BOOK REVIEW:

By Joseph Horowitz

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For better or worse, the final English-language installment of Henry-Louis de La Grange’s monumental four-volume Gustav Mahler biography (of which Volume 1 is as yet only published in French) contains the most detailed portrait of Mahler in America ever attempted. Mahler’s American career, in outline, is well-known. At the Metropolitan Opera, from 1908 to 1910, his impact was great but ephemeral; he was displaced by Toscanini. With the New York Philharmonic from 1909 to 1911, he was admired but controversial; and New Yorkers found Mahler the man inspirational and irritating. In the course of 1,717 pages, de La Grange brings to this story a prodigious wealth of detail, and tireless dedication to the task—and to the genius—at hand. That no less than Mahler he knows Europe better than the United States shades the outcome.

De la Grange demonstrates beyond a doubt that, whatever his eccentricities, Mahler loved his wife profoundly—“more than she was later prepared to admit in her writings” (230). But de La Grange’s hostility toward Alma is such that the source of Mahler’s intense affection remains blurry. The Alma of this account is an alcoholic “too self-centered to devote close and lasting attention to a creative artist” (405) and subject to a “near-pathological craving” for “admiration and devotion” (864). De La Grange is not the first chronicler to stress Alma’s limitations and the unreliability of her well-known memoirs. But his view of Alma produces a fresh perspective on two aspects of Mahler in America: the behavior of Mahler’s New York Philharmonic employers, and the impact of ill health on Mahler’s late career both as conductor and composer. The net effect is a vigorously positive assessment of what Mahler achieved in New York, and of what he might have further achieved had he not died at the age of fifty.

Alma influentially disparaged the Philharmonic guarantors—philanthropic socialites who successfully undertook to reorganize and expand the orchestra’s affairs—as incompetent and disrespectful; upon leaving New York she told an American interviewer: “You cannot imagine what Mr. Mahler has suffered. In Vienna my husband was all powerful. Even the Emperor did not dictate to him, but in New York, to his amazement, he had ten ladies ordering him about like a puppet.”¹ Yet de La Grange presents Mary Sheldon, who led the guarantors, as “clever and enterprising” (150). His admiration for Sheldon is buttressed by Philharmonic archivist Barbara Haws, who, in a lengthy analysis reproduced by de La Grange, takes issue with Alma’s perception that the guarantors made arbitrary financial demands, and that their Program Committee subverted Mahler’s artistic authority. Rather, Haws expalicates a “classic

misunderstanding” (1,172). While this important effort to rehabilitate Sheldon’s reputation is useful, de La Grange himself presents a quantity of evidence that Mahler’s programming decisions were at times less than autonomous—a view also reported in the press (e.g., 1,040 and 1,173-1,175). Certainly nothing like a program committee was imposed on Theodore Thomas in Chicago, or on any of Henry Higginson’s Boston Symphony conductors. And no member of the Chicago Orchestra board would have presumed to apprise reporters, as Sheldon once did, which sections of the orchestra were strong, and which needed “reinforcement.”

Alma blamed the guarantors for undermining Mahler’s health. And she portrayed his New York years—years barely preceded by the death of his elder daughter, and the discovery that his heart was diseased—as a professional postlude darkened by illness and mortality. De La Grange disagrees. He finds that, stimulated by New World tasks and environs, Mahler heroically surmounted challenged circumstances: only with the fatal onset of endocarditis, months before he expired, did Mahler lose the impetus of what he once termed his “new life” (215). In this reading, Mahler’s Philharmonic tenure was an invigorating enterprise; Das Lied von der Erde, and his Ninth and (unfinished) Tenth Symphony emerge as compositions less morbid, more sanguine or defiant, than in other accounts (e.g., 215, 511, 608).

Elsewhere, however, the book’s morass of detail is little sifted. It becomes the reader’s job to factor in the author’s Heldentheben approach. Did Mahler find it “easy to praise his colleagues”? Quite the opposite. And yet: “The force of his convictions as a performing artist was one of the reasons why he was such a great conductor, a greatness that is, in itself, sufficient to justify this aspect of his character” (331). Concomitantly, the New York musical world Mahler encountered is too frequently portrayed as a backwater awaiting reform: “There had never been a first rate orchestra” in New York City, de La Grange opines. It bears stressing that both New York and Boston enjoyed a wealth of symphonic concerts not to be found in turn-of-the-century Vienna. As to quality: visitors like Anton Rubinstein marveled at the Theodore Thomas Orchestra, whose membership overlapped that of Thomas’s New York Philharmonic (1877-1891). And de La Grange seems not to realize that Anton Seidl’s much-admired Philharmonic concerts (1891-1898) represented a fraction of the symphonic concerts Seidl led in Manhattan and Brooklyn; it was in fact Seidl’s opinion that New York boasted a finer pool of orchestral musicians than any European city.

Addressing the perennially fascinating question of what Mahler’s concerts sounded like, de La Grange is impatient with reviews that fail to anoint Mahler a paragon. Sizing up a pair of shrewd and knowledgeable writers, he twice calls W. J. Henderson of the Sun “insidious” (392, 640) and also writes that “his views were still coloured by his systematic desire to belittle the work of the Philharmonic and Mahler’s interpretations” (1,122). And he finds “insidious innuendo” in the reviews of the Tribune’s Henry Krehbiel. But the reservations Henderson and Krehbiel expressed are not difficult to understand.

By the time Mahler arrived, both critics—and many others of lesser distinction—had embraced the bold subjectivity of Seidl and of Arthur Nikisch (a regular visitor with his Boston Symphony, 1889-1893), a style accurately understood to mirror Wagnerian practice. But the basis of Mahler’s practice—the cultural and intellectual currents of fin-de-siecle Vienna—eluded New Yorkers. Clearly, Mahler was not a Thomas-style Kapellmeister; as clearly, he was not a typical Romantic. De La Grange finds “tedious” a Krehbiel review of Mahler’s reading of Beethoven Fifth. But when Krehbiel complains that Mahler “phlebotomized [the first movement cadenza] by giving it to two oboes and beating time for each note—not in the expressive adagio

2 Ibid.,186.
called for by Beethoven, but in a rigid andante” (580), he describes an interpretive decision as odd today as in 1909.

In fact, a sympathetically inquisitive reading of Mahler’s Philharmonic reviews is rewarding. Arthur Farwell’s detailed description of Mahler’s version of Schubert’s Ninth precisely evokes a performance style recognizably “Mahlerian,” with “exaggerated effect(s) of dynamic contrast,” and sharp accents and staccatos. Here is Max Smith, in the Press, on Mahler’s violins “singing in unison”: “a volume of tone brilliant, tense, penetrating, forceful rather than fair to the senses, acrid rather than sweet” (1,165). Here is James Gibbons Huneker on the sound of Mahler’s Metropolitan Opera orchestra in Tristan: “This reading is the modern, not the tempest-tossed Wagner of other years. . . . The torrential swing and profound poetry of Seidl are lacking. . . . Variety, tonal and rhythmic variety, and a potent musical intellect, are in Mahler’s interpretation. Granting the validity of his dynamic scheme at the outset, his logic of tonal gradations is inescapable. From a pin-point pianissimo to a pin-point pianissimo the music surged through the three acts to adequate climaxes. It is a reading that laid bare the nerves of the music. . . . There are too much logic and too little sensuousness in parts of the second act” (74).

Particularly illuminating is de La Grange’s documentation of Mahler’s reading of the Adagio lamentoso of Tchaikovsky’s Pathetique Symphony—a slow finale forecasting Mahler’s own practice. In the World, Reginald De Koven wrote: “the dominant note was one of rebellion and not of that supreme anguish which lays the soul bare and makes life no longer possible” (1,113). De La Grange helpfully comments: “Today’s listeners are bound to find it entirely natural that Mahler should have introduced into the work a spirit of defiance rather than of despair, since this was precisely what he always did with his own works” (1,133).

Huneker—who looked forward to modernism—was atypical in his Tristan review for deciding: “There is no reason why we should not accept this novel Tristan und Isolde” (75). For other critics, Mahler’s anomalies and transgressions were a puzzling concomitant to readings nonetheless grippingly alive. In hindsight, we can apply the evidence of Gustav Klimt’s flat, polyphonic canvases and recognize their aural equivalent in Mahler’s eschewal of Romantic Innigkeit, in his predilection for kaleidoscopes of sound pursued by adding or modifying wind and brass parts, in his preference for a mosaic of instrumental voices canceling the Romantic cathedral sonority of dominant strings and recessed winds.

De La Grange equally supplies a mountain of fresh documentation regarding the New World reception of Mahler’s symphonies, as conducted by the composer. Though he impatiently regrets New York’s failure to acknowledge Mahler’s world stature as a creator, the performance of the critics is again impressively plausible, given their place and time. Here is Aldrich on Mahler’s Fourth: “It has not the grandeur and vast ambition of his Second Symphony; it is more accessible, and, to tell the truth, has more real musical substance than the Fifth . . . It has its enigmatical qualities, like these others, and it shows certainly the remarkable power of an original and individual talent that goes its own way”(1,127). Most New York critics preferred the Second Symphony to the First.

Such views, if not prophetic, are not undiscerning. A necessary context—lacking in de La Grange—is the genteel tradition. More than Europeans, turn-of-the-century Americans equated truth with beauty and applied to art a criterion of moral uplift. This orientation is today

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3 Horowitz, Classical Music in America, 188-189; a shorter extract appears in de La Grange, A New Life Cut Short, 1,047.
anachronistic, but in fin-de-siecle New York it girded a dynamic cultural moment.⁴ And so it comes as no surprise that the Boston Symphony’s refinements were preferred to the more jagged sound world of Mahler’s Philharmonic, or that Mahler’s symphonies were faulted for mixing the quotidian with the sublime. A more sympathetic American response awaited the post-World War I arrival of immigrants for whom a worldly sensibility of fatalism and ennui was not exogenous.⁵

Boston is another necessary frame of reference lacking in de La Grange’s assessment of Mahler’s Philharmonic tenure. As inventor, owner, and operator of the Boston Symphony, Henry Higginson was a colossal force with no New York equivalent. Higginson had been schooled in music in Vienna. He spoke German and French fluently, and he kept a European residence. He relied upon an ongoing European braintrust to help him find and engage Wilhelm Gericke, Nikisch, and Karl Muck. He maintained a personal relationship with his players, and he did not meddle with the programming of his conductors. His orchestra was a marvel of efficient management and fiscal stability, and his audience was loyal and sophisticated. All this was well-known in New York.⁶ Mary Sheldon, in comparison, was a dilettante—and never more than when, following Mahler’s death, the Philharmonic went conductor-shopping abroad and ultimately came up with Josef Stransky; Musical America was reminded of “Aesop’s fable of the mountain in labor which finally brought forth a mouse” (1,190).

Finally, inescapably, any assessment of Mahler in New York must grapple with the long shadows cast by Seidl and his friend Antonín Dvořák — of whom the former figures fitfully in de La Grange’s biography and the latter not at all. For grateful observers with long memories, Seidl and Dvořák defined the possible benefactions of newcomers and visitors to musical New York. They also happen to have been closely linked with the arch-villain in de La Grange’s narrative: Henry Krehbiel. To be sure, Krehbiel’s instantly notorious fifty-inch Mahler obituary, in which he declared that “Mahler’s American career was not a success,” was indefensible. But it remains illuminating, once Seidl and Dvořák are taken into account.

For de La Grange, Krehbiel is an ignorant pedant pretentiously eager to disparage venerable Old World practice in favor of fresh New World achievement. Many readers of this review will have their own feelings about Krehbiel.⁷ De La Grange writes: “Probably because he was self-taught and lacked any university training, of all the [New York] reviewers Krehbiel was the most anxious to display his erudition and to praise American musical culture, of which he himself, of course, was the most conclusive evidence” (59). From a different perspective, Krehbiel the tireless autodidact was predisposed toward a tireless pedagogical mission little

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⁴ This is a central theme of my Wagner Nights: An American History (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).
⁷ De La Grange vigorously contests my own high opinion of Krehbiel in Wagner Nights and Classical Music in America, and considers my account of Mahler’s American career, in Classical Music in America, marred by “lack of objectivity,” “unverified opinions,” and “time-worn clichés.” He also cites two ostensible factual errors: “[Horowitz] mentions James Gibbons Huneker as one of the members of New York’s ‘superb critical community’ but Huneker never reviewed any of Mahler’s Philharmonic concerts . . . . Vienna did not give Mahler a hero’s funeral: he had insisted on a private funeral, without speeches or music” (1,201). In fact, Huneker (who more typically wrote articles than reviews) was indeed part of New York’s critical community during the Mahler years. While it is true that Mahler insisted on a private funeral, the area outside the Gürzenzing funeral chapel was densely thronged with mourners, and so was the route of the cortege; I would call that outpouring a “hero’s funeral.” Elsewhere, de La Grange generously acknowledges my chronicle of Seidl’s New York career in Wagner Nights, for which I thank him.
practiced by the music critics of Germany or Austria: he lectured incessantly, and his many books include a layman’s guide called *How to Listen to Music*, which was reprinted thirty times.

If Krehbiel unreasonably judged Mahler a failure, what might have been his models for success? I can think of any number, beginning with Higginson, who single-handedly transformed American symphonic culture. And there is Oscar Hammerstein, who single-handedly created opera companies “for the people,” eschewing glamour. For Krehbiel, Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera—of which he was owner, architect, builder, and producer—was a lesson the Met repudiated. As for Seidl and Dvořák: one was the central missionary for Wagnerism, a national cultural current overwhelming in scope and impact, and the other influentially and controversially impacted issues of American identity. Advocating and supporting Dvořák’s advocacy of “negro melodies” and Native-American song and dance, Krehbiel fed the composer specimens of plantation song and Indian chant. When Krehbiel in his Mahler obituary complained that “it was a singular paradox in Mahler’s artistic nature that while his melodic ideas were of the folksong order his treatment of them was of the most extravagant kind, harmonically and orchestrally,” that “he was utterly inconsiderate of their essence,” it was Dvořák’s more seamless way of absorbing indigenous influences that seemed to him a better strategy.8

Mahler’s own response to New York, like de La Grange’s, was inconsistent. Extrapolating from a trove of contradictory evidence, one gleans that Mahler was gradually seduced by the grandeur, energy, and novelty of New York City—and also that his propensity for titanic self-absorption remained an obstacle. Seidl, before him, and Mahler’s onetime acolyte Artur Bodanzky (both of whose names de La Grange misspells), coming after, trimmed Wagner at the Met in consideration of an audience that mostly did not know German. Mahler could see no further than his nose in declaring that, were he to stay in New York, he would “prevent the entirely unjustified—and in a German theatre absolutely unforgivable—mutilations of Wagner’s works” (198). His tactless handling of the press, and of his own musicians, was chronic. Mulling Mahler’s disdainful response to a critic’s letter requesting attendance at dress rehearsals, de La Grange is understated: “Mahler had still not managed to become a suave and accomplished diplomat” (591).

A crucial impediment to Mahler’s greater “success” in America was his failure to embrace a democratic ethos. His elitist predilections set him apart from Thomas, Higginson, Hammerstein, Krehbiel, Seidl, Dvořák, and countless others who mattered more. And the same could be said of the two institutions he served. Neither the Met nor the Philharmonic offered tickets for a quarter, as Higginson regularly did. Laura Langford, the visionary impresario whose Seidl Society presented concerts at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Coney Island’s Brighton Beach, likewise insisted on offering inexpensive seats; and Seidl joined her in preaching the importance of bringing music to all classes.9 Only Mahler could have heedlessly written for the popular American journal *Etude*: “I cannot subscribe myself to the doctrine that all men are born equal, as it is inconceivable to me. It is not reasonable to expect that a nation

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8 Arthur Farwell, another New York critic de La Grange furiously disparages, was, like Krehbiel, a collector of folk and indigenous music; as a composer, his Bartokian Navajo War Dance No. 2 (1905) helps to contextualize his critiques of Mahler’s symphonies.

9 Like Higginson, Langford afforded observers like Krehbiel (who lectured for the Seidl Society, with Seidl himself offering musical examples at the piano) and Henderson (who was her brother-in-law) a counter-example to Mary Sheldon; Langford’s dealings with Seidl, preserved in detailed correspondence, were notably affectionate, harmonious, and efficient. See Horowitz, *Wagner Nights*, 236-239.
could arise from a savage condition to a high ethnomological state in a century or two. . . . That the Negroes in America have accomplished so much is truly amazing. . . . But to expect that they would evolve a new, distinct and original folk-song is preposterous in itself. They are great imitators, I am told, but that is no reason why the American composer should imitate their distorted copies of European folk-songs” (1,142).

Ultimately, Mahler’s paramount importance has relatively little to do with his New World sojourn. Nothing in de La Grange gleans Mahler’s actual greatness more eloquently than the testimony of Oskar Fried (who, with Bruno Walter, was one of two conductors Mahler recommended to succeed him at the Philharmonic [1,190]).10 Flagged by de La Grange as “one of the most faithful and complete portraits of Mahler ever written by someone who knew him well,” Fried’s words illustrate what makes this mega-book as indispensable as it is frustrating.

It was not his strong points which I admired and loved so much about him. Rather, it was his weaknesses. And these were the more moving and tragic because they were rooted in and determined by his humanity. He was searching for God. . . ; he believed that he had a divine mission, and wholly imbued by the idea. . . . Again and again he spoke to me about this when we went for walks together in Toblach and then his whole being was suddenly overcome with an unearthly rapture . . . He needed a servant, a disciple, on whom he could test the reality and genuine nature of his religious mission. His subconscious constantly sought someone like this in his vicinity, and used the latter’s inner elation and transfiguration to measure the truth and the significance of his religious powers. And if I provided neither answer nor echo whenever I was unable to agree with some opinion or mood, then his face froze in a strange kind of way, and he retreated in an impenetrable manner into the shell of his supernatural dwelling, a child which, cheated on earth, mourned its divine origins. For me such moments were devastating. . . . Thus he was continually engaged in struggle and in strife. . . . And for this reason the much-derided despot, like any other truly lonely and unearthly human being, needed such an abundance of warmth, admiration and love in his art. At heart he was really soft and had a craving for love. And yet he never made the slightest compromise or concession whenever it was a question of carrying out his most high office in the cleanest and purest manner imaginable. And here he was pure in a superhuman way (470).

10 Among Fried’s recordings is the first ever made of Mahler’s Resurrection Symphony—a potent 1924 reading that transcends historic interest.