

**Dear Mahler Fans:**

I am writing to welcome you to the Academy's "*Gustav Mahler: Creating Beauty from Tragedy*" course being offered this spring. I am a great fan of Mahler's music--particularly the pieces we will be studying--and am looking forward to presenting to you the materials I have gathered for this coming term.

## **LOGISTICS**

Our course will commence on this coming Tuesday, February 14 (Valentine's day), and will begin promptly at 1:30 PM in the Choir Room.

The Academy leases space from the Calvary Baptist Church which is located on the Northeast corner of Hampden and Monaco in Southeast Denver. You can find driving directions here (<http://academyll.org/about/driving-directions/>). There is plenty of parking to the north and east of the building in a large parking lot or on the street. Most of the doors to the building will be locked, but the main doors near Monaco and on the north side of the building will be open

Please plan to arrive early the first day to allow for checking in and finding the right classroom. This year name tags will be in the classroom waiting for you. No need to go to the welcome desk for name tags. There will be volunteers stationed in the building to help you find what you need--I'll be one of them. Should we have severe weather on the 14th or during the term you can check the Academy web site ([www.academyLL.org](http://www.academyLL.org)) or call the Academy phone number ([303-770-0786](tel:303-770-0786)) at 7:00AM or thereafter to find out if classes have been cancelled.

This semester the Academy is changing the course day and class times. The day will be broken into three different 90-minute class sessions with 30 minute breaks between them (9:30 to 11:00, 11:30 to 1:00, and 1:30 to 3:00). Each class will now meet for a continuous 90 minutes rather than the old style of two 60-minute sections with a break between them. Thus our Mahler classes will begin at 1:30 and run continuously until 3:00. Should coffee or nature call, stepping out of class briefly will be no problem.

Because Mahler wrote long symphonies, we may occasionally run over the planned 90 minutes of class time. If you have to leave promptly at 3:00, please do so quietly.

## **MATERIAL TO BE COVERED**

Our course this term will focus on Mahler's life and the works that he composed in his last decade. I have chosen to include his sixth, ninth, and tenth symphonies along with *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth), and the adagios from his fourth and fifth symphonies. I consider these works to be his most mature and powerful works which, in combination, express Mahler's struggles and ultimate reconciliation with life's challenges and his own corporeal and creative mortality. Additionally, they mark a clear transition away from the romantic school of music that had dominated composition since Beethoven to the more modern forms, dissonances, and atonalities that have governed music in the 20th century.

Mahler lived a life that Hollywood could not have concocted. From modest beginnings he rose to the top of the music world (Music Director of the Vienna Court Opera), composed songs and symphonies that remain highly popular today (the "*Greatest of the Germanic symphonists--which means of all symphonists*" according to Leonard Bernstein), married the most beautiful women in Vienna (with whom he produced two beautiful daughters), and lived a life of great comfort and happiness in Vienna and the Austrian Alps--all by the age of 40!

Within the next ten years he lost it all. His tyrannical approach to interpersonal relations had cost him his position at the Vienna Opera, his beloved elder daughter had died a horrible death before his eyes, his wife, Alma, had been unfaithful, and his heart failed, restricting his physical activities and leading, ultimately, to his death at age 50. Yet during this tragic decade he also composed some of his best works--works that deal with life's transitions and challenges in ways that can inform us all.

While we won't be covering all of Mahler's symphonies and song cycles in this course, I have listed most of them (with links to YouTube video performances) below (in this email) and (they will be) on the Academy web site under course materials (<http://academyll.org/course-materials/>). By going to the course materials page and clicking on our course name, you will

find a list of links to the Mahler performances that I recommend. You can also get to them by clicking on the links in the email below. Once at the YouTube screen, you can enlarge the screen by clicking on the screen icon in the lower right corner and control your position in the performance by moving/sliding the indicator in the timeline at the bottom of the screen.

In class I will be presenting lectures and performances of Mahler's works that are not available in the public domain. There will be short audio lectures by outstanding musicologists from the San Francisco (Robert Greenberg) and New England Conservatories (Benjamin Zander), a 90-minute video on Mahler's life and works put together by Michael Tilson Thomas, Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony, as part of his "Keeping Score" series, video performances conducted by Claudio Abbado and Leonard Bernstein, and a fascinating 2010 German movie, "Mahler auf der Couch", covering Mahler's life in creative flashbacks as he is psychoanalyzed by Sigmund Freud (it really happened) after Alma's infidelity. The actual meeting between Freud and Mahler took less than five hours, but using the device of psychoanalysis to explore the explosion of Mahler's happy life is filmmaking of the best sort.

In addition, I plan to include material on the Tristan Chord (a novel and dissonant progression used by Richard Wagner to create intense musical suspense and angst). Mahler was a great fan and musical disciple of Wagner's and used the Tristan Chord as a device in many of his works--to great effect! Mahler was rightfully proud of his performances of Tristan und Isolde and conducted the opera often to introduce himself to new audiences. I had planned to present the Tristan Chord material in the Opera Pastiche course which will now be offered another time. The description of my portion of that course is listed here for you to preview:

***The Tristan Chord: Four notes that changed music and opera for all time.***

*Four simple notes seeking a resolution to a dominant chord--but that resolution is delayed for five hours and the quest can drive one crazy. the Chord has been described by one musicologist as "seasick music that destroys all sense of structure in its quest for tonal color" while Friedrich Nietzsche described hearing the brief Prelude (which introduces the Chord) as "dangerous music with a terrible and sweet fascination, I simply cannot bring myself to remain critically aloof from this music; every nerve in me is a-twitch". Clara Schumann referred to it as "disgusting--every feeling of decency is violated" while Alma Mahler referred to Tristan as the "only opera that truly exists in the whole world for me" and it seemed that Gustav Mahler could not write an adagio that did not incorporate the new modulating technique learned from Wagner's use of the Chord. Puccini found the opera intimidating saying that by comparison ". . .we're all mandolinists, amateurs: woe to him who gets caught up in it!" In 90 minutes of listening, viewing, and discussion you will be introduced to the music that caused Jim Kneser (and many millions of others) to swear off Bel canto forever. Love it or hate it you will never forget this music that portrayed Wagner's affair with Mathilda Wesendonk--wife of his financial patron. Come prepared. Tristan is reputed to have frequently sent conductors and tenors to either their graves or an asylum!*

For our purposes I will focus on the direct connections between Tristan and Mahler's music.

**Right now I expect our schedule to look something like this:**

**Feb 14:** Course introduction and first half of "Keeping Score" by Michael Tilson Thomas (MTT).

**Homework:** Watch the BBC YouTube (linked below) between Feb 14 and Feb 21.

**Feb 21:** Class discussion and second half of "Keeping Score"

**Feb 28:** "Mahler auf der Couch" in its entirety (we may run over a few minutes, be prepared)

**Mar 7:** Sixth symphony

**Mar 14:** Sixth symphony continued--the hammer blows of fate, be prepared

**Mar 21:** Das Lied von der Erde (Song of the Earth)

**Mar 28:** No Class

**Apr 4:** The Tristan Chord and Mahler's use of Tristan references

**Apr 11:** No Class

**Apr 18:** Ninth symphony

**Apr 25:** Ninth and Tenth symphonies. Conclusion

## OUR HUMAN RESOURCES

Why am I leading this course? I am not a musicologist. I played in orchestras as a boy (percussion and reeds) but gave it up in college and have forgotten more than I ever really knew. I do, however, still have an uncontrollable passion for western high art music in the Germanic tradition and have spent decades studying the masters and accumulating a library of resources. I plan to share the best of what I have found with you and hope that it appeals to you the way it does to me.

At the Academy over the past 15 years I have lead courses covering the general topic of opera as well as the specific music of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner, and Mahler. In creating my courses I look for the work of experts that I can present to you in order to guide the class. I believe I have some very interesting sources on Mahler to share with you this coming term.

One of the great features of Academy courses remains the talent one finds in the registrants. In my course on Beethoven's ninth symphony we had a gentleman who had sung in the chorus of a performance of the 9th in New York conducted by Leonard Bernstein. In a course on Wagner's Ring Cycle we had a serious professional Mezzo (Marcia Ragonetti) who belted out a high decibel "Valkyrian" ho yo to ho catching many of us by surprise. So what sort of Mahlerian experience do we have lurking in this year's registrants? **Please reply to me before the 14th) with answers to the following questions so that I can tailor the course to the level of knowledge in the class. Just hit "Reply" and not "Reply All".**

**1. Are you brand new to Mahler and looking forward to learning more?**

**2. Did you take all or part of my previous courses in 2006-7, or 2012 (four courses totaling 32 weeks)?**

**3. Do you actively listen to Mahler now?**

**4. Are you a musician? (don't be shy)**

**5. Have you performed Mahler?**

### **Professional Resources--books**

There are dozens of books written on the life and works of Mahler and all are interesting because Mahler's life (and music) is so very interesting. Henri-Louis de la Grange, having inherited a fortune, could spend his life cataloging every possible fact about Mahler including what he favored for Breakfast. Gilbert Kaplan, after making a fortune early in life, dedicated the balance of his time to gathering what de la Grange had missed and becoming a passable conductor in his own right (I find his Adagietto from the 5th symphony to be my favorite of all). For our purposes, I recommend the chatty books of Norman Lebrecht: "Mahler Remembered" and "Why Mahler" if you want to dig deeper after watching the BBC video and the MTT Keeping Score videos. "Why Mahler" was published in 2010 and is a very quick read. If you want more suggestions on books, please ask me. At last count I have read almost two dozen books on the Mahlers and can steer you once I find out your specific interest.

### **Professional Resources--Video**

For your viewing and listening pleasure I have included below a representative sample of YouTube performances of Mahler's compositions or works that influenced Mahler. When you click on any one of them, YouTube will pop up some suggestions to the right of other videos you might want to watch. Be careful about being sucked in here. I started following some

suggestions one afternoon and quite soon three hours had passed. You're over 21 and you're on your own!

The first listing below is a one hour video from a BBC series on Great Composers. I suggest that you watch it before 21 Feb. The combination of the BBC video and the longer MTT Keeping Score video that we will watch in class will prepare you quite well for the performance of Mahler auf der Couch that we will watch on 28 Feb. The movie will be in German with English subtitles. The subtitles are quite adequate for your understanding and enjoyment, but if you know some German I think you'll find the spoken dialog to be less dry.

As you can see below, Claudio Abbado is my favorite interpreter of Mahler's symphonies--particularly his later works. Abbado put together the Lucerne Festival Orchestra (A European All-Star collection) to specialize in Mahler's works every summer. Abbado was given a terminal diagnosis early in the life of the Festival series and his interpretations of Mahler's works composed when Mahler shared that fatal outlook are really profound and moving. Abbado's performance of Mahler's 9th is the most telling of them all. As time dissolves at the end of the final movement, Abbado stands and quakes for a full three minutes before acknowledging the end of the piece. Neither a sound nor a dry eye in the house!

I switched to Barenboim and Chicago for the fifth symphony for personal reasons. Sally and I had the pleasure of seeing the Fifth performed by Barenboim and Chicago while they were on tour in Vienna--in the Goldener Saal in the Musikverein where Mahler had also conducted. Prior to the orchestra's arrival in Vienna, a local critic had questioned whether a US orchestra could (or should try to) match the local favorites in interpreting the works of their hometown hero. Barenboim got a standing ovation (three curtain calls) and made several gestures to the critic (he had been informed of the seat location) all but flipping him off. He then pulled the orchestra off the stage and refused to play an encore--despite continuing standing applause. A good bit of theater.

I suggest (and will show in class) Bernstein's performances of the Sixth not because I favor his interpretation--I don't--but because he honors Mahler's first order of movements (scherzo, adagio in the middle) and includes all three of the hammer blows of fate. We'll cover this in detail in class, suffice for now to note that Mahler wrote an incredibly powerful and scary symphony and then backed away from its full effect by changing the order of movements and softening up the crushing music at the end of the final movement before its first performance. Bernstein plays it in the original and very few others do. Last summer the Dallas Symphony under Jaap van Zweden played it in the original in Vail. Now that van Zweden will be moving to lead the New

York Philharmonic we may see a return to the truly tragic version if he sets a new pattern from on high.

My choice for Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth) is also non-standard. Mahler wrote it for tenor and alto, but allowed that a baritone could sing the alto part. I really love Thomas Hampson singing the alto (Baritone) and, therefore, closing up the piece by singing Der Abschied (the farewell). Hampson sang it at the Boulder Mahler festival several years ago and Sally and I got to see it live. I have several recordings of Hampson singing it and I love them all. Waltraud Meier is my favorite Mezzo singing Das Lied, but I still will take Hampson if given the choice. We might watch the Bernstein performance with Rene Kollo and Christa Ludwig in class for some contrast.

I like the Boulez performance of the adagio from the Tenth with the Cleveland Orchestra. He gets a sense of power and insanity out of the highly-piled atonal chords that really appeals to me. Deryck Cooke, contemporary British musician, finished a version of the 10th from Mahler's notes. Mahler only completed the first movement (adagio) and a snippet of the second (Purgatorio) and I can really only appreciate what Mahler wrote. Many people really like the Cooke version, I'm just not one of them. The full Cooke extrapolation can be found on YouTube should you wish. Others have also tried their hand at completing the symphony.