



Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis

Stuart Feder

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The life of the brilliant composer and conductor Gustav Mahler was punctuated by crisis. His parents both died in 1889, leaving him the reluctant head of a household of siblings. He himself endured a nearly fatal medical ordeal in 1901. A beloved daughter died in 1907 and that same year, under pressure, Mahler resigned from the directorship of the Vienna Opera. In each case Mahler more than mastered the trauma; he triumphed in the creation of new major musical works.

The final crisis of Mahler's career occurred in 1910, when he learned that his wife, Alma, was having an affair with the architect Walter Gropius. The revelation precipitated a breakdown while Mahler was working on his Tenth Symphony. The anguished, suicidal notes Mahler scrawled across the manuscript of the unfinished symphony revealed his troubled state. A four-hour consultation with Sigmund Freud in Leiden, Holland, restored the composer's equilibrium. Although Mahler left little record of what transpired in Leiden, Stuart Feder has reconstructed the encounter on the basis of surviving evidence. The cumulative stresses of the crises in Mahler's life, in particular Alma's betrayal, left him physically and emotionally vulnerable. He became ill and died soon after in 1911.

At once a sophisticated consideration of Mahler's work and a psychologically acute portrait of the life events that shaped it, this book extends our thinking about one of the great masters of modern music.

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