In what follows I touch on the full range of issues in the rivalry: first the mundane ones, in an awkward but necessary challenge to long-standing caricatures, and then, building on those conclusions, the fundamental aesthetic disagreement, which is now due for reconsideration in light of important recent work on both composers. As we shall see, the issues that occupied them are still very much with us, and not only as they shape our understanding of music from the turn of the century.

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To begin dispelling myths about the Mahler/Strauss relationship one need look no further than the sources of those myths. It is a curious fact that most of the individuals who supplied material for our working assumptions also supplied contradictory or complicating information. Ida Dehmel, for example, offered a familiar characterization of both

<sup>5</sup> E. Stein, ed., *Arnold Schoenberg Letters* (London: Faber, 1964), 50-51.

<sup>6</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Richard Strauss at Sixty," trans. Susan Gillespie, in *Richard Strauss and His World*, ed. Bryan Gilliam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 406-15; quote on p. 409. Idem, "Richard Strauss. Born June 11, 1864," trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, *Perspectives of New Music* 4 (1965): 14-32, and 5 (1966): 113-29.

<sup>7</sup> Herta Blaukopf, "Rivalry and Friendship: An Essay on the Mahler-Strauss Relationship," in Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss*, 103-58.

composers in a diary entry quoted by Alma Mahler in her memoir: "Strauss dazzles and sparkles, tell stories and keeps close to the earth," she wrote, while "Mahler both glows and illumines, points upwards and carries us with him far beyond the individual destiny."<sup>8</sup> Here we recognize the time-honored idealist/materialist dichotomy. But in the same breath Dehmel also confessed that after talking with Mahler about Strauss, "I detected a little envy of Strauss's success, in terms of money," and her account goes on to describe the "feeling of complete satisfaction" she felt after spending an afternoon with Mahler in his "bright, comfortable, even luxurious flat," enjoying "good food and good wine."<sup>9</sup> Alma herself made no secret of her husband's taste for the finer things, notwithstanding her ongoing complaints about Strauss's lust for money and physical comforts. Writing of the early days of her marriage she observed, not without self-pity, that "Mahler's suits were made to measure by first-class tailors, and his innumerable pairs of shoes were made by the finest English shoemakers."<sup>10</sup>

My point here is not to indict Mahler as a clotheshorse but to suggest that he, too, was a businessman, and a good one, with a good businessman's tastes and mode of life. Unlike many twentieth-century composers, Mahler understood that for art to succeed in the most meaningful sense—for it to reach listeners—certain demands of the market had to be met. This clear-sightedness came into play during the first Vienna performances of Strauss's second opera, *Feuersnot*. Alma recalled after the premiere that Strauss "tormented Mahler without ceasing with calculations of the exact royalty on successes great or middling, with a pencil in his hand the whole time which he now and then put behind his ear, half by way of joke."<sup>11</sup> But it was actually Mahler who laid more weight on ticket sales, for as he subsequently explained to Strauss after surveying what he called the "very eloquent attendance figures" of the first four performances, without an audience an opera could not live.<sup>12</sup> Mahler knew well the value of money for an artist, and he understood how to negotiate; witness the delicacy with which in 1905 he backed out of a deal with Peters to publish the Sixth Symphony after receiving an offer of 15,000 florins from C. F. Kahnt. "I don't know what to say to Peters," he told Alma. "Let me sleep on it for a few nights. This is an unexpected windfall, and on no account do I want it to slip through my fingers."<sup>13</sup> Where the young Mahler could complain in 1891 of "endless, fruitless peddling," the mature composer recognized, along with Strauss, the legitimate artistic benefits of effective self-promotion.<sup>14</sup> And one could pursue this line of inquiry further: Mahler's interest in the composer's rights activities of Strauss and Friedrich Rösch, and his adjustment of his schedule in later life along the Straussian model, are not the choices of a martyr.

Equally impressive and colorfully documented is Mahler's acute political sensitivity. Following the ugly negotiations in early 1894 over Strauss's participation in the Hamburg memorial concert for Hans von Bülow, Mahler warned him not to avoid the funeral service: "it is very important for your opera," he told Strauss regarding *Guntram*, which was being considered for performance at the Hamburg Stadttheater.<sup>15</sup> Later that year Mahler lost his composure during the first intermission

<sup>8</sup> Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Knud Martner, trans. Basil Creighton, 4th. ed. (London: Cardinal, 1990), 90.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 90, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in La Grange and Weiss, *Letters to His Wife*, 205.

<sup>11</sup> Alma Mahler, *Memories and Letters*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Mahler to Strauss, 21 February 1902. Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss*, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 3 June 1905. La Grange and Weiss, *Letters to His Wife*, 203.

<sup>14</sup> Mahler to Strauss, October 1891. Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Mahler to Strauss, 24 March 1894. *Ibid.*, 33.

of a Bayreuth *Lohengrin* when Ludwig Karpath remarked in full voice, among the Wagnerian faithful, that the production looked quite a bit like Mahler's in Budapest.<sup>16</sup> Mahler can hardly have believed that he might join Strauss among the rotation of festival conductors—in fact neither would conduct from that podium for the next thirty-nine years—but the thought of offending Cosima seemed positively terrifying.

In his handling of critics, the mature Mahler reached a level of facility bordering on the virtuosic. A December 1896 letter to Max Marschalk demonstrates the subtlety of his technique. Thanking Marschalk for an article in the *Prager Neue Musikalische Rundschau*, Mahler took aim at Strauss:

Permit me to differentiate myself thoroughly from Strauss—and to differentiate what you write about me from what the shallow Corybants say about that—forgive the harsh term—knight of industry! All the press's utterances about him reveal his knack of currying favor with his own kind.<sup>17</sup>

What better way to curry favor with the press than to attack one's principal competitor for currying favor with the press? And Mahler picked an opportune moment to compliment Marschalk on his impartiality, for Strauss's latest tone poem, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, had received its Berlin premiere just five days before.

Two months later Mahler chose a different tack in the famous letter to Arthur Seidl of 17 February 1897, in which the composer described himself and Strauss as miners digging toward one another from opposite sides of a mountain. Mahler of course knew that Seidl was something of a highbrow press agent for Strauss, and so he applied his flattery liberally, calling Strauss a "comrade-in-arms" whose successes had "paved the way" for his own, and remarking of Seidl, "happy the artist who has such a 'critic' as an ally!"<sup>18</sup> This set-up, however, had the fundamental purpose of stimulating Seidl's interest in Mahler's latest compositions, works that, if Seidl took the time to study them, would provide the critic with further evidence of his own wisdom:

When you refer to us [Strauss and Mahler], in a way so flattering to me, as the 'opposite poles' of the new magnetic field, you express a view I have for a long time held in secret, and only when you come to know the scores I have written since my Second will you realize, I think, how profoundly intuitive your way of putting it is.<sup>19</sup>

Thus Seidl's deep intuition would put Mahler on a par with Strauss.

Subsequently Mahler was exceedingly irritated that Seidl saw fit to publish a portion of this letter, and he later admitted to Natalie Bauer-Lechner that his remarks to Seidl had been "not completely sincere."<sup>20</sup> But Seidl had a reputation as a blabbermouth, which Mahler might have known; in another context Strauss told Seidl that he was "one of the most indiscreet people of the century."<sup>21</sup> Mahler certainly would

<sup>16</sup> Herta Blaukopf, ed., *Mahler's Unknown Letters*, trans. Richard Stokes (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1967), 202-03.

<sup>17</sup> Mahler to Max Marschalk, 4 December 1896. Knud Martner, ed., *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, trans. Eithne Wilkins, Ernst Kaiser, and Bill Hopkins (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), 200.

<sup>18</sup> Mahler to Arthur Seidl, 17 February 1897. *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Killian, ed., *Gustav Mahler in den Erinnerungen von Natalie Bauer-Lechner*, rev. Knud Martner (Hamburg: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1984), 170-71; quoted in Stephen E. Hefling, "Miners Digging from Opposite sides: Mahler, Strauss, and the Problem of Program Music," in *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and His Work*, ed. Bryan Gilliam (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 41.

<sup>21</sup> This remark was quoted by Seidl in a letter to Strauss of 22 December 1896. Richard-Strauss-Archiv, Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

not have been disappointed if the critic had shared this letter with Strauss, whom Mahler called "of all the gods[...] my only friend." Less certain is whether Mahler intended to skew Seidl's understanding of Strauss's compositional process by telling him that for Strauss the program was a "given task." Walter Werbeck has documented exhaustively the parallel development of music and program in Strauss's tone poems, but we cannot be sure how much Mahler knew about Strauss's working methods.<sup>22</sup> In any case, Mahler's testimony placed Strauss at the far end of the continuum between programmatic and absolute music, perhaps to create space for a composer with subtler programmatic inclinations.

At a bare minimum, this evidence allows us to conclude that Mahler, like Strauss, took seriously the business of music, and that he operated with a keen political sensitivity. With respect to Strauss, now, a new look at the relationship must note preliminarily the significant growth over the past two decades in our awareness of Strauss's compulsively private intellectual life. As late as 1976 the critic and Strauss friend Willi Schuh could declare categorically that Strauss "did not possess what it would have taken to get thoroughly and comprehensively to grips with Schopenhauer."<sup>23</sup> The sources tell a different story, but in fairness to Schuh, the enormity of his biographical enterprise did not allow him time for the kind of focused, reflective study that has taken place in the interim. Marked-up copies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche; philosophical reflections in personal notebooks; debates in correspondence with Rösch, Cosima Wagner, Ludwig Thuille, Alexander Ritter, and others; and the programmatic and musical operations of the tone poems and early operas testify not only to an active intellectual life but to the central place of intellectual concerns in his creative work.<sup>24</sup> Here too even Alma Mahler undermines the conventional wisdom; one does not have to read between the lines to recognize that she despised Pauline Strauss largely because Pauline's very presence excluded her from the composers' conversations on music, art, history, philosophy, and so on. These passages in Alma's memoir tell painfully of higher aspirations. It did not help that Pauline was herself a successful professional musician, thanks in part to Strauss's support—indeed, husband and wife often shared the stage in Lieder recitals in the 1890s and early 1900s but whatever Alma's complaints, even this habitual detractor of Strauss marveled at the high level of intellectual development in the composer.

It is high time, then, to abandon at least the most superficial misrepresentations—Mahler as dreamy, *weltfremd* Romantic, Strauss as mindless "captain of industry"—images that have remained more or less current even in recent work that aims to complicate our understanding. But if these friends shared a unique level of musical understanding, a skilled approach to the business of music, and a wide range of intellectual concerns, what kept them from becoming intimates?

Here there is no denying that differences in public reception, especially of original compositions, created friction. The relationship began awkwardly, when the twenty-three-year-old Strauss came to Leipzig in 1887 to conduct his F-Minor Symphony with the Gewandhaus Orchestra, an honor for which the twenty-seven-year-old Mahler did not yet qualify because he had not completed a symphony. Their most significant mutual acquaintance at that time was Hans von Bülow, who two years previously had chosen the utterly inexperienced Strauss over Mahler as assistant conductor at Meiningen, in spite of Mahler's

<sup>22</sup> Walter Werbeck, *Die Tondichtungen von Richard Strauss* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1996), 103-207.

<sup>23</sup> Willi Schuh, *Richard Strauss: A Chronicle of the Early Years, 1864-1898*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 131.

<sup>24</sup> For an extended discussion of these issues and their relationship to the tone poems see Charles Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

plea to "let me be your pupil, even if I must pay my fees in blood."<sup>25</sup> The early years of correspondence are peppered with Mahler's complaints about perceived injuries received from Strauss. In 1893 he remarked pointedly to Strauss that no living conductor (i.e., including Strauss) was interested in his compositions.<sup>26</sup> In 1894, after negative reviews of a performance of the First Symphony organized by Strauss, Mahler suggested to Arnold Berliner that Strauss himself might have been behind the critics' reaction.<sup>27</sup> In 1895 Mahler went silent after Strauss had to decline an invitation to attend the first full performance of the Second Symphony.<sup>28</sup> Over time, the list grew: Strauss allegedly mistreated him at a social gathering; Strauss neglected to ask him about his latest compositions; Strauss stole the credit for introducing the E-flat clarinet into the orchestra.<sup>29</sup> And most distressingly to Mahler, Strauss included criticism in his generally favorable remarks on Mahler's compositions, for example concerning the finale of the First, the Adagietto of the Fifth (a critique echoed by Adorno), and the Sixth in general, which he called "overinstrumented."<sup>30</sup> (One must admit that it took extraordinary gall for Strauss to make that latter accusation.)

While a negative word from Strauss could plunge Mahler into self-doubt, success in Straussian territory elicited bravado. In Amsterdam in October 1903, Mahler wrote to Alma of a performance of his Fourth Symphony: "Everyone here tells me it was completely unprecedented, and that I now rank far higher than Richard Strauss, who's very much in vogue here."<sup>31</sup> Alma may have taken such effusion with a grain of salt, and not only because Strauss was, in her words, "the greatest master of contemporary music in the first decade of this century."<sup>32</sup> She had noticed that in social encounters in which Strauss and Mahler were joined by others, Mahler withdrew from the conversation, and she had witnessed Mahler's competitive side as early as December 1901, when he bragged that "whereas I have a clear view of him, all he can see of me is the pedestal on which I stand."<sup>33</sup> But she also knew, from Mahler himself, that few experiences gave him more pleasure than the opportunity to spend time alone with Strauss. There are numerous documented cases in which uninterrupted conversation with Strauss brought forth from Mahler an expression of sincere satisfaction, as, at least momentarily, the defenses relaxed.<sup>34</sup>

Now to look once again at things from the other side, complaints about Mahler by Strauss are difficult to find; in fact there are none, aside from a scribbling in the margin of his copy of Alma's memoir, to the effect that Mahler seemed not to have been grateful for Strauss's promotion of his works. The absence of fire from this direction would come as no surprise to Mahler, who would have said that Strauss felt no animosity

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Blaukopf, "Rivalry and Friendship," 107.

<sup>26</sup> Mahler to Strauss, 20 October 1893. Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss*, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Mahler to Arnold Berliner, 31 January 1895. Martner, *Selected Letters*, 158.

<sup>28</sup> Strauss to Mahler, 10 December 1895. Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss*, 44-45.

<sup>29</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 12 January 1907. La Grange and Weiss, *Letters to His Wife*, 257. Mahler to Alma Mahler, 16 August 1906. *Ibid.*, 236. Mahler to Max Marschalk, 4 December 1896. Martner, *Selected Letters*, 201.

<sup>30</sup> Mahler to Strauss, 19 July 1894. Strauss to Mahler, 5 March 1905. Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss*, 37, 75.

<sup>31</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 23 October 1903. La Grange and Weiss, *Letters to His Wife*, 137.

<sup>32</sup> Alma Mahler, *Memories and Letters*, xliii.

<sup>33</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 18 December 1901. La Grange and Weiss, *Letters to His Wife*, 76.

<sup>34</sup> See Alma Mahler, *Memories and Letters*, 260, 266, 277, 285.

toward anyone because he simply did not care. The charge of "coolness" was the most frequent and the most passionate that Mahler directed at Strauss, and in this issue we begin to see that something more complicated and indeed more meaningful than jealousy or an inferiority complex was at work.

Mahler could never come to terms with what he called "the coldness of Strauss's nature as a human being."<sup>35</sup> He longed for "a little more warmth;" he recoiled from "the cool, blasé feeling;" he feared that it might be contagious: "Strauss sheds such a blight—you feel estranged from your very self."<sup>36</sup> Ultimately Mahler went so far as to admit a certain bitterness towards providence; after calling *Salome* a masterpiece of the first rank, he confessed resignedly, "I cannot explain it to myself, and can only surmise that from within genius speaks the voice of the 'Earth Spirit', who does not choose his abode according to human taste."<sup>37</sup> Strauss was a "Vulcan who lives and labors under a heap of slag," and the slag occupied Mahler more than anything else.<sup>38</sup>

For Strauss, Mahler had his own slag, and pinpointing its nature is relatively easy in spite of the dearth of complaints from this side. Simply put, Mahler's religiosity and its influence on his aesthetics placed a barrier between the two composers that could never be penetrated. Though Strauss did not ever reach the boiling point on this issue in Mahler's presence, he also did not show the slightest patience with it. It was clearly the intensification of spiritual content in the Third Symphony that moved Strauss to walk out of the premiere, and later that evening to visit Mahler's table without mentioning the work. (Alma said that after this treatment Mahler's "spirits sank and the public acclamation now seemed of no account.")<sup>39</sup> Walter Panofsky claimed that Mahler reminded Strauss of Jochanaan, perhaps in his straddling of Judaism and Christianity but certainly because of what Strauss considered the simple foolishness of outdated metaphysical yearning.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately Mahler's death brought forth from Strauss a spectacular surge of directness; in a private diary-entry written the day after Mahler died, Strauss explicitly attacked Mahler's Christian spirituality and its links with the Romantic tradition: "The hero Richard Wagner came back to it as an old man through the influence of Schopenhauer. It is absolutely clear to me that the German nation can only attain new vigor by freeing itself from Christianity."<sup>41</sup> The Christian religion stood here for what Strauss elsewhere called the "Christian-Jewish metaphysics," a problematic notion that makes sense only if one remembers that Strauss's study of Nietzsche had taught him to regard idealism as a single philosophical movement with many faces. Judaism, Christianity, Plato, and Schopenhauer: all these blurred together for Strauss, through their preoccupation with an unseen world.

Mahler's religiosity was thus bound up with a view of music that Strauss had spent the better part of twenty years trying to destroy. Beginning with the abstruse reflections of *Guntram* (1894) and continuing more palatably and more figuratively in the subsequent tone poems, Strauss had launched a critique of musical idealism from the inside. I have detailed this critique at length elsewhere, always leaving

<sup>35</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 22 May 1906. *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>36</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 8 November 1905, 31 January 1902. *Ibid.*, 266-67, 221.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Blaukopf, "Rivalry and Friendship," 149.

<sup>38</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 10 January 1907. Alma Mahler, *Memories and Letters*, 282.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Anette Unger, *Welt, Leben und Kunst als Themen der "Zarathustra-Kompositionen" von Richard Strauss und Gustav Mahler* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), 93.

<sup>41</sup> A facsimile of this diary entry appears in Stephan Kohler, "Richard Strauss: *Eine Alpensinfonie*, op. 64," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 143, no. 11 (Nov. 1982), 42-46.

open the question of who might have recognized what Strauss was up to; one simply cannot know.<sup>42</sup> It might at least be said, however, that no one was in a better position to recognize Strauss's attack than Mahler. If Alma judged correctly that in Mahler's opinion "[no one] had said anything of value about the nature of music" aside from Wagner and Schopenhauer, then we can well understand how he would have perceived Strauss as "cold."<sup>43</sup> Mahler was reacting against not just a dry personality or a crude obsession with royalties, but against a philosophical argument, coming from the most technically gifted composer of the day. For an educated, reflective musician such as Mahler, who was loath to give up Schopenhauer, Strauss represented an enemy, whose worldview moved Mahler to Schopenhauerian laments: "It is enough to make one retreat to the wilderness, unsullied and alone, and never know another thing about the world."<sup>44</sup>

Did Strauss and Mahler discuss such things? We know that they both enjoyed informed conversations about the western humanistic tradition; they attended the Gymnasium, and were proud of it, and retained those studious habits, and tried to connect what they learned with music. We know that no one talked to the young Strauss without hearing at least an overview of his current creative projects; he was particularly forthcoming with educated artists and anyone who could promote his work, such as conductors. Mahler fit both profiles, and in fact we have stories, from the very beginning of the relationship, of the composers sharing their latest works with one another at the piano. Is it not reasonable, then, to assume that in 1896 each of them knew that the other was at work on a symphony inspired partly by Nietzsche? Would they have known, through the grapevine if by no other means, that one of these works would embrace the late, anti-Wagnerian Nietzsche while the other would invoke that same period in order to transcend it with a freely Christian redemption? Would they have seen these new efforts in light of their previous attempts at high orchestral seriousness—the Second Symphony and *Tod und Verklärung*—both of them C-minor depictions of death and the afterlife, but one undercutting itself with moment-by-moment tone-painting in flagrant violation of Liszt's practice and Wagner's theory? Would they not have recognized that their first programmatic orchestral works had used features of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (including the key) to trace the struggles of a hero? The principal dramatic difference between Mahler's First Symphony and Strauss's *Macbeth*—that Mahler's hero triumphs while Strauss's meets a grotesque downfall tinged with realism—already shows Strauss to be looking toward the future, both in terms of commercial viability and distance from his artistic predecessors. When they made their definitive artistic statements regarding Nietzsche, then, they already had a track-record of disagreement, indicating that one composer meant to chart new territory while the other held fast to tradition.

Given this context, the suggestion that Mahler and Strauss were "rivals" seems a bit tame. Rivals strive for the same goal; they want to be like each other, but better than each other. "Antagonists" seems a more apt characterization of how these two looked on one another with regard to aesthetics. With Mahler we even have an account of the moment when war was declared. Ludwig Schiedermair described the scene in Munich in the fall of 1900, when, after a performance of the Second Symphony, Mahler rejected program music once and for all and declared everlasting allegiance to metaphysical Romanticism:

It was as if lightning had struck a calm sunny landscape. Mahler's eyes shone more than ever, his brow furrowed, he rose excitedly from the table and proclaimed in an emotional voice, "Away with programs that arouse false notions. Leave the audience its own thoughts on the work being performed; do not force it to read while the music is being played; do not teach it to be prejudiced! If a composer has imparted to his listeners the feelings that flowed through him, his goal is attained.

<sup>42</sup> See Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music*, 3-142.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Hefling, "Miners Digging from Opposite Sides," 43.

<sup>44</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 12 January 1907. Alma Mahler, *Memories and Letters*, 284.

The language of sound has come close to words, but has revealed infinitely more than they can express."<sup>45</sup>

Mahler sounds very much like Mendelssohn here, and E. T. A. Hoffmann for that matter, as he must have known, rededicating himself to their ideas in a new century and on Strauss's home turf. This is not the voice of a composer who "outgrew" Nietzsche, in Herta Blaukopf's words. This is an attempt to erase Nietzsche's existence, in the century that had been claimed by Strauss, musically, for Nietzsche's post-metaphysical worldview. Here Mahler responded to the challenge laid down by Strauss: would music participate in ending western culture's idealistic tradition, or would it redouble its efforts to preserve that tradition?

Mahler became a cult figure among the younger generation of Viennese artists around 1900 largely because he reminded them of the past. Pierre Boulez would later grumble about this reality, saying that in Mahler there was "too much nostalgia, too much attachment to the past" for the composer to have been a legitimate precursor of the Second Viennese School.<sup>46</sup> Even a poet as close to Strauss as Stefan Zweig could admit that in his youth, enthusiasm for Strauss felt like "a kind of betrayal" of Mahler.<sup>47</sup> Zweig and his young contemporaries regarded Mahler as "the unforgettable one" precisely because he walked among them as the embodiment of a great tradition, a bygone era; the fact of that tradition's personification in this brilliant and needy individual made loyalty to him a profound ethical responsibility.

However broadly Mahler's disciples construed that tradition, there was something specific about the past that they particularly did not want to lose: the unique spiritual capacity of autonomous music, inherited from Beethoven and Hoffmann and now enjoying a new golden age. On Mahler's death Schoenberg put into words what he heard in this music: "the longing of humanity for its future form, for an immortal soul, for dissolution in totality [im Weltganzen]"—the longing of the soul for its God!<sup>48</sup> Webern similarly found that it was Mahler's ability to express the "Unmaterielle" that raised him above Strauss, and it is in this light that we should view Webern's dedication to traditionally autonomous musical genres.<sup>49</sup> Abstraction allowed for a certain kind of depth in one's hearing of music, a realm of spiritual imagination that was obliterated by Strauss's detailed and visual approach to programmaticism; hence the complaints of musicians such as Felix Weingartner, who contrasted the "shallowness" [Verflachung] of Strauss's music with Mahler's "authentic musicality."<sup>50</sup>

It was not only the musicians who made this distinction. Gerhart Hauptmann admired the "grand cosmic idea" and the "Jenseitigkeit" in Mahler, even while admitting that Strauss seemed to be "healthier than his own time."<sup>51</sup> Arthur Schnitzler praised Mahler for not having joined Strauss among the "Literaten-Musikern," whose compositions were musically "empty" precisely because they placed programmatic content in the foreground.<sup>52</sup> Later, Thomas Mann recoiled from Strauss's "vitalism," which is to say his music's excessively human character, while Hermann Hesse maintained what Anette Unger has called "an essentially Romantic conception of music, which raised music to a

transcendental plane, far from life."<sup>53</sup> Even today, Mahler critics commonly regard autonomy as a spiritually compelling mystery; Talia Packer Berio, for example, contemplated in 2003 the "nameless substratum within which Mahler enacts his musical and nonmusical exegesis."<sup>54</sup>

This sort of language, and its underlying assumptions, may explain how musicologists as different as Lawrence Kramer and Peter Franklin can agree that twenty-first-century musicology must turn to what Franklin calls the "unmasking [of] the idealist construction of music."<sup>55</sup> Kramer characterizes Brahms and Hanslick explicitly as "idealists," making plain what perhaps ought to have been obvious all along—that devotion to the autonomy aesthetic has served as a rear-guard defense of musical metaphysics.<sup>56</sup> I would suggest that the implications of this discussion are broader than is generally recognized, and the stakes higher. For example, Leon Botstein has been studying for over a decade now the implications of the "collapse of the importance of modernism," with the result that, in his words, "Strauss[...] has emerged as a defining figure for twentieth-century music[...] central, even innovative, in terms of modernism itself."<sup>57</sup> Bryan Gilliam, in work echoed recently by Walter Frisch, reached conclusions that are consonant with Botstein's, placing Strauss at the forefront of a variety of modernisms, particularly in *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne auf Naxos*.<sup>58</sup> But whereas all these accounts acknowledge that modernism's decline was a key factor in making possible new scholarly approaches to modernism, none of them deals head-on with the reality to which the movement gave way, namely that, in the recent observation of Michael Broyles, "the very idea of music as a separate, independent art has fundamentally eroded" in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>59</sup>

To determine whether the future belonged to Mahler, as he claimed, or to Strauss, as he hoped, one must look directly and honestly at the current state of autonomous music. Mahler and Strauss lived in a world in which new works by leading composers of "abstract art music" could still have a major impact on the culture at large. That world is gone, replaced by one in which the iPod serves as musical intravenous device (an "iV") for endless hordes, while shrinking ticket and recording sales confirm the irrelevance of nineteenth-century musical aesthetics and the art that supported it. Broyles would have us look on the current moment as "a revolution in music as profound as any that has happened in the past four hundred years, one that goes beyond style to the very purpose and nature of music." Whether or not our era is quite that pivotal, we can say with certainty that whatever need was once filled by autonomous music has declined considerably. And in that decline we can locate a resolution of debates that lay at the center of the relationship between Mahler and Strauss.

As Broyles points out, building on the ideas of Leonard Meyer, what has taken the place of the independent art of music is a new symbiosis of the aural and the visual. This development can be found not just in the popular sphere of the music video, but in opera, where ticket and recording sales are rising and directors and stage designers are

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Blaukopf, "Rivalry and Friendship," 127.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Charles S. Maier, "Mahler's Theater: The Performative and the Political in Central Europe, 1890-1910," in *Mahler and His World*, ed. Karen Painter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 78.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Unger, *Welt, Leben und Kunst*, 40-41.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>54</sup> Talia Packer Berio, "Mahler's Jewish Parable," in Painter, *Mahler and His World*, 101.

<sup>55</sup> Franklin, "Richard Strauss and His Contemporaries," 56.

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 92.

<sup>57</sup> Leon Botstein, "Whose Gustav Mahler? Reception, Interpretation, and History," in Painter, *Mahler and His World*, 17.

<sup>58</sup> This theme runs throughout Gilliam's work on Strauss; see, for example, Bryan Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 82-101. See also Frisch, *German Modernism*, 214-55.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Broyles, *Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 298.

celebrities; in a wide range of post-1950 composers of serious music, from Cage, Glass, and Partch to Stockhausen, Boulez, and Andriessen; and in film, a medium that more than any other has allowed serious music old and new a chance at life among contemporary audiences. If the increasing association of music with the visual tends to blur the line between art and popular culture, that effect must surely be a sign of health, and in any case it inches us at least a bit closer to the situation that obtained when Mahler and Strauss were living out their prickly comradeship.

Then as now there was no doubt about which of these two composers had a friendlier attitude toward music's capacity for visual representation. Strauss was considered a "photographic" composer when photography was still young. That talent in particular endeared him to listeners, including, perhaps surprisingly, Mahler himself. Mahler had a special fondness for the Strauss tone poems most given to tone-painting: *Don Quixote*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Tod und Verklärung*. Arthur Niesser remarked that after hearing Strauss conduct *Don Quixote*, Mahler "applauded wildly from his box."<sup>60</sup> In New York, Mahler favored these works when choosing from Strauss's oeuvre. One might almost wonder whether they reminded him of his youth; Mahler's early symphonies had their share of moments of this sort—the awakening of nature in the introduction of the First, the knock on the door at the beginning of the Second, the rabble in the first movement of the Third. But Mahler had learned the hard way that that kind of programmaticism was not to be his road to success, and even if those works had been embraced by the public from the outset it is difficult to imagine that his interest in redemption would not have taken him down the path that in fact he did follow.

Perhaps a better way to put that observation would be to say that among a number of available modernisms, this one piqued Mahler's curiosity but never gained his full confidence. Charles S. Maier, writing specifically about Mahler, has challenged the idea of a single modernist style around 1900, focusing instead on competing modernist visions, each represented by a composer.<sup>61</sup> But the range and nuance must certainly have been greater, as we might infer from Paul Bekker's remark that "Mahler [...] belongs to that class of composers who lack a language of their own and therefore speak in many."<sup>62</sup> This characteristic may have been the composer's greatest strength; if Mahler was given to citation and stylistic juxtaposition, that tendency turned out to be just as forward-thinking as any that might have anticipated the Second Viennese School. It would be interesting, then, to consider ways in which Strauss and Mahler helped one another, or goaded one another, to explore the various possibilities. For example, Mahler did not live quite long enough to hear, in *Der Rosenkavalier*, Strauss moving in yet another new direction. But was it a new direction? According to Adorno, Strauss could not have conceived *Rosenkavalier* without knowing the Scherzo of Mahler's Fourth—which in fact was Strauss's favorite Mahler symphony.<sup>63</sup> Or to take another example, Strauss is known to have regretted that Mahler did not develop his talent for operatic composition. Mahler wrote to Alma, perhaps with some pride, that "Strauss (this is the truth) keeps on insisting that I should write an opera. He says I have great talent for it."<sup>64</sup> What beliefs lay behind this attempted manipulation on the part of Strauss? That Mahler should be more like Strauss? That Mahler should give free rein to talents that might go to waste? That Mahler should explore more aggressively his music's capacity for visual representation?

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in La Grange and Weiss, *Letters to His Wife*, 365.

<sup>61</sup> Maier, "Mahler's Theater," 78.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Painter, *Mahler and His World*, 350.

<sup>63</sup> Donald Mitchell, "Eternity or Nothingness? Mahler's Fifth Symphony," in *The Mahler Companion*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 302.

<sup>64</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 18 August 1906. Alma Mahler, *Memories and Letters*, 278.

For Strauss, a more visual music was a more physical music, a more down-to-earth music. Strauss was asking Mahler, not for the first time, to pull his head out of the clouds. Here we arrive once more at the basic divergence in their attitudes toward music: the reason for their differences about programmaticism, and the reason they were inscrutable to one another. The obvious frustration that they felt with each other, which manifested itself in ways that could be petty and even comical, had a serious cause in each composer's exasperation that the other could not see that he was wrong about the future of the art. Would music continue to flourish as an autonomous art, and continue to sustain the general philosophical associations of that art, or would it become a component of a collective but fundamentally visual meta-art? A century later, that question seems to have been decided, and in a manner basically consistent with the aesthetics and practice applied by Strauss during his period as a composer of tone poems. For better or worse, and for many different reasons, autonomy ran aground—as Strauss predicted that it would.

The reading that I am proposing here is separate from the revisionist argument offered by Bryan Gilliam and Leon Botstein concerning Strauss's later operas, but the two are not mutually exclusive. What I mean to describe is a set of conditions that predated, and grounded, Strauss's subsequent exploration of what would turn out to be an incipient postmodernism. To the extent that Mahler did anticipate features of "High Modernism"—technically and in its covert, die-hard Romanticism—we can see a conflict between modernism and postmodernism prefigured here in microcosm and at a strikingly early date. How clearly did Mahler see this future when he sighed, dejectedly, "oh blessed, oh blessed a modern to be?"<sup>65</sup> What did he mean by "modern?" What musical tendencies did he have in mind? How broadly did he imagine the aesthetic implications? We do not know, but to pass over those questions without imagining what he could have meant would be to underestimate the intellect and cultural development of a composer for whom the purpose of music was to express a worldview.

It may be that behind Mahler's apparent confusion about Strauss's character was an uneasy suspicion that his friend was a prophet. At the very least, on the technological level Strauss produced "modern miracles;" his music cried out for a visual component that had not yet been invented. Without compromising the technical demands he placed on himself, Strauss unapologetically directed his artistic expression at non-musicians with disposable income. He regularly accomplished the feat of making what we might call "advanced" or "difficult" musical materials palatable, by linking them with extra-musical contexts. Moreover, Strauss openly relinquished, as our own culture has done, the connection of music to a threadbare spirituality.

These tendencies, and the public enthusiasm for them, told of a bleak future, from Mahler's perspective. They told of the "end of music," a phrase used around 1900 to describe Strauss's effect on the art. But they also told the truth, or a truth, one that seems more alive today than it was when Strauss proposed it. Insofar as Strauss remained an heir of Wagner and Liszt, then, we might say that *Zukunftsmusik* really was the music of the future.

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<sup>65</sup> Mahler to Alma Mahler, 15 August 1906. *Ibid.*, 276.