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Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies (review)

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Especially welcome in this chapter is the attention devoted to Clementina Albéniz, the composer's highly accomplished sister, who was herself a talented musician, one who gave Albéniz his first instruction in piano and later became a teacher at the Escuela de Institutrices de the Asociación para la Educación de la Mujer, a major educational institution for women. She emerges here from her brother's shadow, and Torres's portrait of her tells us important things about the status of women in Spain at that time and the role they played in education and professional life. Albéniz's correspondence with his sister also tells us important things about his views concerning their parents as well as Spain, its politics and culture.

A most welcome feature of this book is the representative sampling of nineteen letters and music manuscripts presented in facsimile. These provide the reader with the rare opportunity to enter the musicologist's world of primary sources, to hold between one's fingers the documentary evidence of an exceptional life in music. These facsimiles and their significance are the subject of the next chapter. Ensuing chapters present a chronology of Albéniz in Madrid, excerpts from the memoir of Arbós dealing with Albéniz, and the collaborations between Albéniz and Bretón as detailed in the latter's diary (see Tomás Bretón, *Diario 1881–1888*, ed. Jacinto Torres Mulas [Madrid: Acento Editorial, 1994]). The concluding chapter explores Albéniz's relationship with the Madrid press, a relationship that was complex and conflicted even during the best of times. The book concludes with a very helpful bibliography; even more helpful would have been an index, which is unfortunately lacking.

The book is available only in Spanish, and though this may prove a hindrance to some readers, the wealth of images and primary sources will be useful to all. Those who do read Spanish will appreciate Prof. Torres's elegant and pellucid prose. This landmark volume commemorates the centenary of the composer's death yet contributes an enduring testament to the central role Madrid played in the career of one of Spain's greatest composers.

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Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies. By Julian Johnson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. [xiv, 361 p. ISBN: 9780195372397. \$49.95.] Bibliographic references, indexes, illustrations, music examples.

Julian Johnson's *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies* provides an exhaustive look at the processes of narrative in all of the composer's works, ranging from student compositions from his days at the Vienna Conservatory to the incomplete Tenth Symphony. Johnson views Mahler's narrative process as stemming from a series of dialectical relationships: those between genuine emotive authenticity and performed artifice; sincere, innocent expression and knowing irony; intuitive nature and considered construction; pure representation and analyzed critique; society and the individual; modernity and nostalgia; and Mahler's conflicted identity as German and Bohemian Jew. The book's eight chapters examine these relationships by way of their musical expression in a dizzying flurry of music examples that demonstrate the inherent tensions that saturate Mahler's music—those very qualities that once confounded his critics and now allow his music to resonate with listeners in the postmodern age.

Writing about Mahler's songs, Theodor Adorno observed: "What they narrate is musical content itself; they recite themselves" (*Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 76). Johnson sees this very process as artificial, describing this continuing interplay of irony and expression as "the paradoxical ways in which Mahler's music proposes itself as authentic expression, called forth from a mysterious origin, and yet also draws attention to itself as something made—as artifice" (p. 93). Johnson views this dialectical relationship between expression and irony as essential to Mahler's music. He describes the composer's work as having "specific expressive power [that] derives directly from its own anxiety about that power" (p. 4). In other words, every attempt to express genuine emotion is negated by the knowledge that the act of its own expression is in and of

itself artificial. This tension between the authentic and the constructed permeates every facet of Mahler's compositions.

Johnson's text builds on a solid foundation of scholarship on musical narrative and then broadens it by taking the bold step of applying these various narrative theories to the entire catalog of one composer in a full-length monograph. Raymond Monelle (*The Sense of Music* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000]) provides an examination of Mahler's use of musical topics and motives. The work of Carolyn Abbate (*Unsung Voices* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996]) allows Johnson to interrogate the idea of voice in music and the temporal qualities of a musical narrative in Mahler's works. Anthony Newcombe ("Narrative Archetypes and Mahler's Ninth Symphony," *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. Steven Paul Scher [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 118–36) offers Johnson the concept of the plot archetype through which to look at Mahler. By way of Lawrence Kramer's work (*Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990]), Johnson explores the role of repetition in Mahler's musical narrative. Roland Barthes ("Music, Voice, Language," *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. R. Howard [New York: Hill and Wang, 1985], 278–85) examines the roles of performance and evaluation in musical meaning. And Edward Cone (*The Composer's Voice* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974]) provides the theory that composition is a reflection of the composer's persona which is then interpreted by the performer.

No work of Mahler's, not even his surviving student works and what remains of his failed attempts to write an opera, goes unexamined in Johnson's study. Of course, it is not uncommon to see essays discussing narrative function in a single piece or a small sampling of works, but typically the authors of these studies tend to cherry pick prime examples from a broader body of work. Very few published works of monograph length have emerged from established scholars exploring the function of narrative within the works of a single composer. This speaks not only to the uniquely narrative qualities of Mahler's musical style,

but also to Johnson's careful and thoughtful research and innovative work.

Using dialectical narrative strategies as a way to explore Mahler's oeuvre reveals relationships between even the most distant of the composer's works that would otherwise remain hidden. In order to do this, Johnson must call upon a dizzying number of works within a very short space to demonstrate a seemingly endless variety of meanings and connections. For example, in his extensive discussion of Mahler's use of fanfares (pp. 53–61) which he calls "both rhetorical, local devices for framing structural arrivals and the outward sign of narrative and programmatic concerns . . . [displaying] an element of realism [and] a sign of psychological distance" (p. 54), Johnson refers to no less than twenty-one distinct examples drawn from twelve compositions within roughly four pages of text (the opening of the First Symphony, the finale of the Second, "Um Mitternacht" from the Rückert Lieder, "Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz" from the *Wunderhorn* Lieder, the recapitulations in the first and last movements of the First Symphony, the first movement of the Seventh, the *Großer Appell* from the finale of the Second, the finales of the Fifth and Seventh, the opening of the Ninth, part 1 of the Eighth, the openings of the First and Third, part 2 of the Eighth, the third movement of the Fifth, the second movement of the Seventh, "Der Abschied" from *Das Lied von der Erde*, *Das klagende Lied*, and the third movements of the Third and Fourth Symphonies). Without easy and instant access to recordings of the composer's complete works or intimate familiarity with the music, the reader is at risk of becoming shell-shocked by the rapid fire of so many distinct musical impressions in such a short period of time, but the connections Johnson draws between these works are so convincing that the reader who takes the time to carefully consider them will be well rewarded.

While the vast quantity of musical references in the text allows the reader to view the enormous narrative potential Johnson hears in Mahler's music, this plenitude hints at the biggest problem with this monograph. As with so many things, the devil is in the details, and this is also true of Johnson's study. The most frustrating aspect of the book lies in the printed music

examples. The book identifies these examples within the text using two distinct numbering systems: with music example numbers corresponding to the chapter in which they appear, and with figure numbers that appear to be in no discernible order (twenty-two of the thirty-nine examples listed in the "List of Musical Examples" [p. xiii] feature these figure numbers, which range between 1.15 to 118; some numbers are subdivided; some do not appear at all). The text refers to some specific musical passages by example number and others by figure number, which seem to refer to resemble rehearsal numbers within the examples, though this is not made clear. This makes the process of locating the referenced music examples unnecessarily difficult, provided that they can be found at all. Readers will find themselves frustrated while flipping through multiple chapters searching for numbers, hoping to stumble upon the correct example. It appears as though last-minute decisions to omit examples were made without the necessary changes in the text, leaving the reader on a kind of musical snipe hunt. Furthermore, although the examples (when they can be located) greatly demonstrate issues brought up in the text, they appear to have been something of an afterthought. The type setting for them is sloppy (those on pp. 15, 46, 60, 78, and 142 look particularly slipshod), which detracts from the overall authority of the book. Note stems and slurs obscure articulation markings, stems point in the wrong direction, words in the lyrics do not have proper spacing, etc. Had these been rare oversights, they would have been easy to ignore, but their relative frequency, combined with the challenge one faces trying to find the examples in the first place, make it difficult to focus on the excellent writing. While it is doubtful that Johnson completed this aspect of the work himself, it does raise the question of why this carelessness was not observed and corrected during the editing process.

Julian Johnson's *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies* blazes innovative trails for scholars in several areas. For those who study narrative theory, Johnson offers a valuable template for full-length monographs discussing the work of a single composer. Mahler scholars can appreciate the continuous threads that

Johnson uses to draw connections between works from throughout Mahler's entire composing career. Johnson finds the perfect balance between specificity and generality, making this book useful to anyone interested in learning more about Mahler, musical narrative, or both.

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Inside *Pierrot lunaire*: Performing the Sprechstimme in Schoenberg's Masterpiece. By Phyllis Bryn-Julson and Paul Mathews. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009. [xvii, 235 p. ISBN 9780810862050. \$50.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, index.

The issue of how to handle the Sprechstimme in *Pierrot lunaire* is primary for any performer of this masterpiece, myself included. The number of variables present, from striking a balance of vocal color somewhere between speech and song, deciding how specific to be with pitch, expressing something immediate to an audience, not to mention finding a place of comfort in Schoenberg's sound world can overwhelm even the most adventurous performer. The widely divergent approaches taken in the distinguished discography of this masterpiece hardly make the decisions any easier. And why should the decisions be easy? Schoenberg himself vacillated wildly throughout his life in what he wanted in the Sprechstimme and in his opinions of performances of the work. The curious and dedicated performer must explore as many resources as possible regarding text, musical style, history, theory, and technique in order to make her own decisions. *Inside Pierrot Lunaire: Performing the Sprechstimme in Schoenberg's Masterpiece* by Phyllis Bryn-Julson and Paul Mathews presents the perspectives of both a performer and a theorist and makes some enlightening conclusions based on both new and old information.

At this point it is appropriate to define the term "Sprechstimme," as the authors do in the introduction. In the score of *Pierrot*, Schoenberg named the part of the reciter a Sprechstimme, or speech part, as one would refer to the part played by a flutist as a Flötenstimme, or flute part. It refers to the voice in terms of its role in the