

Papers and Articles

Psychoanalysis and Music at the Freud Museum

Introduction:

Over the last few months the Freud Museum, London has offered a series of public events concerned with Psychoanalysis & Music and entitled '*Psychoanalysis and Modern Music in Freud's Vienna*', '*the 'Faust' Problem: Music and Madness in Mahler's Vienna, and Music*' and '*Meaning and Emotion*' the last event comprising three talks about what music 'means', and how and why it affects us so profoundly.

Primarily directed at a lay audience, the second of the two events involved a lecture on Mahler & Freud given by the British writer and musicologist Gavin Plumley who describes himself as a 'Vienna-obsessive'. He writes widely on central European music and has contributed to *Opera*, *Opera Now*, *Classical Music* and *The Guardian*. He has taken a particular interest in the meeting of Freud and Mahler, which took place a hundred years ago this August.

The Freud Museum invited Anthony Cantle, who is also a member of the UK Mahler Society, to chair the event and to offer a psychoanalyst's perspective on some of the ideas and beliefs held by Mr Plumley. Shortly after the event Gavin Plumley summarised the discussion he'd had with both Anthony Cantle and the unexpectedly large audience on the night through his website '*Entartete Musik*' and this, together with Anthony Cantle's introductory paper, is reproduced below.

The German premier of Percy Adlon's new film '*Mahler Auf Der Couch*' takes place on the 7th July and later this year, coinciding with the Freud and Mahler encounter, the BBC will record a programme in Leiden, Holland involving Anthony Cantle and the distinguished British composer David Matthews (orchestrator of the performing version of Mahler's Tenth Symphony) which is expected to be transmitted early next year under the title of 'Walking with Freud'.

Freud and Gustav Mahler¹

Anthony Cantle

A warm welcome to you all. My name is Anthony Cantle and before I introduce you to Gavin Plumley, our speaker for this evening in this series of music related events held here at the Freud Museum, I am going to use a few minutes to make some observations of my own and after Mr Plumley's lecture I hope you will feel free to direct your questions to him which I know he will endeavour to address.

For me it's a happy coincidence that the Freud Museum's invitation to introduce and chair tonight's event allows me to combine two of my own interests; my work as a practising Psychoanalyst and my appreciation of the music of Gustav Mahler.

Just as Poland and elsewhere is celebrating this month the birth of Frederick Chopin two hundred years ago, this year also marks the 150th anniversary of Gustav Mahler's birth on 7th July 1860 and next year will see the 100th Anniversary of his death in May, 1911. Later tonight we will hear something of the meeting on 26th August, 1910 between Sigmund Freud and Mahler – at the Golden Turk Restaurant in Leiden, Holland followed, we're told, by a four hour stroll through the local park and along its canals.

Let me pause here to emphasise something. Mahler did not have an analysis with Freud; they met just the once. We might best think of this as an analytic conversation rather than an

¹ This public lecture took place on 9th March, 2010

analysis in the more orthodox sense and one between two very serious men, both I think rather fascinated by the other and with several things in common. Any help Mahler may have been seeking from Freud's wisdom might in certain respects equate with the assessment consultations of today between clinician and patient. I say any help Mahler may have been seeking because some Mahlerian scholars question Mahler's real motives in seeking a meeting with Freud – a suggestion that had originally come from a acquaintance who, so to speak, was in the trade and known to Alma Mahler, the composer's wife.

As is likely with any other consultee we know that Mahler was quite ambivalent about the consultation and, according to Freud's first biographer, Ernest Jones, Mahler cancelled his appointment three times and we also know that Freud's bill of 300 crowns went unpaid in his lifetime and was then only settled by a friend five months after Mahler's death. We also know that Freud was on holiday at the time of the consultation and so it's clear that Freud himself may have had his own reasons for agreeing to interrupt his holiday in order to meet Mahler.

I mention this because the claim of Freud analysing Mahler is a popular canard and a rather more mundane truth applies to one afternoon's thoughtful work by Freud. Whilst clinicians here tonight will recognise the considerable effects that a good consultation can achieve in helping a prospective patient to identify their difficulties and concerns it's not the equivalent of several years spent horizontal in the rigorous search for understanding and the not infrequent evasion of unpalatable truths. Notions of Freud always curing people, including Mahler are, so to speak, the stuff that dreams are made of.

Attempting and often succeeding in understanding his patients very well, acquiring the Goethe prize for literature when describing his ideas and practice and influencing forever the way we evaluate and understand human behaviour and development is the enduring legacy of Freud. The word "cure" is unlikely to feature very much, if at all, in the vocabulary of the practising Psychoanalyst of today, concerned as they will be with the sole purpose of psychoanalytical treatment; endeavouring to

do their very best in understanding their patient through the primacy and centrality of the transference and counter-transference.

We should remember that the Psychoanalyst of 2010 is a rather different creature from the one that Gustav Mahler met in Holland a hundred years earlier. Things modify; theories alter and undergo revision and technique and practice can acquire a fresh impetus for change in the slipstream of new ways of thinking. To take one example from another discipline - the gastric surgeons of today are very different from those practising decades earlier. Today's specialists, along with all other surgeons, routinely wear masks in the operating theatre and adopt rigorous aseptic protocols because they know that bacteria can be introduced to and survive in the human stomach in the form of a *Helicobacter pylori* whereas a century ago (and indeed right up to 1982) it was thought that bacterial survival was impossible in the acidic environment of the stomach containing the equivalent strength of car battery acid.

A Nobel Prize was awarded for this ground breaking discovery that freed medical science to think about and treat a whole raft of stomach related disorders in a wholly different way. The last hundred years has seen the mind and brain thought about very differently too. As in medicine there have been many other modifications and improvements in psychoanalytic practice and technique. Today's Psychoanalysts, like their contemporaries in other professions, constantly think about their work in ways that reflect the vitality of new learning about their practice and themselves.

Freud himself will have contributed to the speculations surrounding his meeting with Mahler as he was somewhat indiscrete in choosing, some years later, to discuss the Dutch meeting during his analysis of Marie Bonaparte when he referred to it in sufficient detail for her to record it in her diaries. There's evidence too that he referred to it again in correspondence with one colleague in particular as well alluding to it, but this time rather more cautiously, at one of the Wednesday evening scientific meetings of his psychoanalytic collaborators— a monthly Wednesday tradition that continues to this

present day in psychoanalytic institutes both here in London and elsewhere.

Sad though it is to say but Freud would seem to have compromised, if not actually breached, Mahler's expectation of confidentiality. However, this needs to be set in context, as by then many others will have known of the meeting between the two men. This was as a result of Alma Mahler's need to colonise and then go on to repeat some of the things Freud is reported to have said to her husband for the purposes of aligning Freud's sympathy and understanding with her view of the problems in their marriage and the apportionment of blame.

Psychoanalysts take very seriously the confidentiality of their patient's material even if this wasn't wholly evident in the case of Freud's disclosures about his meeting with Mahler. Just to digress for a moment let me remind you that although the outcry over British MP's expenses and the present furore over the tax status of Non Doms is embarrassing for our politicians I suggest that without a strict adherence to confidentiality by Psychoanalysts an entire government might be brought down overnight.

It's also especially fitting tonight that in considering this and other features arising from Gavin Plumley's lecture we can hold it here in the house where one of these great men spent the last months of his life until his death in 1939 and where, elsewhere in this very road, his daughter Anna's work has been consolidated and developed by generations of child psychoanalysts and psychotherapists.

The American composer Charles Ives composed a work he called the unanswered question, itself utilised by Leonard Bernstein as the title of his now famous and brilliant Harvard lectures.

I want to tell you of another unanswered question.

In the 1980's I lived around the corner from here where my neighbour was one of Anna Freud's secretaries. Hearing Mahler from my flat on a fairly regular basis, more regularly than one can say she ideally wanted, I mentioned to her about Freud's meeting with Mahler - I think in an attempt to lend my

unneighbourly activity some official respectability – and knowing of this link with Sigmund Freud she suggested she'd wait for the right opportunity to ask Miss Freud if she ever listened to Mahler. One day in October, 1982 my neighbour returned home with tear filled eyes to tell me that Anna Freud had just died so neither of us ever found out.

Talking of questions – here's another. What do Ernest Jones, the founder in 1913 of The British Psychoanalytical Society and Sir Samuel Hoare, the former Home Secretary in 1938 and Richard – the little boy analysed by Melanie Klein (and documented in her classic study of a 'Narrative of Child Analysis') have in common with Gustav Mahler and the recent winter Olympics in Vancouver?

Well the answer is that Ernest Jones and Samuel Hoare were acquaintances of sort and would regularly go ice skating together, a fact that is rumoured to have assisted in obtaining the British government's agreement that Freud and his family could safely flee to England in order to avoid the Nazis—and when Melanie Klein's biographer, Phyllis Grosskurth, caught up with the little boy Richard when he was then in his fifties and asked him about the experience of his analysis with Klein he replied *'The Adegietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony more perfectly than any words I could use sums up the complete truth of my feelings at that time'*.

Finally, and to come up to date, the Canadians Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir collected their Gold Medal in Ice Skating last month having performed their winning performance to the same Adegietto from Mahler's 5th to which Klein's patient had made reference; the same music layered into the iconic scene from Visconti's 1971 film 'Death in Venice' and of course the identical music used at the funeral of Robert Kennedy

For Freud, famously tone deaf and with Van Gogh's ear for music and, it seems, apart from an appreciation of about five operas, not especially interested in matters musical it's worth noting that of all the people Freud was to encounter in his lifetime Jones recalls Freud saying that *'although Mahler had had no previous contact with Psychoanalysis he had*

never met anyone who seemed to understand it so swiftly'.

Later Freud had described Mahler to a colleague as having *'a brilliant faculty of comprehension'* in relation to Psychoanalysis.

There can be no doubt about the ubiquitous nature of Mahler's music in our contemporary culture both here in the UK and throughout the world – what Hans Keller refers to in his essay entitled *'The Unpopularity of Mahler's Popularity'*. Even tonight, as we gather here, there will be performances of Mahler's music throughout the globe and tonight at St John's Smith Square they're soon to hear a performance of Mahler's unfinished 10th symphony.

But it wasn't always so. In post war Europe we owe the promotion of Mahler's music to people like Bruno Walter, Eduard Beinum, Jascha Horenstein, George Szell, John Barbirolli, Leonard Bernstein, Bernard Haitink, George Solti, Klaus Tondstedt & Herbert Von Karajan. Their sustained inclusion of Mahler's music in the actual performance and recorded repertoire of some of the world's major orchestras and leading singers brought to the wider public's attention, rather like Psychoanalysis itself, an opportunity to be open to new experience. The Marmite test almost certainly applies to Mahler – you either love it or hate it – but there's no denying the challenge and impact his music offers to the listening mind. Even the normally conservative British publication *'The Record Guide'* conceded in its 1955 edition and, with commendable prescience, that *'Mahler is not for every day, but there are certain moods, common to us all of us, which only he has interpreted with such poignancy'*.

I believe there's a good chance tonight that we might later hear from Mr Plumley about Alma Mahler – Gustav Mahler's only wife but significantly not her only husband. Time doesn't permit me to fully respond to the observation drawn to my attention after last year's BBC documentary presented by Professor Robert Winston of Imperial College – sometimes affectionately known as the good lord - that in view of my comments in the programme about Alma Mahler I must be the

only person on the planet to have a good word to say in her defence.

Alma Mahler didn't enjoy a good press but I continue to believe that the threat of losing Alma utterly overwhelmed and destabilised Mahler's equilibrium in the last years of his life rather like the grief and guilt that I've always thought overwhelmed Alma following the death of their first child Putzi for which the unconscious sexualisation of her grief and unresolved mourning sadly went on to become her signature tune.

Although we know that infant and childhood mortality were very common at that time and therefore death from disease by no means rare – Mahler himself had lost five brothers by the time of his adolescence and then when he was fourteen his beloved brother Ernst died - something Mahler shared of course with Freud who had lost a younger brother - it's my belief that neither Mahler or his wife ever recovered – if one can ever be said to recover - from this terrible loss of their first child and all that she might have embodied and represented for the couple.

Finally, something I am looking forward to hearing more about from Mr Plumley is the whole question of whether the creative artist is really so at risk from psychological understanding and treatment – what is referred to as *'paralysis by analysis'*. Freud himself said *'Artists are usually afraid of being cured of their peculiarities; they believe that their creative powers depend on them'*. I don't recognise the world of contemporary psychological therapy that undervalues or subtly destroys the creative capacities of the troubled mind and later on I welcome finding out whether I am in a minority of one on this point.

For my own part and earlier in my career working a lot with artists, and seeing since patients involved in the pursuits of writing, composing, painting, theatre, television and film making my enduring impression is of their creativity being recovered and enhanced through analysis rather than flattened and diminished. Whilst this dread of the loss of creativity and artistic potency seems a terribly common fear for many people I think it's overvalued and may for some, and

unfortunately so, dissuade them from seeking the competent help their problems require.

What I think we can wonder about is the struggle that all of us can encounter, composers and artists and non artists alike, when having to survey the roadmap of our own unconscious. Talent and creativity are seldom immune from the more destructive and self defeating parts of the personality. As the American Psychoanalyst, Victor Bloom, so sagely put it - *'It's alright for Socrates to go on about the unexamined life not worth living but the examined life is almost unbearable'*.

Rather than consider a world where some people are automatically exempt from the task of better understanding themselves and their impact on others because of their creative achievements, it seems more in keeping with the ordinary in all of us to tolerate sharing these contradictions with a trusted other. For most of us it's usually quite painful to face the discrepancy between the kind of person we'd ideally like to be and the one we actually are and this applies whether someone has written a whole symphony or struggles to barely write a postcard. Yeats so helpfully captures this when

remarking on the inevitability of the contradictions and personal difficulty found in the gifted and the genius as *'still the same bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast'*.

For myself I am not convinced by the claim that creativity and the professionally creative are harmed by Psychoanalysis and therefore need to steer clear of analysis and allied therapies because it will destroy or undermine the well spring of the very creativity that accounts for their success or fame thus far in their life. Instead I think they have beliefs and fears in common with anyone else contemplating serious and proper psychological help; namely a terror that facing themselves in psychoanalytic treatment is inevitably only going to be to their detriment or those close to them. In this they have appreciably understandable fears deserving of our sustained interest and respect.

Now it's my pleasure to welcome and introduce to you our speaker for this evening, the writer and broadcaster Gavin Plumley.

Anthony Cante

The 'Faust' Problem Music and Madness in Mahler's Vienna

A Talk by Gavin Plumley

9th March 2010 - 7pm
at the Freud Museum, 20 Maresfield Gardens,
London, NW3 5SX
Introduced and chaired by Anthony Cante

100 years ago this summer, Gustav Mahler saw Sigmund Freud for a one-off consultation in the Dutch town of Leiden. Mahler had just discovered that his wife, Alma, was having an affair and was encouraged by her to seek Freud's counsel; Freud promptly offered the composer a cure, which can be at best described as reductive. Mahler's neuroses were more profound, as can be heard in the fractured harmonies, ironic cackles, half-heard waltzes and stymied longing of his

symphonies. Following their meeting, Freud's discussions with his disciples Marie Bonaparte and Theodor Reik reveal some trepidation at curing 'a man like Mahler'.

The above was the subject of my talk last night at the Freud Museum in London. Before I spoke Carol Seigel, the Director of the Freud Museum, introduced Anthony Cante, a respected analyst and learned listener of Mahler. Anthony spoke about the issues surrounding the treatment of creative persons. He corrected one major element of the Mahler literature about the Freud meeting, which is that Mahler did not undergo analysis, but had an analytical conversation, which is markedly

different. He suggested that the superficiality, of which I accuse Freud in his 'diagnosis' of Mahler's issues, was symptomatic of the time spent with the 'patient'. Anthony's insight into the practice of psychoanalysis was hugely interesting; that he approaches this subject from a Freudian rather than an initially Mahlerian perspective, opened up new insights for me. It was a great evening with lively debate and questioning. Over the course of the event, several interesting points were raised about the meeting and Mahler's life and work in general.

Judaism

One element I only hinted at was Mahler's conversion from Judaism to Roman Catholicism in 1897. This hasty decision was made to ensure that he could be taken on at the Hofoper. What impact would this have on Mahler? There is little evidence that Mahler was a devout Jew prior to his conversion. Although brought up in a Jewish household, Mahler, like Freud, lived the life of an assimilated secular Jew. But, as one of the erudite audience posited yesterday evening, surely, even without the religious trappings, that change of identity, that subjugation would have troubled Mahler. It raised intriguing issues about the 'authentic' Mahler.

Authenticity

As part of the question about Mahler's faith, a point was made about Mahler's authentic voice, in particular reference to the 'Resurrection' symphony. Having heard the work in concert recently, an audience member had tears rolling down his cheeks at the Festival Hall, so overwhelmed was he by Mahler's music and message in the final movement. However, that particular member of the audience has no truck with such religious posturing and he wondered, shortly after leaving the hall, what the whole piece was really about and why he, the doubter/atheist, would find it so moving. Was it genuine? Mahler's ability to bring his audience in, aligning us with his subjectivity, is one of his greatest strengths. But he is able to push us away just as quickly. I admitted that the second and eighth symphonies, arguably the 'religious' ones, had always been the most troubling for me. It is only recently that I am coming round to their bombast and overloud sincerity. Does the lady protest too much? Is

Mahler displaying his credentials as, as Adorno said, the 'poor yea-sayer'?

Alma Mahler

Alma always gets a good drubbing. But it was interesting to hear some strong defence of her position, not least in response to Mahler's lack of care following the death of 'Putzi'. As imbalanced as Alma's own version of events can often be, there is an equally unbalanced swing in the opposite direction. The men with whom she had relationships – Gustav Klimt, Max Burckhard, Alexander Zemlinsky, Gustav Mahler (whom she married in 1902), Walther Gropius (married 1915), Oskar Kokoschka and Franz Werfel (married 1929) – were hardly the easiest to deal with. Although the literature about Alma is growing, it is high time we had an English-language biography that debunks the myths that Alma created and reinvestigates her own personality.

Narcissism

The biggest accusation against Mahler last night was the sense of narcissism. Certainly his behaviour toward Alma, his conversion to Catholicism and his approach to the running of the Hofoper all indicate an untameable drive and selfishness. And while some in the audience felt his music was universal, able to embrace all, I suggested that its power to embrace might come from its narcissism... it may be universal, but Mahler perceives himself (and aligns us with that idea of the self) in the great big canvas. That, as one audience member quite rightly said, is the job of the artist, whoever he may be. That is why the individual may burst into tears in the second symphony (or in the final movement of the tenth for me last year at the Proms), because of the lone voice in the *melée*. I drew a parallel here with the lone trumpet screaming out of the nine-note chord in the tenth symphony.

Analyzing Creative Beings

It was interesting to note that, despite my position that the analysis of creative beings could derail an inner core of generative neuroses, many, including Anthony, suggested that analysis could open up new avenues. Only by undergoing an extended stretch of analysis could the results of that be truly revealed, but I respect that without that information, my picture is only half-complete. For many,

including some of my own guests, the superstition about undergoing such analysis still exists. Given the haziness of Freud's conclusion over Mahler, I can see why those doubts are prevalent.

These and other thoughts about Freud and Mahler will be published later this year in my

essay 'Symphonies and psychosis in Mahler's Vienna' in the forthcoming volume *Journeys into Madness* (edited by Gemma Blackshaw and Sabine Wieber) by Berghahn Books.

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