CHAPTER 1

Setting the Scene

Grandiose Symphonics and the Trouble with Art

> Within the period 1890–1914, and especially in the German-speaking lands, modernism chiefly manifested itself . . . as a radical intensification of means toward accepted or traditional ends (or at least toward ends that could be so described). That is why modernism of this early vintage is perhaps best characterized as *maximalism*. The cultural phase . . . was called the fin de siècle not only because it happened to coincide with the end of a century, but also because it reflected apocalyptic presentiments. . . . The acceleration of stylistic innovation, so marked as to seem not just a matter of degree but one of actual kind, requiring a new "periodization," looks now, from the vantage-point of the next fin de siècle, to have been perhaps more a matter of inflated rhetoric than of having new things to say.
>
> —Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*

Having invoked the autobiographical mode as a tool in my introduction, I should confess at once that this book is one in which I intend to indulge my passion for this period of Western musical history that I love and which, I suspect, many secretly cherish even as they avow that they probably shouldn't. As we have seen, it has accordingly been labelled transitional, decadent, over-inflated, and characterized by a desire always to be satisfying what Richard Taruskin has described as its apparently obsessive drive toward "maximalism."[1] In putting it this way—by confessing a more than modestly scholarly interest in a period so weighted with the concrete boots of critical put-downs—I inevitably invoke the politics of my subject even as I nervously prepare my apologetics for an era that is additionally awkward in that it fits no neat chronological box. Too many "periods" overlap here, across stretches of two adjacent centuries.

When these thoughts were originally presented as a series of public lectures, I perhaps eccentrically, but deliberately, described the era from which my examples were drawn as "the age of Leverkühn." The reference is to the fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn, whom Thomas Mann offered up in his 1946 novel *Doktor Faustus* as a sacrificial victim to the inexorable rise of high musical modernism of the "difficult," Schoenbergian kind. Since it is also a difficult novel that is as much admired as read, I should explain that Leverkühn was born in 1885 and died in 1940. The "difficulty" of the high modernist works that crown his tragic career, and which were meticulously imagined by Thomas Mann, was closely related to that of music by real-life composers like Schoenberg and Stravinsky; indeed, Leverkühn develops a synthetic compositional technique so like Schoenberg's technique of "composition with twelve tones" that the novel's publication led to rancorous exchanges between Mann and Schoenberg which resulted in the former eventually agreeing to include at the back of all subsequent copies an explicit acknowledgment that the technique apparently alluded to was "in truth the intellectual property" of Schoenberg.[2]

The difficulty of such music stemmed directly from its avoidance of the more conventional harmonic and melodic manners employed in late-romantic works that were being positioned by Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School Marxist philosopher and critic who was Mann's adviser on *Doctor Faustus,* as exemplifying the troublingly manipulative and ideologically compromised excesses of Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian symphonic and operatic music. Modernist and left-wing critics like Adorno considered such music to be commodified false consciousness, designed for easy consumption; what was being consumed they associated directly with the problems and ideology of an imperial, culturally bourgeois Europe rolling toward and through the revelatory disaster of the First World War. We "know where it all led," as commentators have been prone to put it, with darkly knowing emphasis. Late-romantic musical manners, as I shall call them, were thus critically consigned to guilty historical irrelevancy, and perhaps worse things still in the decades of fascism. Interwar modernists and avant-garde artists seemed advisedly to be seeking a different direction and different goals. They too nevertheless owed much to Romanticism, whose contradictory character I invoked in the double image that appeared on posters

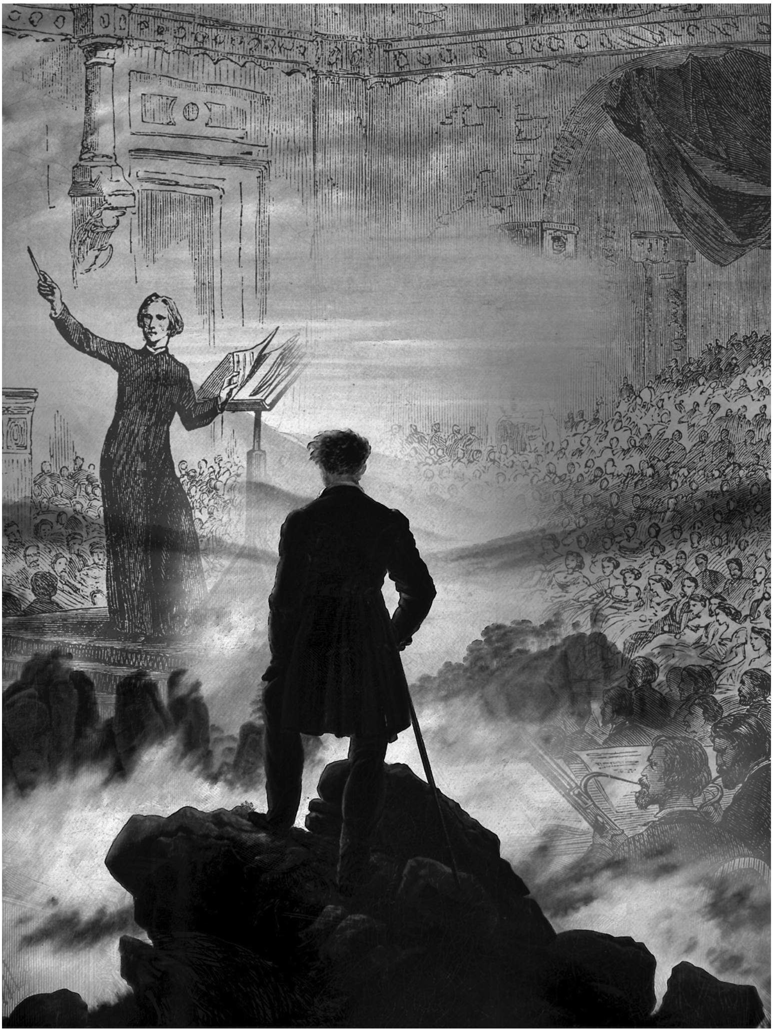

FIGURE 1. Caspar David Friedrich, *The Wanderer above the Mists,* c. 1818 (Kunsthalle, Hamburg), overlaid with an artist's impression, from the *London Illustrated News,* 9 September 1865, of "Franz Liszt conducting the performance of his new oratorio in Pesth." (It was the premiere of his *Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth*.) Composite image created by Kathleen Karn.

advertising my lectures in Berkeley in 2010: Liszt conducting the first performance of his *Legend of St. Elisabeth* (*Die heilige Elisabeth*) in Budapest in 1864, overlaid with Caspar David Friedrich's famous 1818 painting of *The Wanderer above the Mists* on a lonely rocky outcrop in the mountains. This composite image is reproduced here as figure 1: the private moment of brooding or ecstatic reflection set against a public show of musical force in Liszt's grand urban concert-entertainment—the latter looks and was probably intended to be somehow religious and communally "improving" in the standard manner of Great Music in the West—"classical music." How were these two modes of aesthetic experience and cultural practice, public and private, actually linked? What aesthetic, subjective, and intellectual work accompanied that linkage?

The problem I shall be confronting here is really the problem of art and its audience in the age of modernism. Can bourgeois art survive its own self-criticism in public works that seem to fill the same spaces as the artworks of old, albeit "maximalized" in some way, while also advertising their desire to be liberatedly "something else"? This leads me back to Richard Taruskin and the thought-provoking introduction to his *Oxford History of Western Music.* As philosophers once used to write footnotes to Plato, so musicologists are bound to be writing footnotes to Taruskin for some time to come. What he does in his introduction, subtitled "The History of What?" is to frame one particular subspecies of a broader problem: namely the problem of talking and writing about art historically. He sets out an ideological distinction between the historian and the critic, indicating that where the latter may be permitted partiality and bias in favor of this or that, the former (the historian) will not take sides. Turning away from what he rightly regards as futile, self-renewing theoretical debates about whether and what music "means" to what it demonstrably *has meant,* he seeks to balance the more familiar history of production with a judicious history of *reception* that can only broaden the range of what is considered and the way it has been considered. Distancing himself from "new musicology" (which he mocks as aging "with stunning rapidity"[3]) and what he believes to be the baleful influence of Adorno on its authoritarian practice of "hermeneutics," he addresses the alternative Cold War dominance of "internalist," notes-on-the-page approaches whose ideological character was perhaps informed by a desire to avoid the suspected tendency toward totalitarian co-option of all more socially or contextually orientated historical approaches to music. Here Taruskin cites as a victim of that suspicion the East German Communist Party member Georg Knepler, Carl Dahlhaus's "equally magisterial East German counterpart," whose music-historical work is consequently much less widely known than that of his almost tiresomely over-translated West German counterpart. Taruskin has few words of praise for Dahlhaus, whose prestige he finds "otherwise inexplicable," his work given obsessively to "empty binarisms."[4]

A set of curious coincidences and connections led, as it happened, to Knepler being the external examiner for my own doctoral thesis on Mahler, long ago. I well recall the viva voce examination in his home in what was then, decisively and memorably, East Berlin—as I recall his startling opening comment ("Of course I have not read *all* of this"); and then there was the hassle of getting in and out of the GDR via the Friedrichstrasse border crossing. I was enormously impressed by Knepler and his clearly and directly expressed political idealism, but would have to say, albeit with admiration, that both he and Dahlhaus were equally creatures of their own time and place: objects as much as subjects of legitimate political-historical study—as we all are. But let us beware falling into the trap of appearing to permit those who have become "historical" no greater intellectual stature than what we can see "over," than what we can "survey," as other historical textbooks put it. That, of course, is too crude a manifestation of the discourse of modernism.

Provoked and inspired by Taruskin's magisterial history, I am moved to revisit one of his own objects of cautionary historical comment—Mahler's Second Symphony—for my initial example of the grandiose symphonics signaled in my chapter title. Given the association of "grandiose" with both grandiloquence and even maximalism, that very phrase, of course, flirts with allegiance to the historical superiority that I actually want to problematize in revisiting critical and historical anomalies that hedge both scholarly and popular discourse about so-called late-romantic music. The reasons for doing so are at once personal and historical: properly historical, in Taruskin's sense of wanting to avoid authoritarian pronouncements and pursue evidence of experienced musical meaning beyond abstrusely transcendent aesthetic theorizing. This may, of course, lead us back to Bourdieu on music's role in the "consumption of cultural goods" as "one of the primary means of social classification" and, almost inevitably, of social division.[5]

SONORIC SURVEILLANCE AND THE MASSES

Two writers not so far mentioned, two specific books, will help to further locate the aims and intellectual terrain of this project as involving at least three overlapping disciplines: art history, musicology, and the literary and philosophical history of modernism. The first two of these came together in Richard Leppert's remarkable, and too little celebrated, 1993 book, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body*.[6] While avowedly associated with the aims and methods of New Musicology in the 1980s, Leppert sought here to move somewhat beyond the pioneering work "on *particular* musical texts" by his colleagues Susan McClary, Lawrence Kramer, and Rose Subotnik ("necessary" as he accepted it to have been).[7] What he offered as "even more than this" took the form of a virtuosic interpretation of music's cultural-historical development and meaning as, and in, social discourse—specifically as represented in paintings of musical activity, roughly from the sixteenth century to the early twentieth.[8] In a sense he ends in and overlaps with the period that will occupy me here.

Leppert was concerned with what Kramer subsequently called "music as a cultural trope."[9] Where Kramer may turn to the hermeneutic elucidation of specific works, Leppert turns to paintings: representations of music-making in the center or at the periphery of some social or mythological scene. Early in the book he chooses Antwerp painter Abel Grimmer's *Spring* of 1607, in which foregrounded peasants work in a formal garden while in the background, across a winding river, a group of leisured aristocrats enjoys a performance by some musicians: "To the extent that this music is listened to, it is a passive engagement; but because passivity functions here as a sign of social division, it is a means of valorizing social difference. Not accidentally, it recapitulates the ancient Boethian precedence of the critic/auditor over the producer."[10]

In this way, Leppert extends the more usual iconographic and historical interest that musicologists might have in paintings. Sociocultural criticism here leads him, via Gramsci, to propose that this passively consumed music, as a sign of social difference and privilege, is also a form of activity "whose valorization is organized by rendering the body static": "Music in this guise acts as a sonoric surveillance on the body, holding it captive to contemplation with the social prescription of physical reaction. Not accidentally, whether the auditor actually contemplates is perfectly irrelevant to the demand."[11]

Leppert's subsequent course leads through a pictured series of binaries that he sees as constructing the history of Western music: high-status "culture" *versus* peasant passion and vitality, the assertion of order over the threat of lower-class music and anarchy. As he moves into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he turns increasingly to the gendered opposition of musical contemplation (masculine) and the permitted domestic *practice* of it by women. Male reason (fueling Romantic idealism) is opposed to musical pleasure, as something problematically feminine and "embodied." Leppert's fascinating history ends a little bleakly. The possibility arises of musical activity in the Victorian parlor violating "what it intended to inscribe" as music comes increasingly to be confronted critically "in its divides across cultural lines, gender lines, and the lines separating high art from popular and mass culture."[12] But the final painting discussed, Fernand Khnopff's *Listening to Schumann* of 1883, inspires a disconcerting reading of the painter's mother, seated in her parlor, her hand raised to hide her face from our view as she listens to a pianist, whose right hand alone is visible as he plays Schumann to her. Leppert's interpretation is harsh: "The averted eyes of the painting's listener register the horror of the body, and a plea for something that cannot—ought not [to]—be: Schumann without loving, Schumann *qua* thought."[13]

As I move into the territory of the nineteenth-century concert hall and opera house, where the listener is not only feminized but reduced to becoming a member of an audience, a "mass," my tendency will be to want to disagree with this reading and add a rather different perspective on what might really have been happening. Khnopff's mother, in Leppert's reading, may internalize the patriarchal requirements of domestic and social order—but is her hand shielding her eyes from the pianist or from *us,* and the painter? Might they have revealed a different and more passionate reaction? Here I turn to a second source of inspiration and guidance: John Carey's wonderful, and still rather shocking, 1992 study *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939*. Not only did Carey move further into what is precisely my period of interest here; he, like Leppert, confronts high art and the masses in a rather unusual way.

The primary subject of Carey's book was late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century British intellectual culture and its fear, often amounting to detestation, of "the masses," whose pleasure it feminized in the standard fashion alluded to by Leppert, one of whose persistent topics was the patriarchal association of reason with male intellectuals, as opposed to embodied pleasure and performance, familiarly associated with women. A passage in which Carey describes an attack by Holbrook Jackson on the early-twentieth-century invention of tabloid newspapers, with their reliance upon pictures, conveniently links some of Leppert's preoccupations with the kind of music history I shall be concerned with here: "Holbrook Jackson held female readers responsible for the new evil of pictorial journalism. Women habitually think in pictures, he explains, whereas men naturally aspire to abstract concepts. 'When men think pictorially, they unsex themselves.'"[14]

Carey's intellectuals are many and various, their number including writers associated with Bloomsbury (Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster) as much as F. R. Leavis and his hero D. H. Lawrence. And then come T. S. Eliot, Ortega y Gasset, George Gissing, Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, and Wyndham Lewis—to name but some of the more prominent figures whose preoccupations, prognostications, and anxieties Carey finally, and devastatingly, compares with those of Adolf Hitler. Their anxieties were directed at suburbia and the middle-class masses (and the hated clerks) that populate its ever-extending sprawl, covering the woods and fields of Merrie England and infecting its cultural values. A secondary theme of Carey's is artistic Modernism and the lengths to which the intellectuals went to make "modern" art incomprehensible and inaccessible to those same masses: "The principles around which modernist literature and culture fashioned themselves was the exclusion of the masses, the defeat of their power, the removal of their literacy, the denial of their humanity."[15]

We might think that he goes too far here, but the cumulative power of his examples (based on wide reading of the novels and other, sometimes "scientific," writing of the period) is as startling as his larger strategy of attempting to reclaim and understand mass cultural practices. This leads him, for example, to offer two chapters on H. G. Wells: "H. G. Wells Getting Rid of People" (the famous writer harbored clearly expressed thoughts about the need to control population by exterminating the fecund masses) and then "H. G. Wells Against H. G. Wells," in which the writer is seen to argue against himself, appearing anxious, in much of his later fiction, "to put forward ideas but not to be held accountable for them."[16] Carey suggests that he "makes it hard to guess his standpoint by putting what seem to be his views about the individual and the masses in the mouths of decidedly sinister characters."[17]

Carey's underlying critical project is not all negative, however. The novelist Arnold Bennett was mocked by Bloomsbury for his accent and manner as much as for the down-to-earth subject matter of his novels; he came, Carey points out, "from the provincial shopkeeping class": "The Bennett home, though beneath contempt from the viewpoint of metropolitan culture, seems to have been lively and artistic. The family enjoyed papers like *Tit-Bits* and *Pearson's Weekly*. Bennett later recalled his 'principal instrument of culture' was *The Girl's Own Paper,* which advised on aesthetic matters. He also devoured best-sellers."[18]

Carey hails Bennett as the hero of his book, alongside other writers, outside the circle of high-culture elitists, like Conan Doyle, whose famous detective, Sherlock Holmes—"a comforting version of the intellectual for mass-consumption"—is able "to disperse the fears of overwhelming anonymity that the urban mass brought": "Holmes's redemptive genius as a detective lies in rescuing individuals from the mass. . . . The appeal of the Holmesian magic and the reassurance it brings to the reader are, I would suggest, residually religious, akin to the singling out of the individual soul, redeemed from the mass, that Christianity promises."[19] Armed with Leppert's and Carey's mapping of the terrain upon which art, patriarchal power, and anxiety about the masses confronted opposing, gendered ways of accessing and utilizing the products of aesthetic culture, we might now return to German music and a German document of the Romanticism whose "late" manifestations concern me here.

BERGLINGER'S EXPERIENCE

I have already alluded to the problems that hedge the very term *late romanticism* as we apply it to the music I shall be talking about and have noted that Dahlhaus believed it to be a "terminological blunder." It has probably been in use too long to abandon on the grounds of academic pedantry. In fact, its problems are relevantly linked to those of "romanticism" itself, and particularly German Romanticism, whose character as dreamy, self indulgent, and nostalgic is often taken as read. Those three features translate easily into the more specific attributes of Romanticism listed by Taruskin in volume 2 of his *Oxford History:* as idealism and a belief that art seeks to articulate the ineffable—as Rousseauesque devotion to idiosyncrasy and (implicitly egoistic) uniqueness, and as the melancholy that inevitably attends its attempts to articulate the potentially terrifying "sublime."[20] Taruskin relevantly foregrounds E. T. A. Hoffmann's celebrated Romantic, chronological mapping of the "Viennese classics" (Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven) as representing ever more demanding levels of the quest for the autonomous and ineffable, inspiring the ritualizing and "sacralization" of the concert experience that Taruskin attributes to the "iron rule of romanticism."[21]

Taruskin's account of musical Romanticism indeed betrays a mounting skepticism that is in a way perhaps more truly "romantic" than the cultural practice he thus mockingly construes. As a result, he perhaps misses an opportunity to spot how the quest for the Romantic ineffable in music generated a public discourse of autonomy and how the quasi-spiritual invocation of the redeeming transcendent was often mobilized to perform strategic cultural work of the kind explored by Richard Leppert and John Carey. This was apparently less to reveal than to mask the true character of what we might call "high" or "late" romantic music, as its structural conceits acquire the inner eyes, ears, and nervous expressive sensibilities of Wagner's "art of subtlest and most gradual transition," while being fueled in part by the very skepticism and ironic detachment whose contrariness it embraced.[22] In doing so, it arguably became the quintessential bourgeois art of private expression in public; an art that dare not speak its name, save in deliberately mocked "programs" and elucidations, and supposedly "silly" opera libretti (such things might well have inspired Holbrook Jackson's strictures about "thinking pictorially"). It was, nevertheless, an art that kept faith with German Romanticism's mixture of the enthusiastic spiritual-emotional quest and a skeptical ironizing of its lament at the impossibility of achieving the goal of that quest. Its secret nature was understood to be finely nuanced expressive revelation that maintained a close affinity with the nostalgic awareness of its own limitations (even as it achieves its rapturous flights of perhaps self-deluding "expression"). The critics of Romanticism, variously late and early, tend to take at face value the public discourse of Romanticism, which was certainly only ever one side of the coin of Romantic practice where music was concerned.

Literary scholars and philosophers have always known rather more about Romanticism than have musicologists. Even Dahlhaus, who knew a good deal, accepted that the definitional battle was as good as lost, and that the concept of "romantic music" was linked to a stereotype, "which, misleading as it may be, we cannot simply ignore, since it is so deeply ingrained as to be virtually ineradicable"[23] One need, however, only glance at some of the more recent titles in just one university press's list of books devoted to the history and criticism of German Romanticism to see how those outside musicology have nuanced stereotypical notions about "romanticism," variously early and late. Just after our own century's turn, Richard Eldridge published his book *The Persistence of Romanticism: Essays in Philosophy and Literature,* described on Cambridge University Press's website as arguing "that Romantic thought . . . remains a central and exemplary form of both artistic work and philosophical understanding."[24] More recently there came Andrew Franta's *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public,* followed in 2010 by

Edward Larrissy's edited collection *Romanticism and Postmodernism.* In 2009 another multiauthored volume had appeared, edited by Nicholas Saul: *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism.* This closes with an essay by Margarete Kohlenbach, "Transformations of German Romanticism, 1830–2000," in which she proposes that polarizing developments in nineteenth-century German politics were accompanied by "interpretations of Romanticism that ignored, misunderstood or reinterpreted the apolitical, philosophical, non-traditionalist and aesthetically innovative concerns of early Romanticism," adding, "The resulting image of Romanticism as an anti-modern and conservative movement remained dominant until the 1960s."[25]

As Julian Johnson demonstrates in his recent book *Mahler's Voices,* Mahler's generation of the 1860s would have had a decidedly more nuanced sense of what Romanticism was. Mahler would have got it from his reading, not least of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Jean Paul Richter (a remarkable writer who had adopted Bayreuth over half a century before Wagner).[26] In spite of the relative inaccessibility of Jean Paul, of whose novels there exist only forgotten nineteenth-century translations, and the confusing association of Hoffmann with Offenbach, English-speaking music students have long had access, in all versions of Strunk's *Source Readings in Music History,* to at least one revealing key text of early German Romanticism: the closing section of Wackenroder's and Tieck's *Herzensergiessungen eines Kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* (literally "outpourings from the heart of an art-loving monk").[27] Do they read it? Had *I* read it sufficiently carefully before teaching the early nineteenth century and feeling obliged to do so? It can still come as quite a surprise. The source volume, written in 1797 by the twenty-three-year-old W.H. Wackenroder in collaboration with his friend Ludwig Tieck, was a deliberately haphazard-seeming multi-text: an assemblage of essays and poems, mostly on medieval and Renaissance art and with a Catholic bent imparted by Tieck. It concludes with Wackenroder's fictional life of a composer which reads like a blueprint for Mann's *Doctor Faustus* a century and a half before its time; it too is narrated by a friend of the composer (the art-loving monk, presented as the fictional author of the whole volume). "The Remarkable Musical Life of the Musician Joseph Berglinger," as this closing story is called, is remarkable not least for its ambivalence about the very thing it concerns: Art.

Berglinger is presented as one of the six children (the only son) of an impecunious doctor, a single parent "living in straightened circumstances."[28] Here, then, we encounter an untimely member of a *declining* middle class. His son Joseph not surprisingly aspires to higher things whose character is best revealed to him in the music he hears in churches—"sacred oratorios, canticles and chorales."[29] I cannot help suspecting that he was probably ready for Mahler:

> Expectantly, he would await the first sound of the instruments—and when it came bursting forth, mighty and sustained, shattering the dull silence like a storm from Heaven, and when the sounds swept over his head in all their grandeur—then it was that his soul spread great wings, as if he were rising up from a desolate heath, as if the curtain of dark cloud were dissolving before his mortal gaze, and he were soaring up to the radiant Heavens. Then he would hold his whole body still and motionless, fixing his eyes unmoving on the floor. The present receded, and his very being was purged of all that earthly ballast which is the very dust upon the polished mirror which is the soul. . . . Finally, at certain moments in the music, it seemed as if his soul were illuminated by a divine radiance. He would suddenly feel much wiser, as if he were looking down upon the earth and its teeming millions with a visionary's eyes and with a certain noble and serene sadness.[30]

Such passages are usually taken either as risible examples of romantic "purple prose" or simply as evidence of romantic idealism—believing that music really *was* linked to divine radiance and transcendent truth. But there's more here, more in Wackenroder's "Romanticism"—and in his narrator's account of Joseph's experience, which I confess I can recognize as closely related to the one I initially had of Mahler's Second Symphony. We note that Joseph's experience is "escapist" in an intense, bodily sense—but that the escape is also nuanced in sociopolitical terms: Joseph soars *upward, above* his fellow listeners, who merge into the "teeming millions" down upon whom he imaginatively gazes like some privileged ruler who sees and knows more than the huddled masses over whom he rules. The narrator goes further and tells us that Joseph subsequently felt "purer and nobler" and alienated from the now "repulsive" passersby through whom he makes his way home, convinced of the need to prolong his "sublime poetic ecstasy."[31]

The second half of the story tells us how he tried to do this, to marry the "mass" and "intellectual" identities within himself: by becoming a composer. Adorno would accuse Wagner, the upstart bourgeois music enthusiast, of following precisely Berglinger's path, first becoming a Kapellmeister who beats time, then a composer (playing upon the German word *schlagen,* meaning to beat, just as in English) who literally beats his listeners into submission with his mighty musical visions.[32] We are pitched into the domain of the singing devil. As was Joseph Berglinger, the closing phase of whose fate must, however, be carefully noted.

He is disillusioned by the strictures of the musical technique that he has to master, longing, like some precocious Debussy, to access more immediately the mysterious realms of musical affect. In the end he succeeds most fully by expressing his disillusionment musically in an Easter oratorio filled with the sounds of suffering. Embracing textbook literary Romantic nostalgia of the pre-1960s variety implicitly mocked by Margarete Kohlenbach in 2009, he had subsequently written to his father about how, now that he had found success, he wanted to reject the "culture" of his uncomprehending socialite admirers and "flee to the simple Swiss herdsman in his mountain, and join him in his Alpine songs for which he feels homesick."[33] His summatory complaint takes the following form: "In my youth I thought that through music I might escape all earthly woe, only to find myself now the more firmly bogged down in the mire. Alas! There can be no doubt that, stretch our spiritual wings as we may, we cannot escape the earth, for it pulls us back with brutal force and we fall again amongst the most vulgar of vulgar people."[34] The art-loving monk closes his account of Joseph's artistic odyssey by posing the startling question: whether his friend might not have been born "to enjoy art rather than to practise it."[35]

THE POLITICS OF MAHLER'S ROMANTICISM

I must now accept that my own first response to Mahler's Second Symphony was probably not quite what it seemed: a shatteringly direct and unmediated experience of a rehearsal run-through under Georg Solti. It took place on a Saturday morning in London's Royal Festival Hall, otherwise largely empty apart from thirty or forty secondary school students on prearranged trips. What I clearly recall experiencing was not a piece of "art," of cultural capital or decadent maximalism, but something liberating and revelatory, something physical as much as intellectual. It grabbed me by the throat, expanded my world, exploded it, and then overwhelmed me with a choral and orchestral festival of, indeed, grandiosely joyous celebration that left me blown away for days and weeks (did I ever recover?).

With the benefit of hindsight, I could say more to some imagined ethnographic interviewer from another culture: Whatever it felt like (and I was hearing the work for the first time), I can of course now see how the experience was mediated. I am pretty sure I had prepared myself to the extent of reading a little and finding the "program" reproduced by Alma Mahler in her *Memories and Letters of Gustav Mahler* (in Basil Creighton's unsatisfactory translation of the German original first published in 1940). Written for a Dresden performance of December 1901, Mahler had sent it to his sister Justine, whom he knew Alma would be visiting when the letter arrived; he wrote to Alma too, but without copying the program out again, in spite of assuring her that it was "actually intended" for her. It opens, like the symphony, in arresting style:

> We are standing beside the coffin of a man beloved. For the last time his life, his battles, his sufferings and his purpose pass before the mind's eye. And now, at this solemn and deeply stirring moment, when we are released from the paltry distractions of daily life, our hearts are gripped by a voice of awe-inspiring solemnity, which we seldom or never hear above the deafening traffic of mundane affairs. What next? It says. What is life—and what is death?
>
> Have we any continuing existence?
>
> Is it all an empty dream, or has this life of ours, and our death, a meaning?
>
> If we are to go on living we must answer this question.[36]

There was plenty to whet the appetite there, but the description of the Finale was tantalizingly specific, beginning as follows:

> FIFTH MOVEMENT
>
> We are confronted once more by terrifying questions.
>
> A voice is heard crying aloud: The end of all living beings is come—the Last Judgement is at hand and the horror of the day of days has come.
>
> The earth quakes, the graves burst open, the dead arise and stream on in endless procession. The great and little ones of the earth—kings and beggars, righteous and godless. . . . The wailing rises higher—our senses desert us, consciousness dies at the approach of the eternal spirit. The
>
> "Last Trump"
>
> is heard—the trumpets of the Apocalypse ring out; in the eerie silence that follows we can just catch the distant, barely audible song of a nightingale. A last tremulous echo of earthly life![37]

I was thus prepared for a musical apocalypse that promised an epic, protocinematic scenario of terrifying cosmic splendor. I was also studying Mahler's First Symphony as an "Advanced-Level" set work, albeit with little more than the relevant half of Redlich's *Bruckner and Mahler* to go on (I should explain that A-levels were and are the final high school examinations in Britain, where one generally specializes in only thee or four subjects). My teacher's evident unease about how to deal with the Mahler, of which (I suspect) he had no more than skeptical distant knowledge, was of course guaranteed to encourage me to believe that *I* had special and direct access to it. As a product of the suburban middle classes, I would also, I guess, have to explain to that notional ethnographer of European music, who might have read Carey, something about social class and aspiration—not, perhaps, without relevance to Mahler's own class-conscious program about the leveling of "kings and beggars, righteous and godless" in the great procession of the risen dead.

As if to reinforce any reading of his creative project as authentically *late Romantic,* some of Mahler's later letters from New York to Bruno Walter echo the Wackenroder/Berglinger complex in an almost knowingly intensified form. As in Wackenroder, the *experience* of art, specifically music, remains numinous, revelatory, and idealized, while its practice is materialized and problematized. Here in 1909: "When I hear music—even when I am conducting—I hear quite specific answers to my questions—I am completely clear and certain."[38] Later that year Mahler wrote in a similar vein after conducting his First Symphony: "That is—what it is like *while I am conducting!* Afterwards it is all instantly blotted out (otherwise one just could not go on living). This strange reality of visions, which instantly dissolve into the mist like the things that happen in dreams, is the deepest cause of the life of conflict an artist leads."[39]

One might put it that it was part of Mahler's birthright as a bourgeois intellectual artist—whose aspiration to "soar" had been heightened, "maximalized" even, by his status as a Jew in Catholic Habsburg Vienna—to take art way too seriously: at least by the lights of those still powerful and ostensibly "philistine" aristocrats he would have encountered in the corridors of power as Director of the Imperial and Royal Court Opera. Their philistinism arguably masked an instinctive suspicion that art might in reality be a route to communication with the masses and thus an alternative practice of power. We encounter the humorous reflection of such figures in Robert Musil's great Vienna novel *The Man without Qualities* (1930–32), where we meet Count Leinsdorf, for whom "literature" was "bound up with Jews, newspapers, sensation-seeking booksellers, and the liberalistic spirit of the impotently wordy, commercially-minded third estate."[40]

We also encounter there Ermelinde Tuzzi, whose salon celebrated "striving towards the ideal," just so long (Musil put it) as there was "nothing concrete about this idealism":

> for concreteness suggests craftsmanship and getting down to craftsmanship meant dirtying one's hands; on the contrary, it was reminiscent of the flower paintings done by archduchesses, for whom models other than flowers are not suitable on grounds of propriety. And what was especially characteristic

> of her idealism was the concept of "culture": it felt itself to be cultured through and through. It could also, however, be called harmonious, because it detested all that was uneven and unbalanced, and saw it as the function of education to bring into harmony with each other all the crude antagonisms that unfortunately exist in the world.[41]

Music, of course, could always be passed off as being all about "harmony"—unless its modern tendency to emphasize disharmony was signaled not only in the dramatic range of noises being made, but also in verbal programs that specified what these noises might signify. Such things distanced music from archduchesses and flower painting and brought it into the tiresome and sometimes threatening realm of those others, the Jews, newspapers, and sensation-seeking booksellers.

I realize that I am in danger here of reinscribing the myth of Modernism and the role in it of early twentieth-century maximalization that Richard Taruskin has analyzed and criticized so persuasively. In this respect it is of some considerable interest to note how Mahler fell out of that mythic narrative, when the post–Second World War avant-garde either dispensed with him as a mere "late-romantic" or damned him with faint praise as a "bridge" to the Second Vienna School and a "precursor" of Expressionism. He thus became surveyably historical and fell away from the focus of the narrative in a way that was somehow reinforced and underlined by his return in the 1960s as a *popular* symphonist who spoke to the masses and the impressionable young, like my own earlier self. This was the sort of thing that high-modernists bitterly disapproved of, even after Pierre Boulez started conducting Mahler and Wagner (and some of them were uneasy about that). Let us not forget the old animosity between High Modernists—whether or not knowingly Adornian—and mass culture. But let us also remember how powerful was the fear of Mahler's mass appeal even in some of his early critics. The stern Robert Hirschfeld in Vienna was quite ready to analyze the inherent meaning of Mahler's music, even as evinced in his notation. Each individual note seemed to him to acquire a quasi-democratic, or indeed anarchic nuance and intent of its own while dispensing "dionysian" excitement to Viennese burghers of a kind that might well put them off their sedate professional lives:

> The Musikvereinsaal . . . once again became the setting for one of those dionysian festivals which the Mahler bacchantes and maenads of Vienna go in for with frenzied enthusiasm. . . . a Mahler symphony is now used by a post-Hellenistic society to release the explosive forces which have been pent up in quiet bourgeois duties and professions. Deranged by such explosions,

> the mind thoroughly upset by the tumult, it is impossible to engage in the least objective discussion.[42]

Hirschfeld was deadly serious in that time and place where music still mattered, was talked about and consumed like Apple's latest device or 3D movies. Mahler himself proved peculiarly aware of this in his way when, in a fascinating letter, he rationalized his own maximalism to the nine-year-old Gisela Tolney-Witt, who had no doubt been prompted to write to him by a conservative parent or teacher. Why, she appears to have asked, did he need such a large instrument as the extended Wagnerian symphony orchestra? This is an extract from his letter of 1893:

> With Beethoven the *new era* of music began: from now on the *fundamentals* are no longer mood—that is to say, mere sadness, etc.—but also the transition from one to the other—conflicts—physical nature and its effects on us—humour and poetic ideas—all these become objects of musical imitation.
>
> . . . I would now mention only one thing more, the physical necessity to enlarge the musical apparatus: music was becoming more and more common property—the listeners and the players becoming ever more numerous . . . We moderns need such a great apparatus in order to express *our* ideas, whether they be great or small. First—because we are compelled, in order to protect ourselves from false interpretation, to distribute the various colours of the rainbow over various palettes; secondly, because our eye is learning to distinguish more and more colours in the rainbow, and ever more delicate and subtle modulations; thirdly, because in order to be heard by many in our over-large concert halls and opera-houses we also have to make a loud noise.[43]

Material culture and cultural practice evidently and pragmatically played their part in Mahler's sense of his own "maximalism"—it was also, we gather, a medium for the communication of something precise and yet complex. Here we must be more specific, returning to the Second Symphony in order to reengage with the direct experience of the kind of music I am talking about. Thanks to the still growing corpus of recorded performances of all of Mahler's symphonies, that experience is widely accessible, although to hear the Second Symphony live in an "over-large" concert hall such as Mahler described, and in the company of a mass of willing listeners, is to find the experience provocative of many additional layers of response. In returning to a work that so defines what and why the music of this period means and matters to me, why I both love *and* worry about it, I therefore feel obliged to complete this particular footnote to Taruskin on maximalism by explaining why I modestly but earnestly want to add a "Yes, *but*. . . ."

SOUNDS HORRIBLE AND DISTANT

That the Second Symphony was *heard* as modern maximalism is reinforced by an anecdote about one of the very passages carefully analyzed by Taruskin—the maximally dissonant, shattering "retransition" of the first movement around cue 20. A chaotic-sounding climax, already apocalyptic in tone, masses warlike tropes of marching, of fanfares and dire portent that lead us toward a terrifying aural precipice. A *molto pesante* buildup of an ever more dissonant chord is achieved by rhythmically insistent reiteration of its components in the heavy brass and timpani, joined soon by horns, strings, and woodwind. Taruskin identifies the dissonant seven-note agglomeration as "a 'dominant thirteenth' chord, here making what amounts to its symphonic debut": "Connoisseurs of musical horror will recognize this cluster as the very chord that Beethoven had used in the finale of the ninth for the intensified repetition of the *Schrekensfanfaren,* the 'horror fanfares' (as Wagner called them) that precede the Ode to Joy."[44]

Taruskin describes it, taking his cue from Guido Adler, as exemplifying Mahler's maximalization of the way in which post-Beethovenian "great music" had "long been sacrificing ingratiating pleasure on the altar of edifying pain."[45] The whole climax certainly seems to herald a barbaric spectacle, like a public execution. But is this really just edifying pain, or rather, perhaps, unedifyingly pleasurable spectacle? A crescendoing roll on suspended cymbal, with sponge-tipped sticks, adds a thrilling visceral rushing sound like an approaching tsunami as the chord finally collapses in tumbling chromatic scales into a surprise recapitulation of the movement's opening. The anecdote to which I referred above was told by Wilhelm Kienzl, who recalled sitting between the thirty-one-year-old Richard Strauss and the thirty-six-year-old conductor Carl Muck at an 1895 rehearsal by Mahler for a performance of the first three movements of the still unpublished Second Symphony in Berlin. At the moment in question in the first movement: "Strauss, sitting on my left, turns to me with enthusiasm in his eyes, 'Believe me, there are no limits to musical expression!' At the same time, to my right, Muck's face is distorted with unmistakable revulsion and the single word, 'Horrible!' comes from between his teeth."[46]

What neither of those responses really does justice to, however, is just how "shattering," and *why* shattering, that movement is: precisely, I would argue, because it deliberately dramatizes a tension between expression and form, where the experience of each is heightened by the other—something the movement has prepared with self-destructively meticulous care. The contrast between first and second “subjects” is heightened gesturally and affectively by the contrast between the aggressively, eruptively questioning and threatening character of the first subject and the songlike, fragilely aspiring quality of the second in a fantasy land of E major (against the opening key of C minor). So far “out of it” is that second subject that it seems to become a marginal, ever more distant voice *commenting on* a foregrounded symphonic “argument” that is really a monologue. The massive structural return to the point where the movement had started asserts a voice of fatefully denying masculine power—as it does more stealthily after the final second-subject episode here—and I would note for any surviving New Musicologists (and I welcome them) that this second subject is “feminine” with a will and identifies itself as such with pride, notated portamenti and all. It cares little for “organic unity.” Small wonder that Adorno would later write wonderfully about Mahler’s music as an example of art whose goal and subject matter are its own theoretical impossibility: “Mahler’s primary experience, inimical to art, needs art in order to manifest itself, and indeed must heighten art from its own inner necessity. . . . The enemy of all illusion, Mahler’s music stresses its inauthenticity, underlines the fiction inherent in it, in order to be cured of the actual falsehood that art is starting to be.”[47]

We might put it that Mahler keeps faith with the Romantic dream that, as we have seen, embraced the disillusionment and denial that were always a part of it, that represented the rational or waking side of Romanticism. He therefore gives us, in the Finale—what? Resurrection? The solace of “faith”? Taruskin proposes that the Finale be seen “either as an ecstatic renewal of faith in spite of everything, or as a desperate effort to drown out doubt.”[48] That would certainly push the symphony firmly back into the dark domain of the Singing Devil, noisily embracing affirmation for doctrinal, or simply manipulative ends, or both at once (which would perhaps be worse). It is precisely this reading that inspires my “Yes, *but* . . .”—or perhaps more of a “Yes, *and*. . . .” It also leads me to some distant sounds, as signaling what levels of complexity and subtlety could be achieved *within* the maximal style, both by internal and “external” means. Let me be clear that when talking about symphonic programs and the like I will not compound the romantic legacy problem by speaking of the “extra-musical.”[49] My interest here is rather in the hierarchical and territorial significance of music that is audibly placed outside the primary frame of the symphony, extending its domain into potentially limitless space. This might be to invoke Adorno's notion of *Durchbruch* or "breakthrough";[50] at its most extreme it involves music literally played from somewhere beyond the concert platform: behind the scenes or in some farther-removed location.

I have already quoted from the most famous version of the program—the one I read before my initial encounter with the symphony, the one reproduced by Alma Mahler.[51] As we know, he had sent it to her and his sister Justine in 1901, evidently rather pleased with it, although he affected to disparage it. Publication of Mahler's fascinating correspondence with his sister and other family members has brought into the public domain the full text of the letter he deliberately sent to *her,* with the program (that was also for Alma) that he said he had produced "for someone naïve."[52] The letter to Alma had included a veiled reference to royalty when he tells her (speaking of the program) that he really intended it for her eyes, and otherwise "would not have drawn it up for the king himself."[53] We learn from the letter to Justine that the King of Saxony was in fact its intended recipient; the King, via the conductor Ernst von Schuch, had requested that for his better enjoyment of the performance Mahler might provide a program (not long after the composer had publicly vowed, in 1900, to abandon such things).[54] The "politics" of Mahler's programs, in all senses of that word, are worthy of a study in their own right. Like many nineteenth-century composers, he was ever mindful of whom his explanatory glosses and titles were for and what messages they should send, negotiating inventively between what he *might* say and what he felt it judiciously *appropriate* to say. In this case, as in other versions of the Second's program, we have seen that he emphasized the socially leveling nature of the apocalypse his music was presenting. Mahler's social politics were ultimately not those of Joseph Berglinger. After the opening of the graves and the beginning of the "endless procession" of "the great and the little ones of the earth—kings and beggars, righteous and godless," the program had gone on to position us, the audience, as spectators of the great march of the dead: "all press on—the cry for mercy and forgiveness strikes forcefully on our ears. The wailing rises higher—our senses desert us, consciousness dies at the approach of the eternal spirit."[55]

The music maximally engulfs and involves us, manipulates us into imagining ourselves transformed from spectators into participants—something startlingly reinforced when (from cue 22) we begin to hear apocalyptic trumpets sounding now from *outside* the concert auditorium. But it is what happens next that endlessly fascinates. The climax of communal terror erupts into a mighty full orchestral fanfare which heralds . . . what is, by comparison, a great—but not empty—silence. The songlike theme sometimes referred to as a "resurrection" motif, climbs now in transfigured calm among the epic spaces defined by descending fifths in horns and harps that majestically outline D flat major. Then, astonished and confused, we hear two distant sounds: the one a stereophonic performance by offstage apocalyptic brass and timpani on both sides of the playing area, and disappearing into precisely requested *ever greater distance,* the other an "onstage" solo flute and piccolo miming the effusively unknowing "distant, barely audible song of a nightingale, a last tremulous echo of earthly life!"[56] Numinous power fades against a small, improvisatory "sound of nature." It all dies away on a bare fifth—the nightingale holding to C sharp while the distant trumpets fade on D flat. Only now, surprisingly—if they are kept seated at this point (as Mahler sometimes preferred)—does the chorus, *ppp,* slowly and "*Misterioso*," start to sing the first two stanzas of Klopstock's resurrection chorale that Mahler had heard at Hans von Bülow's memorial service ("*Todtenfeier*") in Hamburg in 1894, and to which he added some significant text of his own.

Generations of commentators have resolutely failed to "read" the odd implications of that disappearing apocalypse, which Mahler himself emphasized by telling Natalie Bauer-Lechner: "There now follows nothing of what had been expected: no Last Judgement, no souls saved and none damned."[57] The 1901 program for the King of Saxony had gone further: "There is no punishment and no reward. An overwhelming love lightens our being. We know and are." While Mahler's added sung text flirts with the doctrinal imagery of Catholic resurrection and redemption, the great line "*What thou hast fought for* (or *overcome*—"*Was du geschlagen*") shall lead thee to God" in fact proclaims a relativistic, and potentially political, message of the transvaluation of values as much as it bows the knee to a deity who seems rather to merit scare quotes here:

With wings that I won for myself	*Mit Flügen die ich mir errungen*
In the ardent striving of love,	*in heissem Liebesstreben,*
I shall fly away	*werd' ich entschweben*
To light glimpsed by no other eye!	*Zum Licht, zu dem kein Aug' gedrungen!*
I shall die in order to live!	*Sterben werd' ich, im zu leben!*
You shall rise again,	*Aufersteh'n wirst du,*
My heart, in an instant!	*mein Herz, in einem Nu!*

What you have overcome	*Was du geschlagen*
Will lead you to god!	*Zu Gott wird es dich tragen!*

Mahler manipulates us, the listening masses, to the ends of including us, even representing us, in a musical experience that is also somehow *for us,* and him (more than the King of Saxony, perhaps). It is also a work that questions and even replaces itself before our very eyes and ears. In the chapters that follow I will explore other examples of late-romantic, “maximal” music by which I am still moved, which I love, while accepting how problematic it all was and remains. They echo a kind of musical cultural practice which dealt, I will suggest, in voices, passions, and perceptions that are not only those of power or delusion: voices variously sensual, fearful, critical, and lamenting. We may be swayed by the tumult and the grandeur of it, but we must also listen for and to the distant sounds within this disappearing music to arm ourselves against its singing devils, to understand how such music was itself urgently aware of their threat and their ironic laughter, in which it sometimes shared, yet whose denying Mephistophelean mockery it also feared and lamented.