

Paper 2

Mahler and JB: two great artists in search of the sublime...

'Mahler's music was written for Sir John Barbirolli'. So said one of the conductor's close friends, reflecting on the prospect of Barbirolli conducting the symphonies of Gustav Mahler. Barbirolli was an excellent interpreter of the Romantic repertoire including works by Brahms, Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Bruckner. But a full understanding of Barbirolli's extraordinary talents cannot be made without reference to his performance (and advancement) of Mahler's music. His recordings made during the 1950s, 60s and early 70s stand shoulder to shoulder with other great interpretations, including those by Bruno Walter — Mahler's friend — who gave the first performance of Mahler's late works after Mahler's death.

When I hear a work for the first time, I tend to assume that this is how it should be played. But when I hear JB's interpretation of the same work I generally prefer it — it has more energy, more passion, more balance and subtlety, all crowned with a love that is JB's own. This, I think, is the ultimate accolade. Music enthusiasts view Mahler and Barbirolli as a kind of unique union — two great artists, one the creator, the other the interpreter. In performance, JB seemed to be in touch with the zeitgeist.

Mahler's music was informed by his own conducting as he interspersed seasons of conducting with summers spent composing. He drew constant inspiration from these performances, which gave him a deep understanding of orchestration and helped to develop his extraordinary talent for composition. The deaths of his brothers and sisters and his eldest daughter left their mark on him both as a man and as a creative artist. He poured these emotions into his music — it's hard to think of a human feeling not expressed in his symphonies and songs. Furthermore, he believed that music could address philosophical ideas concerned with the nature of human existence.

Barbirolli understood these facets of Mahler's life and work, but brought his own unique talent to each performance he gave. As a cellist he understood the part that an exquisite string tone plays in music — his sensitive ear created a special orchestral texture and sound. JB was able to find the centre of gravity of a composition, the heart of a work, its essence — a quality essential to the interpretation of Mahler's longer works (his symphonies span over 80 minutes). But there was one other facet of JB that played its part in his Mahler performances. He

encompassed Mahler's massive canvass, his vast 'soundscape'- his emotional persona.

He also addressed another feature of Mahler's music which is central to an investigation I have been involved in since I was first touched by Mahler's music in 1974. At that time I was an undergraduate student of architecture, which seemed a world away from Mahler's music and the emotions they evoked. My fellow students began spotting books on Mahler symphonies concealed beneath my lecture notes! Much later, I began to identify areas that I wanted to study further.

To begin with, I was struck by Mahler's contribution to the Vienna Secessionist movement. But I was not the right person to address these issues: an art historian would be better placed. Besides, I felt there was a different story to be told — a story that would call on my emerging understanding of architecture.

So I began to consider buildings — places and spaces — that seemed important to Mahler: special locations that supported him in his life and work. I was driven on by something Winston Churchill said during a parliamentary speech in 1943: "We shape buildings; thereafter buildings shape us". But it's not simply buildings that have a determining effect on our lives — the spaces between buildings are important too. In fact our lives are framed by a host of influences, including geographical, contextual, aural, visual, environmental, cultural and, not least, architectural. These forces help to define who we are. Put simply, buildings and their surroundings are part of our biography.

But which buildings — places and spaces — were important to Mahler? My investigation was now taking on a distinctive character, embracing architectural principles and applying them to Mahler's life and music — a subject conspicuous by its absence. I was also attending some thought-provoking meetings with key players from the world of Mahler scholarship. Standing inside the Foyer of the Royal College of Music in London I was introduced to a group of musicologists as 'an architect carrying out a study into Gustav Mahler'. The silence was deafening. (I surmised their thoughts. How can an architect study a composer? What's the point?) It was precisely because I was approaching this subject from a new direction — a new viewpoint, outside the usual historical and musicological perspective — that I felt I had something *new* to say. My study was different from anything I had read, and it focused on two crucial elements of my life: my fascination for architecture and my love of Mahler's music. (My experience of JB's performances heightened my motivation.)

I embarked on extensive trips to European libraries, carrying out site surveys and creating architectural drawings depicting key periods during Mahler's life. I was also questioning assumptions about Mahler and his ways of working — the sources of his inspiration and the relationship between 'place' and his music. Soon I was considering how best to present my new ideas. Gradually, the Mahler's Heavenly Retreats project evolved to consider building-in-use studies. I made live recordings of the sounds Mahler would have heard — the wind blowing through trees, the clanging of cow bells and the sound of water lapping a shoreline. I sketched key

landscapes, including huge sweeps of space and private (and very atmospheric) retreats where Mahler composed. I was scratching beneath the surface to reveal the nature of key environments in Mahler's life and their associations. Broadly, there were three sites that were instrumental to Mahler's life and music creation. The first is located beside the shores of the Attersee beside the mountains at Seefeld in Upper Austria, the second is a forest hideaway near Klagenfurt in Southern Austria and the third is the Summer House of a farmhouse in the Tyrol at Toblach (now Dobbiaco in Italy).

Barbirolli understood the part played by these sites — Mahler's feelings and memories, and the part they played in the nuances of Mahler's music. In the opening of Mahler's first symphony, recorded in 1957 with his beloved Hallé Orchestra (obtainable from The Barbirolli Society), the stirring of nature fittingly launches the music and is captured by Barbirolli with suspense, insight and beauty. The precision JB imparts to his orchestra in his 1957 recording of the finale of Sibelius's glorious Fifth Symphony — music inspired by the composer's sight of sixteen swans in flight. The explosions of sound in the final movement of the Second Symphony (on Testament) magically embrace the atmosphere of the Salzkammergut where Mahler spent his summers of 1893—6. (This mountain range was visible from Mahler's first Composing House as he created this work at Steinbach in Upper Austria.) And finally — and perhaps most important of all — the Scherzo in JB's celebrated 1969 EMI recording of Mahler's Fifth Symphony where he supremely recreates the sadness, wonder and reflection that was experienced first hand by Mahler as he observed the mountains, forests and lakes of his summer retreats.

Barbirolli made a unique contribution to our understanding of this great composer. I regret that Mahler and JB did not have the opportunity to swap ideas about music and that Mahler did not live to hear what Barbirolli was to make of his legacy. They had one thing in common — they were special. *Two great artists in search of the sublime!*

The book, DVD and CD is available for purchase for £20.00, (includes postage and packing). Cheque addressed to K J Clarke.

Book: Mahler's Heavenly Retreats: Encounters with the master's 'Composing Houses'

DVD: Landmarks, sites and sounds... (37 minutes)

CD: Spaces, places and associations... (57 minutes)

For details see www.mahlersheavenlyretreats.com

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Architect Keith James Clarke is a specialist in buildings and the importance of the 'character of place'. In his book, DVD and CD he applies this know-how to Mahler's life and music. Keith lectures in architecture at Central Saint Martins, Chelsea College of Art and Design and is Project Director of Mahler's Heavenly Retreats.

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