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Gustav Mahler: A Life In Crisis



Synopsis

The life of the brilliant composer and conductor Gustav Mahler was punctuated by crisis. His parents both died in 1889, leaving him the reluctant head of a household of siblings. He himself endured a nearly fatal medical ordeal in 1901. A beloved daughter died in 1907 and that same year, under pressure, Mahler resigned from the directorship of the Vienna Opera. In each case Mahler more than mastered the trauma; he triumphed in the creation of new major musical works. The final crisis of Mahler's career occurred in 1910, when he learned that his wife, Alma, was having an affair with the architect Walter Gropius. The revelation precipitated a breakdown while Mahler was working on his Tenth Symphony. The anguished, suicidal notes Mahler scrawled across the manuscript of the unfinished symphony revealed his troubled state. A four-hour consultation with Sigmund Freud in Leiden, Holland, restored the composer's equilibrium. Although Mahler left little record of what transpired in Leiden, Stuart Feder has reconstructed the encounter on the basis of surviving evidence. The cumulative stresses of the crises in Mahler's life, in particular Alma's betrayal, left him physically and emotionally vulnerable. He became ill and died soon after in 1911. At once a sophisticated consideration of Mahler's work and a psychologically acute portrait of the life events that shaped it, this book extends our thinking about one of the great masters of modern music.

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Customer Reviews

Psychiatrist Feder (Charles Ives: My Father's Song) proves himself adept at delineating the emotional themes of Mahler's life and compositions in this psychoanalytic biography. Central

to the project is a four-hour session that Mahler had with Sigmund Freud ("He had strong obsessions," Freud later wrote) in 1910, after the composer learned of wife Alma's affair with the architect Walter Gropius. But Feder looks at Mahler's life and works through the prism of psychoanalysis throughout the volume ("Mahler coveted gifted Gentile goddesses, but he had a strong need to hold them at bay"), suggesting that "autobiographical sources were symbolized in Mahler's music rather than blatantly represented." Feder connects what he identifies as crises in Mahler's life, such as the youthful deaths of several of his siblings and his troubled marriage to the beautiful, depressed Alma, to particular musical themes and works. Leder gives short shrift to Mahler's professional triumphs and their influence on his music, and lay readers may find his prose too full of psychoanalytic jargon. Nevertheless, this is an interesting and idiosyncratic look at a man who once wrote, "My whole life is contained in my first two symphonies.... To anyone who knows how to listen my whole life will become clear."Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The crises in Mahler's life concerned death and relationships. Several siblings died very young. At 19, Mahler (1860-1911) lost his parents and thereafter cared for two brothers (one of whom later committed suicide) and a sister. His oldest daughter died early as well. No wonder death and fate figure in his compositions, including *Kindertotenlieder* and movements of his symphonies (hope and redemption are also in them). Further, Mahler prohibited Alma, his 20-years-younger wife, from composing and performing as a condition of marriage, and when he withdrew from her sexually to pursue conducting in Europe and New York as well as his own composing during summers, she turned to architect Walter Gropius. The stresses of conducting, composing, and marriage led Mahler to consultation with Freud in 1910 and ultimately to his death. Though psychiatrist Feder concentrates on Mahler's relationships and mental states, he also covers Alma after Mahler, Freud, Mahler's daughter, and his other doctors to reveal the psyche that governed the composer's life and influenced his music. A good addition to Mahler biography. Alan HirschCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

This was a fascinating read from start to finish. Feder's psychoanalysis and assumptions aside, Mahler's life was already interesting and filled with excess drama. His relationship with his wife (another fascinating character) and all the name droppings around their small circle of friends/lovers/associates, etc., made this account one any Mahler fan will read cover to cover in a day or two. Just great stuff.

For those interested in examining the person (Gustav Mahler) behind the music, this book can be fascinating. Mahler's Viennese period, and some aspects of the Fin de Siecle, are interwoven seamlessly by the author. The fact that Sigmund Freud and Gustav Mahler met and talked intimately,(although not in Vienna), is enough of an irresistible, magnetic draw to this well written book. That meeting between the two geniuses was incredibly brief; but the author dissects Mahler's tempests that were the catalyst for it. It was a psychiatric consultation of historic significance for those interested in human vulnerability, medicine, musical genius, or simply the dynamic Viennese period these two extraordinary men represented. For the reader, there is a degree of frustration that Feder can only surmise the actual content of that meeting; though his is an educated guessing game. The irony is that the meeting of the two famous men is the implied focus of the book. Feder succeeds, however, by examining and providing much of the surrounding evidence. This is a lean biography that focuses on and illuminates shattering events in Mahler's adult life, that contributed to his "life in crisis". It can be read on its own, or in addition to his other biographies. His relationship with his wife, Alma, as well as her infidelity, are central to the book. The author brings Mahler's withdrawals, which were both personal and creative, into focus. Mahler's music and his philosophical view of life were inseparable. He was a self absorbed genius whose compositions are universal in a deeply human message. The author brings the personal dimension forward in a compassionate, yet realistic view of Mahler. Stuart Feder, the author, was a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and musicologist. He also wrote quite well. His unique set of qualifications gave much credibility to this effort.

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