

Preface

BY JACK DIETHER

Gabriel Engel, concert violinist, composer, musicologist and rare book dealer, was born in Hungary in 1892, was raised and lived mainly in New York City, and died in Vermont in 1952. My personal acquaintance with him dates from 1942, and today I am both proud and happy to be the editor of *Chord and Discord*, the occasional journal (twenty-one issues to date) which Engel edited from its very first issue, in 1932, until his death. *Chord and Discord* was and is the magazine of The Bruckner Society of America, Inc., which was itself conceived in the mind of Gabriel Engel about 1930, while he was in Europe studying composition with Ernst Křenek. It was conceived as a society devoted to the propagation of the then highly unpopular (or at least unfamiliar) music of Bruckner and Mahler in America, and it has been carried forward continuously in that spirit.

Gustav Mahler—Song Symphonist was not only “the first account of his life based on his collected letters,” as Engel has mentioned in his original foreword. It was also the first Mahler biography in the English language, and it was companioned by the first Bruckner one as well, also by Mr. Engel. In those days, to conduct the symphonies of either composer on an American podium was such a hazardous undertaking that the conductors who persisted were awarded medals and citations by the Bruckner Society, as if for “valor beyond the call of duty.” Today the only Bruckner and Mahler “heroes” are the conductors of orchestras in colleges and small

communities who regularly put their young men and women through their paces in what are still among the most exacting scores ever penned. For today almost every leading professional orchestra, in America and throughout the world, has some Bruckner and/or Mahler in its regular repertory. The symphonies are represented in the record catalogues by multiple recordings of each work. Leonard Bernstein has achieved the first complete recorded cycle of "the basic Mahler nine" by a single conductor; in Europe Eugen Jochum has achieved the same for Bruckner, and similar follow-up cycles are currently in progress.

The final recognition of Bruckner and Mahler by the "public-at-large" was triggered in the early 1950s by the advent of the long-playing record. Then for the first time, listeners and phonophiles were able to hear these magnificent structures without recourse to frustrating interruptions and record-flipping every three or four minutes, they were able to get really close to them by frequent repetition under nearly ideal conditions, and they were able to trace out and study the entire evolution of each composer in its over-all sweep. They were able to form their own opinions about the music, instead of acquiring them at second hand from random comments in books on orchestration, or from often superficial reviews by the chronically jaded musical pundits of the daily press. Familiarization by recording brought a demand for live performances, thus reversing the more familiar sequence of the past.

Not every enthusiast liked both composers, or liked them equally, of course. Added familiarity brought indeed an increased awareness of their fundamental differences. Some few listeners still feel deeply attuned to Bruckner but alien to Mahler, or vice versa; but most special admirers can at least sense the underlying grandeur

and strength of both. Gabriel Engel was one of those who could respond and write with equal conviction about both composers from the start, and so he became the chief pioneer of Bruckner-Mahler musicology in America.

The present status of Mahler in particular, which roughly dates from his centenary year of 1960, is that of one of the most widely heard and discussed of all symphonists, the discussions frequently embracing everything from philosophical argument to the most minute comparisons of different performances by orchestras, conductors, and singers. It is a status which, for a number of reasons connected with the present nature of music and civilization, I believe will continue for a long time—or at least for as long as our threatened civilization itself continues.

It might reasonably be said, in fact, that our greatly increased knowledge of his music has now far outrun our knowledge of his life. It is not very difficult to discover the specific holes in Engel's depiction of Mahler's works; a few of them could only be described today as gaping. We know, for example, that *Das klagende Lied* was not, in its original version, an opera. We know also that the *First Symphony* was originally presented in five movements, not four, the *Third Symphony* in six movements, not seven, and that the *Fifth Symphony* is not and never was "a work in the classically sanctioned four movements." But Engel's general discussion of the composer's musical language in Chapter VI is precise, perceptive and illuminating. And the biographical material judiciously garnered from the 1924 *Gustav Mahler Briefe* (the 494-page collection of letters and footnotes which is still unpublished in complete English translation after forty-six years) is converted into a spontaneous and flowing kind of narrative that carries us smoothly through Mahler's Promethean career.

The writer also has a delightfully off-the-cuff sense of humor, sometimes neither telegraphed nor explained, as when he punningly refers to one of Mahler's typical adversaries, the gross but inordinately influential "Mr. Goldberg" of the Leipzig opera-theatre (actually the chief stage-manager there), as the "power behind the scenes." The young composer, it is explained, had just then completed his *First Symphony* to the serious detriment of his duties at the theatre, since he had not yet mastered the device of relegating his major compositional work to the summer months. Here Engel contrasts the creative "spring in his heart" with the "wintry scowls on the face of Director Staegemann" as if he were indeed narrating something that happened yesterday—which, in relativistic terms, is exactly what it is. Mahler is as alive in our imaginations as his music, when evoked by someone to whom both the music and the spirit behind it are living entities.

I know that I, for one, will always be able to see Mahler quite vividly, along the general lines first sketched out for me in this small book. And just as the music takes on added color and meaning from day to day, so do these pages when returned to with an ever-fresh perspective.