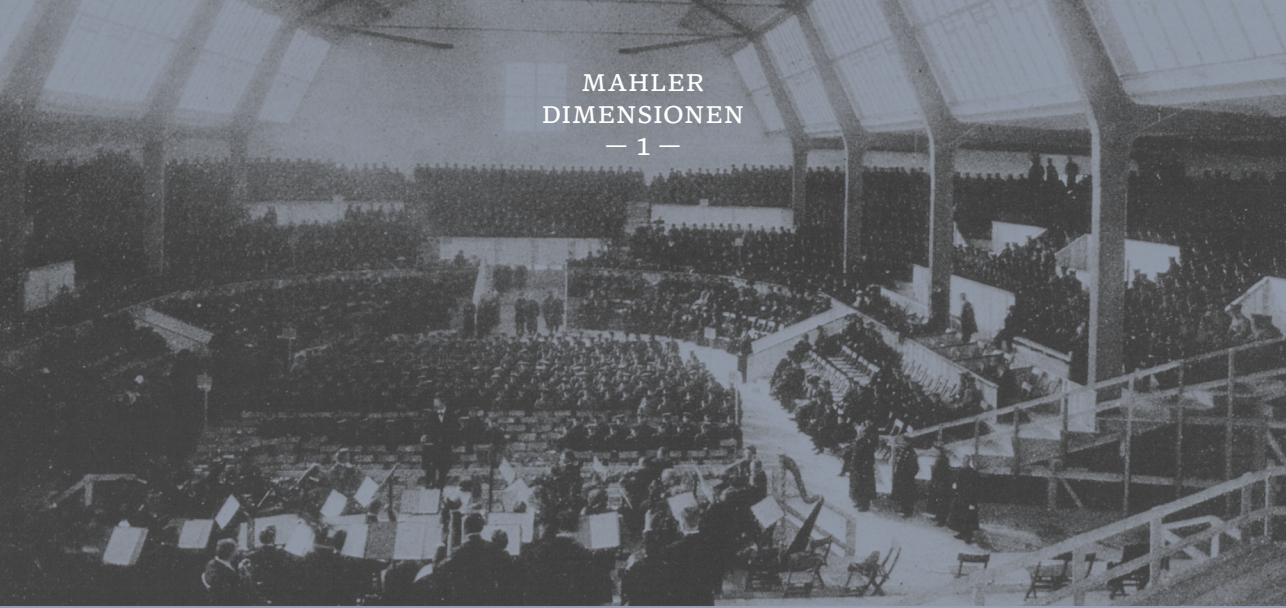




MAHLER
DIMENSIONEN

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TOBIAS JANZ & CHRISTIAN UTZ (HG./EDS.)

Gustav Mahlers Klang

*Zwischen Schaffensprozess,
Interpretation und Rezeption*

Gustav Mahler's Sound

Between Compositional Process,
Performance, and Reception

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“Mr. Mahler at the Harpsichord” Mahler, Bach, and America¹

Lóránt Péteri

In memory of László Somfai

A short obituary of Gustav Mahler’s, which was published in an American local daily, *The Buffalo Commercial*, recalled that he “was in Buffalo with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra last winter and music-lovers will remember his splendid performance of the Bach suite in which he played the solo part on the harpsichord.”² While *The Buffalo Commercial* did not mention any other composer or work from Mahler’s repertoire, the more sophisticated *Boston Evening Transcript*, which dedicated two columns to the musician upon his death, discussed Mahler’s performances of operas by Mozart and Wagner as well as his interpretations of orchestral pieces by Beethoven, Schumann, Berlioz, Richard Strauss, and the “‘new’ Parisians.” Nevertheless, the author of the Boston obituary also emphasized that “[h]e wove Bach’s music out of large and plastic strands.”³ Just two years earlier the notion of Bach as a core component of Mahler’s repertoire would have been unconceivable. Apart from a single performance of the E-major Concerto for Violin (BWV 1042), however, the conductor Mahler’s American Bach repertoire was identical with “A Suite from the Orchestral Works by Johann Sebastian Bach with Written-Out Continuo and Arranged for Concert Performance by Gustav Mahler.”⁴ The score was published by Schirmer in 1910, in New York, but the first performance of the work (or, for the moment, let us call it the arrangement) had already taken place on 10 November 1909 at Carnegie Hall. Mahler, the conductor, led the New York Philharmonic from a special keyboard instrument. The program promised Bach’s “Suite” to the audience, who only learned from the detailed guide that the arrangement included a total of five movements from the Second and Third Orchestral Suites in B minor and D major respectively (BWV 1067 and 1068).⁵

The questions that puzzle me about the score, which I hereinafter refer to as Mahler’s *Bach Suite*, are rather basic: why did Mahler create this score? And what are the reasons for

1 I have reached my press sources through the digital newspaper archives Newspapers.com and TimesMachine. My gratitude goes to Dr Elisabeth Reisinger for sharing her valuable experience in using American press sources in her research and for her commentaries on my manuscript. My thanks also go to Bill Levay, the digital archivist of the New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives, for his unwavering help.

2 N. N., “Musical News,” *The Buffalo Commercial*, 20 May 1911, 12.

3 H. T. P. [Henry Taylor Parker], “Gustav Mahler. Conductor, Composer, and Unique Personality,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, 19 May 1911, 10.

4 *Suite aus den Orchesterwerken von Joh. Seb. Bach mit ausgeführtem Continuo* zum Konzertvortrage bearbeitet von Gustav Mahler, New York: Schirmer 1910. The conductor Mahler’s European experiences in the performance of Bach’s music were even more limited: he conducted the choir “Wir setzen uns” from the *Matthäus-Passion*, and Ferruccio Busoni’s performance version of the Piano Concerto in D minor (BWV 1052), both on only one occasion, see Knud Martner, *Mahler’s Concerts*, New York: Kaplan Foundation 2010, 317.

5 “Programme”; H. E. K. [Henry Edward Krehbiel], “Notes on the Programme,” ID 7068, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives, <https://archives.nyphil.org/asset-management/2TTUGP9KZN97> (30/06/2026).

this arrangement's prominence in Mahler's repertoire with the New York Philharmonic? I suggest that the arrangement emerged at the intersection of three tendencies that characterize Mahler's work as a composer and performer. The first of these is Mahler's compositional reception of Bach. Mahler was an avid purchaser of the complete edition of Johann Sebastian Bach's works (the Bach-Gesellschaft Gesamtausgabe), whose volumes were published between 1851 and 1899. These scores were always to hand in his composing hut, which stood next to his summer house in Maiernigg and which he occupied with his family for seven years from the turn of the century.⁶ However, the influence of Bach had been already present in his œuvre from 1892 at the latest, both in stylistic and generic references, and in quotations from and allusions to specific works of Bach.⁷ Nevertheless, I do not think that the *Bach Suite* would have been created at all without the motivations of Mahler the conductor. One might consider the arrangements made by leading performers of 19th-century German concert life, from Felix Mendelssohn's performance version of the *Matthäus-Passion* to Hans von Bülow's transcription of the *Orchestral Suite in B minor*, as precursors to Mahler's *Bach Suite*.⁸ Bülow's transcription may have served as a model, all the more so since Mahler certainly attended a concert of 1892 in Hamburg, where the elder conductor led the performance of this work.⁹

In a recently published article, however, Hartmut Krones convincingly argues that when it comes to the reception of Bach by Mahler, the focus should be shifted away from the general history of Germanic Bach transcriptions towards specifically Viennese traditions in the performance and analysis of the Baroque master's music, to which Mahler was exposed from the beginning of his studies at the Conservatory.¹⁰ Yet I believe that the creation of Mahler's arrangement was also fostered by the concert life of New York and of other American East Coast cities, and by the growing role Bach's music played in this milieu in the early 20th century. The *Bach Suite* was written specifically for an American audience.¹¹ Finally, we must take into account a key role in performance that was far from self-evident around 1910, that is, playing the keyboard *continuo* and conducting simultaneously.¹² This was a role that Mahler chose for himself, which also meant that he was preoccupied with a renewal of the public concert as a genre and rethinking the function of the conductor.

6 Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler: The Wunderhorn Years*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1995, 346, and Hartmut Krones, "'But may my latter days [...] be dedicated to him! Mahler's Bach Gesamtausgabe and Mahler's 'Bach-Suite'," *News about Mahler Research* 76 (2023), 7–38: 8–13.

7 Mitchell, *The Wunderhorn Years*, 297, 345–362, 367, 374–385, Philip Otto Naegle, *Gustav Mahler and Johann Sebastian Bach*, Northampton: Smith College 1983, and Lóránt Péteri, "Form, Meaning and Genre in the Scherzo of Mahler's Second Symphony," *Studia Musicologica* 50 (2009), no. 3–4, 221–299: 250–251, 294–295.

8 See Norbert Bolin, "Mahler's Bach: About Mahler's Suite of Orchestral Works by J. S. Bach," *News About Mahler Research* 62 (2011), 15–30: 15–18.

9 For Mahler's presence at the concert held on 21 March 1892, see HLG-E1, 483. For the inclusion of the *Orchestral Suite in B minor* in the program, see Kenneth Birkin, *Hans von Bülow: A Life for Music*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011, 363–365.

10 Krones, "Mahler's Bach Gesamtausgabe and Mahler's 'Bach-Suite,'" 13–18.

11 Mahler conducted the *Bach Suite* in Europe only once, on 28 April 1910, in Rome, at the Regia Accademia di Santa Cecilia. The final program of the concert was the result of several changes, and the *Bach Suite*'s inclusion was not among Mahler's original plans, see HLG-E4, 759–761.

12 During his tenure as opera conductor in Vienna, Mahler restored the *secco recitativos* in Mozart's Italian operas and in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, breaking with the 19th-century practice of replacing them with spoken dialogues. He accompanied the recitatives at the harpsichord, see HLG-E3', 496. However, accompanying singers from the orchestra pit is of course a matter different from performing on the podium and conducting the orchestra.

The biographical moment in which Mahler worked on the *Bach Suite* can be justifiably regarded as the key turning point in his career as a conductor. Throughout a three-decade-long period commencing at the age of twenty, Mahler's primary work in the field of performance was conducting in the musical theatre. During these decades, his activity as a concert conductor merely supplemented his opera work and was aimed to no small degree at popularizing his own compositional output. From the age of ten until the end of his life, that is, for 41 years, Mahler gave a total of 324 concerts as a conductor or, much less frequently (and mainly at the beginning), as a pianist.¹³ Of these, 102 concerts (31% of the total) took place between November 1909 and February 1911, a period of merely thirteen months, excluding the summer break.¹⁴ His musical theatre performances between 1881 and 1909, on the other hand, totalled 2,020, and in March 1910 he topped this with further five performances.¹⁵ In the autumn of 1909, Mahler took over the New York Philharmonic as the principal conductor of the reconstituted orchestra, and embarked on the very first full-scale symphonic season of his life (he was 49 then). It was during these pivotal weeks that Mahler presented his *Bach Suite* as the opening number of the third concert of the season to a Manhattan audience, thereby raising high expectations as to the new era.¹⁶

During his season and a half at the helm of the New York Philharmonic, Mahler conducted the *Bach Suite* 19 times: eight times in New York and eleven times on the orchestra's tours in New England and in the Great Lakes region (TABLE 1).¹⁷ The tours were initiated by Mahler, and before that the orchestra had never performed outside New York City. Mahler was spurred on by, among other things, a competitive spirit: the local competitor, that is, the New York Symphony, had already completed several tours, while the then *superego* of American symphonic ensembles, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, had been regularly visiting New York.¹⁸

The repertoire of the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Mahler included 174 works by 52 composers, of which the *Bach Suite* had the second highest number of performances (TABLE 2).¹⁹ The eleven most frequently played pieces, with the exception of the *Bach Suite*, were all 19th-century works: the *Siegfried-Idyll* and excerpts from five stage works by Wagner, the "Pastorale" Symphony and the Third *Leonore* Overture by Beethoven, the *Symphonie fantastique* by Berlioz, and *Till Eulenspiegel* by Mahler's friend Richard Strauss.²⁰ So the significance of the *Bach Suite* in the repertoire is clearly highlighted by this context.

13 Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, xiv.

14 Calculation is based on data published in Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, 241–309.

15 Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, 365.

16 For the expectations, see HLG-E4, 376–383.

17 For the data of the first three columns of Table 1, see Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, 241–309: 317. For the fourth column ("By request"), see N. N., "Philharmonic Plays Well," *The Sun*, 26 October 1909, 7, advance publicity in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, 16 January 1910, 57, Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, 283, advance publicity in *The Pittsburgh Press*, 23 October 1910, 24, advance publicity in *The Buffalo Enquirer*, 3 December 1910, 7, advance publicity in *The Springfield Daily Republican*, 7 February 1911, 7. The *Bach Suite* was performed on 16 January 1910 by "the requests of the patrons of the several series of the Philharmonic concerts," see N. N., "In the World of Music," *The Daily Standard Union*, 16 January 1910, 17.

18 For the tours of the New York Symphony Orchestra, see Nancy Toff, *Monarch of the Flute: The Life of Georges Barrère*, New York: Oxford University Press 2005, 95, 99. For the presence of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in New York, see HLG-E4, 379–380.

19 Calculation is based on data published in Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, 317–339.

20 Ranking is based on data published in *ibid.*

Date (DD/MM/YYYY)	City, State	Concert Hall	"By request"
10/11/1909	New York City, NY	Carnegie Hall	
25/11/1909	New York City, NY	Carnegie Hall	+
26/11/1909	New York City, NY	Carnegie Hall	
08/01/1910	New York City, NY	Brooklyn Academy of Music	
16/01/1910	New York City, NY	Carnegie Hall	+
23/02/1910	New Haven, CT	Woolsey Hall	
24/02/1910	Springfield, MA	The Court Square Theater	
26/02/1910	Boston, MA	Symphony Hall	
01/11/1910	New York City, NY	Carnegie Hall	+
04/11/1910	New York City, NY	Carnegie Hall	+
06/11/1910	New York City, NY	Brooklyn Academy of Music	
05/12/1910	Pittsburgh, PA	Soldiers Memorial Hall	+
06/12/1910	Cleveland, OH	Grays Armory	
07/12/1910	Buffalo, NY	Convention Hall	+
08/12/1910	Rochester, NY	Convention Hall	
09/12/1910	Syracuse, NY	Wieting Opera House	
10/12/1910	Utica, NY	The Majestic Theater	
15/02/1911	Springfield, MA	The Court Square Theater	+
16/02/1911	Hartford, CT	Parsons Theater	

TABLE 1: The *Bach Suite* on the program of concerts given by Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic.

Rank	Composer	Title	Number of performances
1	Wagner	Prelude to Act I of <i>Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg</i>	20
2	Bach–Mahler	Suite for Orchestra	19
3	Wagner	Prelude to Act I and "Liebestod," from <i>Tristan und Isolde</i>	15
4	Wagner	<i>Siegfried-Idyll</i>	14
5	Beethoven	Symphony No. 6, F major, op. 68, " <i>Pastorale</i> "	11
6–7	Strauss	<i>Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche</i> , op. 28	10
6–7	Wagner	Overture to <i>Tannhäuser</i>	10
8–9	Wagner	Overture to <i>Der fliegende Holländer</i>	9
8–9	Wagner	Prelude to Act I of <i>Lohengrin</i>	9
10–11	Beethoven	<i>Leonore</i> Overture No. 3, op. 72b	8
10–11	Berlioz	<i>Symphonie fantastique</i> , op. 14	8

TABLE 2: The most frequently performed works in the shared repertoire of Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic, 1909–1911.

Mahler's personal motivation met public demand: the *Bach Suite* became a genuine success. It may have been a journalistic exaggeration to claim that "more requests for it [that is the *Bach Suite*] have been received than for any other single work."²¹ It is noteworthy, however, that seven out of the 19 performances were performed at the request of concert-goers, or, more specifically, of the orchestra's patrons (TABLE 1).²² With regard to the *Bach Suite*, the most frequently repeated cliché in the advance publicity for performances during the 1910–11 season was that it had been "the chief sensation of last year's Philharmonic concerts in New York."²³ As one critic of the New Haven performance put it, "[w]e doff our hat to the man who can make Bach interesting, even if he has to tamper a little with his score to do it."²⁴

Bach in New York, Bach in Boston

In the second half of the 19th century, an average of three works by Bach were played in public concerts in New York each year. Among these performances, the orchestral suites were prominently featured. The Third Suite in D major was performed 19 times in the city between 1867 and the turn of the century; the Second Suite in B minor was first performed in New York in 1874, with three further performances before 1900.²⁵

From the late 19th century onwards, a remarkable increase in the number of Bach performances can be observed. In the decade prior to the premiere of Mahler's *Bach Suite*, works by Johann Sebastian Bach were performed a total of 159 times (with an annual average of 15.9) at Carnegie Hall alone.²⁶ The New York Symphony Orchestra performed five movements from the Orchestral Suite in B minor in 1903 under the baton of Frank Damrosch.²⁷ His brother, Walter Damrosch, the principal conductor of the ensemble, conducted excerpts from the same work in 1906 and 1907 in New York, and also on a national tour of the ensemble.²⁸ Seventeen days after the premiere of Mahler's *Bach Suite*, at the very same venue, Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Orchestra performed the B-minor Suite in its entirety, for the

21 N. N., "Pastoral Symphony Has Mahler at Harpsichord [sic!]," *Buffalo Evening News*, 26 November 1910, 9.

22 For a general evaluation of the role of the patrons in the life of the New York Philharmonic, see Linda Whitesitt, "Women as 'Keepers of Culture': Music Clubs, Community Concert Series, and Symphony Orchestras," in: *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*, ed. by Ralph P. Locke and Cyrilla Barr, Berkeley: University of California Press 1997, 65–86: 76–77.

23 Quotation from N. N., "Music," *The Buffalo Enquirer*, 3 December 1910, 7. I have found virtually identical wording in six further advance publicity articles published in dailies between November 1910 and February 1911.

24 Quoted by HLG-E4, 672.

25 Mary J. Greer, "'The Public ... Would Probably Prefer Something that Appeals Less to the Brain and More to the Senses.' The Reception of Bach's Music in New York City, 1855–1900," in: *Bach Perspectives*, vol. 5: *Bach in America*, ed. by Stephen A. Crist, Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2003, 57–114: 59–66.

26 For the concerts given between 10 November 1899 and 9 November 1909, see Performance History Search at [carnegiehall.org: https://www.carnegiehall.org/About/History/Performance-History-Search?q=&dex=prod_PHS&cmp=Johann%20Sebastian%20Bach_&start=-2213485200&end=-1898038800](https://www.carnegiehall.org/About/History/Performance-History-Search?q=&dex=prod_PHS&cmp=Johann%20Sebastian%20Bach_&start=-2213485200&end=-1898038800) (30/06/2026).

27 Complete program of Symphony Concert for Young People, 28 November 1903, CH194331, <https://collections.carnegiehall.org/archive/Complete-program-of-Symphony-Concert-for-Young-People--November-28--1903-2RRM1TR3OP0F.html> (30/06/2026).

28 Concert program, 10 November 1906 (repeated the next day), Program ID 8167, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives, <https://archives.nyphil.org/asset-management/2TTUGP9KS9GP> (30/06/2026); Concert program, 19 January 1907, Program ID 13828, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives, <https://archives.nyphil.org/asset-management/2TTUGP9KQF04> (30/06/2026); Toff, *Monarch of the Flute*, 99.

season opening event of the *Symphony Concerts for Young People*.²⁹ During its New York tours in 1907, the Boston Symphony Orchestra played the work twice in Hans von Bülow's transcription, under the baton of Karl Muck.³⁰ The Third Orchestral Suite in D major was also included in the program of a New York concert given by the same ensemble in 1906, conducted by Wilhelm Gericke.³¹ Vassily Safonov, Mahler's predecessor at the helm of the Philharmonic, also opened his final season with Bach's music, namely, the Toccata and Fugue in F major for organ (BWV 540), arranged for large orchestra by Heinrich Esser in 1854.³²

It is not unreasonable, therefore, to assume that in the "brisk rivalry" between conductors and orchestras of the New York music scene, Mahler found it necessary to come up with his 'own' Bach, and immediately surpass the others.³³ As one New York critic put it: "To make a modern audience applaud Bach almost as tumultuously as it applauded Mr. Safonoff when he conducted Tchaikowsky – that is one of Mr. Mahler's achievements. Any one predicting that a year ago would have been laughed at."³⁴

By this time, a special instrument was already accessible for symphony orchestras in New York to play 18th-century music. At the Metropolitan Opera's commission, the Steinway firm reconfigured a baby grand piano by placing tacks on the hammers. The idea was that the timbre would be reminiscent of a harpsichord, while the volume of the sound would meet modern orchestral and operatic requirements. In 1906, the instrument was put into use, and was also included in the recitatives of Mahler's production of *Don Giovanni* in 1908. In the same year, Frank Damrosch employed this special instrument in his performance of Bach's *Matthäus-Passion*. The next time the modified piano appeared was at the premiere of Mahler's *Bach Suite*.³⁵ In the program booklets, the instrument was initially referred to as a "Bach Klavier," and later simply as a harpsichord.³⁶

In the first decade of the 20th century, however, New York audiences were introduced to an authenticist, or 'historically informed' performance of Baroque music in addition to the

29 Complete program of Symphony Concert for Young People, 27 November 1909, CH179362, <https://collections.carnegiehall.org/archive/Complete-program-of-Symphony-Concert-for-Young-People--November-27--1909-2RRM1TJ71R5I.html> (30/06/2026).

30 Complete program of Boston Symphony Orchestra, 23 March 1907, CH169745, <https://collections.carnegiehall.org/archive/Complete-program-of-Boston-Symphony-Orchestra--March-23--1907-2RRM1TJV14LC.html> (30/06/2026); Complete program of Boston Symphony Orchestra, 7 November 1907, CH174585, <https://collections.carnegiehall.org/archive/Complete-program-of-Boston-Symphony-Orchestra--November-7--1907-2RRM1TJ13VU9.html> (30/06/2026).

31 Complete program of Boston Symphony Orchestra, 15 March 1906, CH170222, <https://collections.carnegiehall.org/archive/Complete-program-of-Boston-Symphony-Orchestra--March-15--1906-2RRM1TJR5SAK.html> (30/06/2026). The *Overture* from the Third Orchestral Suite was also conducted by Karl Muck in another concert of the era, see Complete program of Boston Symphony Orchestra, 20 February 1908, CH174447, <https://collections.carnegiehall.org/archive/Complete-program-of-Boston-Symphony-Orchestra--February-20--1908-2RRM1TJ1APJ5.html> (30/06/2026).

32 Concert program, 13 November 1908 (repeated the next day), Program ID 1721, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives, <https://archives.nyphil.org/asset-management/2TUGP9KO15Q> (30/06/2026).

33 Quotation from N. N., "Music. The Season in New York," *The Times*, 20 April 1911, 8. For a historical perspective on the fierce competition of the symphonic field, see HLG-E4, 379–383.

34 A review on the concerts of 25 and 26 November 1909 is quoted by HLG-E4, 575.

35 Mary H. Wagner, *Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra Tour America*, Lanham: The Scarecrow Press 2006, 59–61.

36 Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, 243. The first printed program in which the wording "Mr. Mahler at the Harpsichord" appeared was of the concert given on 1 November 1910, at Carnegie Hall, see Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, 285.

symphonic or romantic interpretations of Bach. These influences reached New York mainly from Boston. The French-born British musician and instrument maker Arnold Dolmetsch, who pioneered the performance of Baroque instrumental music on period instruments, first visited the United States with his fellow musicians in 1903. During their tour they had given concerts in New York and in several cities where Mahler's *Bach Suite* was performed a few years later. Dolmetsch and his musicians performed the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto (BWV 1050) by Bach. The keyboard solo was performed by Arnold's second wife, Elodie Dolmetsch, at an original 18th-century harpsichord made by the renowned English instrument maker Jacob Kirkman. Following a second tour in 1904, Dolmetsch signed a contract with the Boston manufacturer of instruments Chickering & Sons to produce 'authentic' instruments of the renaissance and baroque periods.³⁷ In a concert in Boston in February 1909 devoted exclusively to Bach's music, Dolmetsch presented the Orchestral Suite in B minor with an ensemble of one flute, four violins (first and second parts together), two violas, and a continuo group including one cello, one double bass, and a harpsichord.³⁸ The flute solo was performed by André Maquarre, who played the same part with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 16 performances between 1906 and 1915, including the aforementioned guest productions of 1907 in New York.³⁹

A native of Cambridge (Massachusetts), Arthur Whiting, who worked in Boston during the decade following 1885, gave a harpsichord recital in New York in 1907, playing an instrument from Dolmetsch's Boston workshop.⁴⁰ Whiting founded a baroque chamber ensemble in New York, which was joined in 1909 by flutist Georges Barrère, who otherwise played the solo part of Bach's Orchestral Suite in B minor in five performances given by the New York Symphony Orchestra between 1906 and 1927.⁴¹

An odd blend of the symphonic approach and the authenticist inclinations was manifest in a production of Bach's Third Brandenburg Concerto (BWV 1048), which was brought to Manhattan's audiences by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in November 1910. For the continuo part, they used harpsichords which were "manufactured in Boston to imitate the old instruments," and made by Chickering & Sons, most likely at Dolmetsch's workshop. The performance was led by the ensemble's chief conductor, Max Fiedler, who "used his full complement of strings" in contrast to Bach's original instrumentation for three violins, three violas, three cellos, and one violone. Seeking a balance of sound, however, he "decided to have two harpsichords play in unison."⁴² Consequently, the keyboard instruments played the same fixed musical material, thus leaving absolutely no room for improvisation in their performance.

37 Larry Palmer, *Harpsichord in America: A Twentieth-Century Revival*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1989, <https://publish.iupress.indiana.edu/projects/harpsichord-in-america> (online version without page numbers, 30/06/2026), chapter 2 ("An Explorer Arrives: Arnold Dolmetsch").

38 E. B. H. [Edward Burlingame Hill], "Music and Drama. A Concert of Bach's Music by Mr. Dolmetsch," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 10 February 1909, 17.

39 Search result with no specific link at bso.org, see <https://archives.bso.org/Search.aspx> (30/06/2026).

40 Palmer, *Harpsichord in America*, Chapter 3 ("Dolmetsch's American Legacy").

41 Toff, *Monarch of the Flute*, 90, 99, 105–108; search result at <https://archives.nyphil.org> (30/06/2026).

42 Quotations from N. N. "Boston Symphony Concert," *The New York Times*, 11 November 1910, 9. Complete program of the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, 10 November 1910: <https://archive.org/details/bostonsymphonyor1011bost/page/n653/mode/2up> (30/06/2026).

A differently hybridized production of the *Matthäus-Passion* allowed Mahler's orchestral musicians to collaborate with Arnold Dolmetsch, right in the middle of the performance series of the *Bach Suite*. The liturgical work was performed as the opening event of the Fifth Bach Festival in Montclair, but also as part of a church service at the First Congregational Church on 20 May 1910 (Part I) and 21 May 1910 (Part II). A total of fifty members of the double orchestra, which accompanied the 250-voice choir, were "recruited from the ranks of the Philharmonic Society of New York, of which Gustav Mahler, a persistent and devoted exponent of Bach, is the director."⁴³ Arnold Dolmetsch presided at the harpsichord of a continuo group also including four string instruments. The performance was conducted by the young church musician and organist Clarence Dickinson.⁴⁴

The assertion that, prior to Mahler's initiative, "almost no music from the 18th century had been presented" in American concert halls is therefore clearly in need of thorough revision.⁴⁵ The claim that Mahler championed an "emphatically German" orchestral program as a reaction to the expansion of Italian and French repertoires on the East Coast is also problematic.⁴⁶ The conductors of the rival orchestras, namely the Damrosch brothers, Muck and Fiedler, had strong Germanic backgrounds, both personally and professionally. To be frank, their experience in Bach performance had been much more robust than Mahler's, at least until the Autumn of 1909. In my opinion, this was precisely the challenge that Mahler intended to meet. However, alongside the "German" Bach of musicians associated with Central Europe, a "historically informed" Bach was also present in some cities of the USA, mainly owing to the initiative of Western European artists. New York was an excitingly diverse arena for Bach interpretation in the early 20th century – and I think the eclectic features of Mahler's *Bach Suite* resonate with this milieu quite clearly.

An Arrangement, Its Performances, and Its Reception

Mahler's *Bach Suite* opens with the *Ouverture* of the Suite in B minor (**TABLE 3**). The next movement is in A–B–A form, based on two original movements of the Suite in B minor: the framing musical material is the *Rondeau* (which was originally also in second place) and the middle section is the *Badinerie* (i.e., the original final movement). The third and the fourth are two internal movements from the Suite in D major, which were also originally in succession: the *Air* and the *Gavotte*.

In the summer of 1909, Mahler was visited in his summer residence in Toblach by music critic Ernst Décsey, with whom the composer, hardly by chance, began to talk about Bach. Mahler expressed his respect for the Baroque master and said that he intended to conduct all of Bach's church cantatas, but, in keeping with his evolutionary view of music history, he also addressed the perceived imperfections in Bach's music:

⁴³ Harry C. Plummer, "A Bach Festival," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 21 May 1910, 46.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Quotation from Bolin, "Mahler's Bach," 19.

⁴⁶ Quotation from Bolin, "Mahler's Bach", 29–30.

no.	title	tempo	key	orchestration	keyboard continuo
I	Ouverture	Grave [Allegro] Lentement	B minor	flute, strings	organ, harpsichord
II	Rondeau Badinerie Rondeau	– Più mosso –	B minor	flute, strings	harpsichord
III	Air	Andante	D major	strings	–
IV	Gavotte I Gavotte II Gavotte I	–	D major	3 trumpets, timpani, 2 oboes, strings	harpsichord

TABLE 3: Mahler, *Bach Suite*, order of movements, orchestration.

[Bach] is dusty, but that does not diminish his greatness. Every era has its own means of expression, and a later era cannot naively enjoy the earlier one; it must resort to the help of education [...] His arias are too long, and in general, he still lacks the principle of contrast, as introduced by Haydn.⁴⁷

In this spirit, the order of the movements in Mahler's *Bach Suite* seems to attempt to break the perceived Baroque monotony of the original works. The cycle features two tonalities instead of one, and, in the second movement, two Bachian affects create a new complementarity. The orchestration also represents the principle of contrast: in the *Ouverture*, Mahler adds organ to the flute and string ensemble of the *Suite* in B minor, lending sacred sublimity and weight to the French overture. This is balanced by the earthly splendor of the *Gavotte*, which takes the role of finale – here Mahler is content with Bach's original instrumental palette. The intermediate movements are also faithful to Bach's orchestration. In all movements except the *Air*, the harpsichord, which plays the continuo devised by Mahler, contributes to the texture.

In a footnote to the score, Mahler stressed that "[b]oth the piano-part and the organ-part are to be regarded as a sketch which should bear, in general, the character of free improvisation."⁴⁸ This exhortation, reflecting the need for historical authenticity, is combined with the heterogeneous role of Mahler's harpsichord part in the musical fabric, where it sometimes provides harmonic continuity, sometimes simply an element of timbre. However, in several passages Mahler does use the harpsichord part as an extension of Bach's original polyphony: sometimes by means of imitation, but often by composing a free counterpoint (EX. 1).

In any case, the powerful sound of the reconfigured Steinway piano placed Mahler at the keyboard in a solo role, as is obvious from concert reviews and pieces of advance publicity, which, at the same time, never included any reference to the iconic flute solo in the first two movements.⁴⁹ As for the flute part, however, we cannot be sure that it maintained its soloistic

47 "Bach ist verstaubt, aber das ändert an seiner Größe nichts. Jede Zeit hat ihren Ausdruck, und eine spätere Zeit kann die frühere nicht naiv genießen, sie muß die Bildung zu Hilfe nehmen [...]. Seine Arien sind zu lang, und überhaupt, es fehlt bei ihm noch das Gesetz des Gegensatzes, wie es Haydn einführt." See Ernst Decsey, "Stunden mit Mahler: Notizen," *Die Musik* 10 (1911), 352–356: 354, also quoted by HLG-E4, 491.

48 Mahler, *Suite aus den Orchesterwerken von Joh. Seb. Bach*, 1.

49 See N. N., "Brilliant Concert. Excellent Work Done by Gustav Mahler and Philharmonic Orchestra," *The Buffalo Commercial*, 8 December 1910, 9. See also the obituary I quoted at the beginning of this chapter (note 2). I have

character throughout, since it had to be reinforced by additional flutes playing in unison in the *forte* sections, and even by clarinet if needed – according to Mahler’s instruction.

All of the recordings of Mahler’s *Bach Suite* I know combine the timbre of a large symphony orchestra with that of a ‘proper’ harpsichord – a blend which was definitely available to, but also declined by Mahler.⁵⁰ Mahler did love the reconfigured Steinway, naming it a “spinnet” and praising it for its rich tone. He was highly satisfied with the interplay between the orchestra and the keyboard part, and, in a letter, he concluded that “[t]he result was more intense (also in terms of tone-color) than any modern work.”⁵¹ A similar opinion was expressed in the reception. A reviewer of the December 1910 Syracuse performance put it this way:

The somewhat nasal voice of the harpsichord sounded through the bright fabric of the composition like some oriental pattern appearing and reappearing amid the broad color of the orchestral score in contrast and yet in exquisite harmony with the rest.⁵²

One press source gives accurate data about the impressive number of string players participating in the 1911 New England tour: 16 first violins, 12 second violins, 8 violas, 10 cellos, and 8 double basses were involved in the performances of the *Bach Suite*.⁵³ Mahler’s virtuosity in conducting a huge ensemble from the keyboard was often praised in the advance publicity of the production, and was also approved from a historically informed perspective. In her “musical comments,” Jennie Irene Mix, then a music critic in Pittsburgh, contextualized this remarkable aspect of the *Bach Suite*’s performances with reference to Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach’s discussion of the numerous benefits of leading an ensemble from the keyboard instrument.⁵⁴

The articulation marks and other notational features of Mahler’s arrangement of the *Bach Suite* suggest that he was aiming for historical authenticity in this respect and for a speech-like quality in the performance. His intention to develop a reading of the score that was independent of Romantic performance conventions and to go against the legato-centric practice, is clearly evident from the arrangement of the *Bach Suite*’s parts. (EX. 2, compare the first violin part in EX. 1).

also found five pieces of advance publicity communicating the aforementioned role of these instrumental parts in 1910–1911.

50 For a discography of the *Bach Suite*, see https://classite.com/composition/Johann-Sebastian-Bach_Gustav-Mahler_Suite-aus-den-Orches-c125855/related-editions (30/06/2026). A recent revival of the *Bach Suite* was executed with an ‘amplified harpsichord’ (New York, New York Philharmonic, 19 and 21 September 2024, conducted by Ken-David Masur), Program ID 14935, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives, <https://archives.nyphil.org/asset-management/2TTUGPG33UQTL> (30/06/2026).

51 Gustav Mahler to Paul Hammerschlag, 19 November 1909, quoted in English translation by Krones, “Mahler’s Bach Gesamtausgabe and Mahler’s ‘Bach-Suite,’” 26.

52 HLG-E4, 1080.

53 N. N., “The Philharmonic Society, And the Program Which This Famous New York Orchestra Will Play at Court Square Theater This Evening Under the Direction of Gustav Mahler,” *The Springfield Daily Republican*, 15 February 1911, 6.

54 Jennie Irene Mix, “Musical Comments and Current Events,” *The Pittsburgh Post*, 17 April 1910, 11. The citation can be identified as the English translation of a passage from the lengthy footnote adjoining paragraph 9 of the “Einleitung” of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, vol. 1, Leipzig: Im Schwickertschen Verlage 1787, 5, <https://digitale-sammlungen.ulb.uni-bonn.de/content/pageview/5517748> (30/06/2026). The first complete English translation of the *Versuch* appeared as *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, translated by William J. Mitchell, New York: Norton Company 1949.

EXAMPLE 1: Mahler, *Bach Suite*, iv, reprise of Gavotte I, orchestral texture and harpsichord part.

EXAMPLE 2: J. S. Bach, Third Orchestral Suite in D major BWV 1068, *Gavotte I*, first violin in the Bach-Gesellschaft Gesamtausgabe, ed. by Alfred Dörffel, 1885.

In a study on the notation of Mahler the composer, and in particular on the revisions of his own scores, Reinhold Kubik concludes that he “favoured [...] a short-range, declamatory style of ‘baroque’ articulation.”⁵⁵ On one occasion, Mahler even described the continuous use of legato and vibrato as a “liquefied pulp without substance or form.”⁵⁶ In the first half of his career, the composer expected musicians to have a continued familiarity with conventions of interpreting musical notation that had been codified, among others, by Leopold Mozart in his *Gründliche Violinschule* (1787). Mahler’s legendarily meticulous notational system, replete with performance instructions, was developed in part because he was confronted with the disintegration of that performance tradition.⁵⁷ Mahler’s affinity for baroque articulation was

55 Reinhold Kubik, “‘Progress’ and ‘Tradition’: Mahler’s Revisions and Changing Performance Practice Conventions,” in: PGM, 401–415: 404.

56 NBL-2, 41, quoted in Jeremy Barham’s English translation by Kubik, “Mahler’s Revisions and Changing Performance Practice Conventions,” 404.

57 Kubik, “Mahler’s Revisions and Changing Performance Practice Conventions,” 404–405. For the suggestion that Mahler may have read other 18th-century treatises on performance practice, see Krones, “Mahler’s Bach Gesamtausgabe and Mahler’s ‘Bach-Suite,’” 20.

also noted by the contemporary critics of his Bach arrangement, who confronted him with other performers' interpretations that were faithful to the letter of the score but alien to its spirit. Commenting on the Buffalo production of Mahler's *Bach Suite*, one critic praised the performance's flexible rhythms and subtle nuances of phrasing, and how this "made Bach seem the human being he was in his music and not the automaton that pedantry often makes him appear."⁵⁸

However, the popular success of the *Bach Suite* did not prevent the arrangement from being criticized for its eclecticism by advocates of historically informed performance. The foundations of the authenticist approach of the time are well reflected in a review by Arthur Whiting's former piano student, the composer and music critic Edward Burlingame Hill, in which he praised the interpretations of Bach's music by Arnold Dolmetsch:

The acuteness of his realization as to the essentiality of the archaic instruments, his exact conformity with the older interpretation of ornaments, and more especially his willingness to let the music speak in the idiom of its time rather than attempt the fruitless sacrilege of modernizing its sentiments [...].⁵⁹

From the 'historically informed' standpoint, both Max Fiedler's and Mahler's "attempts [...] to resuscitate the figured bass accompaniments which used to be improvised by the conductor on the harpsichord" were dissatisfying. While Mahler's reconfigured Steinway did not bring about "a return of the original atmosphere" in the *Bach Suite*, Fiedler's two harpsichords playing in unison in the Third Brandenburg Concerto "made little or no effect against the army of strings."⁶⁰ Some music critics objected to the disruption of the original order of movements in the *Bach Suite*, while others wanted to hear the sound of a proper harpsichord (and some even of a clavichord) instead of the reconfigured Steinway, and would have found a slimmer string section more transparent.⁶¹ The aforementioned flutist Georges Barrère found the notion of a reinforced flute part so scandalous that in December 1909 he launched a press attack against Mahler in the French journal *S. I. M. (Bulletin français de la Société internationale de musique [Section de Paris])*.⁶²

Reviews of performances of Mahler's *Bach Suite* often paid special attention to the production as a spectacle, and this does not seem to have been against Mahler's intentions. At each venue, a platform of three step-like blocks was built, and the reconfigured Steinway piano was positioned on it.⁶³ A press report noted the "picturesque effect produced by the fiery conductor, as he sat at the keyboard, sometimes playing, sometimes lifting a directing hand, much like a cavalry officer leading a charge."⁶⁴ In any case, having left the orchestral pits of opera houses, Mahler was apparently already looking for ways to strengthen the theatrical and performative power of the concert genre. The potential for heightened performativity

⁵⁸ N. N., "Superb Concert Philharmonic Orchestra," *The Buffalo Evening News*, 8 December 1910, 18.

⁵⁹ E. B. H., "A Concert of Bach's Music by Mr. Dolmetsch," 17.

⁶⁰ N. N., "Boston Symphony Concert," *The New York Times*, 11 November 1910, 9.

⁶¹ HLG-E4, 568, and Wagner, *Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra Tour America*, 76, 125.

⁶² HLG-E4, 603–604, 750–751.

⁶³ Wagner, *Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra Tour America*, 60.

⁶⁴ N. N., "Gustav Mahler's Program Given Here by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra," *The Springfield Weekly Republican*, 9 February 1911, 6.

associated with purely instrumental music, in addition to its elemental effect on the audience, does not seem to have escaped the attention of Mahler's rivals in New York. In 1911, the New York Symphony Orchestra under Walter Damrosch reissued Bach's Third Orchestral Suite in D major, with one of the pioneers of modern dance, Isadora Duncan featured as soloist.⁶⁵ Both spectacular New York productions of Bach's orchestral music were invited to Washington D.C. and scheduled for late February – early March 1911. Since both the Mahler and the Damrosch-Duncan concerts were organized by a certain T. Arthur Smith, they were advertised jointly. Regardless of the "Pastorale" Symphony, *Les Préludes*, and works by Weber included in the program, the advance publicity of the New York Philharmonic's concert focused exclusively on the fact that "Gustav Mahler will appear in the double capacity of orchestral director and soloist on the harpsichord. Bach Suite promises exceptional attractions."⁶⁶ Owing to Mahler's serious illness, the program had to be modified, and the performance of the *Bach Suite* was cancelled.

A Composition?

Ultimately, the question arises: does Mahler's work on the *Bach Suite* not transcend the creative spheres of arrangement and performance? The four-movement orchestral form, developed from the suites, seems to refer quite strongly to the symphony genre that is so inseparable from Mahler's identity as a composer. The symphonic character of the *Bach Suite* has been a recurrent theme in the literature since Volker Scherliess's article of 1986.⁶⁷ Others have already expressed skepticism about this thesis, raising legitimate questions about the identification of the second movement as a scherzo.⁶⁸ Yet I believe that Mahler refers specifically here to some particular ideas of Johannes Brahms regarding the symphonic form. The first is an agitated fast movement with a slow introduction and an epilogue in modest tempo; the second is an intermezzo in trio form, whose middle section has a nimble and sparkling character; the third is a lyrical slow movement; and the fourth is an energetic finale.⁶⁹ The composer was hesitant about the order of the intermezzo-like and the lyrical movements.⁷⁰ If he had committed himself to the reverse ordering, the *Bach Suite* would be even closer to the Brahms model.

65 Isadora Duncan with New York Symphony Orchestra, 15 February 1911, CH153095, <https://collections.carnegie-hall.org/archive/Isadora-Duncan-with-New-York-Symphony-Orchestra--February-15--1911-2RRM1TJIZNPO.html> (30/06/2026). Only some of the movements of the Suite in D major were performed (*Ouverture*, *Gavotte I and II*, *Bourrée*, *Gigue*), and Duncan only appeared in the *Gavotte* and the *Gigue*.

66 N. N., "Amusements," *The Evening Star*, 22 February 1911, 12.

67 Volker Scherliess, "Ganz nach Art der Alten. Mahler als Interpret Bachs – Ein Beitrag zur Rezeptionsgeschichte," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 147 (1986), no. 5, 4–8: 6.

68 Bolin "Mahler's Bach," 22.

69 Brahms's First Symphony has a proper slow introduction (*Un poco sostenuto*), while his Second Symphony begins with a lengthy section of slow pace (mm. 1–43 of the first movement); the last tempo instruction in both movements refer, explicitly or implicitly, to a moderation of the main tempo: *Meno allegro* in m. 495 of the First Symphony, and *in tempo, ma più tranquillo* in m. 477 of the Second Symphony. The intermezzo-like third movement of the Second Symphony is based on the alternation of a primary *Allegretto grazioso* (*Quasi Andantino*), and a secondary *Presto ma non assai*. The third movement's genre is also an intermezzo in Brahms's First and Third Symphonies.

70 Krones, "Mahler's Bach Gesamtausgabe and Mahler's 'Bach-Suite,'" 19.

The symphonic character is also enhanced by Mahler's bold decision that only one dance, the *Gavotte*, is present in a multi-movement form, developed from two baroque suites. The tonal plan, based on parallel minor and major keys, provides an adequate framework for a musical narrative that was often recycled since Beethoven, namely, the trajectory from the ominous to the jubilant. Due to the organ and the harpsichord parts, Bach's music is interwoven with Mahler's timbral and thematic commentaries. The intimate, soft string sound over the *pizzicato* Mahler prescribed for the cello and the double bass in the *Air* evokes the tone of the slow movements of his Fourth and Fifth Symphonies.⁷¹ The result was described by a reviewer of the *Bach Suite* as follows: "So softly modulated is the greater part of the movement that the throbbing undertones of the basses sounded like one's heartbeats heard above a deathlike stillness."⁷²

So what do we hear? An arrangement of Bach's works or a neoclassical Mahler symphony stubbornly clinging to its pre-existing sources? I believe there is some similarity between the employment of the organ in the fugue section of the first movement of the *Bach Suite* on the one hand, and in the double fugue of the First Part of the Eighth Symphony, on the other. In both cases, the continuum of a busy polyphonic texture of fast motion is segmented by the organ's loud entries which function as markers of the main harmonic and tonal milestones.⁷³

Walter Frisch, analyzing the neo-Baroque *fugatos* or "Bachian polyphony" of the finale of the Fifth Symphony, concluded that Mahler's reception of Bach was fundamentally different from that of his contemporaries, such as Busoni and Reger. While the latter, in the spirit of "historicist modernism," "took their Bach—and their musical history—very seriously," there was something ironic in Mahler's approach. This is not to say that Mahler was making fun of the composer, whom he also admired. But his music did sometimes humorously acknowledge the distance that separated him from the past as seen from the perspective of the present.⁷⁴

However, it would be misleading to describe Mahler's compositional reception of Bach merely in terms of distance and irony. Mahler sometimes refers to Bach's affects with a strong gesture of identification. In the first song of *Kindertotenlieder*, the downward leaning, lamenting vocal melody, the sighing semitone steps of the accompaniment, the asceticism of the texture, and the *klagende* expression of the oboe all combine to evoke the Aria (in fact, a duet with choir, No. 27a) "So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen" from the *Matthäus-Passion*.⁷⁵ The texts set to music are not only linked by the representation of personal loss at a general level. Both Picander's text for the aria and Rückert's poem evoke the *topos* of the motion of celestial bodies. But while the capture of Jesus is mourned by the universe as the lights go out ("Moon and stars for sorrow have gone down / because my Jesus has been taken"), the death of the child resonates only in the parent, who is left alone to grieve ("Now the sun prepares to rise as

71 See, e.g. the double bass part in measures 1 to 30 of the third movement of the Fourth Symphony, and in measures 1 to 18 of the fourth movement of the Fifth Symphony.

72 N. N., "Orchestral Concert. New York Philharmonic Plays to Handful of People," *The Springfield Union*, 16 February 1911, 8, also quoted by HLG-E4, 1150.

73 See the passage which commences six measures before rehearsal number 11 and concludes at rehearsal number 12 in the *Bach Suite*, and measures 355 to 391 in the Eighth Symphony.

74 Walter Frisch, *German Modernism. Music and the Arts*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2005, 182–185.

75 See measures 5 to 10 and 25 to 31 in Mahler's song on the one hand, and measures 1 to 4 and 17 to 19 in Bach's Aria, on the other.

brightly, / As though no misfortune had befallen in the night!").⁷⁶ Mahler's allusion to Bach makes this contrast poignantly explicit.

Mahler's sophisticated understanding of Bach at the beginning of the century is only heightened in the works and performance aspirations that followed a few years later. In any case, Bach's intense influence is present in the metaphysical fugue of the first part of the Eighth Symphony, premiered in 1910, and in the grotesque, ironic, disillusioned fugato sections as well as in the free polyphonic textures of the Ninth Symphony's *Rondo-Burleske*, composed in the summer of 1909. Mahler's compositional reception of Bach thus seems to have embraced a late Romantic desire for synthesis, the modernistic critique of (musical) language and a playful neo-classical historicism simultaneously. What is fascinating, is that at least a part of these aesthetic connections was already uncovered in the contemporary American discourse. Philip Greeley Clapp, a Bostonian composer and conductor, argued as early as 1910 that Mahler's and Richard Strauss's modernism greatly relied on Bach in terms of its radical linearity of part-writing, and some aspects of harmonic thinking. To make his argument more convincing, Clapp, who had recently attended the Munich premiere of Mahler's Eighth Symphony, referred to and analyzed in detail a particular passage of that work.⁷⁷

Philological Observations

Philological research on Mahler's *Bach Suite* has been initiated by Hartmut Krones, whose recent study describes in detail Mahler's hand-written entries in the volumes of the Bach-Gesellschaft Gesamtausgabe, which the composer personally possessed. As to the volume of the orchestral works (hereinafter referred to as **A**, see **TABLE 4**), Krones convincingly argues that Mahler's entries concerning articulation, dynamics, and numbering of the movements are actual preparations for the edition of his *Bach Suite*.⁷⁸ The philological inquiry, however, can be continued. For reasons of space, I will focus here on just two important sources of Mahler's performance instructions.⁷⁹

One of these is *Joh. Seb. Bach's Werke. Für Orchester. Gesamtausgabe für den praktischen Gebrauch*, a "practical" edition of the orchestral works equipped with performance instructions. The second and third volumes of this series contain the Second and Third Orchestral Suites respectively (hereinafter referred to as **B** and **C**).⁸⁰ The relevance of **B** and **C** in the creation of the *Bach Suite* is disclosed, curiously, by some of Mahler's autographic entries in **A**. Capital letters from "A" to "E," which Mahler seems to have used to divide the *Ouverture* of the B-minor Suite into larger sections, are actually rehearsal marks taken from **B**.⁸¹ The fact

⁷⁶ Translations by Peggy Cochrane and Richard Stokes respectively.

⁷⁷ I identify the locus discussed by Clapp as the passage between rehearsal numbers 19 and 21, with special regard to the last four measures, see Philip Greeley Clapp, "A Bach Festival in Germany," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 10 December 1910, 6.

⁷⁸ Krones, "Mahler's Bach Gesamtausgabe and Mahler's 'Bach-Suite,'" 18–29.

⁷⁹ In a separate study, I would like to discuss the genesis of the *Bach Suite* from a philological perspective.

⁸⁰ For the editors and publication years of **B** and **C**, see the Bach Printed Music Database, <https://bachbib.bw.edu/script/bach2.pl?23=52612>, <https://bachbib.bw.edu/script/bach2.pl?23=47935>; <https://bachbib.bw.edu/script/bach2.pl?23=48524>, <https://bachbib.bw.edu/script/bach2.pl?23=45720> (30/06/2026).

⁸¹ For the claim disputed in the main text, see Krones, "Mahler's Bach Gesamtausgabe and Mahler's 'Bach-Suite,'" 19.

Sign	Series	Volume	Editor / Arranger	Publisher	Year of publication	Type
A	Johann Sebastian Bach's Werke. Herausgegeben von der Bach-Gesellschaft zu Leipzig	XXXI/1: Orchesterwerke [including BWV 1067 and 1068]	Alfred Dörrfel	Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel	1885	score
B	Joh. Seb. Bach's Werke. Für Orchester. Gesamtausgabe für den praktischen Gebrauch	2: Ouvertüre in H moll [BWV 1067]	Anon.	Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel	c. 1900	score
			Max Seiffert		1891	parts
C	Joh. Seb. Bach's Werke. Für Orchester. Gesamtausgabe für den praktischen Gebrauch	3: Ouvertüre in D dur [BWV 1068]	Anon.	Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel	1900	score
			Julius Otto Grimm		1892	parts
D	--	Joh. Seb. Bach. Suite in H moll [BWV 1067]	Hans von Bülow	Leipzig, Jos. Aibl Verlag	1892	score
E	--	Suite aus den Orchesterwerken von Joh. Seb. Bach mit ausgeführtem Continuo	Gustav Mahler	New York: G. Schirmer	1910	score

TABLE 4: Editions and arrangements of BWV 1067 and BWV 1068.

that letter “F” by Mahler’s hand appears in both the *Rondeau* and the *Air* (in measures 11 and 27 respectively) has nothing to do with his likely hesitation about the order of the inner movements.⁸² Instead, Mahler merely inserted the rehearsal marks, appearing in the corresponding loci of **B** and **C**, into **A**. It seems highly probable, therefore, that Mahler had copies of **B** and **C** in hand when preparing the printed edition of the *Bach Suite*.

For the performances of the *Bach Suite*, the New York Philharmonic used copies of the orchestral parts of **B** and **C** containing a vast number of pencil written entries, which were blended with pages written by copyists.⁸³ Before the publication of the arrangement, Mahler also conducted from the scores of **B** and **C**.⁸⁴ Mahler obviously rejected the majority of the performance instructions of these editions, but not all of them. He incorporated some of the instructions into his arrangement, most notably in certain passages of the *Air* and the *Gavotte* in terms of dynamics and articulation. As to the *Air*, Mahler’s dynamics for the first violin in the second section of the movement (from measure 7 onwards) includes each of the eight instructions present in **C** (namely, *crescendo*, *decrescendo*, and *crescendo* hairpins respectively; *forte*, *decrescendo* hairpin, *piano*, and *poco crescendo*; and finally, a *crescendo* hairpin, FIG. 1 and EX. 3). In **A**,

⁸² For the claim disputed in the main text, see, *ibid.*

⁸³ Gustav Mahler, *Bach Suite*, orchestral parts, ID 7068, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives, <https://archives.nyphil.org/asset-management/2TTUGPV4LQHW> (30/06/2026).

⁸⁴ BWV 1067, score with Mahler’s annotations, ID 6185, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives, <https://archives.nyphil.org/asset-management/2TTUGPLNCIOM> (30/06/2026), BWV 1068, score, ID 6190, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives, <https://archives.nyphil.org/asset-management/2TTUGPW84MEX> (30/06/2026).

a tie appears between the second and third F# of the first violin in measure 15 – an instruction that is omitted by Mahler in the printed version of the *Bach Suite* (hereinafter referred to as *E*).⁸⁵ This decision, again, is in full accordance with the text of *C* (FIG. 1 and EX. 3).

There are also some remarkable similarities between *E* and *C* in terms of the articulation and dynamics of *Gavotte I*. *Forte* directions can be found at the beginning of measure 1 and in the middle of measure 5 in both scores. In *E*, *piano* is prescribed in the middle of measure 3, then a *decrescendo* hairpin appears in measure 4 of the two violin parts. At the same time, one finds a *decrescendo* hairpin occupying all parts in measure 4 of *C*. The upward gesture of the Continuo at the beginning of measure 5 is to be played legato according to both scores (FIG. 2 and EX. 4).⁸⁶

In *Gavotte II*, Mahler equips the triadic motif of the three trumpets with an opening *piano* followed by a measure-long *crescendo* hairpin which leads to a *fortissimo* with a small hairpin indicating an accent on the last note of each instrument (see rehearsal number 29 of the fourth movement in *E*).⁸⁷ All but one element of this dynamic structure can be traced back to *C*. The sole difference is that the dynamic target in *C* is less extreme (*mezzoforte*). Mahler's *Grave* and *Andante* tempo markings for the first and third movements of *E* can be traced back to *B* and *C* respectively.

It seems very likely, however, that Mahler also studied Bülow's transcription of the Suite in B minor with great care (hereinafter referred to as *D*). Mahler's decision about the performance of the fugue's *Themenkopf* in the *Ouverture* clearly flies in the face of *B*. In terms of dynamics, both *D* and *E* prescribe *forte*, as opposed to the *piano* of *B* (FIG. 3 and EXX. 5 and 6). As far as the articulation is concerned, one finds a legato slur between the second and third notes of the *Themenkopf* in *B*, while legato slurs connect the first and second, and then the third and fourth notes respectively in *D* and *E*. Mahler's performance notion can be, therefore, traced back to *D*, which also seems to be the source of Mahler's *staccato* on the second note of the motif.⁸⁸

The opening sigh motif of the refrain in the *Rondeau* is presented with a legato slur and also with a *staccato* on the second note of the motif in *A* (FIG. 4A). These instructions are complemented by an up-bowing sign at the beginning (mistakenly included in the flute part alongside the strings), by a *decrescendo* hairpin above the sigh motif, and by an accent sign (small hairpin) under the first note of the second measure in *B* (FIG. 4B). In *D*, one finds an accent sign (small hairpin) on the first note instead of a *decrescendo* connecting two notes (FIG. 4C). Mahler's choice, again, seems to fall on *D*, while he also follows his habit of replacing the quarter note at the end of a gesture by an eighth note followed by an eighth-note rest (FIG. 4D).

Finally, the dense alternation of *pizzicato* and *arco* passages in the first violin, second violin, and viola parts of the *Badinerie* is a shared feature of *D* and *E*.⁸⁹ Sixteen out of the twenty loci where Mahler's arrangement switches from one string technique to the other are identical with those in Bülow's transcription.

85 Krones, "Mahler's Bach Gesamtausgabe and Mahler's 'Bach-Suite,'" 20.

86 All of these instructions are absent from *A*.

87 Legato slurs in the passage in question are equally included in *A*, *C*, and *E*.

88 All of these instructions are absent from *A*.

89 Krones, "Mahler's Bach Gesamtausgabe and Mahler's 'Bach-Suite,'" 13.

Handwritten musical score for Violino I of Bach's Air, BWV 1068. The score is written on five staves in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The tempo is marked "Air. (Andante.)". The score is heavily annotated with blue and red ink. Blue annotations include slurs, accents, and dynamic markings such as *p*, *f*, *poco cresc.*, and *dim.*. Red annotations include slurs, accents, and dynamic markings such as *f*, *p*, and *tr.*. The score is divided into three sections by Roman numerals: III, IV, and V. The title "Violino I." is written above the first staff. The score is signed "Bach" in the bottom right corner.

FIGURE 1: Bach, BWV 1068, *Air*, First Violin part of C with hand-written annotations for the performances of Mahler's *Bach Suite*, ID 6187–101, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives.

Printed musical score for the beginning of Gavotte I, BWV 1068, for a full orchestra. The score is written on ten staves in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The tempo is marked "Gavotte I. (Allegro.)". The instruments listed on the left are Tromba I., Tromba II., Tromba III., Timpani., Oboe I., Oboe II., Violino I., Violino II., Viola., and Continuo. The score is marked with dynamic markings such as *f* and *tr.*. The score is signed "Bach" in the bottom right corner. The page number "Part. B. 1365." is written at the bottom.

FIGURE 2: Bach, BWV 1068, beginning of Gavotte I, C, ID 6190, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives.

(Andante)

EXAMPLE 3: Mahler, *Bach Suite*, iii: *Air*, E.

Tromba 1 in D
 Tromba 2 in D
 Tromba 3 in D
 Timpani D-A
 Oboe 1
 Oboe 2
 Violino 1
 Violino 2
 Viola
 Continuo

EXAMPLE 4: Beginning of the fourth movement (Gavotte) of Mahler's *Bach Suite, E*.

Flauto.
 Violini

Allegro.
 ad libitum.

EXAMPLE 5: Bach, BWV 1067, *Ouverture*, beginning of the fugue (Allegro), D.

Flauto trav. *f* *p*

Violino 1 *f* *p*

Violino 2 *f*

EXAMPLE 6: Beginning of the fugue ([Allegro]) in the first movement of Mahler's *Bach Suite, E*.

Allegro)

Part. B. 1364.

FIGURE 3: Bach, BWV 1067, *Overture*, beginning of the fugue (Allegro), *B*, with Mahler's autographic entries for the performances of his *Bach Suite*, ID 6185, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives.



FIG. 4A



FIG. 4B



FIG. 4C



FIG. 4D

FIGURE 4: BWV 1067, beginning of *Rondeau*, Flute

A. source A

B. source B (ID 6185, New York Philharmonic Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives)

C. source D

D. Mahler, *Bach Suite*, ii (source E)

The Historical Concerts

The premiere of the *Bach Suite* took place at the first event of the New York Philharmonic's *Series of Historical Concerts* whose concept and actual program were elaborated by Mahler.⁹⁰ Zoltan Roman suggests that Mahler's inspiration for the series came from a friend, Guido Adler, the founder of institutional Austrian musicology.⁹¹ Compared with Guido Adler's *historische Konzerte*, organized in Vienna in 1892, or with similar contemporary efforts, such as the concert series of Arnold Dolmetsch and his fellow musicians in Boston, it must be said that Mahler did not take the mission of presenting historical rarities and forgotten early repertoire too seriously.⁹²

In the opening concert, Bach's Violin Concerto in E major (BWV 1042), arias from operas of Handel and Grétry, a movement from Rameau's ballet for his opera *Dardanus*, and Haydn's Symphony No. 104 ("London") were performed after the *Bach Suite*. In all but the Haydn, Mahler conducted from the keyboard, playing the continuo.⁹³ It was not the first appearance of either composer at New York's symphonic concerts, but works by Rameau and Grétry were undoubtedly rarities, and it was only the third time that Haydn's last symphony had been scheduled for the Philharmonic's program.⁹⁴ The second concert, which concluded with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and included works by Haydn and Mozart, entered the familiar territory of the 'Viennese Classics.'⁹⁵ With the Schubert–Mendelssohn–Schumann program of the third evening, the series attached itself to the core repertoire of Western concert halls. The fourth concert in the series included a Mahler work, namely, *Kindertotenlieder*, juxtaposed with the work of other composers who were born in or migrated to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Brahms, Weingartner, Wolf, Dvořák, and Smetana).⁹⁶ The fifth concert presented the 'New German School' (Wagner and Liszt), while the last concert included works by Bruckner, Pfitzner and Richard Strauss.⁹⁷

90 Mahler's autograph sketch for the program of a "Historical-Cycle" is published as a facsimile in Zoltan Roman, *Gustav Mahler's American Years 1907–1911: A Documentary History*, Stuyvesant: Pendragon 1989, 271.

91 Roman, *Gustav Mahler's American Years 1907–1911*, 295.

92 For Adler's enterprise embracing chapters of music history from the 11th to the 18th century, see Theophil Antonicek, *Die internationale Ausstellung für Musik- und Theaterwesen Wien 1892*, Vienna: printed by author 2013, 110–113, and María Cáceres-Piñuel, "From Historical Concerts to Monumental Editions: The Early Music Revivals at the Viennese International Exhibition of Music and Theater (1892)," *Musilogica Austriaca: Journal for Austrian Music Studies* (3 April 2021), <https://www.musau.org/parts/neue-article-page/view/101> (30/06/2026). For Dolmetsch's concerts programming of 16th-, 17th-, and 18th-century music in Boston between 1907 and 1910, see Palmer, *Harpsichord in America*, Chapter 3 ("Dolmetsch's American Legacy").

93 The soloist of the concerto was Theodore Spiering; see Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, 243.

94 Prior to Mahler's first historical concert, both Rameau's and Grétry's music was included in the program of seven orchestral concerts at Carnegie Hall, which opened in 1891; see https://www.carnegiehall.org/About/History/Performance-History-Search?q=&dex=prod_PHS&cmp=Jean-Philippe%20Rameau_&start=-2492989200&end=-1898038800 (30/06/2026), https://www.carnegiehall.org/About/History/Performance-History-Search?q=&dex=prod_PHS&cmp=Andr%C3%A9-Ernest-Modeste%20Gr%C3%A9try_&start=-2492989200&end=-1898038800 (30/06/2026).

95 8 December 1909; see Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, 247.

96 26 January 1910, with Ludwig Wüllner (tenor); see *ibid.*, 255.

97 2 March 1910 and 30 March 1910; see *ibid.*, 263, 269.

The ‘historical’ nature of the series had already been questioned by contemporary critical reception. In a review about the fourth concert, the author impertinently emphasized that “[t]he exact relation of these songs [by Weingartner, Wolf and Mahler] to musical history is not clear, for neither Hugo Wolf, who is dead, nor the two conductor-composers, who are very much alive, have established their final positions in the long perspective of art.”⁹⁸

Mahler himself declared at the beginning of the season that “for students and others, and for the education of my orchestra, [there will be] the historical cycle, in which I shall try in six evenings to present an outline of the music, chronologically, from Bach down to the modern composer.”⁹⁹ In the context of the performance history presented in this chapter, some doubt can be raised about the specific educational impact of the historical series – apart from the obvious fact that any rehearsal or concert led by Mahler provided any orchestra with an enormous learning opportunity.

The name “historical” thus seems to be more a brand for the *Bach Suite* than a true description of the overall concept behind the concert series. The concerts were less about history than about Mahler’s multi-faceted self-identification. Mahler the representative of the Great German Tradition, Mahler the man from the Habsburg Lands, Mahler the conductor, Mahler the composer, Mahler the modern voice of Bach – these were the protagonists of the series.

In the summer of 1909, Mahler said:

In Bach, polyphony reached the peak, then the thread suddenly broke. Folk music made its way in, Haydn and Beethoven opened the door to it; but, considered *cum grano salis*, they were not as *skilled* as Bach. The ideal for the future would be artists who could execute Bachian polyphony just as well as they could sing folk music.¹⁰⁰

One might wonder whether Mahler, while discussing Bach, history, and the future, had spoken about himself – and, particularly, his Ninth Symphony in progress.

Concluding Remarks

The eclecticism of Mahler’s *Bach Suite* was rooted in a variety of sources, revealing the composer’s Vienna-bound need for a speech-like articulation based on Baroque conventions, his familiarity with Romantic Bach arrangements, his experimental approach to timbre, and his need to respond to the richness and pluralism of early 20th-century American Bach interpretation. The most modern feature of the performances of the *Bach Suite* was also the most historical. While representing a truly authenticist performance strategy, the personal union of continuo playing and conducting elevated the concert genre to a new, heightened level of

⁹⁸ N. N., “The Philharmonic Concert,” *The Sun*, 27 January 1910, 7.

⁹⁹ N. N., “Mahler Talks About Music,” *The Sun*, 31 October 1909, 8.

¹⁰⁰ “In Bach hat sich die Polyphonie zur Höhe entwickelt, dann riß der Faden plötzlich ab. Die Volksmusik drang ein, Haydn und Beethoven öffneten ihr die Tür; aber sie waren, *cum grano salis* betrachtet, nicht solche *Könnner* wie Bach. Das Ideal der Zukunft wären Künstler, die die Bachsche Polyphonie ebenso ‘könnten’, wie sie Volksmusik sangen.” Decsey, “Stunden mit Mahler,” 354, also quoted by HLG-E4, 491.

performativity, with the soloist-conductor-composer at its core. The theatricalization of the public concert genre was also a crucial aspect of Damrosch's and Duncan's Bach productions (1911), as well as the Munich premiere of Mahler's Eighth Symphony on 12 September 1910.¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, the connections between the *Bach Suite* and Mahler's compositional reception of Bach are equally complex. Even if it is not self-evident to consider the *Bach Suite* as a neo-classical Mahler symphony, one can venture to say that the composer's unparalleled composition-al-cum-performative work on Bach's orchestral music was a genuine personal *opus* – and one of his final achievements.¹⁰²

This chapter re-contextualizes Gustav Mahler's last published score (*Suite aus den Orchesterwerken von Joh. Seb. Bach*, 1910), and the twenty performances of his Bach arrangement he conducted from the keyboard within a period as short as 14 months. Why did Mahler create this score and what are the reasons for the prominence of this arrangement in his repertoire with the New York Philharmonic? I suggest that the arrangement emerged at the intersection of three tendencies that characterize Mahler's work as a composer and performer. The first of these is his compositional reception of Bach. In order to understand its relevance, it is better to regard the *Bach Suite* not only as a compilation of the Baroque composer's re-arranged movements, but also as an "autonomous" work of art, a piece of Mahler's œuvre. The *Bach Suite* can be fruitfully linked with a neoclassical orientation, recurring from time to time in Mahler's art since the Fourth Symphony. It also seems to be part of a series of stylistically diverse answers to the "historicism modernist" Bach reception of his Austro-German contemporaries. However, the *Bach Suite* would not have been created at all without the motivations of Mahler the conductor. His arrangement was fostered by the concert life of New York and of other cities of the American East Coast, as well as by the growing role played by Bach's music in this milieu in the early 20th century. The *Bach Suite* was written specifically for an American audience. The eclectic features of Mahler's score and its performances seem to reflect on the simultaneous presence of the "romantic/symphonic" and the "authenticist/historically informed" interpretations of Bach's music in American concert halls. Finally, we have to take into account a key role in performance that was far from self-evident around 1910, that is, playing the keyboard *continuo* and conducting simultaneously. This was a role that Mahler chose for himself, which also meant that he was preoccupied with a renewal of concert as a genre and rethinking the function of the conductor. While being a concert piece, the *Suite* was received by its contemporary audiences as a kind of spectacle in which bodily presence, theatricality, and performativity were decisive components.

Schlagworte/Keywords: arrangement, Aufführungspraxis, Bearbeitung, Cembalo, Gustav Mahler, harpsichord, J. S. Bach, New York Philharmonic, Suite aus den Orchesterwerken von J. S. Bach, performance practice, reception history, Rezeptionsgeschichte

¹⁰¹ For the theatrical dimension of the production of the Eighth Symphony, see Peter Revers, "Gustav Mahler's Eighth Symphony and Max Reinhardt's Concept of *Massenregie*," in: *Rethinking Mahler*, ed. by Jeremy Barham, New York: Oxford University Press 2017, 203–216.

¹⁰² An early version of this chapter has been published in Hungarian, see Lóránt Péteri, *Gustav Mahler körút: Hét tanulmány* [Gustav Mahler Boulevard: Seven Studies], Pécs: Kronosz 2023, 106–122. One of my articles, also published in Hungarian, discusses overlapping topics, see Lóránt Péteri, "Bach, continuo és billentyűs hangszerek az amerikai keleti parton a 20. század elején" [Bach, Continuo, and Keyboard Instruments on the East Coast of the United States at the Beginning of the 20th Century], *Magyar Tudomány* 186 (2025), no. 12, 2436–2445.

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