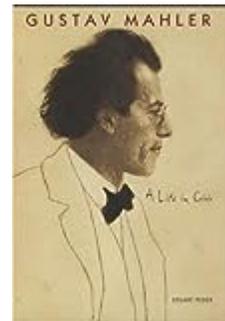
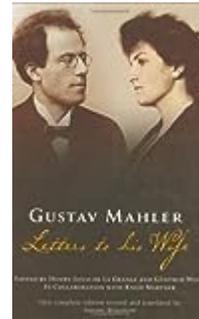




Stuart Feder. *Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 353 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10340-3.



Gustav Mahler. *Letters to His Wife.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. xxvii + 431 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4340-4.



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Gustav Mahler's death centenary approaches, and these two new works illuminate important and intriguing aspects of his life, particularly his marriage to Alma Mahler, some of his social and professional relationships, including that with Richard Strauss, and, for historians, a fascinating glimpse into everyday life at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the popular consciousness, we understand artists as gifted, but troubled, individuals. Vincent van Gogh, Ludwig von Beethoven, Robert Schumann and others embody and articulate the Romantic myth of genius. Biographers have mined this tantalizing material for decades. A newer field of biography includes work undertaken by those with medical training, who perform

posthumous diagnoses of medical and psychological conditions, such as Peter Ostwald's works on dancer Vaclav Nijinsky and pianist Glenn Gould. Now psychiatrist Stuart Feder has written a biography of Gustav Mahler.

Mahler and his music have long challenged and puzzled listeners. Leonard Bernstein made Mahler accessible for me in his talks *The Unanswered Question*, in which he argues that Mahler's Tenth Symphony is about the death of an age, "the twentieth century crisis," as well as Mahler's own impending death. Feder argues that Mahler's foreboding of twilight and dissolution dogged his steps from a very early age, and we are still intrigued by it. Mahler's music mourns openly and intimately, and such directness is increasingly taboo in our current quest

to medicalize, hide, and even prevent death.

The question of the relationship between art and life is an old one. Feder claims with confidence that Mahler is one of few composers whose works address the question, “can music be in some sense autobiographical?” with a strong “yes.” As Mahler himself observed after the completion of his Second Symphony, “My whole life is contained in my two symphonies. In them I have set down my experience and suffering, truth and poetry in words. To anyone who knows how to listen my whole life will become clear” (p. 7). Happily for Feder, the manuscript for the Tenth Symphony, Mahler’s most anguished work, contains scribbled notes addressed to his wife Alma. In these notes Feder reads suicidal longings as well as an expression of guilt and aggression. Feder seeks to reveal and interpret this life and leaves the reader free to interpret its transfer to musical form, for the most part. Feder does engage in some musical analysis, but it tends to be brief.

Feder’s book is built around a structure of Freudian analysis. Its chronological framework is anchored in three crises Feder proposes are central to understanding Mahler’s compositions. When Mahler believed himself to be dying in 1903-4, the resolution of the crisis was the Fifth Symphony. The tragic death of his daughter in 1907, as well as his own declining health, and the loss of his position in Vienna produced one of his masterpieces, “Das Lied von der Erde,” and lastly, the marital crisis precipitated by Alma’s affair with architect Walter Gropius produced the Tenth Symphony. Death was a constant companion in Mahler’s life from an early age, and much of his music can be understood as mourning, as Alma herself noted. I found his treatment of Mahler and Alma nuanced and compassionate; the Freudian analysis at no time seemed to contort the facts to fit the theory, and indeed, Feder’s interpretation of dreams makes for convincing reading. The language is heavily discipline-driven, as the following passage illustrates: in interpreting a statement of Mahler’s, Feder suggests that “[o]ften, offering a single explanation detracts from several latent interpretations, all of which may be involved in an action overdetermined by multiple motivations” (p. 57).

Feder’s training as an analyst is most evident in his treatment of the Mahlers’ marriage crisis. His careful groundwork in establishing Alma’s Electra complex, as well as Mahler’s anxiety about playing Hans Sachs to Alma’s Eva from Wagner’s *Meistersinger* allows him to explain without condemnation the events in Mahler’s last year of life. This is where Feder’s project truly shines: in

its focus on intimate relationships.

Like Feder’s work, the new volume of letters focuses close attention on Mahler’s personal life. De la Grange was the first musicologist to systematically study Mahler, and his three-volume biography of the composer is considered definitive. This English translation, released ten years after the publication in Europe, allowed for yet more accurate dating because more diaries and correspondence have been published, and the editors had access to the envelopes and verso sides of postcards. The translator’s notes are very helpful as well as entertaining, as he explains slang and the broad range of German dialects employed by Mahler. The letters included in this collection have been elaborated with information from Alma’s diaries. Careful comparison of the various editions and manuscripts allowed them to correct the record in several instances: Alma frequently edited or omitted letters she found undesirable to publish. The editors humbly observe that this collection may “not necessarily represent the final word,” but they certainly aim for precision and careful documentation (p. xix). Indeed, they include information about postal deliveries and the “distinctive violet ink” Alma used for her correspondence (p. xxi).

The editors explain that Alma’s suppression and abridgment of letters (of which I get a whiff of disapproval) was intended “not so much to deify Mahler as to create an unsullied monument to an ideal marriage, whereby she, the ideal helpmate and long-suffering partner, would stand just as high and proudly on the pedestal as her celebrated husband” (p. 23). My most serious complaint about this work, in contrast to Stuart Feder’s, is its disapproving stance toward Alma Mahler. Like Elizabeth Fñrster-Nietzsche and Cosima Wagner, women frequently disparaged in the literature, Alma Mahler made the most of an opportunity presented her for influence, power, respect, and acclaim in her husband’s death. In times when women could not vote, own property, or enjoy other civil and economic rights, can we condemn these women? I see Alma as someone constrained by convention—she longed for emancipation and self-expression as she asked, upon meeting Mahler, “Why can’t I simply move in with him?” (p. 93).

The most fascinating aspect of the work is indeed the dynamics of Gustav and Alma’s marriage. Gustav Mahler gave the young Alma Schindler an ultimatum before marriage: that she completely give up her own composition and creative life to dedicate her life to his happiness. This unequal distribution of power revealed itself in

the Mahlers' marriage to both their detriment—he did not look at her music until nine years into their relationship when she was straying from him. The notorious letter delivering his ultimatum is introduced by the editors as exhibiting “impressive clarity and complete honesty” (p. 78). They claim that “After Mahler’s death, Alma built up the ‘composition ban’ into a sentimental legend, perpetuating the myth of her having been smothered by Mahler’s genius” (p. 85). Yes, Alma tended toward melodrama, but the facts remain that Mahler did indeed require her to give up composition. Alma’s lack of creative outlet and stimulation led to her philandering.

The unequal balance in the relationship was caused in part by the sizable difference in their ages, but also, of course, because of social norms. Throughout their correspondence Mahler seeks to edify and educate his wife, as in May 1906, when she is studying their friend Richard Strauss’s opera *Salome*: “Your remarks on ‘Salome’ are very interesting. It’s just as I predicted. But now you *underestimate* the work, which really is a very significant one, though ‘virtuosic’ in the negative sense, as you rightly discerned.... The further you develop in life, the more clearly you will sense the difference between those few great, *genuine* figures and the mere ‘virtuosos.’ I’m happy to see how *quickly* you’re beginning to grasp such things” (p. 233). The roles of Mahler as conveyer of elevated truths and Alma as receptive vessel would come to harm both of them.

Another aspect of Mahleriana illuminated by this new edition is his personality traits. Mahler’s wit and amazing breadth of literary knowledge make for entertaining reading: he quotes frequently from theater, opera, prose and poetry, often altered slightly to fit his point. Another aspect of Mahler that remains unaddressed by Feder and De La Grange is his antisemitism, expressed vis-À-vis Eastern European Jews, such as when he observes in St. Petersburg, “It’s strange to observe such exotic people at close hand” (p. 284).

As in the biography, the letters devote very little discussion to Mahler’s compositions. Here the editorial commentary is invaluable in reminding the reader what Mahler was composing or conducting at the time. Glimpses into Mahler’s life as a guest conductor appear in his twice-daily reports from the road: “The other side of the coin in Antwerp, unfortunately, is the orchestra. Unspeakable! The performance is going to be sheer hell. I would gladly do without my bath if the musicians would play a little more cleanly” (p. 227).

Ironically enough, both books end with chapters on Alma’s continuing relationships and life. Stuart Feder titles his last chapter “Forever Alma,” which, one can be sure, would please her. Although she lacked the power and recognition she yearned for in her marriage, she seems to have achieved it posthumously. While we may not admire her behavior, we can seek to understand it without condemnation.

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