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Peeking into Mahler’s Compositional Workshop

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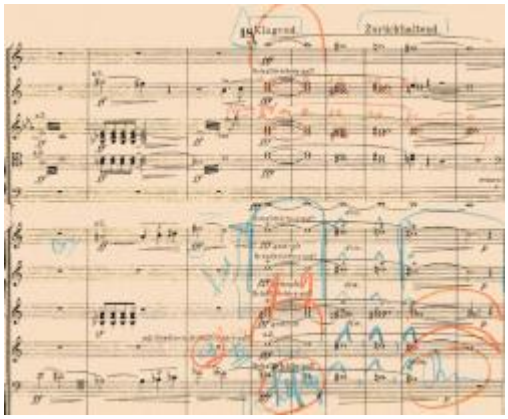
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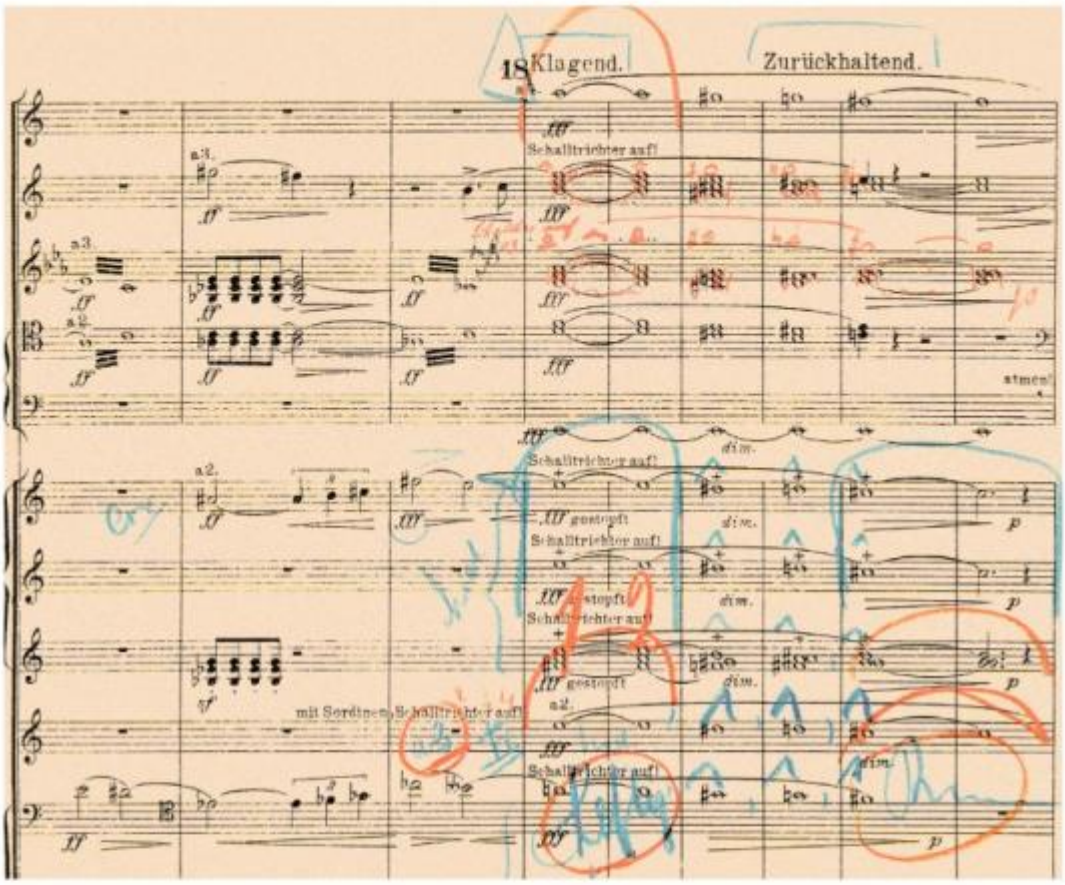

ANNA FICARELLA

NON GUARDARE NEI MIEI LIEDER!

MAHLER COMPOSITORE ORCHESTRATORE INTERPRETE

LIBRERIA MUSICALE ITALIANA

Anna Ficarella, *Non guardare nei miei Lieder! Mahler compositore orchestratore interprete*
Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana (LIM), 2020 (Studi e Saggi 33)
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https://www.lim.it/it/saggi/5935-non-guardare-nei-miei-lieder-9788855430333.html

Do not Peek at my Songs!

[1] *Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder!*: with these words, and the poem they begin, the poet Friedrich Rückert and the composer Gustav Mahler admonish those who would like to pry into the tireless and brisk activity of bees, with a subtle allusion to those who intend to peek into the artist's creative process.[1] *Blicken*, looking into the signs and notes written by Mahler on his manuscripts as well as on printed scores, is precisely what Anna Ficarella pursues with great competence and excellent results in *Non guardare nei miei Lieder!* The imperative of the first of the *Rückert-Lieder* quoted in the book's title reveals Mahler's skepticism towards the nascent *Skizzenforschung* (sketch studies)[2] and his own (fortunately not fully accomplished) intention to dispose of his own sketches, drafts, and short scores, which, according to Mahler, would "only lead to misunderstandings."[3] By publishing the results of her almost twenty years of research, Ficarella shows instead how the analysis of autograph sources raises new research questions and opens unexplored paths of investigation for discovering Mahler's inner workings as composer, conductor, and protagonist of the Viennese *fin de siècle* culture.

Figure 1: Mahler in the loggia of the Vienna Court Opera, photo by Moriz Nähr (1907); by courtesy of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Bildarchiv Austria

Even though the book is aimed at a specialist audience, the author's clear prose, as well as the judiciously chosen facsimiles from Mahler's surviving scores, now housed in several archives,[4] allow the reader to follow her discourse with great precision and full participation. In the structure of Ficarella's monograph—following a Preface by Alberto Fassone—each of the five chapters and the excursus are aimed at specific self-enclosed themes: the historiographical debate on Mahler (Chapter 1); the exegesis of his symphonies by Donald Mitchell and Stephen Hefling with Adornian derivation (*Excursus*); Mahler's working methods (Chapter 2); the "performative writing" and the "sonic editing" in the scores (Chapter 3); and finally Mahler as interpreter of Mozart's operas (Chapter 4) and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* (Chapter 5).

Once having read the whole book, it becomes clear how Ficarella's research on Mahler's laborious compositional process—one that goes well beyond the final published scores—brings out all the extraordinary richness of his aesthetic world.

Mahler's Compositional Workshop

With a deep knowledge of the specialized literature on the subject (especially that in German and English), Ficarella places herself in the middle of the most recent debate on Mahler, combining a philological approach to the scores[5] with a historico-aesthetic analysis of the composer's search for a personal "orchestral idiom" (45) in the light of his own *Klangvorstellung* (sonic imagination)[6] in the context of the European musical culture of his time.

In Chapter 2, "Quel che mi raccontano gli schizzi: Come componeva Mahler" (What the sketches tell me: How Mahler composed)—a title hinting at the *Überschriften* (movement titles) in Mahler's Third Symphony—Ficarella explores Mahler's compositional workshop in light of the dialectic between compositional ideas, performative intentions, and the *medium* of notation (65). The dynamic creative process—through *Gestalten und Umgestalten* (forming and re-forming, 115)—is examined on the theoretical basis of "genetic criticism," a philological approach rooted in French literary studies[7] and elaborated also in a musicological perspective. In this sense, the project "Beethovens Werkstatt" (Beethoven's workshop),[8] led by Bernhard R. Appel and Joachim Veit, represents a relevant example of combining a genetic approach with digital music editing practices in order to investigate the compositional processes in Beethoven's *oeuvre*, which could be extended very productively—as the author suggests—to the analysis of other composers' workshops, such as Mahler's.

Ficarella's book highlights the composer's "aesthetic need" (35) to provide performers with all the necessary elements to follow his musical intentions as faithfully as possible. It was partly his uncertainty of having achieved such a purpose, together with a certain distrust of his performers, which led Mahler to conduct all the premieres of his own works.[9] The rehearsals generally involved numerous "radical" orchestration adjustments, as Mahler wrote from Vienna to Felix Weingartner at the end of the summer of 1901, on the occasion of the performance of his Fourth Symphony (41).

Mahler's compositional process, trying to achieve his precise *Klangvorstellung*, is thus manifested not only in the manuscripts, but also in the revisions and adjustments made in the printed scores during and after the performances, the so-called *Retuschen*, to which he submitted both his own works and some of other composers he conducted. Such variations occur more frequently in moments of dissatisfaction with the rendering of a precise compositional idea or an unsatisfactory aural result.

Within the revision process of Mahler's Fifth Symphony, Ficarella points out on the one hand his attempts to clarify performance details with the intent of preventing errors on the part of future performers and on the other, to fix deeper unresolved compositional problems that first became explicit in early performances—problems regarding orchestral texture, timbre balance and disposition of the instruments on stage, instrumental effects and playing techniques, dynamics, agogics, articulation, and phrasing. All these are "paratextual" or "secondary" elements (expressions that in my opinion do not render the substantial and structural value that they have in Mahler's compositional technique) on which he concentrates his revisions to pursue his musical

and aesthetic orchestral sound idea (40). In this sense, Adorno already emphasized how Mahler exploited every possible dimension of composition for the realization of the "Fülle des Diskurses" (richness of discourse) of the composition (44).[10]

Ficarella wonders to what extent Mahler's two professional roles, the composer and the conductor, interact with one another while he revised compositional problems or smoothed out unintended sonic effects (45). And also whether in Mahler's orchestral writing one can clearly distinguish the performance field as an "accidental" factor from a strictly compositional and "substantial" field (68). Referring to Adornian concepts, it is possible to distinguish the "idiomatic" element, *das Idiomatische*, relative to the *hic et nunc* of a specific performance, from the "neumatic" one, *das Neumische*, which concerns the internal structure, of which the "mensural" element, *das Mensurale*, refers to the notation representing the *medium*.[11]

[2] In Ficarella's opinion these questions remain to be researched, even if she herself sets out the fundamental coordinates for it in her book. Indeed, from her analysis it emerges how Mahler in each of his works has always been guided by a precise sonic imagination. In order to reach it, he used both his skills as a composer and as a conductor to model the sound material in a continuous work in progress, manifested in all its richness during the performance. The act of writing itself thus becomes the instrument through which the idea is refined and perfected, at first only in the composer's private work, then in the direct and immediate confrontation with the sound material (68). Mahler's orchestral writing is ultimately not only the writing of the work (*Werkschrift*), but also a performing protocol (*Aufführungsprotokoll*), which takes shape in a continuous process of rethinking, of which the score revisions leave traces.

Mahler's Guiding Principles

In Chapter 3, "Scrittura 'performativa' e regia sonora nelle partiture mahleriane" (Performative writing and sound direction in Mahler's scores), the progressive refinement of the work, which is evident from the stratification of the handwritten annotations on the printed score, is described by Ficarella in the light of three principles that characterize Mahler's *modus operandi*: precision, transition, and loosening up (*Auflockerung*).[12]

Through these techniques, Mahler progressively seeks to entrust his compositional intentions to the most appropriate musical notation, prompted also by a certain distrust of performers—as Adorno pointed out—whose carelessness, incomprehension, and lack of study time he feared (68).[13] After misunderstandings concerning the titles he used in his early compositions, which were interpreted as referring to underlying programs (*inneres Programm*), Mahler decided to reduce this practice. Through an increasingly accurate notation, the composer therefore intended to define the precision of the *ductus*, the trend of phrases (*Tonfall*), the balance of timbre, and the relationships in the dynamics between the different registers of the orchestral texture in light of the different effects of "spatiality," "depth," and "distance"—in a sort of "sonic editing" *ante litteram* (74). In this regard, Ficarella points out how Mahler's musical writing moves from narrative and descriptive paratextual elements to more technical details. In demonstrating this maniacal search for the precision of the written indications, she quotes particularly significant passages taken from the revisions of the score of the Fifth Symphony, as for example the retouching of the rhythmic profile in the first movement (at N. 5), in which the *Luftpausen* (breath pauses) are incorporated with the symbol of quaver rests to note the course of the march with

the greatest possible precision (76, see note 77). This kind of *Retuschen* shows how Mahler's notational technique was addressed to performers, transforming the score into a sort of "performative text" (82).

The score's revisions regarding the meticulous control of the aforementioned secondary elements in Mahler's orchestration are used not only for notational clarity, but also for the definition of the musical form (84). Based on the study of Robert Hopkins about the so-called *closures*,[14] Ficarella highlights how these secondary elements help clarify the transitions between formal sections, describing this compositional strategy as a "Kunst des Übergangs" (art of transition) specific to Mahler, referring here to the famous Wagnerian expression (84). The treatment of the fanfare at the end of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony offers a telling instance: starting from the section N. 18, "Klagend," Mahler suggests the idea of a deep displacement, with a progressive reduction of instruments, decrease of dynamics, echo effects, fragmentation of motifs, and creation of background and foreground sound layers (101), until the final collapse, "Einsturz,"[15] to use an Adornian category, or "Auflösungsprozess" (dissolution process) and "Demontage" (disassembly) of sound substance, to use Harald Hodeige's expressions.[16]

This same section (N. 18) in Willem Mengelberg's conducting score,[17] reproduced on the cover of the book, is also interesting from a performance-practice perspective. In this annotated print, we can observe the stratification of handwritten pencil-annotations that different people had made in red and blue: Mahler himself, who directed the symphony using this same score in 1906, a copyist, and also Willem Mengelberg, who had witnessed the rehearsals conducted by Mahler, taking notes of his interpretative choices. In the printed score the agogic indications *klagend* (lamenting) and *zurückhaltend* (held back) are particularly highlighted in blue, and added to them are the word *heftig* (violently), the *sforzato* accents, as well as the *Luftpausen*.

Therefore, it seems that several performers of this score continued to take notes during the rehearsals, using Mahler's own *Retuschen* practice.

The search for clarity in orchestration leads Mahler to pursue a process of "lightening up" of the orchestral texture, according to the principle of "Auflockerung."[18] Ficarella's use of this term is derived from Egon Wellesz,[19] a pupil of Schoenberg, and an important reference point for her interpretation of Mahler's revisions of the orchestral texture in the counterpoint passages. Taking into consideration the *Scherzo* of the Fifth Symphony—a "cursed movement" according to Mahler—Ficarella analyzes the composer's "struggle with the sound material" (104). At the beginning of the "wave-like" process of contrapuntal intensification from N. 17,[20] she identifies in the *Retuschen* Mahler's intention to find a timbre balance between all the instrumental voices, especially in the parts with markedly contrapuntal treatment, in order to lighten the orchestral texture, tending to an expansion towards the extreme registers and redrawing a most rarefied aural space.

Mahler as Interpreter

In Chapter 4, "Quel che mi raccontano le *Retuschen*: Mahler e le opera teatrali di Mozart" (What the *Retuschen* tell me: Mahler and Mozart's operas), the author deals with Mahler's decisive contribution to the revival of Mozart operas during his ten years as chief conductor of the *Hofoper* (court opera, today *Wiener Staatsoper* or Vienna State Opera) in Vienna (1897–1907), as well as the composer's contribution to the birth of a "modern" musical theater in a unified conception of

musical, scenic, and dramaturgical components (119).

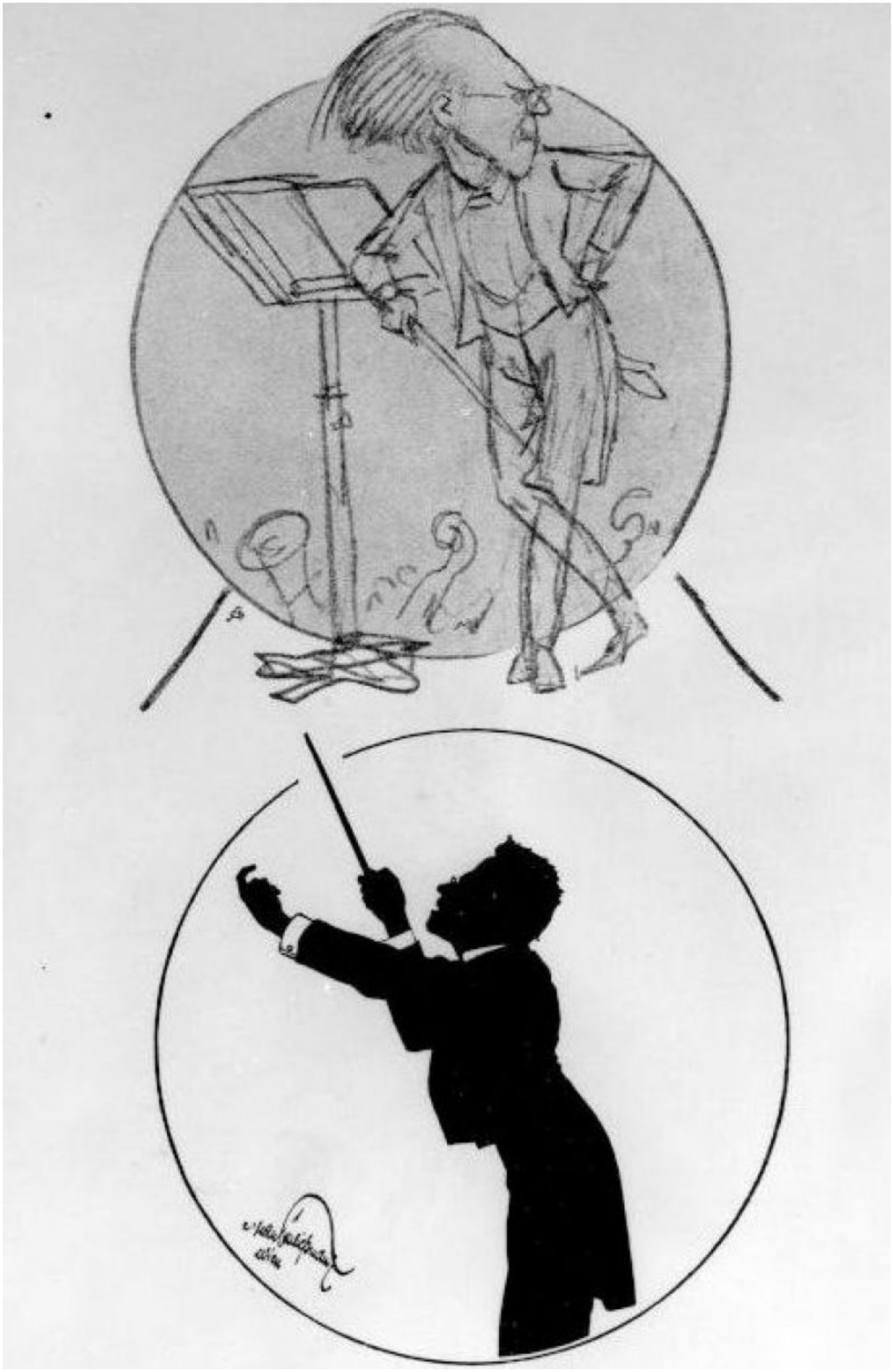

Figure 2: Caricature and silhouette of Mahler by Hans Schließmann (1901); by courtesy of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Bildarchiv Austria

[3] The *Mozart-Zyklus* (Mozart cycle), organized by Mahler in the 1905/1906 season for the 150th anniversary of Mozart's birth, marked a crucial moment in the rediscovery of Mozart's theater and the critical confrontation with the previous performance tradition. Ficarella analyzes in particular a "revolutionary" performance of *Don Giovanni* on December 21, 1905 (which thanks to Mahler, after more than a century, was no longer called *Don Juan*, but regained its original title). From the reviews of the time and the analysis of the orchestral material preserved in the archive of the Vienna State Opera, it emerges that Mahler was not completely faithful to Mozart's score, but introduced a curious mixture of novelties and rediscoveries of historical performance practices (123). Ficarella discusses Mahler's reintroduction of recitatives accompanied by the harpsichord (instead of a piano) or by the string quartet within the orchestra, that in time had been replaced by spoken dialogues, such as in a *Singspiel*. She underlines Mahler's merit in having the recitatives performed in an expressive and theatrical manner, according to those "baroque" rhetorical conventions that were well known at the time of Mozart and therefore taken for granted, without any need to put them in writing (124). Coherently with his need for precision, already expressed in his own *Retuschen*, Mahler replaced the *staccato* and *rubato* indications with the exact writing of the note values, particularly in passages with dotted rhythms, as the original musical materials preserved in the opera archive show (125).

On February 18, 1900, Mahler conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, performed with the Wiener Philharmoniker at the Musikverein in Vienna at the annual Nicolaikonzert. What aroused bitter criticism in the reviews were Mahler's *Retuschen* of Beethoven's "sacred text." Based on a thorough examination of such revisions in Mahler's *Dirigierpartitur* and orchestral part, building also on David Pickett's analysis,[21] Ficarella studies the aesthetic principles that motivated the conductor's choices, extending her discussion to a comparison with the practices of other contemporary conductors such as Hans von Bülow, Felix Weingartner, and Richard Strauss.

In *Deutsche Zeitung*, a newspaper with anti-Semitic orientation, Theodor Helm describes Mahler's performance of Beethoven's "Wunderwerk" (miracle work) as alienating and too far removed from "wie es der Meister schrieb" (137).[22] According to Mahler, the passage had to be adjusted in order to give the right expression to Beethoven's intentions, who at the time did not have an orchestra sufficiently suited to his musical imagination.[23]

Mahler's erasures and additions in the choir passages in the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—which he doubled by other instruments, because he considered them otherwise not properly set in relief (155)—could probably leave even present-day listeners perplexed. Mahler's intention was to bring out in this score the timbre clarity and the "melodischer Gang" (melodic *ductus*)—which were also the goal of Wagner's indications.[24] As Ficarella underlines, Mahler was following a very personal ideal of performance, pursuing a much broader and more nuanced concept of "Werktreue" (faithfulness to the original; 162).

Figure 3: Mahler, after having left through the stage entrance of the Vienna Court Opera (1904); by courtesy of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Bildarchiv Austria

Using a solid methodology for analyzing primary sources and an extensive international bibliography, *Non guardare nei miei Lieder!* offers the opportunity to discover Gustav Mahler's musical workshop, exemplified with multiple references to his compositional and performance practice.

I do hope that this book will soon be translated into other languages, since it not only introduces a state-of-the-art methodological approach to Italian musicology, but also represents a major achievement in international Mahler scholarship that deserves to reach a broader audience.

Furthermore, Ficarella's research opens new scholarly perspectives, stimulating considerations concerning historically informed performance practice as well as interdisciplinary studies on writing music and its relations with compositional and interpretative processes that certainly deserve to be developed further by other scholars in the future.[25]

References

1. A good performance of "Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder!" from the *Rückert-Lieder* (1901) is by Jessye Norman, Zubin Mehta, and the New York Philharmonic: https://youtu.be/yVW1x9lK76s, accessed May 10, 2021. See the full text with an English translation in Deryck Cooke, *Gustav Mahler: An Introduction to His Music* (London: Faber Music, 1988). ↑
2. The *Skizzenforschung* has its origins in the mid-nineteenth century with Gustav Nottebohm's studies on Beethoven's sketches: Gustav Nottebohm, *Ein Skizzenbuch von Beethoven: Beschrieben und in Auszügen dargestellt* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1865). ↑
3. Gustav Mahler quoted in Ficarella, *Non guardare nei miei Lieder!*, 7. Taken from the unpublished manuscript by Natalie Bauer-Lechner, quoted in Henry-Louis De La Grange, *Gustav Mahler* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 1:628. ↑
4. Wienbibliothek im Rathaus, Arnold Schönberg Center in Vienna, Nederlands Muziek Instituut (Mengelberg Archief) in Den Haag, The Morgan Library & Museum in New York, Bibliothek der Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Musiksammlung), Internationale Gustav Mahler Gesellschaft in Vienna. ↑
5. Almuth Grésillon, *Éléments de critique génétique: Lire les manuscrits modernes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994); and Bernhard R. Appel, "Textkategorien in kompositorischen Werkstattdokumenten," in *"Ei, dem alten Hernn zoll' ich Achtung gern'": Festschrift für Joachim Veit zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Kristina Richts and Peter Stadler (Munich: Allitera, 2016), 49–57. ↑
6. Ficarella stresses the need to investigate the models and sources privileged by Mahler for the shaping of his *Klangvorstellung*, such as the "subcutaneous" assimilation (an expression by Maurizio Giani) of the orchestral idiom of Wagner and the derivations from the latest operas of Verdi. ↑
7. *Essais de critique génétique*, ed. Jean Bellemin-Noël (Paris: Flammarion, 1979). ↑
8. "Beethovens Werkstatt: Genetische Textkritik und digitale Musikedition," accessed August 19, 2020. ↑
9. Mahler conducted all the premieres of his own works with the exception of *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony, which were premiered after Mahler's death by Bruno Walter in 1911 and 1912 respectively. ↑
10. Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: Eine musikalische Physiognomik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1960), 125–26. ↑
11. Theodor W. Adorno, *Zu einer Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion: Aufzeichnungen, ein Entwurf und zwei Schemata* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001). For an English-language rendition of this book, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction: Notes, a Draft and Two Schemata*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006). ↑
12. In this context, the German word *Auflockerung* is used with the meaning of "lightening" the orchestration to make the instrumental counterpoint clearer and at the same time "loosening" any timbral rigidity in the orchestral texture. ↑
13. Adorno, *Mahler*, 124–25. ↑
14. Robert Hopkins, "Form in the First Movement of the Fifth Symphony," in *Perspectives on Gustav Mahler*,

ed. Jeremy Barham (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 242–44. ↑

15. In his book on Mahler (65–66), Adorno—discussing his "materiale Formenlehre" (material theory of form)—introduces the four "Charaktere" (characters): *Durchbruch* (breakthrough), *Suspension* (suspension), *Erfüllung* (fulfilment), and *Einsturz* (collapse). ↑

16. Harald Hodeige, *Komponierte Klangräume in den Symphonien Gustav Mahlers*, Musikwissenschaft an der Technischen Universität Berlin 5 (Berlin: Mensch & Buch, 2004), 113–15. ↑

17. Mengelberg *Dirigierpartitur* (1906) of Mahler's Fifth Symphony (I Mov, N. 18 "Klagend," mm. 366–74, p. 44). Nederlands Muziek Instituut – Mengelberg Archief, Den Haag (archive 184, inventary number 437). ↑

18. The author explains how this term is reminiscent of Schoenberg's expression "lockere Formung" (loose formation) as opposed to "feste Formung" (rigid formation) in his *Gedanken-Manuskript* (57, n35). ↑

19. Egon Wellesz, *Die Neue Instrumentation*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Max Hesse, 1928–29). ↑

20. Federico Celestini, "Gustav Mahlers Fünfte Symphonie," in *Gustav Mahler: Interpretation seiner Werke*, ed. Peter Revers and Oliver Korte (Laaber: Laaber, 2011), 2:3–51. ↑

21. David Anis Pickett, "Gustav Mahler as an Interpreter: A Study of His Textual Alterations and Performance Practice in the Symphonic Repertoire" (PhD diss., University of Surrey, 1988). The critical edition of the *Dirigierpartitur* of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* with Mahler's *Retuschen* was recently edited by David Pickett and published by Josef Weinberger Ltd. in collaboration with Universal Edition A.G. On David Pickett's website see also the facsimile reproduction: Beethoven, Ninth Symphony, Mahler's *Dirigierpartitur,* P. 40, I Mov, mm. 313–20, p. 39, Universal Edition Archive, Vienna. ↑

22. "But whoever came to the 'Nicolai' concert last Sunday expecting to hear Beethoven's miraculous work how the master wrote it and as Hans Richter last performed it on April 4, 1897, in simple, proud grandeur of style—only with the indispensable Wagnerian clarification—must have been alienated in many ways." Theodor Helm, *Deutsche Zeitung*, February 20, 1900, 7. Here, Helm alludes to the clarity of Wagner's musical direction. Original wording: "Wer nun aber am letzten Sonntag in dem 'Nicolai'-Concert mit der Erwartung erschienen war, das Wunderwerk Beethoven's so zu hören, wie es der Meister schrieb und wie es zuletzt hier Hans Richter am 4. April 1897 in einfacher, stolzer Stilgrösse—nur mit der unerlässlichen Wagnerschen Verdeutlichung—aufführte, musste vielfach befremdet worden sein." ↑

23. For this, see Mahler's *Erklärung*, February 22, 1900 (International Gustav Mahler Society) in Ficarella, *Non guardare nei miei Lieder!*, 140 (figure 2). ↑

24. Richard Wagner, "Zum Vortrag der neunten Symphonie Beethoven's," in Richard Wagner, *Dichtungen und Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe in zehn Bänden*, vol. 9, *Beethoven: Späte dramaturgische Schriften*, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer (Frankfurt: Insel, 1983), 110–38. For an edition of this text available online, see Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* (Leipzig: Fritzsch, 1873), 9:275–304. ↑

25. Stimulating research synergies could be established with the results of the research project "Writing Music: Iconic, Performative, Operative, and Material Aspects in Musical Notation(s)," especially with studies related to the performative quality of writing. ↑