

## Finding Gustav Mahler

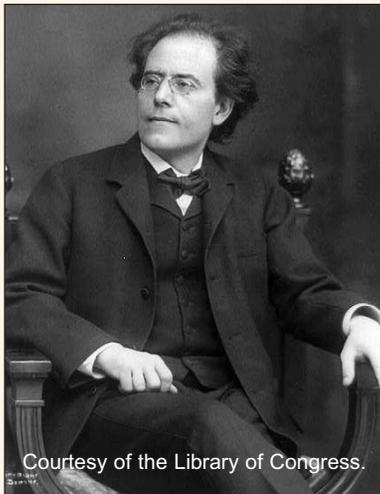
### An Examination of Psychoanalytic Studies of Gustav Mahler

Abstract of winning paper, 2006 Musicological Research Award, Category III (Graduate Research Paper)  
By Aaron Alon, *Phi Omicron, Houston Alumni*

The summer of 1910 found Gustav Mahler, legendary conductor and composer, in an unprecedented state of emotional turmoil. He was a self-declared outsider who had seen nearly every person who occupied a significant place in his life die, many throughout his childhood, and most before he had reached the age of thirty. In this summer, his fears of abandonment were reawakened when he discovered his wife Alma's adultery. Mahler's usual means of escapism—intellectual inquiry and music—proved insufficient and, on the verge of nervous collapse, he consulted with Sigmund Freud.

We know precious little of Mahler's brief consultation with Freud—Freud took most of these secrets to the grave—and after brief mention of Mahler at two meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, Mahler disappeared from psychoanalytic research for over forty years. Interest was reawakened in 1953 by Theodor Reik's *The Haunting Melody*, where Reik disclosed a letter written to him by Freud in 1935 about his brief consultation with Mahler. Reik also proposed a tantalizing theory regarding the conclusion to Mahler's second symphony. After Reik, George Pollock became central to psycho-biographical research into Mahler's life, suggesting that Mahler suffered from "pathological mourning." Modern research has been spearheaded by Stuart Feder, who published three landmark articles as well as the most comprehensive psychoanalytic biography of Mahler to date: *Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis* (Yale University Press, 2004), all of which are analyzed in the paper.

Upon examining Mahler's life psychoanalytically, certain forces emerge as shaping Mahler's inner world and, in turn, his music. Guilt is certainly one of these: survivor's guilt, guilt related to his success, and possibly guilt related to his conversion to Christianity. A sense of isolation or alienation is another—not only the isolation of the creative personality, but also the sociopolitical isolation he himself claimed: "I am thrice homeless, as a native of Bohemia



Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

"As Mahler himself claimed, there is a strong autobiographical element in his music."

in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout all the world." Mahler also struggled with fears of abandonment as well as a death fixation, which took the form of simultaneous fears of and wishes for death. But the strongest theme of all in Mahler's life and work is, as Pollock suggested, that of mourning.

As Mahler himself claimed, there is a strong autobiographical element in his music. Feder makes a persuasive case for how Mahler used composition as an attempt at mastery over death and loss, forces that inexorably shaped his entire life and made appearances in much of his music, from *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children) to *Das Lied von der Erde*, where Mahler envisions a world without end.

The paper briefly disputes Dika Newlin's thesis that psycho-biography is an inappropriate tool for understanding the lives of the deceased. Examination of her claims reveals that they are ill supported and fueled more by derisive language than by persuasive arguments.

There still remains much to be understood of Mahler's life and music. The insight psychoanalysis can provide into his life can only enrich our understanding of his music, because ultimately, Mahler is the hero of his symphonies. His works all depict *his* struggles, principally with death and with mourning. They were his intimate autobiography, the story that was too intense to be told in words. In Mahler's music, we can hope to find Gustav Mahler, no longer "lost to the world."

Contact Aaron at  
asalon@alumni.uchicago.edu.

