

Advance Praise

Horowitz is a master of what I would call “passionate scholarship.” He has a stake in what he writes. There is a lot of very sensitive skin in his game. As a literary writer he is at heart the free-spirited scholar he has been for decades; his prose frames in precise words the psychological ambiguities of personalities no less than the nuances of musical compositions or performances. His deep historical knowledge blends with his narrative imagination to bring to life the sounds, the smells, the physical textures, the very air his characters breathed: Gustav and Alma Mahler are, at the same time, accurate historical portraits and haunting literary presences.

Antonio Muñoz Molina,
winner of the Jerusalem Prize



Despite his emotions having so often been on show, there has always been something enigmatic and unknowable about Gustav Mahler. But where biographers and other musicologists have struggled, Joseph Horowitz succeeds brilliantly in revealing the inner Mahler in this powerful and moving novel. It is a triumph of historical imagination.

Richard Aldous,
author of *Tunes of Glory: The Life of Malcolm Sargent*;
Eugene Meyer Professor of History and Culture, Bard College



If we want to get closer to the “truth” of Mahler and his music, if we hope to improve our understanding of the person and his creations, we need to acknowledge the role our imagination must play in the learning process. In the case of Mahler, the essential facts have long been known. What we need now are fresh attempts to

conceive what further truths they might contain. Joseph Horowitz's brilliant novel reveals much to us about who Mahler was, what he accomplished, and how he related to his world. Readers will be as eager to study it as they would any biography, and they can expect to learn as much.

Charles Youmans,
author of *Mahler and Strauss: In Dialogue* (2016);
editor of *Mahler in Context* (2021);
Professor of Musicology, Penn State University



Joe Horowitz's *The Marriage* portrays Mahler with more power and poignancy than anyone else ever has. Set in a spider web of New York City wealth, power, and intrigue, the writing is so profoundly personal, so searingly intimate, that it is sometimes painful to read – to get that close to Mahler and his wife Alma – “the most beautiful woman in Vienna.” I found myself unable to resist reading passages several times. This is a book for people who love Mahler and long to know him intimately (and there are millions) – a truer, more human Mahler than we have ever before encountered. Alma is also fabulously drawn, with all her love and antipathy towards her husband.

JoAnn Falletta,
Music Director, the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra



Persuasive and fair. It is refreshing to see this chapter of Gustav Mahler's biography from an American perspective, written by someone not automatically biased in favor of Europe.

Karol Berger,
author of *Beyond Reason: Wagner contra Nietzsche*;
Osgood Hooker Professor in Fine Arts, Stanford University

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*The Marriage:
The Mahlers in New York*

a novel

JOSEPH HOROWITZ



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PREFACE

Gustav Mahler was never intended for America. His troubled New York City career, with the Metropolitan Opera and New York Philharmonic (1907-1911), places his features in the sharpest possible relief, removed from their accustomed habitat. There are things to be learned about Mahler the man that cannot as readily be observed in Vienna or Budapest as in Manhattan. That is my first premise.

The second is that, as I have discovered, there are things about Mahler that I can only say, or can say best, by resorting to historical fiction. In fact, I believe that the book at hand illustrates that historical fiction can be a vital tool for the framing of cultural history.

Of the many remarkable musical personalities that made fin-de-siècle New York a distinctive musical capital, the two most pertinent to Mahler were Anton Seidl and Henry Krehbiel. A messianic conductor who was also Richard Wagner's chief protégé, Seidl was Mahler's most formidable predecessor both at the Met and at the Philharmonic. Krehbiel, the pontifical dean of New York City's music critics, was Mahler's chief New World nemesis. Mahler's failure to appreciate the stature and achievements of either man revealed in his nature a self-centeredness seemingly indistinguishable from arrogance. There were no Seidls or Krehbiels abroad. At the same time, one discovers that in New York Mahler provoked controversy much as he had provoked controversy elsewhere. That the hostility that bedeviled Mahler in Vienna is typically attributed to "anti-Semitism," that Mahler's New York was remarkably free of anti-Semitism, puts a new face on things.

Every Mahler biography known to me is written through European eyes and recapitulates Mahler's own ignorance of the New

World – of Seidl and Krehbiel, of the teeming musical life of Manhattan and Brooklyn. So *The Marriage* is partly conceived as a corrective. It is in fact, to my knowledge, the first book-length treatment of Mahler in New York ever written.

Another catalyst was my first taste of writing historical fiction, a young readers' book on *Dvořák and America* (2003). But this stage was set by an earlier book: *Wagner Nights: An American History* (1994), in which I was privileged to retrieve from oblivion Anton Seidl, who conducted the Metropolitan Opera and New York Philharmonic with greater success than Mahler would enjoy. Two pertinent archives existed: one, at Columbia University, left by his widow; the other, at the Brooklyn Historical Society, left by Laura Langford, who headed the Seidl Society. Neither archive had yet been catalogued: at best, there were boxes chronologically arranged, so the act of research was one of intimate sorting and discovery, of touching personal letters or an annotated score or a composition for children set down in Seidl's hand. One day, reading a letter from Seidl to Langford, I found him explaining why his friend Dvořák, an unpredictable fellow, might not bother to turn up at a Brooklyn gathering to which he was invited. On another occasion, I came upon a stirring speech laboriously drafted in pencil, in which Seidl extolled sharing the arts with "the good people."

It is not only right, to give the poor free music at the different parks, but the Bands must play good music. The people not understand it first, but later he will whistle it with more dash and vigor, as the rich, who sits in his box and – chatter, because – he does not understand it.

These discoveries were made without prior warning: I was the first to learn that such a letter, or such a speech, was ever written or delivered. It became an act of communion. As I have many times had occasion to realize, a catalogued archive does not foster the same degree of active engagement. And today, when archives are both catalogued and digitized, the research experience is fundamentally different than before. The implications for scholarship, and for the kinds of books scholars write, have to my knowledge not been sufficiently pondered.

Writing a history, as opposed to retrieving information, is about

contextualization: the size of the frame; the amount of interpretive detail. As empathy and imagination are in play, a novelist's gifts are far from irrelevant. Writing *Wagner Nights*, I found myself in possession of a story wholly forgotten, copiously documented, and richer than any I could have possibly concocted on my own. I was astounded to absorb, for instance, that in summer Seidl would conduct fourteen times a week on Coney Island, presented by Langford's Seidl Society on the grounds of the Brighton Beach Hotel. The venue was a three thousand-seat Music Pavilion on the ocean, exposed to the stars. On Wagner nights, the bill was all-Wagner and the pavilion was full. Based on a clipping in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (and a check of the weather), I wrote:

Three thousand people applauded, and the orchestra played a fanfare, as Anton Seidl left the stage to fetch Mrs. Laura Langford and escort her to the front of the Brighton Beach music pavilion. He then mounted the podium and closed his concert, the last of the 1894 season, with Liszt's *Les préludes*, of which Langford was especially fond. As she listened to the enraptured nature music of Seidl's orchestra, her eyes swept the wooden auditorium, which was filled to capacity. To the sides, she could see the moonlit Coney Island sands, to the rear, the Atlantic. The ushers, all earnest-faced women, wore silver "S" pins on their dresses. Their job was to discipline smokers, talkers, and latecomers. But the stirring music, the sea breeze, and the whisper of the breakers cast a spell stronger than any enforced decorum.

For Seidl's funeral, more than four thousand mourners crammed the Metropolitan Opera House, far exceeding its capacity. Many women had forced their way in, past mounted policeman, by locking arms. The musical selections included Siegfried's Funeral Music. I made this the opening set piece of my book, imagining:

The soft timpani taps, the tense, tragic murmur of the low strings seamlessly joined the mortuary ambience – then convulsively transformed it. Upon the pounding, shuddering tread of Siegfried's dirge were superimposed heroic memories of the departed: his legendary strength, his naïve ardor, the heedless energy of his doomed exploits. In another time, in another place, this thunder-

ing meta-imagery would have seemed a preposterous memorial tribute. On this occasion, the imagery seemed right...

Like many historians, endeavoring to recreate the past, I found myself blurring the lines between history and fiction. But it was my subsequent young readers' book that took the plunge into invented dialogue. I decided to treat Dvořák and America as historical fiction simply because I felt it would make the story more attractive in middle and high schools (and in fact it has been used in both). I did not anticipate that, recreating a conversation between Seidl and Dvořák at Fleischman's Café, I would discover that I knew both men so well that I could readily imagine their exchange – so readily that I could simply eavesdrop, simply let them talk. To my amazement, I learned more about them both by doing so. Fictionalizing this encounter became an unanticipated tool of inquiry. More than recalling the past, I was reliving it. The frisson of this experience was actually spooky.

(I have heard actors say something similar: that in enacting a historical role, inhabiting the past, inhabiting another person's thoughts, they experience an uncanny, unpredictable intimacy.)

There is no clear separation of fact versus fiction. Rather, there is a continuum, with hard data – a date, a time of day, a location – at one extreme and the full play of imagination at the other. The past cannot remotely be retold without subjective authorial intervention. I have never been more keenly aware of this than when writing about the late Gilded Age in three previous books, and about the New York City of Dvořák, Seidl, and Gustav Mahler. I discovered myself describing a musical milieu of astonishing intensity and memorializing a culture hero – Seidl – in his day bigger than Toscanini or Bernstein. And yet he was forgotten even by the institutions – the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic – he once galvanized.

The more I excavated, the more I realized I had stumbled upon the peak decades for classical music in the United States, decades in which Wagnerism pervaded American cultural life and in which the music of native composers seemed poised to foster a native canon of world consequence. And I was challenged to frame all this from scratch, culling the broadest swath of pertinent American experience that I could muster. Another writer encountering the same story for the first time would doubtless have told it very differently. And neither version would be correct, let alone definitive.

It is this journey of discovery that has ultimately led to *The Marriage*. All the characters here in play are crafted based upon documentation at hand. And (as would not be the case in a typical historical fiction), all the events I describe – even the most private: the Eusapia Palladino séance with Otto Kahn and his wife, Mahler’s discussion with the Untermyers about his Philharmonic contract, the Brahms intermezzo with which Ossip Gabrilowitsch declared his affection for Alma – actually took place. My principal sources include the letters of Gustav and Alma, Alma’s diaries and memoirs, and articles and reviews in the New York press – supplemented by my knowledge of Mahler’s New York and, not least, of his self-revealing music. Where I quote letters or clippings, the excerpts are often, but not always, verbatim; I permit myself to abridge or conflate. Where I, for instance, observe Mahler rehearsing his Fourth Symphony, his instructions to the orchestra are based on what he typically demanded – predilections embedded in his scores, and also in his performances as described in detailed concert reviews. Where I show him berating a double bass player, I am animating an anecdote told by a member of the orchestra decades later (without referencing any specific passage or composition). When I quote a February 4, 1911, *Musical American* article by Mary Sheldon, I have merely abridged what was actually there. When I quote a Mahler letter to Bruno Walter dated “19 January 1910,” my template is a letter actually written to Walter on December 18, 1909, with numerous interpolations.¹ In the case of Henry

¹ For those interested in knowing more: I here mainly follow Mahler’s actual letter to Walter, changing “two days ago” to “a month ago” because Mahler in fact conducted his First Symphony on December 16-17, 1909. In the fourth paragraph of “my” letter, I begin to report Mahler’s gratifying experiences with Rachmaninoff and Busoni (Philharmonic concerts subsequent to Mahler’s performances of his First Symphony). Mahler’s appreciation of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 3 (“compositionally the first movement is a highly original sequel to the concertos of Liszt,” etc.) is written by me, inferring the basis of Mahler’s known admiration for Rachmaninoff’s Third Concerto. I am also the author of the sentences in which Mahler admires Busoni’s *Turandot* and Busoni the man. Busoni is himself the source of his reported American impressions, and it is Busoni who (in a letter dated July 21, 1915) reported the “odd incident” at the dress rehearsal. Mahler’s view of MacDowell is again composed by me. I return to his letter to Walter with the request for “Slezak’s transposition in the Queen of Spades.” My final paragraph (“God willing, in a year’s time...”) is based on testimony by Mahler and Alma.

Krehbiel's articles and reviews, however, content and expression are rather often my own invention, emulating the ponderous circumnavigation of the Krehbiel style. Where I cull stories from Alma's memoirs, I embellish or abridge, but the substance stays the same.

I have, in effect, embedded this documentary material in a creative narrative that illuminates it in new ways.

My Afterword – “Mahler's Disputed New World Fate” – endeavors to step back and sketch the world my novel inhabits. I here broadly recount the significance to New York of Anton Seidl and Henry Krehbiel, and also explore in detail a necessary topic seldom addressed by other writers: what can be gleaned about the sound and impact of Mahler's New York performances. Both Afterword and novel impart information the other format cannot. The reader will also find a copious Glossary of names at the close (please use it).

The Mahler scholar Charles Youmans has written: “At this stage, when we've heard all the Mahler stories over and over, creative non-fiction seems the best way forward. Historical imagination, or the courage to use one's historical imagination, will teach us more.” That, in short, is also my conviction.

CHAPTER ONE

DECEMBER 1907

Conried observed the singularity of his smoking room. The divan on which he lounged bore sculpted pillars supporting a baldachin. A suit of armor in the corner was illuminated from within by a red bulb; elsewhere colored electric lights were choreographed to emit a subterranean glow. The walls were hung with portraits of singers and actors. Conried himself was a short, corpulent man with an oversized head, heavy eyebrows, round actor's eyes, a bulbous nose, a full mouth, and a double chin. His thick black hair was combed back from the brow. He wore a black suit and suede ankle boots with elevated heels. Dippel had telephoned from the hotel; the visitors were en route. Conried had achieved his coup. He had assured the future of the Conried Metropolitan Opera Company.

A knock on the door announced their arrival. Dippel peeked in, then ushered into the room a man and a woman mutually striking in affect and appearance and in all other respects strikingly disparate. The man was middle-aged, small, wiry but worn. His long beardless head, his high sloping forehead, his tousled hair, his pointed skull and furrowed sunken cheeks and narrow lips conveyed an anchorite's bristling ascetic piety. His strong nose and piercing troubled eyes, blinking behind rimless spectacles, inflicted a taut ironic intellect and the certainty of a sharp tongue. The woman, at his side, was young enough to be his daughter but was plainly the product of smoother genes and more privileged circumstances. Taller than her husband, buxom, erect, her head gracefully perched, she radiated mystery and ease. Her countenance, neither young nor old, her ivory complexion, her inscrutable eyes, the poise and felicity of her

features, the panache of her coiffure and bearing conspired to arrest and unnerve the masculine world.

Conried already knew the man; he knew – as all Vienna knew – that when tested his brandished self-confidence could escalate to impatience and distemper or disintegrate into high-pitched vulnerability. The woman, whom Conried did not know and could never know, embodied a genus as clothed as the man was naked, a nature as self-aware as the man was self-engrossed; her density of glamour cloaked a complexity of poise and insecurity, a blurred interior probably not understood even by herself, a foil or lure to counterbalance or counteract the man’s self-evident powerfulness.

“Herr Mahler! Welcome to the Metropolitan Opera House,” Conried exclaimed in German. “And you are doubtless Madame Alma.” He had laboriously arisen and with the assistance of two canes was limping toward his guests. Contorting his stocky body, redistributing the canes, he kissed the gloved hand of the exquisite Frau. Dippel took the Mahlers’ coats and hats and disappeared. “Please,” Conried continued. “Sit.” He collapsed back into the canopied divan. “I apologize for the icy weather – it is December after all. Your hotel – it is satisfactory I hope?” Mahler sat on the very edge of the tasseled couch Conried had indicated while his wife, casually disclosing a pair of shapely ankles, luxuriated among a variety of cushions. “We have a suite with more than enough pianos,” he replied. “Two of them, to be precise. And a view of the Central Park with its horse trail and lake.”

“And the voyage?”

“We survived. We arrived only yesterday, as you doubtless know.”

“Good, good. I am glad to see you both. If you are not tired, we have *Tosca* this afternoon – in somewhat less than an hour. With Caruso, whom you must hear. The very embodiment of the *tenore italiano* – sunshine, good humor, *la voce d’oro*. When I arrived here, Grau had let his contract lapse. I scheduled his debut for opening night: *Rigoletto*, with Sembrich and Scotti. This season he sings fifty-one times, exclusively at the Metropolitan. You roll your eyes – yes, of course, I had forgotten; you had him in Vienna. But only when you see Caruso on stage here will you observe the power of American celebrity. This is not Vienna, my friends. The popular touch, in Caruso – it is *infectious*, you will see, you will see. The audience favorites are stars, they are *celestial*. They can do no wrong.

Currently we have Caruso and Cavalieri in *Fedora*, Sembrich in *Barbieri di Siviglia*, Caruso and Eames in *Isis*. And *Mefistofele* with Farrar and *Chaliapin*. An actor of genius. Even at the Burgtheater I never encountered such wizardry of make-up and deportment. As Basilio, in Rossini, he is simply not recognizable. The characterization is complete. But his *Mefistofele* is what you must see. He is practically *naked* in this role. His physique, his physical presence and projection, simply incomparable. I apologize that modesty is not included amongst my virtues; I am after all an impresario. I delight in discovering great talent, in framing it, in displaying it, in publicizing it. I am driven to promote *genius*." Conried fixed Mahler with cheerful eyes at variance with his heavy features and weary body.

"I am not uninterested in the new Italians, Herr Conried." Mahler adopted a tone of ennui. "We are pleased to have a look at your *Tosca*. As for Boito, I of course appreciate his intellectual aspirations. His librettos for Verdi are first rate. But I am far from convinced that he is a finished composer."

"I almost forgot. Are you hungry? Our lunch awaits us. Filet of sole. Please."

The Mahlers stood. Alma studied the contortions required to mobilize Conried's legs and feet. She watched him maneuver toward an intimate yet ornate table elaborately set for three. Conried opened the wine with a pop, poured three glasses, and took a sip. He sat back while the Mahlers began to dine. He turned to Alma.

"You may wonder how little Heinrich Cohen from Silesia wound up running such a big opera company in New York City. I will answer my own question: this is the land of opportunity for those who seize it. I arrived in 1878 at the age of twenty-three – even younger than yourself, my dear. I had already acted at the Burgtheater, and later in Bremen, where I also already directed. I played Mephistopheles. I played *Iago*. But it was in America that I found *pioneer* conditions – for German-language theater, major roles, major plays, for operetta, for touring, a *cornucopia* of possibilities. I eventually took over the Irving Place Theater here in Manhattan – an absolutely world-class ensemble, in Schiller, Lessing, Goethe; in Hauptmann, Ibsen, Schnitzler, Fulda, Suderman. Also operetta: Strauss, Suppé, Millöcker. Every year I brought over the greatest German stage talent. Agnes Sorma. *Sonnenthal* I made famous in New York."

He gulped his wine. The Mahlers, discreetly chewing, stole glances at one another.

“I came to the Metropolitan in 1903 with a mandate to apply my theatrical prowess. You will see the house in a moment. More than three thousand seats. So this is no Hofoper. Also, we have no state subsidies; rather, boxholders whose tastes must be considered. The American audience attends theater and opera after a long workday; the strain of daily life is greater here than abroad. You will initially have a low opinion of these conditions, I am not naïve, I know this. But you will discover how to take advantage of them. There is money enough; it must be coaxed. This is why I have redecorated the auditorium in red and gold, enlarged the pit, modernized the lighting system – the public notices these things, they pay off quickly. Now I must weld my stars into an ensemble. And I must renew the German repertoire with artists who can command proper attention. Fremstad will help. Von Rooy will help. But you, Herr Mahler, you hold the key. I understand your idealism, your impatience, your drive to perfect. Your mission, my mission – you will see they are the same.”

A loud silence descended upon the suddenly sepulchral room, with its red and blue electric hues. The Mahlers studied their potatoes au gratin. Artists. *Artistes*. Conried admired Alma’s neck and its metallic adornments.

“Madame will find the New York fashions different from Vienna’s. But New York has its own elegance of culture.”

Mahler dabbed his mouth. “My wife is a highly trained musician,” he said without expression.

“Does Madame perhaps... play the piano?”

“I had many years of practice on that instrument.”

“Perhaps she will play for us, on some occasion, the *Moonlight* Sonata – my favorite.”

“Perhaps.”

“She also draws. As you may be aware her father was a distinguished painter. Also her stepfather.”

“Caruso does superb caricatures.” Conried pointed toward a half dozen framed portraits in Caruso’s rapid hand.

Mahler placed his napkin on the table. “My dear Herr Conried. Let us talk business – briefly but efficiently please. My first *Tristan* rehearsal with piano, tomorrow, with Fremstad and Burgstaller. I

must know when and where...”

Conried raised his index finger and swallowed some fish. “Burgstaller is indisposed. He has injured his shoulder. You have instead Knot – whom you know from Munich.”

This information activated a tic in Mahler’s left eye; he simultaneously began tapping the floor loudly with his right foot. “Knot! *Excellent!* I had not imagined such good fortune.”

Conried bent toward Mahler and winked. “Our people know how to achieve such things for one another. And for *Don Giovanni* you have of course a *constellation* of stars: Sembrich, Eames, Chaliapin, Bonci, Gadski.”

Mahler’s foot ceased. “But for Mozart we require something more.”

“Of course. My specialty, Herr Mahler. The *staging*. For *Parsifal*, the American premiere, I brought from Munich Fuchs to direct – and also Lautenschlager, the greatest specialist in stage machinery. We installed new trapdoors, new counterweights. The set changes were *miraculous*.”

“But I do not approve of this decision to mount *Parsifal* in New York. Wagner wished it reserved for Bayreuth. My own contract...”

“Yes of course, you will not conduct *Parsifal* for us, we know that. A pity, but understood. I will return to my sole after ‘Recondita armonia.’ Dippel will apprise you of tomorrow’s rehearsal details.”

“Dippel...”

“Yes, we will find him faithfully awaiting us in my manager’s box.”

The Mahlers picked at what was left of their lunch. Meanwhile, Conried prodded his body into an ambulatory posture and proceeded to retrieve the coats and hats Dippel had hung in a closet. The three of them eventually exited into a labyrinth of corridors, of props and trunks and the faint odor of paint and disinfectant. An elevator yielded a shallow circular lobby fronting a multitude of boxes. An usher hurried to unlock a door: an alcove, in which the Mahlers did not pause to hang their coats, then the box itself and Dippel’s welcoming hand. The opera had already begun. The Hofoper, an ocean away, was suddenly revealed in retrospect as a bright and intimate space exuding ease and brilliance and a regal authority as tangible as the venerable Franz Josef himself. The New World opera house to which the Mahlers now succumbed was by

comparison made dauntingly inscrutable by the epic height and breadth of its vast horseshoe auditorium, by the impersonality of its shiny metallic railings and dark encrusted décor. Quickly seated, the visitors discovered themselves incongruously aligned with a casual mass of opulent spectators crowding a second tier of partitioned boxes, the ladies swathed in diamonds, the men smartly waxed and coiffed. Above loomed three unfathomable balconies. The great room was restless with latecomers and whisperers, with the rustle of coats and scarves and gloves. Its juxtaposition of luxurious hauteur with the demotic overhead arena conferred a skewed identity wholly unknown in Vienna.

The stage, framed by a ponderous gold proscenium, was set as a church interior with a painter's easel to the side. A robed baritone was singing in Italian – a tongue unknown at Hofoper performances and little known to the Mahlers. The baritone knelt and recited a prayer in Latin. Suddenly, an avalanche of applause descended from a height. A small round-bellied man with a curled black mustache had entered, looking out of place. Next, a silence as abrupt as the great ovation enveloped the house. Facing the easel, the round man barely pretended to paint, then produced a locket which he addressed in song: a short tenor aria, a tune mounting in ardor and pitch. The man's voice was arrestingly fresh in timbre, in its unstudied delivery, its easy breadth and volume. A prolonged high B-flat drove his song to a refulgent climax. A cataclysm of bravos, of cheering and applause interrupted the music. Both singers froze. The orchestra and conductor waited. Finally, the round, broad-nosed, plain-faced tenor stepped forward and with a gesture obtained a modicum of decorum. The orchestra restarted and he repeated his song to even greater acclaim. Both Mahlers felt tapped on the shoulder. They turned to see that Conried was standing, grinning, ready to depart. He leaned forward and fairly shouted over the din of renewed approbation, "A great privilege to meet you both! Wiedersehen!" And he limped out the door.

* * *

The Atlantic Ocean! After days, weeks, months, *years* of Mahler and Vienna: the sea breeze, the salted air, the endlessness of water and sky. And then the New York harbor! Our Kaiserin Augusta Victoria

passed the unforgettable statue, raising her torch, as we approached the slender island with its two great waterways swarming with boats of every description, fringed with innumerable wharves and docks. A second man-made marvel, the towering Brooklyn Bridge, spanned the East River with the novelty of its suspended webbing. Most wonderful of all was the morning's crisp winter air upon which hundreds of white plumes were inscribed arising from walls densely packed, layer upon layer, in the small island space. Even Mahler insisted on witnessing it all from the uppermost deck. For days, he had sequestered himself below with memories of Putzi and worries for his diseased heart. To mourn and to rest – and to pull me down with him, below and still lower.

And then the melee of reporters and our discovery of Manhattan itself in all its bewildering diversity, headland to a *continent*. Who would have thought that Vienna could seem so small, so inbred with its precious river, its ordered concentricity, its rumor mills and rival sects? To be suddenly rid of Justi, of Moll and Mama, of Burckhard and Schmedes, the whole lot of them. I cannot even say, in all honesty, that I yet miss my surviving daughter. I am young. I have needs.

She walked to the window. Mahler was again asleep. Far below, across Central Park West, was the huge snow-laden park itself, its frozen lake a dance pantomime of tripping children, of athletes skimming the ice and of older skaters who barely budged, of lovers gliding musically in tandem. And what if Olbrich would find our Hotel Majestic a clumsy behemoth? What if the Metropolitan Opera House's brick façade was as plain as a warehouse? What if Conried was a nouveau riche Jewish gargoyle? What if Caruso was a pudgy Neapolitan *paisano*? What if? What if?

Everyone says Mahler is my surrogate father. It's so obvious, so simple – as if I were a pebble in a stream, carried off by the current. Little Alma adored her father, the painter Schindler, who died when she was thirteen. Alma's stepfather, Moll, was no father to her, and once he and Mama Schindler had an infant daughter of their own Alma felt outcast forever. And so poor Alma sought the love of older men. An incorrigible flirt, she lured Burckhard and Klimt and Schmedes and even that ugly little Alexander Zemlinsky, whom she heartlessly abandoned for her biggest catch, Herr Director Mahler of the Hofopera, no less. And then she married Mahler when she was all of twenty-two years old and he forty-one. They had two

children, you know, of which the first died when only five, a terrible pity. And now they are off to America, where Mahler will presumably have fewer enemies than here in Vienna. But mainly he goes to New York for the money. He fancies himself a composer. Of horrid symphonies lasting more than an hour apiece, which generate no income, you see. As for Alma, perhaps abroad she will finally find a lover her own age. Mahler is looking very old ever since that little girl of theirs passed away. They were an interesting couple, don't you think? Vienna seems quieter without them.

Mahler: I answered his invitation to a higher calling. Who was I to say no? My lessons with Labor and Zemlinsky had taught me to play the piano very decently and to compose Lieder by the bushel. Mama would sing them at parties. My keyboard specialty was the Liebestod. And I could read and sing my way through *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. Alex, being a real composer, put everything in perspective. It had all been a game. I had dabbled in music and dabbled in men. My reading and learning were ardent but haphazard. I would visit the Kunsttempel and issue opinions: that Klimt was maligned as a poseur, that Olbrich was petulantly vain. Meanwhile Moll – an eternal pupil who wasted his small talent shuffling from teacher to teacher – had used me to test his skill as an educator, and reaped only hatred in return. Enveloped in Wagner, fleeing my “family,” I had looked to older men to guide my growth. Burckhard was the first. He would send me cartons of books. He would take me bicycling, trailed by a bulky landau in which my mother kept watch over our food supply: bottles of vintage French champagne, partridges, pineapples – whatever was good and accordingly expensive. It was all perfectly innocent, for Burckhard was not my type. He may have been director of the Burgtheater, a man of the most immense vitality – but his ardor sickened me. Klimt I really loved. I was still quite childish when I met him at the Art Institute. He was the most gifted of the Secessionists, already famous at thirty-five, and dangerously handsome. His looks and my young charm, his genius and my talent, our common musicality all attuned us to one another. My inexperience was appalling; he felt and found my every sensitive spot. He pursued me to Italy, where I was traveling with Mama and Moll. At last, in Genoa, my mother cruelly killed our romance. Breaking her word of honor, she studied the stammerings in my diary – and read that Klimt had kissed me. After that we were

forbidden to speak. My first marvel of love had been ruined by my “breeding.”

Morbidly depressed, I gradually took up the thread of life again. I resumed composing and lived for my work. Then I found Alex. He was gnomish, chinless, toothless, reeking of the coffeehouse – and yet the keenness and strength of his mind made him actually seductive. The success of his opera *Es war Einmal* greatly elevated our spirits. Mahler had produced it with exceptional care. Zemlinsky and I used to gossip maliciously, but this time we resolved to toast someone about whom we could think no evil. “Mahler!” we cried in unison. That was the beginning of our love. He played *Tristan* for me, I leaned on the piano, my knees buckled, we sank into each other’s arms. I felt his hand deep in my innermost self like a torrent of flame! I wanted to kneel before him and press my lips to his loins. But I was too much a coward to take the next step. I believed in a virginal purity. It was a trait of mine. My old-fashioned upbringing and my mother’s daily sermons had strapped me into a mental chastity belt.

Of course, Mama and Moll were nonetheless scandalized. “He has no money.” *Vienna* was scandalized. “Have you heard about Alma Schindler and the dwarf Zemlinsky?” Then came Mahler and the dinner party at Berta’s. I was seated between Klimt and Burckhard. I decided to be vivacious and voluble – to mask my shyness. Mahler, at the other end of the table, observed me closely; he even asked that we talk louder so that he could hear. (No one was ever less subtle about such things than he.) A belated guest arrived and praised Kubelik’s recital. I declared that recitals didn’t interest me. “Nor me!” Mahler said. Later, when we were done dining, Mahler began a public disquisition on beauty. I said that in my opinion Alex was beautiful – for his intellect and his eyes. That was going a bit far, Mahler said.

“Why don’t you do his Hofmannsthal ballet, *Das gläserne Herz*? You promised him you would.”

“Because I can’t understand it.”

“I will tell you the story and explain what it means.”

Mahler smiled. “I am all eagerness.”

“But first, you will have to explain for my benefit *The Bride of Korea*, which I saw at your Hofoper.” No ballet plot was ever more confused or stupid. Mahler laughed loudly, flashing his fine white

teeth. From that moment, he had fallen in love and would not relent. Instinctively, recklessly, I had initiated a course of events that would shape my future. The next morning, at the dress rehearsal for *Tales of Hoffmann* (which he insisted that I attend), he devoured me with his eyes and told me he had not slept a wink. The morning after that his poem arrived. Then, at *Orfeo*, he flirted with me from his director's box – so that all could see. Finally, he simply arrived at Moll's unannounced and marched into my room. Inspecting my books, he discovered a complete edition of Nietzsche and demanded that I hurl it in the fire, which I refused to do. We encountered Mama in the hall. With her unruffled charm she invited him to stay for dinner.

“We are having paprika-Hendel and – Burckhard.”

“I am not fond of either. But I'll stay all the same.”

We walked in the crunchy snow with Moll and Burckhard trailing vigilantly. Mahler wanted to telephone his sister. His gait, I discovered, was irregular and peculiarly high-stepping; his knees bent like a horse's. Every minute his shoelaces came undone and had to be retied. At the post office he could not remember his own phone number. He rang the Opera to get it. Then he phoned Justi to say, without explanation, that he would not be home that evening. This was the first time I felt Mahler's vulnerability. When we exited onto the street he suddenly burst out: “It's not so simple to marry a person like me. I am free and must be free. I cannot be tied to one spot” – my first experience of feeling suffocated by Mahler's presence. I said: “Of course. Don't forget that I am the child of artists and am one myself. What you say seems obvious.” In my room he kissed me. He had made up his mind that we would marry. At dinner he performed (for me), arguing the immortality of Schiller, whom I did not yet appreciate, reciting passage after passage by heart in his handsome baritone. The next day copies of all his published songs arrived for my inspection.

Many things about Mahler already irritated me. His bitten fingernails. His smell. The way he sang. His inability to roll his r's. But I had grown completely estranged from my own home. I craved direction. That I seemed to myself incapable of deep feeling, that my behavior was overmuch governed by cold calculation – these were issues I sensed that Mahler could silence in some way. And physically I was more powerfully drawn to him than repulsed. Days

later came the letter – *twenty pages* in his rapid hand, with underlinings and exclamation points mimicking his restless speech – “the most important letter I ever had to write,” addressed to “My dearest Almschi.” I had ventured to express my own needs – to be true to myself and to my music. I was now informed that while “unsullied in body and soul” and “precociously self-assured,” I was yet too young to acquire independence, that my youth had been distorted by idle repartee and shallow relationships with Alex and the others. I would have to give up composing and embrace Mahler’s music “as my own”; my sole profession was to be that of making my husband happy. Gustav was to be the composer, the breadwinner, Alma the valiant partner and protective comrade. I would surrender myself unconditionally and in return receive an entirety of love, a life consecrated to my own. And then Mahler wrote: “Are you satisfied with my conditions? I beg you, be *truthful!*”

I showed the letter to Mama. It seemed so ill-considered and inept, stating things that must be left unsaid. And yet Mahler had dissected and exposed my lonely existence. He had made me feel ashamed of my loose tongue. I glimpsed the possibility of an eternal bond. Would I therefore have to become subordinate? Nothing had remotely prepared me for this moment of decision. Notwithstanding my youth and inexperience – the qualities Mahler italicized as limitations – I could glean his letter’s intimate self-portraiture: of his indomitable strength of candor and of his self-involvement, equally indomitable; of his capacity to love and empathize on his own terms, the singularity of which he proudly appreciated but whose *impact* he could not gauge. In any event, the juggernaut was upon me; my need for purpose was great and indistinct; there was no turning back.

And so it was that I – who never liked children, who viewed my mother and motherhood with such ambivalence – became a wife and mother. And that Mahler, my supposed father figure, became a husband and actual father. That he would worship little Putzi as he did, I could never have predicted – although his music, with its visions of a children’s paradise, might have told me so. For Mahler, Putzi was innocence itself, a divine spur. Then came poor Gucki, whom he will never so revere. The girls were five and three when the decision was made to quit the Hofoper for America. Suddenly, implacably, the hand of fate intervened: Putzi’s death; the diagnosis

of Mahler's cardiac illness. So for Mahler the New World augured an urgent distraction, a chance for respite and recuperation. And it transforms me into a nurse, standing idly in this apartment, watching others disport below.

What would she now become?

The setting sun cast an ever longer, ever darker shadow on the frozen lake.

* * *

The orchestra: uncouth but acceptable. The chorus: undisciplined, imbalanced. The tenors will have to prove their mettle in *Fidelio*. A good thing I am not conducting *Götterdämmerung*. The audience: loud, inattentive. Caruso and Puccini: pabulum for the masses. And now they are expected to grasp *Tristan und Isolde*.

The "stars," Conried says. Well, yes – the casts here are the thing. Fremstad will sing her first Isolde for me: an interesting assignment; her preparatory work in Vienna with Lilli, with Mildenberg and myself was already exceptional. Her high notes hoot and lack clarity of diction – but if Lilli Lehmann insists that Fremstad is a soprano, a soprano she must be. It was Fremstad who sang *Salome* for Conried. Once. Then the high-minded boxholders, guardian spirits of the public morals, intervened so that the Metropolitan Opera stage might remain unsullied for *Tosca*, *Fedora*, and *Iris*. (In Vienna, it was the Church that forbade *Salome*.) Fremstad must have been a *tigress* in that role, kissing and caressing the severed head, no wonder their feathers were ruffled. And I must confess that I should have liked to see her Kundry even if it did violate Cosima's *Parsifal* ban. So no *Salome* in New York or Vienna. No Fremstad in Bayreuth. Opera wars.

Knote – superb diction, an easy top, a well-schooled instrument. And with all the cuts that the philistines here inflict, *Tristan* is no longer a marathon. Of course, he lacks intensity for such a role. But far better Knote than Burgstaller. Better than Schmedes, in Vienna, strutting and shouting, the species that exasperated Wagner all his life. And Alma, silly goose, probably adores him still. So one must suppose that there is opportunity enough here. Barely. I must do what I can with Fremstad and Knote and forget the rest. Otherwise *Tristan* will kill me – as it killed Carolsfeld: the one authentic

Tristan, *clairvoyant* enough to face the abyss and *plunge*. Self-sacrifice: the work demands it. But I must hold myself in check.

He shifted his head and scanned the gargantuan hotel bedroom. The bottles of pills, the thermometer, the washcloth, the little bell used to summon Alma: all were poised in readiness. The curtains were drawn tight. Outside: ice and snow; the walls of stone and cement.

Will *Tristan* finish me off? The Liebestod: a vortex of forgetfulness. Then, unbidden, the daily trauma of remembrance: the divine child with her defiant Mahler eyes, declining into a fever of oblivion. The storms and red skies of the Wörthersee. An operating table improvised in Alma's room, unbearable to watch. Fleeing, sobbing, hurling himself into the wet night. Later, Putzi's face: eyes wide, gasping for breath, the living black curls mocking the pallor of her sweet cheeks, the void of her cancelled gaze.

das dunkel
nächt'ge Land
daraus die Mutter
mich entsandt²

The vacuum coursed through his body. He wiped his brow. His eyes glistened. He exhaled deeply and waited for the pounding to subside. Tristan's delirium, its vertiginous heights and depths of unconscious wisdom, an existential shudder, a metaphysical tremor broaching the futility of existence...

Was Wagner following Faust's terminus in hell and his soul's ascendance into light, traversing the ether, partnered by angels and by Blessed Boys, by the Mater Gloriosa on high, a redeemed spirit borne aloft by the Ewig-Weibliche?³ No, Tristan's descent into the nether realms of self is, of course, more a product of Schopenhauer.

Sehnen! Sehnen!⁴

² The dark night-land out of which my mother sent me. Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act Two.

³ Eternal Feminine.

⁴ Longing! Longing! *Tristan und Isolde*, Act Three.

The Will, the restless Wheel of Time, wanting, striving: the human condition. Surcease: redemption in repose: nothingness; wholeness.

Gib Vergessen dass ich lebe.⁵

The noumenal.

Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis;
 Das Unzulängliche, hier wird's Ereignis;
 Das Unbeschreibliche, hier ist's getan;
 Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan.⁶

Alma, in her letter, asked if the Ewig-Weibliche signified “the force of love.” I replied: yes, you are quite right. Or you might call it the resting place, the goal, in opposition to the Eternal Masculine: striving and struggling. It is all an allegory to convey something which can never be adequately expressed. Only the transitory lends itself to description; but what we feel, surmise but will never reach, the intransitory behind all appearance, is indescribable. That which draws us by its mystic force, that which every created thing feels with absolute certainty as the center of its being, Goethe calls the Ewig-Weibliche. There are infinite representations of it. Goethe reveals it stage by stage, more and more clearly as the soul ascends. The Ewig-Weibliche has drawn us on – we have arrived – we are at rest – we possess what on earth we could only strain and fight for. What Christ calls “eternal blessedness.”

Schopenhauer says that great personal suffering is the “commonest means of fracturing the Will and attaining self-denial. The gleam of silver that suddenly materializes from the purifying flame of misfortune.” Gretchen is the supreme specimen. She renounces everything she formerly desired. Driven by excessive personal pain, in despair of all deliverance. Putzi...

Enough. I am in America now. Conried's hyena grin. *Tosca* and Caruso and Caruso's braying claque. Could anything be more inimical to Tristan and Isolde? My God, the *staging* – Scarpia's dishes were

⁵ Make me forget that I live. *Tristan und Isolde*, Act Two.

⁶ All things transitory but as symbols are sent / Earth's insufficiency here grows to Event. / The Indescribable, here it is done. / The Eternal Feminine leadeth us upward and on. Goethe, *Faust*, ending of Part Two.

fit for a *Bierstube*. And for our *Don Giovanni* banquet – we must at least obtain adequate silverware, plates and glasses. For *Tristan* – imagine the painted backcloths Conried will inflict on Act One, as if *Tristan und Isolde* were a story with singing sailors aboard a jolly ship. How innocent are they all of our Vienna production, of Roller’s use of lighting to achieve a unified impression. And the *costumes* Conried will furnish – can I shut my eyes? Of course not, I must cue that wretched chorus and cleanly, too. *Vigilantly*. Fremstad is an imposing woman – would that she could wear Mildenburg’s gowns. Roller’s ornamentation and design evoked the *primordial*. And how cunningly he had simplified the settings, expelling Broschi’s clutter and “tradition,” relying on color to ensnare the Stimmung. The suffocating yellows and oranges of the first act saturating the compressed playing space. Act Two: oppressively seductive purples, then the sickening cold bluish dawn of Marke’s arrival. Act Three: the ashen grays of Tristan’s delirium. Withal, a dose of Secessionist reform, marching opera into the twentieth century. “My specialty,” Conried said. Well, one man’s specialty is another man’s ball and chain.

Don Giovanni in late January. We can get the silverware right, but our Vienna staging could never happen here: the boxholders would yawn and gabble about the four movable towers as if they were a prank rather than a shortcut for mobilizing the action and the scene changes. *Fidelio* in March! If I could by then bring Roller and his Hofoper production and create a Gesamtkunstwerk on the virgin stage of the Metropolitan Opera House: what a Trojan Horse! A mere designer – it will all seem innocuous enough – at first. A *renaissance of stagecraft* at the expense of backcloths and painted wings. And the opera itself is doubtless unknown here.

Pizarro’s prisoners straggling into the light, blinking and stumbling, feeling their way along the walls, blinded by the sun.

O welche Lust!
in freier Luft
den Atem leicht zu heben!
nur hier, nur hier ist Leben!⁷

Suffering and redemption.

⁷ Oh, what joy in the open air! Freely to breathe again! Here alone is life! Beethoven, *Fidelio*, Prisoners’ Chorus.