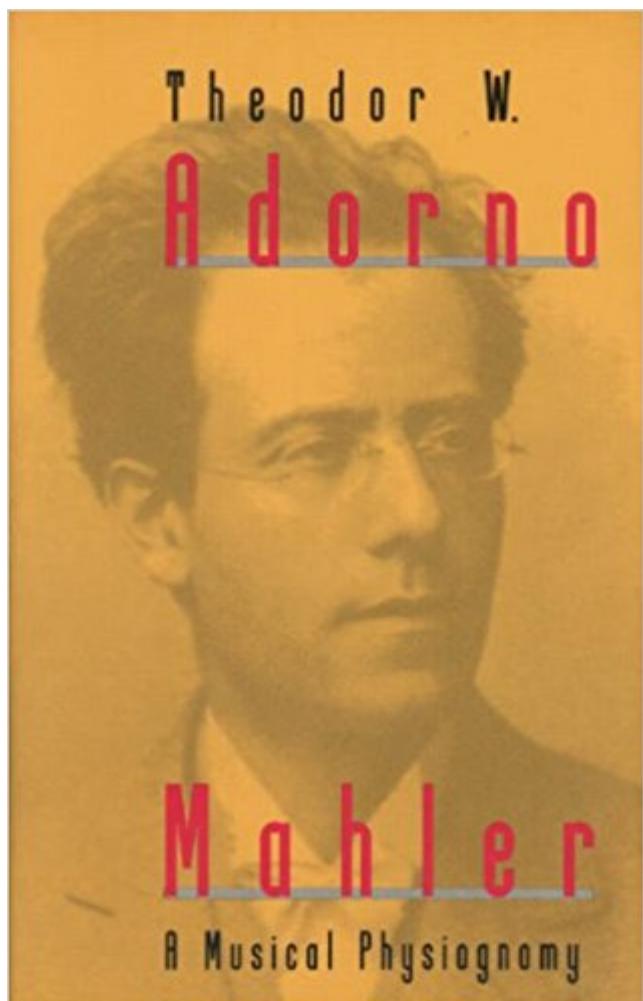


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# Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy



## **Synopsis**

Theodor W. Adorno goes beyond conventional thematic analysis to gain a more complete understanding of Mahler's music through his character, his social and philosophical background, and his moment in musical history. Adorno examines the composer's works as a continuous and unified development that began with his childhood response to the marches and folk tunes of his native Bohemia. Since its appearance in 1960 in German, Mahler has established itself as a classic of musical interpretation. Now available in English, the work is presented here in a translation that captures the stylistic brilliance of the original. Theodor W. Adorno (1903-69), one of the foremost members of the Frankfurt school of critical theory, studied with Alban Berg in Vienna during the late twenties, and was later the director of the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt from 1956 until his death. His works include *Aesthetic Theory*, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, *Prism*, and *Philosophy of Modern Music*.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

A good book!

The subject of this classic of musical analysis is the complicated phenomenon of Mahler's music and our response to it. The treatment is philosophical/psychological/analytic and the abstractness and complexity of the prose is typical of what one would find in a doctoral thesis, except that it is beautifully written (and Jephcott's translation is itself a work of art). To introduce the subject let me start with an experience of my own, which is no doubt typical. My introduction to Mahler's music was through the Ninth and Tenth symphonies, which is like starting a mountain climb already at the top of the mountain. I was 22 and naturally quite bowled over. Imagine my chagrin then at hearing the Fourth for the first time -- what is this Haydn-esque genre piece that ends with a naive song? How could it have been written by the same composer? As always, though, Mahler's music works on one's subconscious and a few days later I felt compelled to listen again, and what a revelation this was! The first movement, in particular, is absolutely extraordinary. It starts with a curious repeated figure, four flutes in unison playing fifths plus a grace note, accompanied by bells; this leads directly into the deceptively classical-sounding main theme and reappears throughout the first movement (and also in the last) as a kind of magic talisman with multiple meanings. The main theme is followed by a striking sunny interlude in A, with bases rocking pizzicato in fifths, a scurrying violin figure, and violas trilling like insects singing in a meadow. I had the impression of an adult and child walking through a field on a summer day. There's a brief change to the minor, then some high sustained notes in the flutes. These are repeated more emphatically by high clarinets, heralding an ominous change, as if the bucolic scene were being overrun by scudding clouds. Things are not what they seemed, and we don't know where we are! Somehow, we've gotten lost in a forest inhabited by goblins, spooky though not actually menacing. There's a swirling sensation accompanied by dark intimations in the bass, chromatic muted trumpets, and repeated sustained high chords in the flutes; the effect is weirdly haunting. After a while a commotion in C develops, drums crescendo, and then suddenly pure terror -- a high trumpet playing fortissimo. By some process of pure magic, the music suddenly recovers its former equanimity and adult and child (who turn out to be one and the same) find themselves back in the sunny meadow. What sublime irony, and how true to human nature -- when we see something uncanny that disturbs us, we try to put it behind us, forget it. Mahler alone is capable of evoking such feelings. Only a magician could have written the Fourth, and Mahler's achievement here is just as great as in the very different late works, not to mention the middle symphonies. I could cite other personal examples, as could any Mahlerian. We might disagree about particulars, but each of us carries away something essential from Mahler's music and is enriched by it. And we are quite confident that the experience is qualitatively the same

from listener to listener. Adorno approaches the subject of our response to Mahler's music and what it means through his own experiences of it. But what a listener! It's as if a very learned friend with a doctorate in Mahler stopped by to discuss the subject over tea and ended up staying all week. A gifted writer and philosopher, as well as a professionally trained composer who studied with Berg, Adorno discusses all the symphonies except the Tenth and is always interesting even when you disagree with him. Musicological jargon is mostly avoided, although philosophical-rhetorical terms abound (he loves the word "aporia"). Two caveats. First, the treatment is vulnerable to the charge of "over-intellectualization". One recalls Mahler's reply to William Ritter, an early admirer: "... I find myself much less complicated than your image of me, which could almost throw me into a state of panic." It seems that we, and particularly Adorno, are the complicated ones. We project our feelings onto the music, which seems to invite them to an extent that would surprise even the composer. The mystery of why this is so, and the multifariousness of Mahler, the capacity of his music to be offensive, highly questionable, fascinating, and sublime all at the same time, form the subject of the book. Second, and more seriously, he disparages Mahler's "ominous positivity" and thereby underestimates the Eighth Symphony at least (readers may agree that the finale of the Seventh is problematic; he does not discuss the extraordinary Tenth, which achieves a wholly serene, positive conclusion). But the positive in Mahler is an essential part of his dynamic disequilibrium; without it, there would be no aporia and the music would degenerate into mere cynicism. Most of the symphonies follow a pattern -- conflict, followed by attempted reconciliation and reconstruction. This process is entirely sincere, and if it fails even in Mahler's hands, it's because he's attempting to do the impossible. Even in the Sixth, the most "tragic" and "despairing" of the symphonies, a good performance will reveal powerful updrafts. To deny the positive in Mahler is to chop him in two. That Adorno's book is nonetheless required reading is testimony to the value of his other observations. Who then is this book for? It is best for Mahlerians of long standing, those who are well past the first flush of discovery and have regained their musical equilibrium so to speak, and who want to put Mahler in perspective, or even just "share" opinions with an uncommonly intelligent and sensitive critic.

I would recommend reading Adorno's book to anyone being fan of Mahler . What we have the feeling of , what for we are overwhelmed as listening to Mahler's music , Adorno succeeded in explaining why in this musical physiognomy .Of course , Adorno is a philosopher , then this book cannot be read as Henry-Louis De la Grange ( fascinating) biography .Adorno did achieve to characterise specificity of Mahler's music .Every chapter of this unique book is a dimension of

Mahler's music .It means Adorno has analysed several features or categories he exposes .As Alan Mason said in his review , Adorno does like aporia . Aporia means dead end ,in the sense of undecidable solve ...unless you invent a new concept that explains both solutions are compatible , from a dialectical point of view . Then each time Adorno tells about aporia , it means he is going to find a new conceptThis book , in itself , is not outmoded , though we can disagree in some opinions he had about some passages . Then , we can read IGMG's publications ...

If you know anything about Theodor Adorno, you might well be familiar with the entire edifice of western cultural and philosophic thought; Kant,Hegel,Kierkegaard, and Marx, the history of art,literature,painting and music. Less film,a realm Adorno never got to know. Here in Mahler,we have a concise profile of this one time neglected composer, long misunderstood,even today. I recall a rehearsal with Bernstein and the Vienna Philharmonic who couldn't quite understand Bernstein's raving from the heart,for clarity yet passion. Adorno knew Mahler's art much better than Mahler ever did for we learn this from Adorno, that Mahler simply abandoned himself to his own intuition to resolve his creative problems. Each chapter in this masterwork in miniature is self-sustaining. In the chapter "Tone" Adorno reveals the basic music materials of Mahler his orchestral palette. The high positioned violins,in uncomfortable registers where they loose their souls to a menaced, shrill, thin timbre. The string section for Mahler is creatively undisciplined to begin with, each playing differing roles, each contributing its own independence, as in the opening of Mahler's "Ninth" Symphony, the melody tossed between the violins, tremoli in the violas, and the contrabass above or equal in register to all with harmonics. Mahler's progressiveness was in pure content,he was not one to pursue "tangible innovations" but secured his tenuous position with the diatonic mode,familiar scales and harmonic surfaces. A chiaroscuro of means (schatten) the shadows he creates with reliefs of foreground and background. Tonality is not so much renewed as an unheard voice enters the stage, Mahler's voice cracks, is overstretched, the various woodwind passages like in the "Scherzo" of his "Seventh" Symphony. The forced tone is itself an expressive innovation of his own making a premonition of the darker lugubrious brooding up the road in the orchestral works of Arnold Schoenberg. In fact we find every bit of these darker pages in Mahler before the horrors which await the citizens of Eastern Europe,even up to Bosnia. Adorno's focus is always how Mahler creates meaning within familiar confines, the roads that lead to simple harmonies. He disrupts the stability of rhythm,of gesture that once was, the familiar in Mahler's orchestral context becomes something quite different, no longer can the romantic symphony depend on redemption. Bruckner could depend on this, for he already found his spirituality, whereas Mahler spent his life in pursuit of

it. Adorno in the chapter "Novel" reveals the non-progressive side of Mahler. He needed to depend on some stability so his musical characters come and go untarnished at times, the lowlife natural trombone, to the intimate/elegant solo violin, and the cracking horn moments in Mahler. This is where we find "Stufenreichtum" the richness of texture, the musical thread running from the full orchestral (tutti) everyone's voice heard, to the single voice the solos. This is Mahler's context from the distance "in sehr weiter entfernung" to the immediate. It is this expressive immediacy, he learned from Beethoven that gives way to developed chaos as his life wears away. The overblown vacuous "Eighth Symphony" resolved nothing for his real creativity, and the "Ninth" the ideas begin toward the irrational, Mahler is serious even in the "Rondo-Burleske" from the "Ninth", the almost improvised gesture reminded me of Charles Ives, who was writing just about the same time. Adorno's chapter "Variant-Form" we learn Mahler's technique progressed away from what an academic would consider "good" Mahler needn't be as glib as Richard Strauss, nor as consummate as Wagner. He learned music in another way and pointed toward a profound goal. A goal in which his music simply breaks its own voice "Durchbruch" as Adorno mentions where there was no comfort in traditional moments. Adorno opens this expressive vault of Mahler and we can see Mahler again. As recently as Pierre Boulez in his ongoing recordings with The Chicago Symphony we find a Mahler quite as a turning point to the 20th century. Well Boulez brings Mahler into our century whether we want him there or not. Boulez brings a sublime ugliness at times to Mahler's simplicity, the functional predictable movements of harmony creates a kind of timbral dirt. Mahler wanted this. No we are not done with his marvelous "Symphonies" we can contemplate them for some time.

Anyone familiar with the growing oeuvre of Mahler biographies must have come across Adorno's now-classic work. Long considered the authoritative analysis of Mahler's psyche, next to Bruno Walter's first-hand account, this work has not aged well. Clogged with psychoanalytic jargon - yet strangely devoid of the details of Mahler's brief analysis with Freud himself - and weak on the facts, this book should be eclipsed by the far more informative, objective accounts of Mahler's life that have appeared in recent years. Carr's superb volume comes to mind.

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