

“Mahler causes a change of heartbeat”

Interview: Markus Hinterhäuser



“Mahler’s modernity lies in the seismographic element, the role of the individual in the world.” Markus Hinterhäuser

With its “Mahler scenes” (3–14 Aug), the Salzburg Festival will be turning the spotlight on the world of music related to Gustav Mahler and presenting him as an outstanding composer of songs. Artistic and concert director, Markus Hinterhäuser, talks about his impressions of Mahler and the concept of his

festival programme.

Over the past 30 years, Gustav Mahler has become one of the most-played composers of the 20th century. Why is that?

Hinterhäuser: It may be partly because the search for a unity of the self and the world is such an intrinsic part of Mahler's music. Perhaps because it's music in which listeners can feel what it means when an era on the brink of tectonic shifts is described.

The "Mahler scenes" include arrangements of Johann Strauss by the Second Viennese School, as well as by Shostakovich, who saw Mahler as a great role model. What connects this series of concerts?

Hinterhäuser: I've never wanted to present a performance of all the symphonies – I hope there are other ways of exploring the "continent that is Mahler" and of approaching him. I'm talking about composers from longer ago, such as Schubert, Zemlinsky and Korngold. And, of course, Alban Berg – the whole Mahler cycle begins with his cantata *Der Wein* and ends with his violin concerto.

There are ways of bringing Mahler into our world – through Shostakovich, for instance. Whatever you may think of him, he saw Mahler as an important reference point. One composer I see as extremely important and whom I also associate with Mahler is Karl Amadeus Hartmann: the symphony as a description of the world.

When you talk about Schubert and Mahler – how do you see their personalities?

Hinterhäuser: Both died relatively young, although Schubert died much earlier of course. Both left behind an extraordinarily strong, profound and great late oeuvre. It is Schubert and Mahler's late works that one thinks of. And when you listen to their late works, you can say, without exaggeration, that they are worth living for. Having the privilege of listening to them makes life worthwhile. I'm talking about Schubert's last piano sonatas, Mahler's *Lied von der Erde* and Symphony No. 9.

The starting point for Schubert and Mahler was the "Lied". Their oeuvres are permeated through and through with songs, both lived and breathed songs, were characterised by the simplicity of the song as a compositional form, the directness of expression, the naivety. Both composers achieved an incredible

depth of expression at a relatively young age.

“Mahler’s œuvre is the great story of his life.”

To me, it is not only the longing for a lost land that connects the two composers, but also an unachievable utopia.

Hinterhäuser: Of course, that’s right.

The pain does not only stem from having lost something, but also from the knowledge that something cannot be achieved.

Hinterhäuser: Yes, but not being able to achieve something is also an incredible impetus, an incredible driving force to carry on. It’s not something that necessarily has to end in resignation. And even if it does, when expressed, this resignation may, in the best instance, be a great artistic statement – something which is true for both Schubert and Mahler.

Mahler’s music always looks back a long way into the past, almost into his childhood – a glimpse of a world of innocence. And what comes afterwards becomes existentially far more immediate – and painful – through this insight. There are many moments when this music ultimately causes a change of heartbeat.

What did Mahler want to achieve?

Hinterhäuser: To express himself. To confess – definitely to confess. And to describe the world, his inner world, the influence of the outer world on his inner world. Of course, it’s very dangerous to say such things because they’re so clichéd – but clichés sometimes contain a grain of truth. I believe that Mahler’s œuvre is the great story of his life, which is written almost like a diary at times. It’s a coming-of-age novel with dimensions barely achieved by anyone else.

What illustrates Mahler's modernity?

Hinterhäuser: Mahler's modernity lies in the seismographic element, the role of the individual in the world. His montage technique is also modern – the assembly of disparate elements that nevertheless form an entity. The question of architecture, of the progression of time in music – those are all aspects that also concern later composers. In general, however, one shouldn't take too much of an academic approach to the Mahler phenomenon. It is music that says: listen to me, listen to what I have to say, listen to how I say it, immerse yourselves in these unparalleled dimensions. And that is already a great deal.

Are Mahler's true hallmarks perhaps his ruthlessness towards himself and his openness? Mahler tears open his innermost self and says: "Look!"

Hinterhäuser: Yes, those are definitely two of the great qualities and driving forces of his music.

▮Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler



MARKUS HINTERHÄUSER

Markus Hinterhäuser was born in La Spezia (Italy) in 1958 and first became known as a pianist and song accompanist (for Brigitte Fassbaender, among others). He is the founder (along with Tomas Zierhofer-Kin) and long-time director (1993–2001) of the Zeitfluss-Festival, which is part of the Salzburg Festival. He has been the concert director of the Salzburg Festival since October 2006 and its artistic director since the 2011 season.