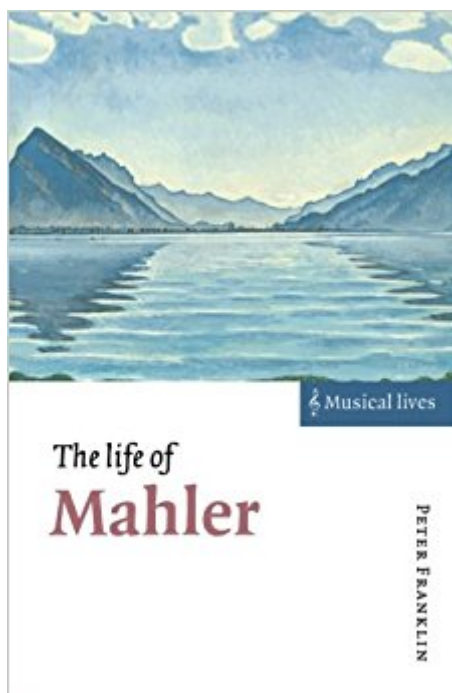


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The Life Of Mahler (Musical Lives)



Synopsis

As a leading European conductor and the composer of enormous and controversial symphonies, Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) inspired mythologizers in his own lifetime. Some of them were personal friends, concerned with countering biased criticism of him in which German-nationalist, hide-bound traditionalist or anti-Semitic elements were often mixed. In this new biography, Peter Franklin reconfronts the myth of Mahler-the-misunderstood-hero and attempts to find the person, or persons, behind the legends. His illuminating biography shows Mahler to be a profoundly sensitive thinker and composer, a dictatorial conductor and husband, an iconoclast and paradoxically, a traditionalist.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a well-written biography that eschews mythology in favor of a closer examination of both biographical and musical materials. A generation after the first wave of Mahler appreciation, Peter Franklin takes a new look from a different angle and succeeds in separating myth from fact, making this book a most welcome one. It does, however, presume a certain amount of prior knowledge of Mahler, his circle, and his music, so don't go into it completely cold. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

'Peter Franklin has achieved the difficult feat in 203 pages of text of covering the familiar ground of Mahler's life from a new perspective and making telling and perceptive comments on the music.

There are no music examples, and Franklin's style is refreshingly free from academic jargon ...'. Michael Kennedy, BBC Music Magazine 'The Life of Mahler has some extremely pertinent comments to make on a complex and not entirely sympathetic personality ... Franklin makes one think afresh about the works he describes'. The Daily Telegraph '... a convincing account of Mahler as an insistent, ambitious individual, informing convention, convinced of his own superiority'. The Times Literary Supplement 'Clearly this book is anything but a traditional biography in the way that the factual information is subjugated to the philosophical subjects that interest the author. He is most stimulating when posing probing questions and tackling head on many of the critical dilemmas which have always been so crucial in discussing this Janus-faced composer.' The Musical Times 'Franklin is deft in his characterisation of Mahler's key works and in relating them to their context.' The Times Higher Education Supplement

At 228 pages long, including the index, this looks like a good introductory book on Mahler. As part of a series called "Musical lives" the reader would be further inclined to believe this is an introductory work. But let the reader beware: this little book is much bigger than it looks. Peter Franklin wanted to be certain that his book would not fall into some of the preconceptions established by so many earlier works. Thus, he is very careful to put his remarks in the context of the times, carefully explaining the intellectual, sociological, and political climates that played a role in how Mahler saw himself, and how the world saw him and his music. To provide an example of this approach: three of the chapter titles are: "Becoming a musician in Vienna" and "Imperial and royal (Nature and the city)." and "Alma's Mahler." So what you get in this book is not a simple chronology of Gustav Mahler's life, but a look at his life with constant references to psychological influences, and the changing worlds that Mahler lived in. Perhaps it was the diversity of the cities and countries where Mahler conducted (and their political climates) that explains why his own compositions were adored in some parts and ridiculed in others. Be advised that this is not a book for Mahler beginners. It sometimes requires an effort to keep in mind the attitudes and conventions being tied in to the events in Mahler's life. To try to explain the life of a musical genius in relation to the many worlds he lived in is certainly no small task. But then this is a BIG little book!

This biography is an excellent introduction into the life of the composer Gustav Mahler. The creative process of his symphonies and his relationship with his wife, the free-spirited Alma, is revealed in great detail, and Franklin avoids any declaration of opinion, forming assumptions through thorough research. And the research comes from reliable resources (Alma's diaries, Mahler's letters,

Bauer-Lechner's accounts), and Franklin is clear when the resource may not be all-together reliable. I particularly appreciated the way he handled the hot topic of the detrimental relationship between Mahler and Alma. He claims that the uneasy marriage is due to the fault of both. Mahler wanted Alma to be an ideal wife, but she desired to be free. Some could say that she was an early feminist, but Franklin doesn't make that assertion. The reader is left to form his own opinion. The storytelling is often very lucid simply by the careful arrangement of primary accounts, be they newspaper articles, memoirs, letters or diary entries. The book is not a threatening size, but the content is not something that can be absorbed all in one sitting. Two-hundred pages probably isn't enough to explain all of Mahler's life, but I believe everything of general import is mentioned in this book and analysis is thorough and journalistically sound.

The first glance of this biography told me that what I was about to read was an incredibly detailed and devoted branch of modern, biographical literature (warning, have some prior basic knowledge of Mahler before reading!) Dr. Franklin has certainly shined in this exploration, which circulates the success of a once dreamy, inspirational child, who became a more practical intellectual both as a composer and conductor. The relationships between Mahler's life and his music are forefronted amongst a variety of primary and secondary sources, including people most close to the impatient, hot-tempered perfectionist, contrasted with those who simply try to interperate his ideas. The course of development is fine-tuned, also, with several illustrated sources, indicating the places where Mahler had worked and their significances. Within this course embodies the causes and effects of his ideas. Austria-Hungary was riddled with anti-semites, which affected Mahler in more ways than one. Vienna, deaths, modernists, religion, nature, nationalism, and other aspects are explored due to their effect, making this exceptional innovator the eclectic, liberal idealist he would increasingly become. These aspects are brought to us honestly and without bias, which is one of Franklins' great assests. The biography is backed up extensively by quotes, especially from the accounts of de La Grange and auxiliary versions. An introduction prepares the reader with Franklin's task throughout the book, accompanied by the usual notes and useful aids, especially for readers wishing to pursue their interests towards other texts. The special aspect of this book is the story being told as it was, with the relationships between Mahler and his wife, the people he worked with, friends, family, and even counter-examinations, where no bias lies. The criticisms are presented to us as well as more valuable accounts recording Mahler's abnormal personality in a way in which we can truly get to grips with this man's philosophy, stringing his ideas in juxtaposition and calculating his aims and methods of going about them. If you like song, dance, long and flowing melodies and richly

expressive harmonies, then you will certainly take to the nine symphonies of Mahler. Mahler's sense of colour ranks with the great masters of orchestration, and the spirit of song permeates his art, taking inspirations from cultures of countries like China, with the poems of Li Po. You can learn much more about his sources of inspiration, the times in which he composed, and how those times affected Mahler throughout this biography. Franklin brings forth the descriptions and induces two-way notions to get the reader thinking about these sources, as well as picturing Vienna at the turn of the century and the changing, post-romantic era. Mahler's life is remarkable, and Peter Franklin has clearly gone to trouble not to offend the person that he was and became, acknowledging the borders that shield wrongs lines of thought. For example, Mahler's wife (Alma) insists "a person should remain a 'person' and not be frozen into a legend, turned into an insufferable plaster-bust". Although we tend to think of composers as slightly odd, abnormal and completely different to ourselves, we must remember that they're still human beings. Franklin injects other points which back this up, touching on Mahler's love for nature and spirit, as well as art, love and religion. I have presented enough of the core elements of the biography, and so what is left is to declare the book as an excellent portrayal, using a variety of techniques in order to capture Mahler the Musician, and the real Mahler, whom always questioned the relationship of his life and his music. The book tends to display thoughts of irony, especially about Mahler's death, and would suit any musician wishing to broaden their philosophical answers to why we, and issues like those in Mahler's competitive life, exist. Indeed, any philosopher with enough scope to facilitate a focussed examination of a famous composer would find this biography useful. The book, however, does tend to be slightly uneasy about its purpose (in relation to two major preoccupations which are induced by two statements highlighted in the introduction). Franklin acknowledges this, and says there lies a knot of wide "interrelated issues concerning notions about 'art' and 'genius' and the ways in which they were mediated in the individual experience and in public creative activity in nineteenth-century Europe". That does not mean, though, that one can't interpret Franklins' notions; I found that the concepts of the string of issues formed neater towards the end by re-examining the two statements previously mentioned. That way, synoptically, one can focus and understand the purpose of the accounts and methods in which the author put them to us, so that we may assemble the notions to achieve the resolution which every reader desires. If you are intellectual enough to percept the outcomes of this intelligent journey, simply jump on board!

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