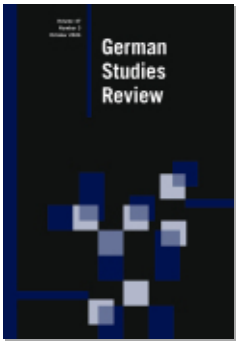
Mahler's Nietzsche: Politics and Philosophy in the Wunderhorn Symphonies by Leah Batstone (review)



Rolf J. Goebel

German Studies Review, Volume 47, Number 3, October 2024, pp. 534-535 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/gsr.2024.a940202

any case, Zimmerer is convincing on the importance of this subject, and it deserves serious, thoroughgoing treatment.

J. P. Short, *University of Georgia*

Mahler's Nietzsche: Politics and Philosophy in the Wunderhorn *Symphonies*. By Leah Batstone. Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2023. Pp. xiii + 189. 3 illustrations and 43 music examples. Cloth $105.00. ISBN 9781837650019.

Among the late Romantic composers, Gustav Mahler appears to be one of the most intellectually reflective voices, seeking to undergird his musical projects with a wealth of overt or hidden references to literary and philosophical traditions. Focusing mainly on Mahler's symphonies nos. 1–4, named after the romantic poetry collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The boy's magic horn), Leah Batstone seeks to reconstruct pertinent traces of some of Friedrich Nietzsche's most important philosophical ideas. The transpositional process from Nietzsche to Mahler, as Batstone makes plausible, was not only based on the composer's own, very sporadic and selective readings of the philosopher. Rather, Mahler's compositional vision was importantly mediated by the discussions among the Pernerstorfer Circle, an informal group of intellectuals, poets, and politicians in Vienna from the 1870s, who were ardent followers of Nietzsche and Richard Wagner. Indeed, inspired by these contacts, Mahler absorbed, extended, and reworked key ideas of both figures, such as the Dionysian-Apollonian duality and Zarathustra's notion of the *Übermensch*, together with "tragicomic juxtaposition, his use of perspective, his dramatic setting of symphonic space and voice, and an aspiration to embrace and overcome adversity so that an eternal return would be welcome" (154–55). In order to show Mahler's deeply rooted cultural legacy, Batstone even traces Mahler's Nietzsche-Wagner lineage back to the conventions of the ancient Greek drama tetralogy—three tragedies, followed by a satyr play. To provide useful background information, Batstone also embeds Mahler's musical productions in the political and cultural dynamics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, marked, among many other facets, by socialist programs, multi-ethnic demographics, including prominent Jewish voices, and intellectual upheavals that Mahler witnessed keenly.

All these cultural interplays, as Batstone shows, explain key elements in Mahler's symphonic output, developed on a monumental scale of world-encompassing ideas unsurpassed at the time. Thus, it seems to me that the composer's output can be seen both as a nostalgically ironic summation of the classical-romantic tradition and a harbinger of the musical modernism, even the avant-garde to come after him. As a trained musicologist, Batstone knows how to support her philosophical explorations and historical reconstructions through meticulous use of music theory and analysis, helpfully illustrated by numerous excerpts from the symphonies' scores.

Tracing a composer's affinity with a philosopher, one might add, is notoriously fraught with methodological problems. Not only would it be reductive to use the (by now largely obsolete) model of influence and reception, as this might imply an overly mechanistic and positivistically verifiable process. But even the newer concept of intertextuality proves very limited. It may reveal citational uses of earlier philosophical writings in the composer's letters, diaries, or other documents, but the traces of philosophical concepts in the composer's music itself defy the intertextual model because music's sonic self-signification in itself is not a language, at least not in the sense of verbally articulated philosophy. Mahler's case complicates these methodological issues even further through his combination of "absolute" music of purely instrumental character with poetic texts and overtly philosophical programs. Thus, when seeking to decipher the musical significance of philosophical or poetic texts, the critic must try to reconstruct the elusive but overdetermined transpositions—echoes, revisions, creative (mis-)understandings—across the intermedial boundaries between musical sound and philosophical/literary textuality. As we have learned from Friedrich Kittler and other media theorists, due to the material differences among music, word, visuality, and so forth, intermediality is never only a facile exchange of cultural ideas but an uncertain process of mutual interrogation, the border-crossing steps of which have often vanished into the undocumented past. Thus, any reconstruction of this process must necessarily remain partial—in the double sense of methodological bias and incomplete findings.

To her credit, Batstone is quite aware of such challenges. Thus, addressing the question of how even the late Mahler could have maintained his loyalties both to Wagner and Nietzsche, despite the philosopher's fallout with the older composer, she remarks rightly: "It must be said from the outset that the idea that a thinker's influence correlates to the adoption of every idea they expressed is a reductive one, and an unrealistic approach to the realities of humanistic exchange" (136). Therefore, as she concludes, Mahler's very selective and sometimes elusive recourse to Nietzsche (and Wagner) only "reveals the sophisticated nature of cultural transfer" (136). Even if explicit references to Nietzsche disappeared from Mahler's later writings and compositions, this should not be construed as waning of the composer's interest in the philosophy. On the contrary, Batstone stresses, it should be seen as an indication that Nietzsche's ideas had by then been so fully "absorbed into [Mahler's] own identity" that it may no longer have been necessary to mention them explicitly (155).

Batstone's approach is marked both by exact musicological/philosophical scholarship and imaginative speculation. Whether or not all readers will agree with some of her findings is perhaps less important than the questions she addresses—questions that should ultimately send us back to live performances or recordings to try to hear the Nietzsche-Wagner references directly in the immersive presence of the music itself.

Rolf J. Goebel, *University of Alabama in Huntsville*