
FREEDOM AND BELONGING:

The intertwining lives of Gustav Mahler and Alfons Mucha



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Gustav Mahler



Carl Gustav Jung

“The mission of art is to express each nation’s aesthetic values in accordance with the beauty of its soul. The mission of the artist is to teach people to love that beauty.”

Alphons Mucha

“When I hear music...I hear quite definite answers to all my questions and am completely clear and sure. Or rather, I feel quite clearly that they are not questions at all.”

Gustav Mahler

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Introduction: Identity

For many people today identity has become a matter of choice, as if we may belong to any tribe, race, culture or religion we wish. Our background and upbringing are apparently cast aside in a superficial act of self-reinvention. Yet, in truth, identity is something deeply rooted in the unconscious of the individual and not so easy to erase. It is most often inherited from parents and close family, although inevitably framed by specific geographical, historical and cultural circumstances. To remove the roots of identity by force is therefore an act of psychic violence against the soul and the community to which it belongs. The French philosopher Simone Weill writes:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession and social surroundings. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw wellnigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.

The Need for Roots (1949)¹

Human identity has to be understood as a subtle interplay of factors, a multi-layered phenomenon that generates an organic psychological reality and which provides the foundation for all subsequent stepwise development towards individuality. Yet, so often, and certainly since the Enlightenment, uprooting has been the normal experience of many Europeans; the result of not only historical events such as political revolutions and territorial conflicts, but also due to industrialisation and the development of an urban

¹ Simone Weill (1909-1943) *The Need for Roots: prelude towards a declaration of duties towards mankind* published originally as *L'Enracinement, prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers* in 1949. The first English translation was published in 1952.

culture divorced from the cycles of Nature. In addition, the bedrock of faith and religious practice was slowly eroded, as science and rational scepticism took hold among the intelligentsia. So-called progress has relentlessly pulled us from our roots, and it has for the most part been left to artists to reconnect us with the atavistic past and Nature. In this context, childhood has also acquired a special meaning, as one of the last vestiges of our natural innocence and true sense of self.

Central Europe, with its diverse ethnicities and historic empires, has long posed many puzzles of identity, the source of countless disputes among political foes and rivals. Where racial identity decides who has power, who controls wealth, land and property, the scope for conflict and division is endless. However, on a more subjective level, many artists have tried to express tribal identity as shared values and common histories, allowing the possibility of dialogue and the recognition that national epics teach largely the same lessons about human nature. Nationalism in the arts can appear at first restrictive and superficial, lacking the generosity and universality we would expect of a genuinely great creative endeavour. Yet artists have so often revealed the universal in the particular that we can confidently conclude this to be a characteristic of romantic art in general. The Czech artist Alfons Maria Mucha (1860-1938) is a fine example of such an artist. He never abandoned his Slavic roots, despite absorbing many varied international influences, including becoming a leading member of the Masonic movement. Throughout his life, his ethnic origins grounded him. Everything he became grew from his love for his homeland's rich traditions and desire for self-determination. By contrast, Mucha's contemporary, the composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) was a German-speaking Jew who struggled to find a solid basis for his identity. Yet, like Mucha, Mahler was a child of the Czech provinces who went on to secure an international reputation. His restless ambition was a consequence of feeling he did not truly belong anywhere, famously declaring himself 'thrice homeless', as a German in Bohemia, a Bohemian in Austria and as a Jew all over the world. Despite his strong identification with German music and literature, rootlessness was the driving force of his art which expressed the psychological travails of a man who felt that he did not belong.

It can be no coincidence that the evidence suggests these two men were only able to meet in the United States, a country comprising of immigrants who hoped to replace old tyrannies with the pioneering spirit. Such new Americans were often more sentimental about their origins than the people they had left behind, and they were thus eager to lend support to liberation struggles in their former homelands. Their uprooting from soil and family was compensated by a firm belief in the opportunities which the burgeoning international culture was able to offer them. It was as if they were entering a metaphorical

'Promised Land'. For those no longer restricted by religion, fixed social hierarchies and provincial marginalisation, modernity meant new personal freedoms. But, without the familiar structures of the past, many people lacked values and direction. Liberation from moral codes and social taboos removed many crucial signposts of cultural identity. Freedom was not, after all, something everyone could handle.

If high culture offers us anything, it is the chance to raise the consciousness of the individual beyond the aimless superficiality which rootlessness encourages. Personal liberty, without the constraints of belonging to a coherent collective, soon leads to greedy consumerism and narcissistic fantasy. Engaging with the works of Mucha and Mahler shows ways in which the atavistic past can be brought into balance with the individual freedoms of modernity. In their time, aesthetics and psychology became the true measures of mankind. Many artists of the early modern period sought a reorientation of identity in which an aspiration to divine beauty could be reconciled with the dignity of the finite human individual. They believed this harmony to be a birth-right available to all, not just a social or intellectual elite. Such artists wanted to explore how we might one day all feel at home amidst the myriad uncertainties of the modern world.

I. Beginnings

Throughout the 19th century, the Habsburg Empire was marked by increasing tensions among its diverse ethnic groups. 1848 witnessed the June Revolution in Prague; a bid for greater freedoms and political autonomy, although the sedition was swiftly put down by the Austrian Army. A decade or so later, the climate had grown more relaxed, even if the underlying tensions had not dissipated. The Czech national revival continued to gather



Figure 1 - Gustav Mahler in 1865

momentum through the musical achievements of Bedřich Smetana (1824-84) whose comic opera, *The Bartered Bride*, was first performed in Prague in 1866. For Jews living in the Czech provinces, it was also a period of unprecedented liberalisation. In 1849, Emperor Franz Josef I repealed prohibitions against Jews organising themselves formally within their own communities and, in 1867, they received full rights as citizens of the Empire. It was a moment of cultural enrichment, and therefore probably no coincidence that two of Europe's leading creative personalities, who would rise to prominence during the late-romantic period, were both born in the same month of

1860 in provincial locations a mere seventy miles apart. The composer Gustav Mahler was born on 7 July in Kalischt (now known as Kaliště), in the Czech province of Bohemia. Meanwhile, the painter Alfons Mucha was born on 24 July, just over a fortnight later, in the town of Ivančice in the neighbouring province of Moravia. In fact, the infant Mahler was moved in December of that year to Iglau (now Jihlava) also in Moravia, thus reducing the distance between the two children by a further fifteen miles. Both were Czech by birth and Austrian by citizenship, but there the similarities of cultural background end. Mahler was a German-speaking Jew whose father was an ambitious wine merchant, while Mucha was a Czech speaker, the son of a court usher and a member of an old Moravian family.

Both men were gifted prodigies, but their respective fathers adopted quite different attitudes to their son's creative talents. Bernhard Mahler saw Gustav's precocious abilities as a stepping-stone to his family's acceptance as part of the dominant German culture, while Ondřej Mucha fretted that his son's desire to paint would lead the family to social ruin. For the Muchas, German culture was problematic. They were Czech Slavs who considered the German-speaking establishment of the Habsburg Empire to be a tyranny over them and their indigenous culture. Worse, Germanic authority not only threatened domination from the south, but also from the north. Young Alfons witnessed a brief occupation of Ivančice by the Prussian Army after the Austro-Prussian War of 1866. For the child, it all seemed at first like a colourful game, but an outbreak of cholera caused many soldiers to end their days in mass graves on the fringes of the town.²

The different childhoods of the two men would manifest in their characters as they grew older. Mahler possessed a strong will to achieve greatness and to overcome the constraints of his racial background, while Mucha was more of a dreamer, easily distracted from making a professional career and indulgently sentimental about his ethnic origins. Later life narrowed the difference, as Mahler grew sick and abandoned Vienna, the scene of his greatest triumphs. Mucha on the other hand became increasingly driven to realise his greatest project; the sequence of twenty large paintings known as the Slav Epic.

If the fathers of both men were notably different in outlook, their mothers were also strikingly contrasted characters. Mahler's mother Marie had to tolerate physical abuse from her husband, suffering also repeated grief, as six of her fourteen children died in infancy. Mahler's empathy towards his mother marked him for the rest of his life. His idealisation of her, transferred to women in general, would later be part of Sigmund

² We are reminded of Mahler's 'Wunderhorn' songs '*Wo die schönen Trompeten blasen*' (Where the beautiful trumpets blow) and '*Der Tambourg'sell*' (The Drummer Boy) which depict ordinary soldiers not as heroes but as the true victims of war.

Freud's diagnosis of his marital problems.³ Mahler was sensitive and insecure, which made him relentlessly ambitious, but also in need of constant reassurance. Alfons Mucha's experience of family was more stable. He was the first son of Ondřej Mucha's second wife, Amalia. Two sisters followed, who were added to three children from Ondřej's previous marriage. While infant mortality was not a feature of the Mucha family story, the death of Ondřej's three children by his first wife in their early adult years reminds us that life in those days was precarious and often tragic.

Mucha's mother instilled in her son the desire to enter public life in some way. She wanted him to be a Catholic priest in order to influence hearts and minds. By the mid-nineteenth century, Catholic priests in small Czech towns and villages were often keen champions of the local culture, since they were the only people in a position to keep the old traditions alive. It might have been expected that the Catholic Church would have been allied with the imperial authorities and to have identified with the dominant Germanic culture but, in provincial parts, the Church was often closer to the indigenous Czech population. While Mucha did not become a patriot-priest, as his mother wished, he never lost his sense of spiritual mission nor his fondness for the rites and religious art of the Catholic Church.

Mahler also became a Catholic in 1897. To take up his appointment as Director of the Vienna Court Opera, arguably the most prestigious musical post in Europe with a salary paid directly from the Emperor's office, Mahler was obliged to renounce his Jewish identity. There was certainly a pragmatic motivation behind his baptism, but we should not underestimate the genuine influence of Christian ideas upon him, nor the way in which the Catholic Church infused the culture of Central Europeans more widely. The Germanic and Slavic cultures both shared colourful pagan origins which had been overlaid by Christian moral idealism. The conflict between the pagan past and Christian spirituality was a major theme of the Romantic period, and this was reflected in the way that Mahler and Mucha treated women in their art. Nature and the feminine were significant creative stimuli for both of them, but their image of woman was idealised and highly spiritual, lacking the earthy and darker components of the female personality.⁴ For

³ Mahler met Sigmund Freud in Leiden in August 1910 following the discovery of his wife's affair with the architect, Walter Gropius.

⁴ Both Mahler and Mucha could evoke the darker aspects of life. Mahler's *Sixth Symphony* (1904) is known as 'The Tragic' and ends in mourning. The brightest moment in the work is the F major 'Alma' theme of the first movement, in which she is depicted as energetic and vital. (At the work's first performance in May 1906 in Essen, it was preceded by Mozart's *Masonic Funeral Music* to mark the recent death of the city's mayor.) Mucha too could evoke great pathos in his work. In his *Woman in the Wilderness* (1923), an old

them, woman symbolised the Holy Mother, the Eternal Feminine or was a manifestation of the world soul; all representations of an abundant, inspiring goddess who carried the projection of their longing for perfect beauty and sensual delight. They placed women on a pedestal, the source of an erotic attraction that drew them along a spiritual path towards transcendence and to experience the ultimate joyous harmony of the Universe.

II. A musical education

Mahler and Mucha both received a musical education, which was perceived as a necessary step towards acquiring respectability in bourgeois circles. Mahler began piano lessons at the age of five, and a school friend took him to Iglau's parish church, where he heard the choir sing sacred music by Haydn, Mozart and Rossini. At the age of eleven, Mahler was sent briefly to a grammar school in Prague to encourage his musical development. But the adventure proved disastrous, and the boy had to be rescued by his father when Gustav was discovered wandering barefoot and malnourished in the streets. Mahler's true musical education came from the sounds of the world around him, which he eagerly absorbed. It was said that, by the age of six, Mahler could sing two hundred folksongs⁵ learnt by ear from various servants. He was equally fascinated by the bugle calls and march music played by the local military band. It is no surprise therefore that Mahler's first composition, written aged seven, was a lively polka followed by a slow funeral march; a characteristic conjunction of opposites gleaned from his early experiences which placed the joy of new life alongside the pain of infant mortality.

Moving in an unlikely parallel, Mucha's musical instruction included being taught the violin by an old priest, which would certainly have required him to learn to play Czech folk tunes. Then, in 1868, he was sent to the grammar school in Brno so that he could sing in the choir of St. Peter's Church. It was here that he first met the composer Leoš Janáček, then a local free-lance organist and choirmaster. The pair would eventually become good friends and they corresponded for the rest of their lives.



Figure 2 – The Choir of St. Peter's Brno painted by Mucha c. 1872

Slavic woman waits under a star as a pack of wolves approaches her in a wintery landscape, symbolising the suffering and hope of the Russian people.

⁵ Mahler told his amanuensis Natalie Bauer-Lechner in 1893, '*The Bohemian music of my childhood home has found its way into many of my compositions...the underlying national element there can be heard, in its most crude and basic form, in the tootling of Bohemian bagpipers.*'

However, Mucha's academic performance at school was disappointing, and his father had to find him a job at the magistrate's court where he was himself already employed. It is fair to say that Mucha was never really interested in the finer points of legal administration, more in seizing every opportunity to paint and draw, or to become involved with local amateur theatre groups. Mucha's desire to be an artist seemed to derive from his sense that staged theatre and religious ceremony were one and the same. Looking up at ornate Baroque altarpieces, smelling the lingering aroma of incense, being overwhelmed by the power of the organ as choral music soared to the rafters, these were Mucha's earliest experiences of how art could awaken transcendence.⁶

On the advice of Professor Josef Zelený, who had observed Mucha's artistic talent during his schooling in Brno, Mucha's father permitted his son to send some drawings to the Prague Academy. In September 1878, Mucha travelled to the City for assessment. The response was not encouraging, and Mucha was advised to pursue another career. Fearing his father's reaction, the penniless teenager spent two days wandering around Prague in a daze, an incident which echoed Mahler's misfortune seven years previously. On his return to Ivančice, Mucha resumed his clerical duties at the court, although his creative impulses would not be denied. He was finally asked to leave his position after making a sketch portrait of a gypsy family rather than a written note of their personal details.

III. Vienna

Early adulthood found both Mahler and Mucha in the Habsburg imperial capital, Vienna. Mahler enrolled at the Conservatory of Music in 1875. He was destined at this juncture to become a concert pianist but was soon engrossed in composition. After leaving the Conservatory in 1878, Mahler signed up for lectures at the University of Vienna to expand his knowledge of philosophy and the history of painting. He was throughout this period consistently short of money, only able to make ends meet by teaching the piano. His income was barely enough to survive, and he was persuaded to take a series of short-term provincial conducting jobs to improve his situation.

Mahler's first residency in Vienna was coming to an end, just as Mucha arrived in the City during the autumn of 1879. Mucha had a position as an apprentice scene-painter with the famous firm of Kautsky-Brioschi-Burghardt, giving him a chance to develop his

⁶ Mucha said, 'For me the notions of painting, going to church, and music are so closely knit that often I cannot decide whether I like church for its music or music for its place in the mystery which it accompanies.' See Jiří Mucha, *Alphonse Mucha: The Master of Art Nouveau*, Prague 1966

skills to a professional level. The job granted the young painter access to numerous theatre and opera performances, and he was able to visit Vienna's many art galleries, while attending evening classes to improve his technique. Mucha became particularly fascinated by the leading Austrian artist of the day, Hans Makart, whose classical style appealed to him. Makart was a friend of Liszt and Wagner who possessed a grandiose sense of theatre, and his unashamed aestheticism drew little distinction between life and art.



Figure 3 - Hans Makart's Studio in Vienna c. 1880

Makart was adept too at design, including the creation of jewellery, lavish costumes and furniture, yet the true summit of his career was coordinating a grand procession to celebrate the Emperor's Silver Wedding Anniversary in 1879. The parade was a sequence of *tableaux vivantes* demonstrating the cultural riches of the Empire and the rise of its mercantile classes. For the occasion, Makart dressed as Rubens mounted on a Lipizzana stallion for maximum dramatic effect. Among the many opulent social occasions hosted by the artist were concerts held in his studio which attracted some of the greatest performers of the day. Mucha was able to attend some of these extravagant musical parties and to absorb the theatrical evocations of history that were Makart's trademark. Makart, who died in 1884, was a potent influence on the next generation of Austrian painters, especially Klimt, who idolised him for his risqué portraits of women. Mucha too would emulate Makart's erotic imagery, but he also admired the grand scale of his work which allowed him to capture the mythic power of real historical events.

It is unlikely that Mahler and Mucha met at this time, although there were plenty of theatres, concert venues, galleries and coffee houses where their paths might have crossed. While Mucha felt at home among people like Makart⁷ and seemed to make friends easily, Mahler was more naturally a rebellious outsider. During his student days, Mahler joined a group known as the Pernerstorfer Circle⁸ which was devoted to the

⁷ Mucha may have been more likely to run into Emil Schindler, the highly respected Austrian landscape painter and father of Alma Schindler (b.1879), the future wife of Gustav Mahler. Emil Schindler was a close friend of Hans Makart, and they co-hosted Renaissance costume parties in Makart's studio.

⁸ Mahler's association with the Pernerstorfer Circle anticipated the Knights of the Holy Grail that feature in Wagner's final Music Drama *Parsifal*, which was not performed until 1882. It is known that Wagner modelled the opera upon Masonic elements such as solemn processions and rituals, where the stages of spiritual growth are marked by a series of trials. With its fraternal atmosphere and socialist aspirations, the Pernerstorfer Circle had much in common with Freemasonry, apart from their Pan-Germanist ambitions.

subversive ideas about art and society proposed by Wagner, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Among members of the group were Siegfried Lipiner, Fritz Löhr and Victor Adler⁹, radical socialists with Pan-Germanist aspirations. While Mahler was a passionate devotee of Wagner's music, he probably joined the group more out of insecurity about his Jewish background. He would also have enjoyed the fraternal solidarity and revolutionary fervour of the circle, which attracted the disapproval of the imperial authorities. Mucha would have had no time for those preaching the supremacy of German culture, and he would certainly have been suspicious of any Nietzschean tirades against Christian morality and the Church. Later in life, Mahler too would grow sceptical about Nietzsche, and he could never have seriously accepted Wagner's advocacy of Antisemitism; a scourge that would later become such a prominent feature of Viennese politics.

Mucha's time in Vienna ended when the Ringtheater, which mainly hosted performances of light opera, caught fire on 8 December 1881, killing up to 500 people in one of the City's most notorious tragedies. Mucha's employers immediately lost their largest single client and were compelled to reduce their workforce in response. Mucha, a mere apprentice at the firm, was among the first to go. Abandoning Vienna for good, the young artist embarked on a path that led to a period of study in Munich under the patronage of the Tyrolean Count, Eduard Khuen-Belasi.¹⁰ The same patron would also sponsor Mucha's relocation to Paris in 1887 to finish his apprenticeship,¹¹ and it would be in that cosmopolitan City that Mucha would finally seal his international reputation as a painter and designer of unique talent.



Figure 4 - The burning of the Ringtheater, Vienna 1881

⁹ Adler, another German-speaking Jew born in Prague, became the first leader of the Austrian Social Democratic Worker's Party which he founded in 1888, after rejecting the extreme Antisemitism of the German Nationalists.

¹⁰ Mucha met Count Khuen-Belasi as a struggling portrait artist, after losing his job in Vienna. The Count employed Mucha to decorate his castle, Emmahof, and later the Khuen family seat, Gandegg Castle in the Tyrol. These were his first major commissions, providing valuable experience in large-scale projects.

¹¹ The period of apprenticeship shared by both men brought them years of wandering and learning. From Mahler's apprentice years came his *'Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen'* – The Songs of a Wayfarer, which date from 1884. 'Gesellen' means more strictly 'a wayfaring apprentice', a stock figure from German romantic literature.

IV. Prague

While Mucha was drifting further from his provincial background, Mahler was suddenly given a chance to reconnect with his Czech roots. Through a series of serendipities, he was offered the position of second conductor at the German National Theatre (*Deutsches Landestheater*) in Prague, housed in one of the City's most historic buildings, where Mozart had conducted the premiere of his opera *Don Giovanni* in 1787. The theatre company had originally been created so that German-speakers in the City could hear opera in their own language, a consequence of the rivalry between Prague's German and Czech populations. The conducting post was a considerable responsibility for such a young man and was further evidence of Mahler's meteoric success. Mahler was resident in the City by the summer of 1885 and, during his time there, he gained valuable experience performing operas by Wagner and Mozart. He was also able to hear operas in Czech by Smetana and Dvořák at the recently opened Czech National Theatre.

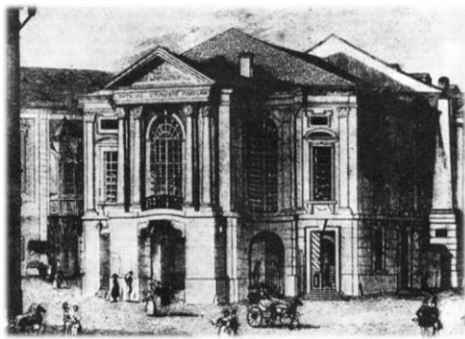


Figure 5 – The Deutsches Landestheater

The impressively grand Czech venue even began to win over German-speaking audiences and, before long, a replacement was proposed for the German National Theatre. The new building did not open until 1888, by which time Mahler had left the City, but he returned to perform in the theatre's opening season, conducting his completion of Weber's unfinished opera *Die Drei Pintos*.¹² Mahler must have found the musicians and the new theatre to his liking, since he conducted the Czech premiere of his First Symphony there in 1898, then visited again in 1904 to present his mighty Third Symphony.

By the end of the summer of 1886, Mahler had transferred to the Leipzig Opera to take up another position working with the highly esteemed Arthur Nikisch. Leipzig was associated with many of the iconic names of German music, including J.S. Bach, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Wagner. Mahler was now in the very heart of the German-speaking musical establishment. Professionally his allegiances were undoubtedly Germanic. It was the only way to develop his career and to escape his provincial and Jewish roots. His attitude to Czech culture remained largely sentimental; a memory of lost innocence and childhood, of a simpler world stripped of politics and ambition.

¹² *The Three Pintos* is a comic opera in which one of the main characters (Don Pinto de Fonseca) is impersonated twice. The plot, which involves a bride who seeks love rather than an arranged marriage, has some striking similarities to Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*.

V. Paris



Figure 6 - Mucha's Studio in Paris

The City of Paris played a significant role in the lives of both men. For Mucha, who moved there in 1887 to finish his artistic education, it was where he found liberation from his provincial background. The intellectual life around Madame Charlotte Caron's Creamery, where Mucha rented his Parisian studio, introduced him to a range of colourful personalities who provided creative stimulus. His friendships with Gauguin, Serusier, Strindberg and Delius, among others, exposed him to the French symbolist movement, with its emphasis on atmosphere rather than illusion, and to other radical ideas emerging at that time. Theosophy, the brainchild of Madame Blavatsky, a Russian clairvoyant, led Mucha to conduct his own experiments in spiritualism and to believe more strongly in the transcendental power of art. In Paris, Mucha was able to absorb impressionist and post-impressionist painting, Japanese Art and the naturalistic designs of the English Arts and Crafts movement. From these diverse influences, the elaborate, curvilinear world of Art Nouveau was born, and Mucha was in the forefront of developing the technical and creative possibilities of the style.

But his moment of breakthrough came when the formidable French actress, Sarah Bernhardt, needed a poster for her next theatrical production, a drama set in medieval Greece called *Gismonda*. Mucha was in the right place at the right time. His poster, which combined French, Slavic and Oriental elements, appeared on billboards around Paris on 1 January 1895. The design was instantly recognisable, and it made him famous overnight. As a result, he was granted a six-year contract to create sets, costumes and posters for Bernhardt's company. 'Le style Mucha' had been born, destined to be imitated and reproduced on an industrial scale as fashionable design. Mucha was no longer an apprentice. He had found some measure of financial security and was rapidly becoming the 'greatest decorative artist in the world'¹³.

¹³According to the headlines of the *New York Daily News* on 3 April 1904.

Success of this kind had its price, as the work for Bernhardt and the many poster commissions that followed were considered commercial, even frivolous. Mucha was eager to show that he was a serious artist who had absorbed the mysticism and esoteric thought that had become so fashionable in intellectual circles during the last decades of the 19th Century. In 1898, Mucha had also been initiated into the Paris Lodge of the Grand Orient de France, the country's oldest Masonic institution. The rites and symbols of the Masonic movement would thereafter be one of Mucha's greatest passions. From a political perspective, French Freemasons held to the original ideals of the 1789 Revolution with its socialist principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. Masons were thus treated with suspicion by conservative elements within the Third Republic such as the Catholic Church. The Church's hostility was exacerbated because French Lodges did not insist upon belief in a Supreme Being, as was the convention outside of France, although they remained committed to the traditional masonic values of peace, high morals and striving for self-improvement.



Figure 7 - Mucha's poster for *Gismonda*,

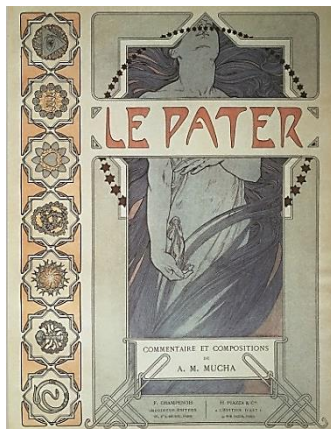


Figure 8 - Mucha, cover page *Le Pater* 1899

Thus, in his efforts to be a serious artist, Mucha was able to draw upon symbols from a wealth of mystical and esoteric traditions. His sumptuously illustrated book, *Le Pater* (The Lord's Prayer) of 1899 combines abstract decorative details and calligraphy with unorthodox poetical musings and mystical imagery. Here Mucha's Catholic background was combined imaginatively with his fascination for the female form and symbols derived from Masonic rituals. Nature is presented as universal longing for spiritual attainment, while God is a mother feeding her children. The symbolism found in the book relates closely to Goethe's¹⁴ idea of the Eternal Feminine, introduced at the end of

his play *Faust*, which so profoundly shaped Mahler's worldview.

¹⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was the founding father of German Romanticism and also a Freemason. In 1780, he joined the Lodge in Weimar at that time under the 'Rite of Strict Observance', a forerunner of the 'Scottish Rite'; a more mystical and demanding brand of Freemasonry followed by Mucha. Masonic Symbols appear in Goethe's *Faust*, such as the spiritual power of light, the pentagram and the granting of keys as a release from imprisonment. Faust also learns through a series of ordeals. Mahler too found in Faust an archetypal figure who strives in vain for intellectual answers to life's questions, before seeking mystical union with Nature in a process of spiritual transformation. The esoteric symbols, angels and penitents who appear in the final scene of *Faust* Part II, which retains quasi-religious status among German speakers, inspired some of Mahler's most powerful and lyrical music.

Le Pater anticipated by only a few years the composition of Mahler's 8th symphony (1906), often referred to as 'The Symphony of a Thousand'. In this massive choral edifice, Mahler combines a 5th century Pentecostal hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, with the final scene of Goethe's *Faust Part II*, in which Faust is redeemed by the loving presence of the *Mater Gloriosa*. She is a fusion of the Virgin Mary and Gretchen, the lover Faust had first used, then spurned, who returns to forgive and redeem him. In Mucha's book and Mahler's symphony, the moral order of Christianity is intuited from and inspired by divine love. The searing intensity of that feeling is expressed through lavish and sensual decoration, reminding us of the Baroque altarpieces of Central European churches, which draw the eyes upward to reveal a glorious heavenly vision of trumpeting angels. Both artists, in these works, achieved a remarkable synthesis of the 'Word' as masculine order, descending from above, and 'beauty' as erotic feeling inspired by the feminine, rising from below. It should come as no surprise to learn that one of Mucha's most influential spirit guides, who communicated with him through automatic writing, called himself 'Goethe'.

Unlike Mucha, Mahler was never naturally attuned to the French aesthetic sensibility. His reputation for Germanic heft and seriousness would appear to run counter to the delicacy, refinement and light-touch of French culture.¹⁵ Yet there was something in the French collective psyche that still found Mahler's rough edges and ruthless integrity attractive. Throughout his career, Mahler made several visits to the French capital to give performances, beginning in 1900 with an unsuccessful tour in charge of the Vienna Philharmonic, during which Mahler became acquainted with several important figures among the 'Dreyfusards'. In late 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French Army, had been wrongly imprisoned as a German spy. Many French liberals believed that he had been convicted as a scapegoat, part of an extensive antisemitic conspiracy. In the course of his visit in 1900, Mahler befriended Colonel Georges Picquart, who had been falsely court-martialled for forgery, after discovering the evidence that ultimately exonerated Dreyfus. The scandal split France, although the creative community mainly campaigned for Dreyfus' innocence. Included among them were the novelist, Emile Zola, author of the famous letter *J'accuse*, and also the actress Sarah Bernhardt, who was Mucha's friend and patron. In Mucha's new circle, after his success of 1895, the artist found himself often playing host to left-wing radicals and

¹⁵ Mahler, early in his career, had become an enthusiast for Bizet's *Carmen*, gradually developing an extensive repertoire of French Romantic operas. Mahler even grew to admire Debussy's music, placing his symbolist masterpiece, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, in the repertoire list of the Vienna Opera before he left as its Director.

Dreyfusards.¹⁶ This may have drawn him close to Mahler's Parisian circle, but also into an increasing conflict with the Catholic Church.

Despite his connections with the Dreyfusards, the French cultured elites were otherwise grudging in their admiration of Mahler. Debussy and his supporters struggled to overcome their historic anti-German bias and were swift to judgement. It was said that Debussy walked out of a performance of Mahler's Second Symphony and, when the pair were introduced at a dinner-party in Paris, the two composers exchanged only polite words. For all that, Debussy and many French composers of his generation were mesmerised by at least one towering Germanic figure, Richard Wagner. His sensual harmony and bold orchestration, his dreamlike narratives and atavism had a deep influence. Wagner's revolutionary ideas helped to liberate French artists from the constraints of bourgeois taste. In truth, prejudice against Germans and German art concealed a sneaking admiration for their metaphysical ambitions and earnest intentions.



Figure 9 - Alma Mahler

Through a series of introductions, Mahler even had Paris to thank for meeting his future wife, the youthful and talented Alma Schindler (1879-1964). Through his friendship with the French industrialist Paul Clemenceau, another Dreyfusard, Mahler became acquainted with Bertha Zuckerkandl, a well-known patron of the arts in Vienna. Clemenceau was married to her sister and, at one of Bertha's dinner parties in the autumn of 1900, Mahler was first beguiled by Alma. It was also through Mrs. Zuckerkandl that Mahler entered the circle of Klimt and the Viennese Secession.¹⁷ His association with that group meant that Mahler would have seen a copy of the 1902 edition of *Ver Sacrum*, the Secession's annual publication, which was devoted in that year to Mucha and Art Nouveau. There is little to suggest that

¹⁶ Mucha's new studio, financed by his commercial success, became a meeting place for all kinds of subversive figures such as the Vicomte de Marsac, the Breton symbolist painter, Ary Senan, the sculptors Auguste Syesses and Marguerite Gangneur. Mucha's Masonic Lodge was also involved in monitoring and hindering the progress of conservative elements within the French army and government.

¹⁷ Alma's stepfather, Carl Moll was also a painter and a founder member of the Viennese Secession in 1897. Part of Mahler's attraction to Alma was that she allowed him to belong to Vienna's visual arts scene. It was through Moll that Mahler met Alfred Roller, another Secessionist, who became the innovative designer for many of Mahler's memorable productions at the Vienna Opera. Alma, who was aged just twenty-two when she met Mahler, had already had liaisons with Klimt and Alexander Zemlinsky, her composition teacher. Mahler was forty years old by the time of his first meeting with Alma and still eager to be accepted as a social equal in Viennese artistic circles. Some simple Freudian psychology might suggest that Alma's interest in him was as a father figure, due to his age and his name, since Mahler means 'painter' in German.

Mahler was enthusiastic about Art Nouveau, but we may sense some affinity with the style in the 'What the flowers tell me' Minuet from his Third Symphony (1896) which conveys the picturesque delicacy of Nature. The Fourth Symphony (1900), much smaller in scale than the Third, is full of birdsong and forest murmurs, as well as neo-classical evocations of an idealised past and allusions to childhood. This seems closer to Mucha's aesthetics at that time with its stylised representations of Nature and folkloristic imagery.

Mahler's friends in Paris proved loyal supporters, and he took every opportunity to be with them when passing through the City. On one such visit, returning from America in April 1909, Mahler was persuaded to sit for a bust by Auguste Rodin.¹⁸ As fate would have it, Rodin and Mucha were close friends. Mucha had even accompanied the renowned sculptor on a visit to Prague in 1902 to view an exhibition of his work, also taking the opportunity to introduce him to Moravia's folk culture, which moved the Frenchman to tears. Alongside such a great figure, Mucha appeared to ordinary Czechs like a returning hero, but his testy observations about foreign influence upon indigenous artistic traditions were not well-received by some Czech artists. They considered him hypocritical, since Mucha was still at that time based in Paris, while the Vienna Secessionists, first among his targets for criticism, had lavished him with praise.

Paris, by coincidence, also played Cupid to Alfons Mucha. Like Mahler, he waited to marry until he was entering middle-age. When, in October 1903, a young, highly cultured Bohemian art student called Maruška Chytilová (1882-1959) travelled to the French capital to seek out Mucha for lessons, he was quickly smitten. The couple became engaged during the summer of 1904, and they married in Prague in 1906, overcoming Mucha's strong reluctance to be pinned down. Maruška came from a good aristocratic family, and she was a well-educated, self-assured young woman. In another remarkable parallel, Maruška Mucha and Alma Mahler were both 'modern' in outlook by the

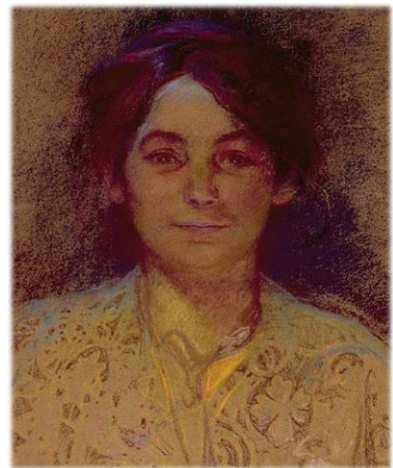


Figure 10 – Portrait of Maruška 1903

standards of the age. Cultured and creatively gifted, confident and beautiful, both women had the potential to pursue their own professional careers. After marriage, Alma was soon irritated by the level of sacrifice she was asked to make to serve Mahler's genius. By contrast, Maruška was largely content to forego her own ambitions in order to take on the role of Mucha's personal confidante and professional adviser. Mucha was easily distracted from the practical aspects of his work such as the need to earn money and to

¹⁸ Numerous copies of the bust exist, including copies in Vienna and Prague.

set realistic goals. Maruška was by comparison much more practically minded in these matters. She would have found Mucha was a more adaptable and instantly likable figure than Mahler, since he was well known for being terse and difficult. Yet Alma was prone to exaggerate this side of his character. Her memoirs are full of inferences that she was a victim of Mahler's egocentric attitudes and indulgent moods.

In 1910, Alma began an affair with Walter Gropius, the modernist architect who would be the founder of the Bauhaus movement and whom she would later marry. Her resentment towards Mahler, who had curtailed her ambitions as a composer, had undoubtedly fuelled her rebellion. Even when he tried to make amends by arranging the publication of some of her songs and even dedicating his Eighth Symphony to her, it did little to stem the crisis in their relationship. Alma was unwilling to accept the limitations of marrying a man of Mahler's sensitive nature and outstanding abilities. Her comments about him after his death suggested that such a man of genius was little more than a trophy for her glass cabinet, and her appreciation of his music was superficial at best.

Marriage for both men brought family life. Gustav and Alma Mahler had two children, Maria who was born in 1902 and was known as Gucki, while Anna, born in 1904, was known as Putzi. When Maria died of Scarlet Fever in the summer of 1907, it was a devastating blow for the couple, especially Gustav who struggled to overcome his grief. The tragedy awakened memories of the many dead siblings of his own childhood. Like the Mahlers, Alfons and Maruška Mucha produced two children but who both survived into adulthood. A daughter Jaroslava was born in New York on 15 March 1909, and a son Jiří was born in Prague on 12 March 1915.¹⁹ Jaroslava would later assist her father with the Slav Epic, as she was a skilled painter in her own right. Her brother Jiří would become a successful journalist and author, who collaborated with his friend, the Czech composer Martinů, providing a libretto for his patriotic *Field Mass*. Jiří also wrote a colourful biography of his father's life and championed his cause after the Second World War.

¹⁹ Jiří went on to marry two women composers; Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–40) whom he met in Paris, and his second wife of Scottish ancestry, Geraldine Thomson (1917–2012), whom he married in 1942. Jiří was attracted by the creativity and independence of both women. Mahler's surviving daughter, Anna, lived to a ripe old age (she died in 1988), and she was a fine prize-winning sculptor who won the Grand Prix at the Paris Exhibition in 1937. She was married for a while to the Czech composer, Ernst Krenek, then later to the Russian conductor Anatole Fistoulari, an alcoholic who bankrupted her. Anna's relationship with her mother was often strained. They fell out when Anna declared her preference for Bach rather than Wagner. Alma was a devoted Wagnerian unable to accept her daughter's defiance. Anna admired her father's music, but his worldwide reputation was often an obstacle to her own identity. It is fascinating to observe how the freedom of women to become professional composers and artists was tested in both families.

VI. Prague and Mahler's Seventh Symphony

After one final performance of Beethoven's *Fidelio*²⁰ on 15 October 1907, Mahler left his post as Director of the Vienna Opera after an unprecedented decade of reform and stunning spectacle. His departure, which was the culmination of increasing gossip and intrigue against him, was one of three calamitous events to afflict Mahler in a short period of time. The death of his first child Maria from Scarlet Fever in July of that year had been a serious blow, while the subsequent diagnosis of his own weakened heart left him full of despair. His life at the centre of the imperial establishment had lost much of its appeal, and Mahler needed somehow to escape his grief. America beckoned, offering him a fresh start. Mahler signed a lucrative four-year contract with the New York Philharmonic and Metropolitan Opera. A new life was about to begin but which required uprooting from all that had grown familiar over the past decade. Mahler's recurrent feeling that he did not belong anywhere was being borne out by events.

In the following year, 1908, Mahler needed to find a location to perform the world premiere of his Seventh Symphony. Vienna was no longer a possibility, since it was assumed that he would not appear in the City while he was under contract in the USA. With the example of Mozart in mind, Mahler chose Prague. Mozart²¹ had found success there with his opera *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1786, after Vienna had given the work a lukewarm reception. The centre of empire had not been ready for the libretto's mockery of the aristocracy, while Prague embraced its spirit of sedition with enthusiasm. The symbolism of these events appealed to Mahler, once again the establishment outsider.

The decision to locate the premiere of the Seventh Symphony in Prague emerged only gradually during the course of 1908. No longer bound by his contract in Vienna, Mahler was asked to conduct the opening concert of Prague's Jubilee Exhibition organised to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the accession of the Hapsburg Emperor, Franz Josef I. The concert's promoters viewed Mahler as a unifying figure. While he was hailed in the press as 'the foremost representative of German Art', he was also widely known to be Czech by birth. On 23 May, Mahler conducted the Czech Philharmonic in a programme that opened with Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and his *Coriolan* Overture. The concert's second half included Wagner's *Tristan Prelude* and the Overture to Smetana's

²⁰ *Fidelio* was Mahler's favourite opera. His choice to perform the work, as so often with Mahler, may have been intentionally subversive. During his tenure at the Vienna Opera, his radical idealism was inevitably constrained by working in the heart of the Habsburg Empire. *Fidelio* is known as a celebration of freedom and the overthrow of tyranny.

²¹ Mozart was a Freemason, and Mahler would have been familiar with the Masonic symbolism of *The Magic Flute* (1791) from conducting many performances throughout his career.

The Bartered Bride.²² The event proved a success, and the idea was immediately mooted that Mahler might return at the end of the summer to conclude the jubilee celebrations with the premiere of his Seventh Symphony.²³

When the premiere took place on 19th September 1908, Mahler's presence in Prague still stirred some controversy among more extreme Czech nationalists who looked upon him as a symbol of imperial domination. Mahler, of course, was far from being Coriolanus at the city gates, but the situation had been exacerbated by the size of the orchestra required for his enormous symphony. Over 100 musicians were needed, and the Czech Philharmonic numbered only 76 players. The remainder had to be hired from the New



Figure 11 – Opening of Mahler's Seventh Symphony

German National Theatre, and these players spoke German rather than Czech. From the first rehearsal there were tensions in the orchestra, and Mahler wrote to inform his protégé, Bruno Walter, that he thought the musicians might 'tear each other's hair out'.

The concert took place in the main pavilion of the Jubilee Exhibition Park. Mahler slowly won the unruly and divided musicians over, impressing them with his authority and the

²² The May programme may have been more of a political rather than artistic choice. German music has greater prominence, while the Czech element is little more than a gesture, and yet the subject of *Coriolan* is subversive and could well have suggested empathy on Mahler's part against a powerful aggressor. The warrior Coriolanus intends to invade Rome and to commit acts of terrible violence, until his mother pleads with him to spare the City. The tension in Prague may well have mirrored those in Ancient Rome, as the citizens awaited a possible wave of oppression.

²³ The Seventh Symphony acts as a bridge between the tragedy of the Sixth and the burst of divine inspiration which launches the Eighth. The Seventh is Faustian in tone. It opens in despair and has a diabolical Scherzo at its heart. The Rondo Finale celebrates ordinary human life and community in what could be a typical Viennese procession. The symbolism of night and day is also significant in the work.

quality of his music. The German-speaking cultural elite, including Alban Berg and Thomas Mann, travelled from far and wide to be present at the performance, sitting at the front of the audience in visible support of Mahler. The concert delighted both ethnic factions, and Mahler received a fifteen-minute ovation. The antagonism between the Czechs and Germans, which was at fever-pitch in Prague at that time, was temporarily forgotten. But, within a few weeks, the City of Prague was placed under martial law by the imperial authorities because of the imminent threat of riots as the actual day of the jubilee, 1 December, approached.

VII. Farewell to Vienna

Mahler's musical success in Prague meant a lot to him. He had felt uprooted throughout his life and, having sought Vienna's embrace, the City had in the end rejected him. His experience in Prague led to a rapprochement with his Czech roots, and there is yet further evidence from this period that he was re-evaluating his provincial origins. Throughout 1908, Mahler was working on one of his most profound and moving works, *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth).²⁴ Based on German translations by Hans Bethge of ancient Chinese poetry. Mahler's work is part symphony and part song-cycle, marking a new delicacy in his musical language which may owe something to Debussy. In late September 1908, shortly after the Prague premiere of his Seventh Symphony, Mahler put the finishing touches to the score of *Das Lied* during a brief stay with friends at a chateau in Hodonin, Moravia.²⁵ This brief return to the land of his childhood was a deliberate choice, as he prepared to leave for a second season of concerts in the United States.

The work's final song, *Der Abschied* (The Farewell) reaches a climax in the form of a purely instrumental funeral march in which the Earth itself seems to mourn for the suffering of the work's human protagonist. After the march, the weary traveller asks:

*Whither do I go? I go, I wander in the mountains,
I seek peace for my lonely heart!
I journey to the homeland, to my resting place!*

The last line came from Mahler's own pen, rather than that of Wang-Wei. The poet returns to his homeland to meet a friend who shares one last drink, before saying farewell

²⁴ *Das Lied von der Erde* owes much to Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise* (Winter Journey) which portrays a bleak passage through a lifeless and loveless landscape. It has been interpreted as a covert complaint against the repressive force of the Austrian imperial authorities that harassed Schubert and his circle.

²⁵ Hodonin was then known as Göding.

for ever. It can be no coincidence that around this time Mahler had begun to restore contact with some of his oldest friends, including Fritz Löhr and Siegfried Lipiner who had been part of his radical circle during his student days in Vienna. The wrench from Vienna was drawing Mahler towards an unknown future in America and, at the same time, pulling him back to his lost roots. Life was imitating art, as Mahler abandoned all that was familiar and said 'farewell' to old friends he feared he might never see again.

Yet *Der Abschied* does not end in grief and loss, but in a miraculous moment of renewal as Spring returns and the soul of the wanderer dissolves ecstatically into the landscape. The maternal embrace of homecoming is expressed as a release into the infinite. In real life, Mahler's ultimate consolation was to seek home in the Moravian landscape that had always been his Eternal Mother. Undoubtedly the wooded hills of the Czech provinces had been a key memory from his



Figure 12 – Moravian Landscape, Alois Kalvoda

childhood. They represented Nature, innocent and timeless, a point of stability compared to the power struggles, intrigues and grand facades of Habsburg Vienna. Mahler may not have felt a strong chauvinistic attachment to his homeland, but it was nonetheless this landscape that had shaped him and to which he felt bound by his past.

Mahler was never an unequivocal enthusiast for Czech music during his conducting career. For instance, he never performed a symphony by Dvořák, although he did conduct Dvořák's fairy-tale tone poems with their vivid Nature-painting. He declined to help Janáček whose operas were too overtly nationalistic. However, Mahler had no such qualms about Smetana, especially his comic opera *The Bartered Bride*. He also performed the famous *Vltava* movement from Smetana's *Má Vlast* (My Fatherland) on several occasions. Latterly, Mahler had planned to conduct Dvořák's 'New World' Symphony in America, but his final illness and death in 1911 meant these concerts had to be conducted by someone else. Judging from his programming in America, Mahler had begun expanding his repertoire well beyond a staple diet of German masterpieces centred around Wagner and Beethoven. Could it be that the rootless man who had always believed in the supremacy of German culture was gradually becoming less partisan? His untimely death cut short this new sense of adventure, and we can only ponder what might have been.

VII. Face to face in New York

Since they were born in July 1860, Mahler and Mucha had followed similar paths which never quite managed to converge. Vienna and Paris had tantalisingly provided them with some potentially shared personal connections and common aesthetic interests, but never enough to cause the pair to meet socially. One reason why such a meeting probably did not happen was Mahler's status as Director of the Vienna Opera after 1897. This placed him at the heart of the German-speaking imperial establishment, therefore outside Mucha's instinctive milieu as a Czech-speaking Francophile. As fate would have it, both men were destined to make a name in the USA. Mucha had been based in Paris since the autumn of 1887, where he had achieved international success. But, in March 1904, he travelled for the first time to America and began spending increasing periods of time there, hoping to earn money from rich patrons to fund his ambitious creative projects.

Mahler was soon following a similar trajectory. After October 1907, following his acrimonious departure from the Court Opera, Mahler began to cut his ties with Vienna. He had been the victim of bitter intrigues and antisemitic prejudice, although he also had a reputation for imposing exacting standards with little diplomacy, often provoking a storm around him. Leaving Vienna was undoubtedly a painful separation for Mahler, but he was at last free to accept a lucrative contract as music director of the New York Philharmonic and Metropolitan Opera. His path was shadowing Mucha's once again, only this time there is strong evidence that the two men finally met.

Mucha arrived in the USA amidst a blaze of publicity in the press, armed with a letter of introduction from Baroness Rothschild. He soon found an active social circle in New York, where there was a substantial community of ex-patriot Czechs. Many were prominent in the musical scene, not least due to the influence of Antonín Dvořák²⁶ who had been director of the New York Conservatory of Music from 1892-95. Dvořák's former personal assistant at the conservatory was Jan Kovarik, a brilliant young violinist. When Dvořák returned to Europe, Kovarik remained in the United States, becoming a leading player at the New York Philharmonic, while also marrying the sister of a young Czech illustrator, Vincent Svoboda. In an intriguing web of connection, Vincent Svoboda had studied art under Mucha in Paris, before returning to New York to join his father, who had emigrated to the USA in 1883. By coincidence, Svoboda senior had been a policeman in Mucha's hometown, Ivančice, where he had known Mucha's father. With Mucha's arrival in March 1904, the Svobodas were eager to include him in their social circle.

²⁶ Mahler had worked briefly with Dvořák in the early 1890s, performed several of his tone-poems and had expressed an interest in presenting his opera *Rusalka* in Vienna. The pair formed a bond of mutual respect.

According to Mucha's son Jiří, in his biography of his father²⁷, Alfons visited the Svobodas several times a week, meeting there many Bohemian artists and musicians, including Gustav Mahler and the Czech soprano, Emmy Destinn²⁸. Mahler of course did not travel to America until the end of 1907, by which time Mucha had married Maruška, so his visits to the Svobodas would have been less frequent. We cannot say definitively that Mucha and Mahler met face to face at the Svobodas' residence, as there is no record of such a meeting from Mahler's side, but the story nevertheless reveals the tightly knit solidarity that existed among Czech artists and musicians in New York at this time.

Mahler's first stay in New York began at the end of 1907 and was widely hailed in the press, so that everyone interested in art and music would have been aware of his presence. He travelled with his wife Alma from Vienna via Paris and Cherbourg, leaving his surviving daughter Anna in Austria with her grandparents. The pair were accommodated in a luxury suite in the Hotel Majestic overlooking Central Park, next door to the opulent Vanderbilt family residence. The Vanderbilts were one of New York's leading cultural patrons with enormous influence at the Metropolitan Opera. They were exactly the type of people who had attracted Alfons Mucha to make regular visits to America. Mucha was always willing to network in these circles, hoping to obtain prestigious and highly paid commissions. Mahler, by comparison, had no need to cultivate such favours. Besides, he was not a great social animal, and his health had been poor since the calamities of the previous summer. Nevertheless, he was still expected to socialise with cultured and not so cultured hosts, all equally excited to meet an international musical celebrity. But, by the time that Mahler returned to New York for three months at the start of 1909, his health had improved, and his willingness to socialise was notably greater. His wife Alma suggests in her memoirs that the pair were now able to dine out more frequently with the City's monied and intellectual elites.²⁹

²⁷ *Alphonse Mucha, His Life and Art* by Jiří Mucha, Heinemann 1966, p.298

²⁸ Mahler admired Emmy Destinn's voice, and he had wanted her to be the soprano for early performances of his Fourth Symphony. She might well have taken Mahler to meet some of her Czech friends in New York. Destinn (her Czech name was Ema Destinová) was a theatrical personality in the mould of Sarah Bernhardt, who was fascinated by the occult and often wore black. She wrote novels and plays, as well as being a passionate patriot.

²⁹ By the autumn of 1909, the Mahlers had moved to the Savoy Hotel on Fifth Avenue at the southern corner of Central Park, just two blocks from where the Muchas were living at 55 on West 56th Street. This makes the possibility of Mahler being part of the Muchas social circle all the more likely. Mahler's admiration for Emmy Destinn adds further weight to the connection.

As part of the new Metropolitan Opera season of 1909, Mahler decided to include a work he greatly admired, Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* (*Prodaná nevěsta*). He had known the work since his year as second conductor in Prague in 1888, and he was the first to introduce it into the repertoire at the Hamburg Opera in 1894. His enthusiasm for the work was never more apparent than during his tenure in Vienna, where he revived an existing production in 1899. The opera received no less than fifty-six performances before Mahler left his post in 1907, although he only conducted ten of them.³⁰ *The Bartered Bride* is a comedy, richly coloured by traditional Czech music, dance and folklore. The score is charmingly melodious, and the appearance of a 'Red Indian' in the circus scene would surely have appealed to an American audience. However, Mahler's enthusiasm for the work had no political dimension. His motives were always artistic, and the Met production watered down its Czech aspect by being sung in German, as was the custom when the opera was performed abroad.³¹ The partial Germanisation of *The Bartered Bride* did not prevent the ex-patriate Czech community treating the performances as a rallying cry, also eagerly claiming Mahler as one of their own. Despite his supposed status 'as the foremost German artist' of the day, Mahler found himself a guest of the New York Bohemian Club on 24 January 1909. Speakers had to be reminded to avoid political statements and show sensitivity toward their guests, many of whom were German speakers.



Figure 13 - Emmy Destinn as Marenka in *The Bartered Bride*

³⁰ Such was his affection for the work that Mahler included a short quotation from the opera's overture in the finale of his First Symphony. See the violas fugato theme in the fourth movement, just after figure 45, which is similar to the fugal passage in Smetana's overture.

³¹ Mahler was always reluctant to reveal any political opinions, although it might be inferred from his provincial background and idealism that he was sympathetic to oppressed minorities. In his youth, Mahler had been a keen Wagnerite associating with Pan-German Nationalists. The movement was anathema to Czechs, and the imperial authorities also tried to suppress their activities because Pan-Germanists believed in dismantling the Habsburg Empire in order to unite Austria with other German principalities and German-speaking enclaves; an ambition which Adolf Hitler came close to realising.

The Metropolitan Opera gave the American premiere of *The Bartered Bride*³² on 19 February 1909. It was the first of seven performances conducted by Mahler, including one in Philadelphia, with the last of the run presented in New York on 17 March. The production was a great critical success, being warmly received by the American audience, as well as the Czech nationals who attended in great numbers. The Czech soprano, Emmy Destinn took the leading role of Marenka, the bride who is 'sold', and she was adored by the public and feted by the press. Mahler too was acknowledged for his fine musicianship and inspirational conducting. Even his retouches to Smetana's score, which included



Figure 14 – Choreographer Ottokar Bartik and principal dancer Gina Torriani in Czech costumes for *The Bartered Bride*, 1909

moving the work's famous overture to the beginning of the second act, were greeted enthusiastically. One of the most striking aspects of the production was the choreography of Ottokar Bartik, a Czech national who was given the task of training the in-house ballet company to perform the various traditional folk dances in the score. Maurice Halpern, music critic for a New York German-language newspaper³³, was full of praise, reporting that the thirty-six dancers were members of the Czech National Theatre in Prague, who had been drafted in to supplement the resident performers. Alma Mahler confirms the story in her reminiscences, although she refers to only six couples being summoned from Prague. However, inspection of the official programme for a performance on 15 March 1909, which took place at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, lists all the main artists without reference to the National Theatre in

Prague. The programme only states that the Polka in the First Act was to be danced by Bartik himself and 'a corps of Bohemian dancers.'³⁴

³²By curious coincidence, the sets for the production, which had originally been made for the Prague National Theatre, were designed and manufactured by Mucha's former employers in Vienna.

³³ The New York Staats-Zeitung, 20 February 1909.

³⁴ The programme is in the Levy Collection, part of the archive of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The bill for the first performance on 19 February also confirms that the polka was danced by 'a corps of Bohemian dancers.' Coincidentally, 15 March was Jaroslavá Mucha's date of birth.

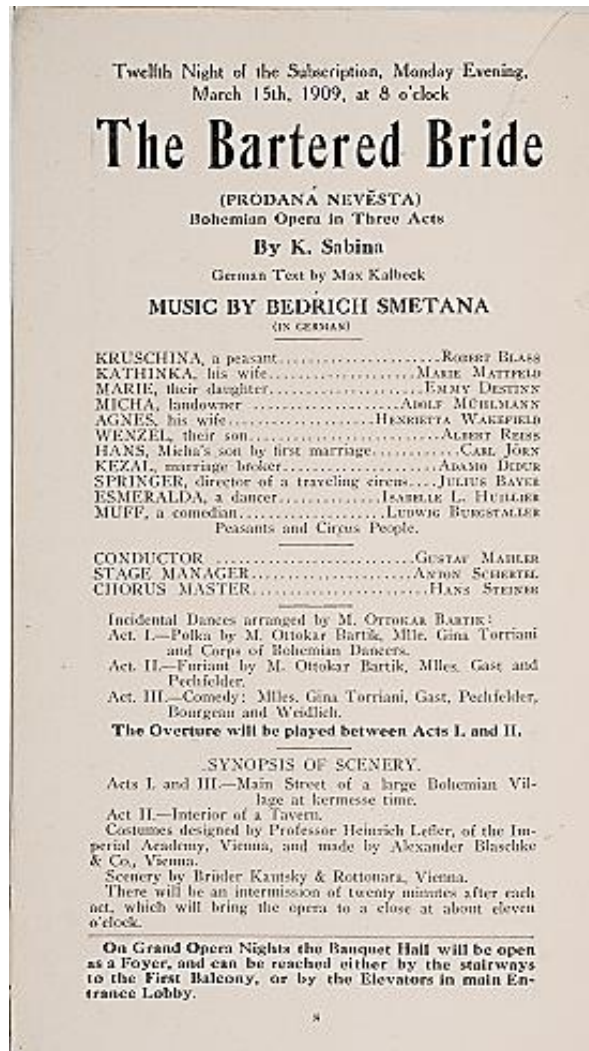


Figure 15 - Cast of the 1909 production

It seems unlikely that as many as thirty-six dancers would have come all the way from Prague at great expense to dance for only a few minutes on stage over a period of almost six weeks. New evidence from the Mucha family archive suggests an intriguing and more likely explanation regarding the source of at least some of the dancers. Two accounts suggest that Alfons Mucha played an important role in the story. Firstly, there is the account of Mucha's daughter, Jaroslavá in her unfinished memoir. She relates a story which must have come from her parents and possibly also from Bartik himself:

On Sunday, March 14, [1909], Jan Masaryk³⁵ came from Chicago, as usual, to the Muchas for lunch. In the evening, he went with his mother and father to the New York Opera to

³⁵ Mention of Jan Masaryk is significant. He was the son of Tomas Masaryk, then teaching as a professor in Chicago paid for by the wealthy entrepreneur, Charles Crane, who would later be the patron of Alfons Mucha's Slav Epic. Masaryk became the first President of Czechoslovakia in 1918, while his son Jan would

see *The Bartered Bride*, which was being staged for the first time in New York conducted by Gustav Mahler. Papa wrote: "*While here, I've been to see The Bartered Bride three times already! A wonderful success on stage with every aria applauded! It is the greatest success of the season, and the German local newspaper wrote an exceedingly beautiful critique saying that nothing like it has been composed since Mozart wrote The Marriage of Figaro!*"

Mahler was lucky to have been able to study *The Bartered Bride* so well with the singers of the Metropolitan Opera. The ballet master of the New York Opera, Ottokar Bartík, was worse off. He liked to tell us how the dancers in *The Bartered Bride* would not rehearse for anything in the world. It just did not work. All that was left was quickly to call girls from the Czech quarters and Sokols (*Falcon Clubs*)³⁶ in New York and Chicago. The girls were to bring their Czech costumes with them. They willingly reported immediately.

And so, it happened that the young cellist Zdenka Černá from Chicago, accompanied by her mother, also came to rehearse the polka in her costume. She wrote extensively to me about it on the occasion of the most recent performance of *The Bartered Bride* in New York, which she watched on television³⁷ ... After the famous performance, as always, Mucha had dinner with the performing artists.

Since Jaroslavá was born the following day, 15 March 1909, we know this record is not first-hand, but she gives the impression that these performances of *The Bartered Bride* retained mythic status in the family's history and were a treasured memory of her long dead father. The testimony of one of the girls who danced in the production adds to the anecdote's authenticity. Jaroslavá's account is further corroborated by Mucha's wife Maruška who confirms that Mahler was part of their social circle during this period. She must also have been heavily pregnant at the time:

The 1908-09 art season in New York was marked by Slavism...The conductor (at the Met) was Gustav Mahler, who is one of the German school of composers, but this native of Humpolec³⁸ always spoke to us only in Czech³⁹ and professed the Czech nation in America. Our great Emma Destinn also sang with the famous Chaliapin here. The Czech

marry Crane's daughter in 1924. In a strange quirk of history, Jan Masaryk, who was a skilled pianist, read out an essay penned by the writer Franz Werfel about Mahler in 1948 on a New York radio station. Werfel, who died in 1945, was born in Prague, a German-speaking Jew like Mahler, and the third husband of Alma, the composer's widow.

³⁶ Since the 1860s, the Sokols (Falcon Clubs) had become an important feature of Czech life by promoting physical activities such as gymnastics to reinforce national solidarity. They would have been a natural recruiting ground for young dancers familiar with the Polka.

³⁷ This was the Metropolitan Opera production of 1978 with Jon Vickers and Theresa Stratas in the main roles, which dates Jaroslavá's account to c.1980.

³⁸ Humpolec is five miles from Mahler's birthplace which was the village of Kaliště. His successor at the New York Philharmonic, Josef Stransky, by coincidence was actually born in Humpolec in 1872.

³⁹ It is likely that Mahler could understand the Czech language but was not fluent in speaking it.

ballet master was Ottokar Bartík, and the choir accompanist Markéta Kučerová also came from Prague.... Finally, Alfons Mucha lectured on composition in fine arts at leading academies in the United States. It was a beautiful moment when, after the theatre or a concert, we spent evenings in the circle of these friends either in the MacDowell Club or at dinner, starting with a Russian borscht, in the rooms of the "Slavic Alliance" ...

Under the influence of E. Destinn and Mahler, it was decided in the spring of 1909 that the Metropolitan Opera would perform Smetana's *'The Bartered Bride'*. The whole Czech world in New York lived in tense anticipation of this great event. Smetana's *Vltava* was in the repertoire of the Philharmonic concerts and the quartet *'From My Life'* was played in chamber concerts every year, but how would the audience accept this opera, which is so dear to us, but to which a foreigner can hardly get used, as was seen in Paris? The American audience is much more immediate than the Paris audience, and we were all looking forward to them falling in love with our *'Bartered Bride'*.

Bartík, the ballet master, introduced us to the preparations behind the scenes. He used to come to us often with Friml⁴⁰ and tell us directly what was happening. He consulted with my husband about the production and especially about the costumes in which the ballet company will dance the famous polka. But for some reason he did not like the way the ballerinas were dancing and kept repeating: *"You know, Master, it's not, it's not our polka, those girls still can't forget that they're ballerinas, and I'd like it to be a folk dance. Do they know how to dance a polka nicely on the floor?"* Once he came from rehearsal, annoyed, and then Mucha suggested that he prepare the polka with real Czech girls. *"Sir, that's a great idea! I'm already dashing off to the Sokol in First Avenue to pick the girls."* He found a lot of them and nice ones. They also had beautiful costumes, and it all went forward merrily. He soon came back enthusiastically: *"You have made such a difference. Those girls from the Sokols are dancing our way, there's real heart in it. It will be a great success ..."* and it was.

Marie (aka Maruška) Muchová, *New York Free Newspaper*, 22 June 1946 ⁴¹

Aside that these accounts are not contemporary with the events they describe, there is little reason to doubt them. The texts are full of convincing personal details which point towards Alfons Mucha playing a significant role in ensuring the quality of the Czech dances. That Bartík sought Mucha's advice is entirely plausible, since Mucha was revered as an expert in theatre production and design because of his work with Sarah Bernhardt in Paris. The close social bonds within New York's Czech community, and Maruška's

⁴⁰Rudolph Friml was born Rudolf Frymel in Prague on 2 December 1879, entering the Prague Conservatory in 1895 to study piano and composition with Dvořák. Later, Friml took a position as accompanist to the violinist Jan Kubelík, before moving to New York in 1906 with the support of the Czech singer Emmy Destinn. His first regular post was as a répétiteur at the Metropolitan Opera. He would become famous as one of the co-composers of the hit musicals, *Rose-Marie* and *The Vagabond King*.

⁴¹ Both accounts, which were originally in Czech, came from the Mucha Foundation archive.

inference that Mahler was accepted as one of its members, would surely mean he was aware of Mucha's 'backstage' involvement. The only caveat is that, with seven performances presented in three venues over a period of more than six weeks, different arrangements could have been made each time, and this may explain any discrepancies regarding the number and origin of the dancers. There is also reasonable cause to doubt the accuracy of Alma Mahler as a witness, since she was prone to treat Mahler's life before she had met him as an irrelevance, including his Czech roots and days of apprenticeship. She may have shown little more than passing interest in the story around the 'corps of Bohemian dancers' beyond what she read in the newspapers.

VIII. Mucha returns home

In 1910 Mucha returned to his homeland after an absence of twenty-five years. There was an increasingly agitated political climate, especially in Prague, but Mucha no longer needed to seek commissions in the USA because now he had the financial backing of the American industrialist Charles Crane for his grand project, the Slav Epic. The Epic would



Figure 156 - poster for a fair in Mucha's hometown

occupy Mucha for the next seventeen years, and he was now devoted to furthering the cause of an independent Czechoslovakian state, whether he was decorating Prague's recently constructed Municipal House or designing a magnificent new window for St. Vitus Cathedral. His female figures from this period are adorned in traditional costumes and headdresses, no longer representing the 'world soul' but the violated and hungry soul of his own country. In 1912, Mucha even paid tribute to his birthplace, Ivančice with a poster for a regional fair.⁴² The imagery reminds us of Art Nouveau, and the human figures echo Mucha's 'Q' girls from his Parisian days, but now the floral designs and swirling ribbons celebrate homecoming. Swallows, migrants who return each summer, wheel about the church tower which Mucha had known since childhood. The 'mother church' welcomes back the prodigal son and, for Mucha, these symbols held a deeply personal meaning.

From 1911, Mucha lived in a castle in West Bohemia, where he had ample studio space and the relative freedom from interruption that would allow him to concentrate on

⁴² The fair never took place.

completing his magnum opus, the Slav Epic. The world was changing fast around him so that, in artistic terms, he was now a conservative. At that time, the Cubists Picasso and Braque were exhibiting in Paris, and a group of followers soon appeared in Prague. Modernism had truly arrived with its abstract forms, experimental techniques and will to eradicate any traces of the former romantic style. Art Nouveau was now ridiculed as mere ornament. Mucha, however, was not impressed by the new forms, describing the modernists as 'a syndicate of cranks.' He was undoubtedly hailed as his nation's foremost artist, but he had lost his former cosmopolitan status as a consequence.



Figure 16 - Mucha in Masonic regalia

After 1918, Czechoslovakia emerged from the First World War as an independent nation, finally liberated from Germanic cultural domination and the shackles of the Habsburg Empire. This was surely the fulfilment of Mucha's lifelong dream, and now he could put his experience as a cosmopolitan artist at the disposal of his country. Mucha had been a devoted Freemason since 1898, and in 1918 he founded the first Masonic Lodge in the new Republic. He felt that the ideals of the movement could contribute to the process of nation-building, ensuring the highest moral aspirations. To show his intent, Mucha permitted German-speakers to join the Lodge on an equal-footing with Czech-speakers. He followed the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, which places greater demands of obedience on

its members than in the mainstream of the movement. The Scottish Rite specifically requires participation in elaborate staged performances, before passage is granted from one 'degree' of attainment to the next.

The power of theatre to represent and promote spiritual transformation had gripped Mucha's imagination ever since he was a child. As a choirboy singing Mass in the Catholic Church, he had first learnt how symbols and rituals leave a profound imprint on the human psyche. He witnessed the same in Hans Makart's Vienna studio, and while he was working in Paris with Sarah Bernhardt, whose entire life was a grand theatrical spectacle. Mucha's own workspaces were created to appear like places of worship, but they were also theatrical sets, in which the artist himself was a work of art, a symbolic representation of the Great Architect constructing the Universe. In Goethe's words from the end of the second part of *Faust*, 'All that is transient is but a likeness'.⁴³ Our material existence is only a symbol pointing towards an unknowable divine essence which dwells

⁴³ 'Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis' are the opening lines of the Chorus Mysticus in the finale scene of Goethe's *Faust Part II*, memorably set to music by Mahler in the closing passages of his 8th Symphony.

in the soul of Man. The individual soul is derived from the world-soul, experienced as various kinds of collective identity, from the ethnic to the pantheistic. The Slav Epic would be Mucha's ultimate expression of his own emerging sense of self, as well as a definitive statement of Czech national identity within the Slavic family of nations.



Figure 18 - 'The Slav Epic' cycle No.13: The Hussite King Jiří z Poděbrad (1923)⁴⁴

In 1928, Mucha completed the Slav Epic and presented the twenty canvases to the City of Prague as a gift in return for finding them a permanent exhibition space. His life's major work done, he moved himself and his family back to Prague, which was his spiritual home. Mucha had become a living symbol of the emergent Czech cultural identity, able now to dwell close to the icons of his country's historical resilience, which are clustered on Prague's sacred mount, the Vyšehrad.

⁴⁴ By the 1430s, Rome was forced to recognise the Utraquist Church in a treaty called the Basel Compacts. In 1458 Bohemia elected its first native Czech King for 150 years, Jiří z Poděbrad, who sent a delegation to Rome to confirm the country's religious privileges. Pope Pius II refused to recognise the treaty, sending one of his cardinals to Prague to ban the Utraquist Church and return Bohemia to the rule of Rome. In this painting, Mucha depicts Cardinal Fantin's visit to Prague and his ensuing confrontation with King Jiří.

IX. A Czech-German axis

By comparison with Mucha, Mahler's attitude to his Czech roots remained ambivalent. In an interview with a New York journalist in 1910, he was at pains to state that he was first and foremost a German.

I am always called a Bohemian...I read it everywhere. Yet I am not, I am a German. It is true that I was born in Bohemia, but of German parents. It is also true that I admire Smetana. Yet I also admire Debussy, and that does not make me a Frenchman. Still, I have denied that I am a Bohemian. I have said to myself 'If people want to call me a Bohemian, well I shall let them call me a Bohemian. Yet I am really a German.'⁴⁵

In this statement, Mahler was trying to prevent people interpreting his love of Czech music as a political posture. By identifying with his Germanic cultural background, his allegiance was not tied to any particular state, but to a set of values. The fanatical Pan-Germanism of his youth was long forgotten, so that his love of German music and literature stemmed from his belief that they were among humanity's greatest spiritual achievements. Mahler's enthusiasm for Czech music, Debussy and even Chinese poetry indicates that his cultural identification was not partisan but open to outside influence. Nonetheless, his Czech identity mattered more than he was willing to admit, and his evasions represent a hesitancy, even confusion, about where he called home.

Mucha was more passionately Czech than Mahler with an innate suspicion of German culture. Yet, we can discern many elements of his artistic values that were rooted in German Romanticism. He had, after all, trained in Vienna and Munich, illustrated a book about the formative moments of German history⁴⁶ and painted the interior of the German Theatre in New York. Mucha also believed that the young idealised female form was a symbol of the world soul; an idea developed by the philosopher Friedrich Schelling⁴⁷ who had been one of Goethe's intimate circle. Such notions were by no means exclusively German, and Mucha would have found similar ideas in the international movement of Theosophy, which attempted to create a world religion from many spiritual traditions. Indeed, Mucha's greatest art integrates symbols from a broad range of sources. Catholicism, Freemasonry, Theosophy and German Romanticism are all woven into a rich tapestry of Slavic history, myth and mysticism. His most ambitious work, the Slav Epic, explores ethnic identity on a Wagnerian scale. Indeed, the Slav Epic can be viewed

⁴⁵ *New York Tribune*, 3 April 1910

⁴⁶ *Scènes et Episodes de l'Histoire d'Allemagne* (1894), a commission which curiously enough may have given him a first inkling of the Slav Epic.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854) was a transcendental idealist of the German Romantic School who sought to unite science and religion by showing that Nature was a unified pantheistic organism. He proposed this in his treatise of 1798 *Von der Weltseele - Of the world-soul*.

as Mucha's riposte to one of the most ambitious products of German Romanticism, Wagner's vast cycle of music dramas, *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

Mucha would have been familiar with Wagner's operas, not least from his work as a scene-painter in Vienna and through his association with Hans Makart, who was a friend of the composer. Mucha was not known as an admirer of Wagner's music, although his wife was more enthusiastic. Yet Mucha's creative work seems steeped in Wagnerian ambition and theatre. The composer's influence on European art was all-pervasive, especially in Paris where it was a vital stimulus to the Symbolist movement in poetry, as well as Debussy's impressionist musical experiments. Mucha's Wagnerism was, if you like, filtered through the prism of Viennese and Parisian cosmopolitanism, rather than being a direct response to one of the most controversial figures of European culture.

Ironically, Mucha's wife Maruška was a distant relative of Prague-born Eduard Hanslick, Wagner's foremost critic and a champion of Brahms whose purely instrumental music was presented in opposition to the grandiose theatricals for which Wagner was renowned. But this was not Mucha's view. He understood the power of theatre, and his wish to encapsulate the mythic past of the Slavs attempted to do for his own people what Wagner had done for the Germans. Mucha was not interested in narrow political gain or exciting revolutionary fervour. In the manner of the poet W.B. Yeats⁴⁸, who was politically active in the cause of Irish independence, Mucha wanted his art to imbue an atavistic sense of belonging into the conventional political discourse. He also wanted to inspire a moral transformation in which the Slavic nations, once liberated from oppression, could provide a model for truth, faith and justice among all peoples.⁴⁹

Here we may sense a common focus in the art of Mucha and Mahler. For all that Mucha was blessed with a confident sense of his own cultural origins, in a way that Mahler could never have imagined, both men realised that modernity brings with it a psychic uprooting which the creative artist must address. It is fair to suggest that alienation and dislocation were even essential characteristics of the romantic sensibility. The folk revival, nationalism and communing with Nature were different ways in which an individual could re-establish lost roots. In Mahler's case, the feeling of homelessness was made more acute by his Jewish background, but he was merely an extreme example of a psychological malaise that affected many as they moved into large and ethnically diverse cities. In the post-Enlightenment world, old tribal groupings defined by race and religion

⁴⁸ Yeats was also associated with Theosophy and other esoteric movements. Like Mucha he had spirit guides who communicated through automatic writing.

⁴⁹ Mucha was working on a grand triptych of paintings, the *Age of Reason*, the *Age of Wisdom* and the *Age of Love*, when he died, a response to the looming threat of war.

were loosened by the impact of science, declining faith and increased mobility. New railways and roads, telegraph systems and a speedy mail service were quickening the pace of life and eroding ancient boundaries.

In addition, during the 19th century, an influx of radical new ideas, including universal suffrage, Darwin's Theory of Evolution and Nietzsche's notion of the 'Superman', compelled artists to explore and redefine human identity, to recreate high culture out of myth and folk tradition for a more individualistic age. Spirituality was now a function of aesthetics and psychology, no longer dictated as moral laws and metaphysical truths by a priestly class. In Mucha's and Mahler's works, the religious impulse was still paramount, if no longer bound by orthodoxy. They both retained respect for the rituals of church and synagogue. Yet they had also both become free thinkers, seeking answers through a subjective interior dialogue which provided the numinous material of their art.

Both men also knew that the individual artist and the symbols he creates belong to a wider cultural process. The hegemony between Germans and Czechs was a historical conflict playing out like some Wagnerian music drama. But this was a battle for political control, not between radically opposed value systems. In the period preceding the First World War, a fragile consensus had continued to exist among artists, politicians and academics about the direction of human progress. This held together, despite the uprooting of identity which had begun with the Enlightenment and which led to the French Revolution in 1789. Thereafter, European culture opened up to all kinds of exotic influence and radical ideas. Nationalist fervour was stirred by the climate of rebellion, but it was also a reaction against the undermining of fundamental values, instead seeking certainties in the atavistic past. The new freedoms and aspirations were sowing the seeds of future chaos. A fragmented culture without a moral centre, where every citizen feels entitled to power, was inexorably heading towards conflagration.

X. Endings

The ways in which our two Czech comrades met their ends were emblematic of Europe's wider fate in the first half of the 20th century. The City of Paris had played a crucial role in bringing Mahler love and marriage, but it provided another less welcome milestone as he journeyed towards death. His final association with Paris was a three-week stay in a clinic at Neuilly, having returned from the USA a seriously ill man in April 1911. With little sign of improvement, his doctors advised that he be moved by train to Vienna, where he would die a week later during a thunderstorm on 18 May 1911, aged only fifty. His final words were to repeat the name 'Mozart', a composer who had achieved his

greatest triumphs in Prague and Vienna. Mahler, it seemed, carried the Czech-German split to his grave.

On 14 July 1939, almost three decades after Mahler's demise in Vienna, Mucha met his end in Prague, a consequence of the Nazi invasion of his country. His health declined quickly after a brutal interrogation by the Gestapo. He was considered a threat to the German occupation because of his Masonic connections and status as national artist. After his death, Mucha was buried in the graveyard on the historic hill of Prague's Vyšehrad, alongside other leading figures of the Czech national revival such as Smetana and Dvořák. Had Mahler still been alive, as a successful Czech-Jewish composer, he would have suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Nazis. His music had been banned in Germany during the 1930s, and Mahler's widow Alma⁵⁰ and his daughter Anna were forced to flee Vienna. Mahler's niece, the violinist and conductor Alma Rosé, suffered a worse fate, dying aged only 37 at Auschwitz in 1944. The rise of National Socialism in Germany under the leadership of the Wagner-obsessed Adolf Hitler was a victory for barbarity and prejudice. Hitler, who had in his youth wanted to be a painter, was twice rejected by the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, and his bitterness was vented against those who did not conform to his own dull bourgeois taste.⁵¹ The Nazis' criminal regime pillaged fine art and persecuted artists wherever they went, mocking the values which high culture is meant to uphold.



Figure 19 - Mahler crossing to America, 1911

The Czech-German political hegemony and the fighting of two catastrophic world wars obscured the true value of great art. It should rise above such conflicts and grow out of universal and enduring values which go beyond easy categorisation. Mahler would have been diminished without his Czech and Jewish heritage, just as Mucha surely benefited from exposure to international influences, whether they were French or German. Both men, after all, had absorbed ideas from the Orient without becoming any less European.

⁵⁰ Alma was by this time married to the writer, Franz Werfel, a Prague-born German-speaking Jew, despite her well-known antisemitic sympathies.

⁵¹ Hitler moved to Vienna from Linz in 1907, when Mahler was coming to the end of his period in charge of the Vienna Opera. In the previous year, the future Nazi dictator had travelled to see Mahler conduct Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and was greatly impressed. Some have speculated that Hitler modelled his extravagant speech poses on Mahler's conducting style, although Mahler was much less agitated on the podium in his maturity. Interestingly, Hitler had come to Vienna in 1907 armed with a letter of introduction to Alfred Roller, the chief designer at the opera, who was also Mahler's close friend. Hitler, perhaps fearing rejection, never chose to use it.

Mucha's Slav Epic might well be considered a regression into nationalism, except that his invocation of Slavic myth and history was intended to inspire other nations and races to follow the high moral example of his own people. Like Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Old Testament, national myth was capable of being translated into universal truth. Equally, Mahler's German sympathies were addressed to an international audience, and his love of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner was because they spoke for all humanity.

Both men rejected the prevailing overly rational and materialistic attitudes of their times which had robbed their world of myth and enchantment. Following Gnostic traditions, they believed that truth was a mystery revealed stepwise by life experience, and that the signposts of meaning were to be found in the symbols of art, religion and the ancient cultures of the past. They both felt destined to greatness and were committed to a heroic struggle for the highest ideals of truth and personal integrity. In this, they modelled themselves on Goethe as the supreme example of a creative genius able to transform the culture around him.⁵² Shaped indelibly by their provincial backgrounds, both rose to the height of international fame. Mahler paid a high price for his success. He died before his time, exhausted by the pressures of his work and disappointed by his fall from grace in Vienna. Mucha, who lived a less tormented life, sadly became an easy target for the Nazis. He died fearing that everything he and his country had achieved was in the utmost peril.

Prescient that Europe was fast approaching the abyss, both Mahler and Mucha sensed that their time had not yet come⁵³, that the world was not ready for the visionary bridges they had built between Nature and the Ideal. The pair would surely have found comfort in the simple humour and naivety of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, which resolves the conflict between the demands of order and the chaos of desire with laughter rather than tragedy. We do not know what Mahler and Mucha may have said to each other after a performance of this appealing work, but they must surely have shared an enthusiasm for its warm humanity, which acknowledges a simple truth. The 'other' wishes for the same as us: to be free and to belong.

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⁵² Nietzsche also considered Goethe the prototypical 'Superman'. He was a man of science, as much as he was a poet and author. His Colour Theory had a direct impact on the art of painting, and his ideas about organic growth influenced Darwin's theories of evolution.

⁵³ Mucha wrote a note before his death '*Mucha viendra*' – Mucha will return. Mahler stated famously to Alma (Letter, 31 Jan 1902) '*My time will come*', although he was comparing himself to Richard Strauss, whose superficial money-grabbing had caused Mahler some irritation. "*Kommen wird die Zeit, da die Menschen die Spreu vom Weizen gesondert erblicken werden – und meine Zeit wird kommen, wenn die seine um ist...*" *The time will come, when men will see the chaff separated from the wheat – and my time will come, when his is up...*"

Acknowledgements

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About the author

Peter Davison hails from Newcastle-upon-Tyne. After studying Musicology at the University of Cambridge, he pursued a varied career in the UK and The Netherlands as an arts manager, until he became Artistic Consultant to The Bridgewater Hall, Manchester UK in 1994, a post he held until October 2018. He created a high-quality classical music programme for the venue as artistic director of its *International Concert Series*, hosting many prestigious performers such as the Vienna Philharmonic, the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony, as well as soloists such as Vladimir Ashkenazy, Lang Lang, Jessye Norman and Cecilia Bartoli. During that time, he was responsible for *Pulse*; a festival of rhythm and percussion for the Commonwealth Games in 2002 and, in 2006, he worked with pianist, Barry Douglas and BBC Radio 3 to stage all Mozart's piano concertos in five days. In 2018, Peter Davison collaborated with Welsh flautist, Emily Beynon and the Mucha Foundation to create a project revealing the relationship between music and the visual arts called *The Colour of Music*.

Peter Davison is also a noted cultural commentator and researcher. In 2001, he combined with Sir Roger Scruton and a prestigious range of contributors to produce *Reviving the Muse*, a book of essays about the future of musical composition. He was also a contributor to the University of Amsterdam Symposium, *Redefining Musical Identities* in 2002, where he offered a unique vision for concert halls at the spiritual centre of contemporary communities. Peter Davison is also an internationally renowned Mahler scholar. In 1989, he was the youngest speaker at the Paris Symposium on Mahler's Seventh Symphony and, in 2010, he published *Wrestling with Angels* about the life and work of Gustav Mahler written to accompany The Bridgewater Hall's acclaimed symphony cycle. In more recent time, he has been artistic advisor to the George Lloyd Society and written a brief study of the music of the Austrian composer, Kurt Schwertsik.

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