BOOKS

GUSTAV MAHLER: A LIFE IN CRISIS. By Stuart Feder, M.D. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004, 368 pp.

Stuart Feder published his first article on Gustav Mahler in 1978. Over the next two and half decades, Feder's initial psychoanalytic exploration of Mahler's life and music were followed by five additional papers. These were interspersed with two books and nearly a dozen articles on Charles Ives; a two-volume series, "Psychoanalytic Explorations in Music," to which Feder contributed and which he also co-edited; along with many other original articles. With these scholarly contributions, Feder established himself as the dean and preeminent proponent of what has, through his stewardship, become its own interdisciplinary field, the study of psychoanalysis and music.

Feder was uniquely suited to this dual pursuit. As an undergraduate, he studied theory with Henry Cowell at The Peabody Conservatory of Music, and obtained a graduate degree in music from Harvard, studying composition with Walter Piston. He subsequently received medical and psychiatric training at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and later graduated from the New York Psychoanalytic Institute.

From the outset, Feder established an original perspective in relating the biographical data of composers' lives to their creative life in music. He sought to illuminate the overdetermined and multifunctional relationship between the artist's mental life and the music itself by way of a sophisticated, synthesized understanding of both areas. In this mode of analysis, Feder departed significantly both from earlier psychobiographies of composers and psychoanalytic writings on music. He advanced the premise that, in considering the relationship between music and affect, writings on the aesthetics, history, or philosophy of music have always grappled with the manner in which music reflects, symbolizes, and communicates aspects of inner life.

For Feder, the study of the relationship between affect and music has far-reaching and reciprocal merits for psychoanalysts as well as for musicians and those writing about music or musicians. In his view, a musical and psychoanalytically knowledgeable study of the nature of

representation in the auditory sphere, that is, of auditory symbolism, together with understanding how affect achieves auditory representation, yields a more expansive conceptualization of the nature of affect in mental life (Feder, 1982).

Music, in Feder's view, is therefore considered not only from an aesthetic or philosophical perspective but as directly related to the mental processes of the composer: "To study the 'complete biography' of an artist such as Mahler," Feder (1978) writes, "it would not suffice to use only the usual materials of biography such as personal accounts, letters and the like, and to omit documents which reveal mental content expressed and realized in his own most characteristic manner of conceptualizing, namely, the form of thought known as music" (p. 127).

In *Mahler: A Life in Crisis*, Feder's scholarly and thoroughly engaging book, he explicitly extends this approach. He invites the reader to consider that Mahler himself provides a partial answer to the question, "Can music be in some sense autobiographical?" when the composer writes:

> My whole life is contained in my two symphonies [referring to the First, the "Titan," and the then just completed Second, the "Resurrection"]. In them I have set down my experience and suffering, truth and poetry in words. To anyone who knows how to listen, my whole life will become clear. (p. 7)

Feder responds to the implicit challenge, closely listening to and interpreting the "latent component of personal meaning [in the music] of which the composer is unaware" (p. 7) with ears trained both as musician and psychoanalyst.

Feder usefully employs his clinical skills as an analyst in both his understanding and writing of the narrative of Mahler's life. As he appositely suggests, "all character sketches collated retrospectively contain contradictions. Properly viewed, these reflect not only the views and vantage point of the observer but the complexity of lives led over the course of time, and the vicissitudes of memory as well" (p. 12). An astute, sensitive observer, Feder views the crises not as points of entry for a forensic pathography but as touch points in structuring a deeper understanding of "Mahler's life, his struggles to overcome them, and the music of which they were a part" (p. 8).

By example, a chapter titled "Family Crisis, 1889" begins with the deceptively simply sentence, "Crisis had a way of coinciding precisely with some exceptional achievement in Mahler's life" (p. 30). Feder's observation has the sound and shape of an incisive interpretation, which is in essence how he treats the material which follows, wherein he expli-

cates the conflictual trends in Mahler's professional life, personal relationships, and musical productivity, as composer and conductor, in the context of their deeper and more archaic psychological currents. While written in a manner accessible to all readers, psychoanalysts may be especially gratified by the exquisite subtlety of such biographical interpretation and elaboration, which count among the many pleasures and rewards of reading this book.

For any biographer, the prime claim to writing a "psychoanalytic biography" might be the inclusion of his subject's consultation with Freud. While Mahler and Freud's perambulating session, their legendary walk in Leiden, has its place, important to be sure, Feder's probing discussion of it avoids verbosity; in my view, its significance is not artificially inflated. To the contrary, like the peripatetic consultation itself—a meandering, freely associative sojourn that "took them through the maze of the ancient city and through the web of Mahler's troubled mental life" (p. 206)—Feder allows the nuanced, underlying threads to emerge by his unforced but keenly attuned presentation of the two men and their brief interaction. Freud himself was uncharacteristically sparing in his account of the meeting. Years later, Freud wrote to Marie Bonaparte: "I once analyzed Mahler. . . . I was vacationing in Holland. . . . There I received a telegram from Mahler. 'May I come to see you?' I answer, 'Yes.' . . . So then he comes to Leiden to meet me at a hotel. I go and we walk over the village for four hours, he telling me his life" (p. 227). Feder notes that a casual observer might easily have mistaken Mahler and Freud strolling through Leiden as two academic colleagues engrossed in conversation. In German, Freud and Mahler's common language, Feder reminds us that the noun *Leiden* means pain or suffering, something else Freud and Mahler shared. As Feder takes us along in his meticulous reconstruction of that *spaziergang*, his focus is on the parallels and similarities in the two men's lives—particularly their common preoccupation with death—rather than as an evaluation of the famous doctor's unconventional session with his equally famous patient. Feder's brilliant analysis of this curious four-hour consultation is a tour de force of investigative biographical reconstruction and psychoanalytic scholarship, and will be equally illuminating to Mahlerians and Freudians.

Above all else, Feder examines the complex interweaving of Mahler's childhood experiences and conceptions of death as both generative and debilitating derivatives unconsciously propelling his later life, which Mahler experienced as being nearly perpetually in crisis, and which he expressed, in part, in his music. Feder suggests: "To say that Mahler simply feared death misses the complexity of his experience.

More to the point, Mahler had a multifaceted psychological romance with death—not only the fear but the fascination, and despite the anxiety, an underlying wish to experience death" (p. 62). Here, the book reflects the abiding focus of so many of Feder's published works, particularly ideas elaborated in earlier writings about Mahler (1978, 1981), to which he has contributed a wealth of insights, especially the interrelated themes of loss, mourning, and creativity. These parallel the principal themes expressed in Mahler's compositional oeuvre: life, death, and resurrection, all of which derive, in condensed form, from Mahler's early experiences with primary abandonments in his family.

It is in this area that the book's title derives its significance. Feder's analysis explicates and persuasively situates the origins of Mahler's persistent morbid attachment to the idea of his own death in the serial losses experienced repeatedly throughout childhood, and in the unremitting, devastating crises of his later life. Mahler's personal iconography of death is recapitulated in his adult relationships and dazzlingly successful professional life; he oscillates between a counterphobic obsession for control, and tragic reencounters with traumatizing deaths, betrayals, disappointments, and abandonments. These are creatively symbolized through manifold distortions, condensations, and oblique eruptions in the language of music. More than a biography, Feder's examination is an important contribution to the psychoanalytic literature concerning early loss, depression, mourning, and guilt. Mahler's musical creations are beautifully illustrative of the processes by which repressed archaic fantasies of fratricide, infanticide, homicide, and one's own death intermingle and find expression in artistic structures.

This book also represents a sobering reminder that Freud's ideas and, therefore, psychoanalysis, are still derided, misunderstood, and caricatured, despite their lucid presentation by psychoanalysts who, like Feder, are also gifted writers capable of rendering complex theoretical and clinical material in clear, jargon-free prose accessible to a general audience. While *A Life in Crisis* has received many favorable reviews and endorsements from both psychoanalytic and Mahlerian scholars, it was savagely attacked in several nonpsychoanalytic publications. In their hostile critiques, these reviews evince an ostentatious illiteracy about psychoanalytic thought, by turns mistaking the general absence of jargon as a paucity of analytic depth and substance. They dismissively conclude that, in seemingly not producing previously unknown biographical data, Feder failed to meaningfully expand Mahler scholarship. In effect, they sweepingly condemn the use of psychoanalytic principles of mental functioning as a viable method for examining

and understanding the composer's inner life and his creative productions as symbolic expressions of that world.

The critical attacks on Feder's book in the mainstream press can be seen as collateral damage in a broader assault against psychoanalysis, lamentable and unwarranted inasmuch as this is a work of tremendous scholarship, brimming with psychoanalytic insight. While negative or vitriolic commentary will be understandably disheartening, even wounding, to any author who has invested a great deal of himself in his work, it can be profitably responded to by the larger psychoanalytic community, with more writing at Feder's level of clarity, erudition, and brio.

Psychoanalysts who write must not shrink from the challenges presented by a hostile environment, just as effective clinicians attend to their patients' resistance, not succumb to it. Psychoanalysts, as a group, tend toward insularity and self-protective guardedness, typically writing for an intrinsically accepting audience, that is, the colleagues far and wide who read the journals, a practice rooted in the belief that the controversy and dissent of theoretical and clinical pluralism suffices to advance (or sustain) the field. Though contributing to the peer-reviewed literature is unassailably important, it ultimately engenders only an undifferentiated form of survival. Psychoanalysis as a profession needs more psychoanalytic writers such as Feder who can knowledgeably venture into the allied realms of human experience and expression, formerly narrowly and more than a little condescendingly referred to as *applied analysis*, and now, more properly, as *interdisciplinary analysis*. Feder joins those who can clearly articulate general psychoanalytic thinking and practice in the popular media. Correcting and dismantling the misconceptions about psychoanalysis and its clinical relevance which so tenaciously persist for the general public constitute the ultimate goal.

Feder's book concludes with a series of concise epilogues concerning each of the major figures in Mahler's life who survived him when he died in 1911 at age fifty-one, notably his wife Alma, Walter Gropius, Carl and Anna Moll, as well as his doctors, which includes Freud. Feder adds that Mahler is survived by his music.

Stuart Feder, who died on July 29, 2005, is similarly survived by his works, brilliant, insightful writings which over a quarter century have immeasurably enriched and expanded the scope of psychoanalytic and musicological thought and scholarship. He is also survived by the personal legacy of colleagues, students, friends, former patients, readers, and loved ones whose lives were deeply touched and indelibly changed for the better by knowing and learning from him. To anyone

who attended his numerous lectures or presentations—he was a prolific speaker at symposia around the world—his unaffected, ebullient style was at once unassuming and commanding, a mode of communicating which translates directly to the page. He was as gracious and generous in person as in his writing. While not his last published work, *A Life in Crisis* will, sadly, be Stuart Feder's final word on Gustav Mahler; fortunately for us, Feder's mind and humanity survive through his words. His substantial book is a welcome—and now doubly poignant—addition to that legacy.

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