MAHLERMANIA
The cult composer undergoes another metamorphosis.

BY ALEX ROSS

I first encountered the name Mahler as graffiti on concrete. Sometime in the mid-seventies, a scrawny-painted French horn and the legend "Mahler Lives" across the pylon of a railway bridge in Washington, D.C. These cryptic signs beckoned to me as I rode past in an overcrowded school bus, tuning out my classmates' mass rendition of "We Are the Champions." In subsequent years, I tried to develop a taste for Mahler's symphonies, but they made no sense next to those of Beethoven and Brahms. Then, like many people, I had my mind changed by Leonard Bernstein. The great Mahler epigone led the "Resurrection" Symphony at the National Cathedral; it was one of his concerts aimed at abolishing nuclear weapons. I infiltrated a rehearsal and looked at a conductor's score that had been left open on the seats. I was awestruck at how simple figures on the page could turn into sound as massive as the cathedral's pillars. "Louder! Longer!" Bernstein shouted over the apocalyptic percussion crescendo in the final movement. It seemed like music's revenge on an unmusical world, noise trampling on noise.

While Gustav Mahler could not rival Jim Morrison or Fado Bagginis as a graffiti icon, he amassed enormous cult enthusiasm in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. After decades of slow progress, he abruptly became one of the most popular of composers, ranking with Mozart, Beethoven, and Rachmaninoff, and his symphonies tested the outer limits of stereo recording. Ken Russell and Luchino Visconti made movies about him—or, at least, around him. Sondheim saluted him in "The Ladies Who Lunch." The prime mover behind the Mahlermania in this country was, of course, Bernstein, whose utterances ranged from the ridiculous ("Mahler is groovy") to the bombastic ("Ours is the century of death, and Mahler is its musical prophet"), but whose performances touched the sublime. In a classic turnabout, a composer who had been dismissed as neurotic, morbid, vulgar, and grandiose was now celebrated as neurotic, morbid, vulgar, and grandiose.

Anyone who thought that the taste for Mahler would die off with Bernstein was grievously mistaken. In May, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, in Amsterdam, presented a Mahler festival louder and longer than any other. It was an unprecedented alignment of the Viennese Philharmonic, the Berlin Philharmonic, and the Concertgebouw itself; it was underwritten by Royal Dutch Petroleum and the Netherlands telephone company; and it engendered a six-pound program book entitled "Gustav Mahler: The World Listens." Meanwhile, Henry-Louis de La Grange has issued the second volume of a multivolume opus that threatens to become the largest musical biography since Ernest Newman's life of Wagner. Gilbert Kaplan, the millionaire Mahler fanatic, has published every known photograph of the composer; and another Kaplan-sponsored publication, the "Mahler Discography," lists more than eleven hundred recordings of twenty works. The countercultural prophet is gone, replaced by Mahler the global symphonic conglomerate.

For most of the century, the Mahler cult profited from sentimental, idealized images. Bernstein's vision of a tremulous soul in love with martyrdom and death completed a tradition of hyperbole that had begun in 1912 with Schoenberg's declaration "Gustav Mahler was a saint." In the introduction to La Grange's first volume, the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen went as far as to say, "Mahler was only transitorily a human being." Mahler's music, with its air of mystical catastrophe, easily provokes this sort of writing. Everyone knows his swooning intensity of emotion: not only the famous grandeurs and sufferings but also the intermedi-
ate states of waltz-time languor, kitsch-drenched sweetness and sadness, medi-

eval revelation, military rancor, disso-
nant delirium, adagio lament. Mahler’s

symphonies and songs, despite their
carefully controlled formal underpin-
nings, inspire deeply subjective com-
prehension, a feeling of possession: I alone
understand.

The vast documentation now avail-
able to Mahler scholars makes it clear
that there was a knowing, calculating
mind at work behind these tumults of
subjectivity. Mahler was, indeed, neu-
rotic and morbid; he was also one of the
most strong-willed people who have
ever lived. Having become the domi-
nant conductor of his generation, he
voiced an alarming certainty that his
compositions would reign after his
death. He predicted, quite correctly,
that his music would be played at festi-
vals consecrated to him, and he ex-
pected the world to change as a result.
Music was superior to man, equal to
nature. Passing beneath the Austrian
Alps, he said to Bruno Walter, “No
need to look, I have already composed
them.” At Niagara Falls he shouted, “At
last, a real fortissimo!” The mountains

and the waters were not an inspiration
for music but a preliminary sketch for
music. He was the Austrian Wilde, cel-
ebra ting art over life; but he was dead
serious. The core of Mahler, as Romain
Rolland once jealously observed, is
power.

La Grange’s “Gustav Mahler: Vienna,
The Years of Challenge” (Oxford, $45) nar-
rates the decisive years of
Mahler’s career, the period from 1897
to 1904. After a relentless rise through
the opera-house circuit of Central Eu-
r ope, this thirty-seven-year-old son of a
Bohemian tavern keeper was appointed
head of the court opera house in the
chief musical city of the world. His dis-
mission of beloved stars, his restoration of
cuts, his termination of premature ap-
pearance, his advocacy of Mozart, his in-
vention, with the painter Alfred Roller,
of modern opera production—all this
changed the way music was heard. He
kept to an insanely hectic schedule of
performances, appearances, tours, trav-
els, conversations, negotiations, and
affairs. In an unexpected fit of domes-
ticity, he married the twenty-two-year-
old Alma Schindler. And, on summer

vacations, he composed his Fourth,
Fifth, and Sixth Symphonies.

The fundamental wonder of
Mahler’s career is how he managed to
achieve so much as a composer in so little time. His creative sched-
ule—drafting evening-length works
over vacations lasting from six to
eight weeks—made him look like a
crazed dilettante to professional
colleagues. After his student days,
there were no preparatory efforts,
no workmanlike exercises. (Four
student symphonies apparently dis-
appeared in the Dresden bomb-
ings.) He staked his career on only
two forms, song and symphony.

There was no room for error; and
he did not step wrong. Before him,
only Wagner had produced such a
strenuous sequence of major works.
In his Vienna period, Mahler set
aside the programmatic spectacles
of his first three symphonies and
entered a world of abstract instru-
mental expression: the sweetly ironi-
cal neoclassicism of the Fourth, the
warring styles and sonorities of the
Fifth, the brutally concentrated
tragic narrative of the Sixth. These
isolated, rapidly sketched works were
conceived out of a sense of divine right-
lessness; whatever was written down must
be. “And he saw that it was good,”
Mahler said upon hearing the first
movement of his Third Symphony—
the same creation that had made the
Alps superfluous.

On the podium of the Vienna Court
Opera, Mahler’s colossal assurance
shaded into megalomania. He presented
his philosophy of conducting in these
unpleasant terms: “I frighten each mu-

sician into abandoning his little ego and
scaring above himself.” It is sometimes
said in Mahler’s defense that his dic-
tatorial methods served to advance
high artistic aims, but the critical de-
scriptions in La Grange’s book suggest
that his way with Beethoven, Wagner,
and other favorites grew willfully man-
nered and self-absorbed. He became re-
liant on instrumental “retouchings” that
served to Mahlerize the whole historical
repertory. (The Mahler fad has reached
its nadir in the recent vogue for perfor-
man ces of these bloated recordings, re-
cently called the Rezuaden. It is pos-
sible to imagine how certain changes—
an E-flat clarinet squawking in the
"Eroica"—might have had an electrifying effect on Mahler's hands; it is also easy to understand why many people became infuriated by him.)

Mahler's urge to mold the world extended into his personal life. His marriage to Alma Schindler was yet another masterpiece, joyous and tragic by turns; Alma was not given much freedom in her role. He approached her with genuine ardor but also with calculated need: he had built a handsome villa on the Wörther See, and he wanted a wife to decorate it. As if following a diagram of wisely nature, he demanded that the musically gifted Alma cease composing. "I wonder what this obsession is that has fixed itself in that little head I love so indescribably dearly, that you must be and remain youself," he wrote to her on the eve of their engagement. "Yes," he continued, "have only one profession from now on: to make me happy." Alma is often attacked by Mahler scholars as an inaccurate diarist and an unfaithful wife; La Grange does his book with portraits of her affair with Walter Gropius, and he has elsewhere speculated that she more or less killed Mahler. (Katia Mann also subscribed to this theory.) Reading the couple's prenuptial correspondence, one feels greater sympathy for Alma. She, too, had been put through.

La Grange, a baron of ancient lineage who has spent his life in Mahler's service, does not speak ill of his subject. In an age of surly biographies, his tireless devotion is somewhat refreshing. (The first volume, in English, appeared back in 1973; a complete three-volume life was published in France over the next decade. The new English volume, confusingly, is the second of a projected four books, and much material from Volume 1 is duplicated in it.) Alas, the stupendous results of his research are not given a narrative momentum appropriate to Mahler's kinetic career. This nine-hundred-page tome—one page for every four days of the composer's life over seven years—is a glacier flow of repetitions, digressions, touristic descriptions of Austrian landscapes ("The light green of deciduous trees contrasts with the darker green of conifers"), numbing trivia ("Universitätstrasse 6, second floor, door 5 is one address"), small errors and omissions (La Grange supplies birth dates for Alma's father, stepfather, half sisters, and maternal grandparents, but neglects to give one for Alma herself), and half-digested musical jargon ("Adornian Emitter" is a phrase that needs elucidation for those who have not read Theodor Adorno's "Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy," and even for those who have).

What we have is not a biography but a chronological Mahler encyclopedia. As such, it is still indispensable. Take, for example, the long, grueling passages devoted to the critics. Whenever Mahler conducts or his music is played, La Grange permits every small-minded scribbler in Central Europe to rise and deliver his morning judgment in turn; the book takes on the pacing of a gymnastics competition. It is almost a relief to reach a performance of Mahler's Third in Mannheim and discover that the local newspaper archives were blown up during the war. One can easily skip these Philistine diatribes, as La Grange defensively suggests in his preface. Sometimes he seems to be skipping them himself; he writes of one concert, "For once, Mahler was not accused of eclecticism," then inserts a review hailing Mahler as "a master at appropriating other people's meanings of expression." Yet there is much to be gained from wading through it all. One feels the obstacles in Mahler's path and the toughness he needed to overcome.

La Grange also spends a fair amount of time and space trying to assimilate Mahler into the world of fin-de-siècle Vienna. Chroniclers of the glittery decadence of Känitz, Hofmannsthal, and Schnitzler have similarly attempted to rope Mahler in, with limited success. True, the Court Opera's impressionistic, intricately stylized productions of "Tristan und Isolde," "Fidelio," and "Don Giovanni" were among the prize exhibits of progressive Vienna. But Mahler's contact with Känitz and other artists associated with the Secession movement came almost exclusively through Alma. He did develop a paternal interest in the young Arnold Schoenberg ("that conceited puppy"), but he had little use for the others. Mahler's literary interests were far-flung but in no way up-to-date; he remained fond of the fantastical, antiquated Romantic novelist Jean Paul, and he adulated Dostoyevski at a time when Ilse and Strindberg were the rage. Unlike his sometime friend and rival Richard Strauss, who allied himself with the most fashionable talents of the age, Mahler joined nothing.

GILBERT KAPLAN'S sumptuous collection of photographs, "The Mahler Album" (Kaplan Foundation/Abrams, $75), attests to the fiery singularity of Mahler's personality. In his memorial essay, Schoenberg again veered into mysticism as he tried to describe Mahler's face: "The thoughts and feelings that moved this man have created a form." Mahler was conscious of his godlike profile; there are pictures in which a number of people look amiably at the camera while he glares stonily off to one side. When he is pictured in conversation, he looks absorbed but distant. In one series, he chats with a man identified as Thomas Mann. (Posibly, although I have never seen a photograph of Mann wearing sideburns.) There is something very strange in the snapshots of Mahler striding through the Vienna streets: twentieth-century paparazzi have overaken nineteenth-century geniuses.

One picture I find particularly spooky. It was taken in Graz, in 1906, on the afternoon of a performance of Strauss's "Salome." Strauss, tall and sporty in a boater, stands at a door-greeting Mahler, who, for once, looks small, nervous, and uncompromising. This Austrian premiere of "Salome" drew an unusual array of personalities: Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, and Puccini. Two others attended, but no one saw them. One was the composer Adrian Leverkühn, who exists only in the pages of Mann's "Die Brüder Karamazov," written four decades later. The other was the seventeen-year-old Adolf Hitler, who had travelled alone to Vienna to see Mahler conduct "Tristan" and then (as he later told Strauss's son) made a detour to Graz for "Salome." Unbelievably, when Hitler moved to Vienna, a few years later, he was given a letter of introduction to Roller, the "Tristan" designer, who had somehow been persuaded to look at his paintings. Hitler did not make use of the opportunity.

We are accustomed to read that Mahler was driven from Vienna by
same current of anti-Semitism that eventually swept Hitler to power. Anti-Semitism certainly played a role in his departure, but it should be remembered that most directors of the Vienna opera, Jewish or not, have been subject to the same cycle of enthusiasm and revulsion. A Catholic convert out of necessity and also out of vague conviction, Mahler neither excelled in his Jewishness nor agonized greatly over the attacks on it. Yet his ambivalence about his Jewish origins ran very deep. La Grange obscures the issue, pursuing a false contrast between Mahler and the self-loathing satirist Karl Kraus; they were not really so far apart. Kraus wrote many words against the Jews, and Mahler did not, but then Mahler did not write words for a living. His music sometimes says the same thing. Everyone agrees that the satiric wedding dances in the third movement of the First Symphony have a Jewish flavor. Few have commented that the dissonances of the finale descended upon them, without pause, like a holy scourge. I think the same progression can be heard in the Fifth Symphony: faintly Yiddish funeral music in the first movement, stumbling toward oblivion; impeccable Lutheran chorales in the finale, riding toward triumph, "Mahler never hid his Jewish origins," said Roller. "But he had no joy from them."

Mahler considered himself German above all—not a German national citizen but a Greater German artist in the spiritual tradition of Goethe. His life's mission was to bring his work into the canon of German culture. According to myth, Mahler cared nothing for acceptance in his lifetime, but La Grange's book reveals how popular several of the symphonies became after 1902, and how hard Mahler worked to achieve that popularity. Indeed, toward the end of his Viennese tenure, critics complained that he took too much time off from the opera to propagate his symphonies across Europe. And more career planning went into the works themselves than mystical Mahlerians would care to admit. The Fourth Symphony was designed to be classical and accessible compared with the elephantine Second and Third. Strangely, it turned out to be unacceptably shocking, while the two previous symphonies drew large crowds. After the instrumental experiments of the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh, Mahler bestowed the Eighth as a German choral festival, "a gift to the whole nation." He thus carried himself another exploratory period—the liminal voyaging of "Das Lied von der Erde" and the Ninth and Tenth Symphonies.

Of the early confusion over Mahler's works came from their monolithic quality: they could not be divided up and judged in parts. Vienna at the turn of the century was still steeped in amateur musicianship, and orchestral compositions were often first assessed in four-hand piano arrangements. Mahler's architecture crystallized only in performance. Viennese expertise also gave rise to early accusations that Mahler was an incessant plagiarist, a pasticheur, a manufacturer of "gigantic symphonic potpourris." The audience found in his works echoes not only of Schubert, Mendelssohn, Wagner, and Bruckner but also of the second and third tiers of German Romanticism, the likes of Goetz and Goltzmark. One composer, the unlucky Hans Rott, was swallowed whole: he studied alongside Mahler at the Vienna Conservatory, went mad in 1880 ("Bruckner has filled this train with dynamite!"), and left behind a Symphony in E that overflows with Mahlerian material. The opening of Mahler's Sixth is plainly modelled on Schubert's A-minor Sonata (D. 784): a grim march; falling figures in minor thirds; held half notes followed by curt eighth notes; dotted rhythms. The savage up-and-down motive in the finale of Brahms's F-minor Quintet reappears in the Fifth Symphony and in the Rondo Burleske of the Ninth. These resemblances are, again, more easily seen than heard. Mahler possessed the central attribute of the major mind: the ability to transform patriarchal into precursors.

Mahler's habit of patching together fragments of all the music he had heard was denounced in his lifetime as his great failing. Now it seems his principal genius. He invented a larger polyphony—an epic multiplicity of voices, accents, styles, spaces. His superpoint was nothing particularly modern, but, rather, the logical extreme of Romanticism—cultural chaos, in Schlegel's definition. Its cultivation was in its fabulous narrative intricacy.

As Adorno observed, the symphonies are like novels, the ever evolving themes like characters who despair, mature, remember, and forget. Giant structures are built up, reach to the major-key heavens, then suddenly collapse in downward chromatic swoops and shuddering dissonances. It is at these moments of collapse ("Adorno Einsturz") that the composer is most in control, wielding his novelistic power over destiny.

The aura of power played out in different ways for Mahler. It gave him freedom, but it also postponed the full acceptance of his music. The Viennese playwright and critic Hermann Bahr caught this paradox perfectly: "His personality stood between his works and the public. His personal impact was so strong that most people could not reach over it to his work, some because of their admiration and love for him, others because of envy, pity, and hatred. He had first to die for his work to become free." He was a great character, a virtuoso presence in the day-to-day life of Vienna, and at the same time a solitary creator. Improbable enough in his lifetime, he now seems completely impossible: who can imagine a musician governing a city? By the time he reached New York, where he conducted from 1908 until his fatal illness in 1911, he had already become something of a walking phantom. (A New York Philharmonic musician saw him on the subway to Brooklyn during those years, staring blankly.) Mahler once said of himself and Richard Strauss, "My time will come when his is past." In truth, Mahler's time has come only when Mahler's time is past.

In a purgent irony, Mahler's obsolescence as a personality was demonstrated at the first festival consecrated to him. The recent survey in Amsterdam marked the anniversary of a Mahler festival that was organized by Willem Mengelberg in 1920. On the periphery of that event, composers gathered for a series of Modern Chamber Music Concerts, which led, in turn, to the International Society for Contemporary Music. "Modern music"—complex, concentrated, proudly marginal music, needing separate institutional support—came into being. The mainstream repertory devolved upon the dead and great, in whose company...
Mahler now suddenly loomed. Schoenberg and others drew inspiration from Mahler's intellectualism, his effects of estrangement, his pursuit of the exceptional, his music about music. But they abandoned his ambition to speak to the crowd. Music passed gently into the domain of specialists.

Mahler's towering, torrenting presence in music today makes me think of the dark fiddler in Yeats's prose poem "The Golden Age," which is set in a speeding train:

A man got into the carriage and began to play on a fiddle made apparently of an old blacking-box, and though I am quite unsuited the sounds filled me with the strangest emotions. I seemed to hear a voice of lamentation out of the Golden Age. It told me that we are imperfect, incomplete, and no more like a beautiful woven web, but like a bundle of cords knotted together and flung into a corner. It said that the world was once all perfect and kindly, and that still the kindly and perfect world existed, but beetled like a mass of roses under many spadefuls of earth... It said that with us the beautiful are not clever and the clever are not beautiful, and that the best of our moments are marred by a little vulgarity, or by a needle-prick out of sad recollection, and that the fiddle must ever lament about it all. It said that if only they who live in the Golden Age could die we might be happy, for the sad voices would be still but they must sing and we must weep until the eternal gates swing open.

Mahler lives.
not what Sartre would consider an authentic Jew, but, compared with his parents, neither was he authentic. He was a third kind of person: an "imaginary Jew."

So he looked at himself and laughed, because of what a fraud he had been, flaunting his empty Jewishness to the world; and wept, because of the sudden lack that he now recognized; and felt a great gushing up of love and regret for his parents, who had brought him up to be a perfect little Frenchman, in order to protect him, and had not been able to give him what had once been theirs, because it was dead. And he realized that this love was itself a key to his Jewish heart. The book that he wrote on these themes, "The Imaginary Jew" (translated by Kevin O'Neill and David Sychoff; Nebraska; $25), is brilliant and rueful and bitter at the same time. It shows the joint influence of Sartre and Philip Roth—a combination that only Alain Finkielkraut could bring off. But, as the author himself points out, the book is incomplete. By the end, you can see that Finkielkraut is going to have to find a new direction for himself, and you wonder what this will be. Will he plunge into Talmud study? Talmud study, believe it or not, was the next step for quite a few disillusioned Jewish leftists from the French student movement. Or will he move to Israel? Or undergo psychoanalysis?

The answer appears in a second book, which has now been presented to the American public—"The Defeat of the Mind" (translated by Judith Friedlander; Columbia; $22.95). Finkielkraut took the criticism that he had made of his own Jewish identity, embellished the argument, extended it, noted what various philosophers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had said on all relevant issues, and, at last, concluded that great swathes of modern opinion about culture and identity are no more impressive or profound than his own student ideas about Jewish authenticity had been.

Ours is a high-minded age, and most of us like to picture ourselves as stoic faces of every kind of prejudice, elitism, and oppression. But Finkielkraut notices that the more we push ourselves to be enlightened and unprejudiced the more we sink back into everything we meant to oppose. In our eagerness to repudiate anything smacking of old-fashioned imperialism, we seize on the principles of modern anthropologists, who insist on regarding the culture of one society as fully equivalent to the culture of another. We applaud ourselves for discovering that our own culture is merely one among many, and is not to be seen as anything superior. But, having set out in the morning along that admirably egalitarian path, we find by around noon that we are obliged to describe the democratic notions of human rights and freedom as merely anthropological traits peculiar to our own culture, and, not wishing to impose our local customs on anyone else, we are obliged by nightfall to conclude that human rights and democracy are fine for us and other customs are fine for other people. Freedom for us, oppression for others (for such is their culture, and we must respect it). Our passion for equality demands nothing less!

Finkielkraut detects a similar fatal slide in our discussions of cultural education. We begin with the anti-elitist idea that culture must be available to all, not just to the rich and the blue-blooded. Then we advance to the idea that the culture of the masses ought not to be regarded as inferior to the culture of the elite. Finally, we affirm that people ought to be congratulated for the knowledge and taste that they already have, and need not be educated to appreciate what is currently beyond them. In short, elite culture for us elites, mass culture for the masses. And once again we enemies of snobbery and inequality have worked our way into accepting the old, reactionary idea that everyone holds an allotted place, high or low, in the social order, and ought to stay there and be happy about it. For we have forgotten that culture is more than a set of anthropological customs, and instead is a product of reading and education and thought; it is not biologically transmitted; it is something we have to strive for.

In recent years, French philosophers have acquired a reputation for writing essays so woolly as to be unreadable even in their own language. But Finkielkraut has reverted to an earlier, superior mode of French writing. It is a style of lucidity and logical reasoning, which in these two books, "The Imaginary Jew" and "The Defeat of the Mind," comes to us slightly chipped and dented, owing to the unavoidable hardships of translation (plus some avoidable hardships in the form of straightforward errors). "The Imaginary Jew" is the better book from a literary point of view, because of its charming humor and self-consciousness.

In "The Defeat of the Mind" Finkielkraut sometimes comes off as a scold, airy instructing us on which arts should be held in high esteem (literature, Duke Ellington) and which in low (movies, rock).

And yet "The Defeat of the Mind" was a big success when it came out in France, eight years ago, and you can see why. Finkielkraut has the kind of talent for generalization which allows his subject to be vast and his book to be short and the reader to be satisfied even so. His final chapter, less than half a page long, offers a vivid cartoon image that sums up his nightmare of life in an age when the last lingering loyalties to the higher ideals of culture have disappeared. He pictures a terrible and laughable encounter between the "fanatic" and the "zombie." By fanatic he means the zealous champions of identity politics, of fundamentalist purity and intolerance (nationalism, which we have been instructed to regard with respect, and who themselves feel under no compunction to reflect on their own ideas). By zombie he means the brainless consumers of the mass media (i.e., we who have made ourselves into idiots by refusing to judge anything as better than anything else). On one side, the fanatics whose bloody deeds fill the evening news; on the other side, we zombies, who watch the evening news and feel that stopping fanatics is no business of ours. Ladies and Gentlemen, Finkielkraut wishes to announce, welcome to the age of barbarism.

Cultural Notes from All Over from the London Times