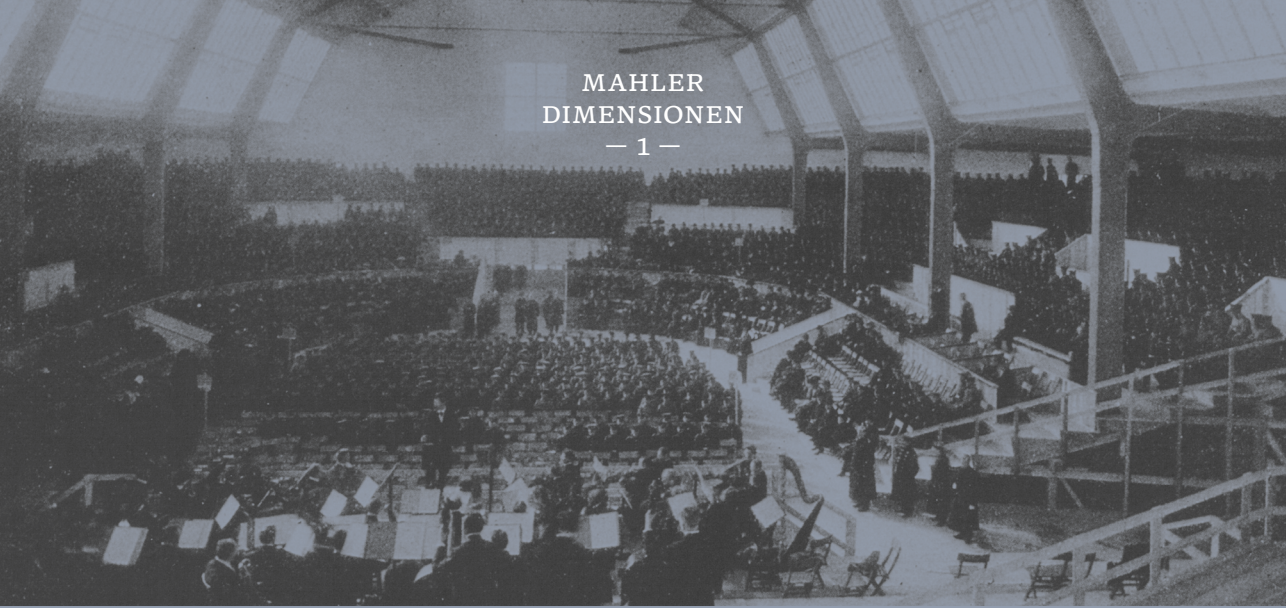




MAHLER
DIMENSIONEN

— 1 —

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

Gustav Mahlers Klang

*Zwischen Schaffensprozess,
Interpretation und Rezeption*

Gustav Mahler's Sound

Between Compositional Process,
Performance, and Reception

HOLLITZER
— H —

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Gustav Mahler's Sound: Between Compositional Process, Performance, and Reception

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H

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“Music that I think I love more than any other”

Benjamin Britten’s Encounter with the Sound of Gustav Mahler

Robert Samuels

The link between Benjamin Britten and Gustav Mahler has never been doubted.¹ That colossus of Mahler studies, Donald Mitchell, was convinced of it, referring to “Britten’s passion for Mahler” and describing Mahler as “one of the most important of musical influences” on the British composer.² Mitchell devoted most of his scholarly life to study of these two composers, and the Festschrift presented to him on his seventieth birthday is entitled *On Mahler and Britten*.³ It is a curious feature of this volume, however, that there is no chapter within it devoted to the study of Britten and Mahler; every one is a study of one composer or the other. The more one considers this, the odder it seems; Mitchell himself never wrote in detail on the nature of what he saw as a self-evident connection. There has been, to my knowledge, just one attempt to explore the relationship between the two composers, Stephen Downes’s substantial book chapter, “Naïve and Sentimental: Britten and Mahler” of 2013.⁴ Otherwise, authors have quite often pointed out a close similarity or suspected quotation of a Mahler theme in a work by Britten;⁵ but the paucity of detailed studies of these two figures is a curious lacuna within scholarship of the early 20th century.

This chapter aims, in a modest way, to begin to fill this gap in knowledge. Its starting point is the simple question of exactly how Britten came to know Mahler’s music, and which works most caught his imagination. In accordance with the overall theme of this volume, a central topic of interest for me is how the sound of Mahler’s music was received by Britten; both the methods of dissemination which enabled him to hear it, and his reception of it as a developing composer. My time frame is therefore principally the period from 1930, when Britten first heard a work by Mahler, up to his departure from Britain for America in 1939, where the outbreak of war compelled him to stay for several years. During this time, Britten actively sought out Mahler’s music; it may fairly be described as the period in which Britten’s

- 1 I am indebted to Nicholas Clarke, together with the other staff of the Britten-Pears Archive at The Red House, Aldeburgh, for his friendly welcome and invaluable assistance in making available to me the archive materials on which this chapter depends.
- 2 Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed, and Mervyn Cooke (eds.), *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976*, vol. 1, London: Faber and Faber 1991, 494.
- 3 Philip Reed (ed.), *On Mahler and Britten: Essays in Honour of Donald Mitchell on His Seventieth Birthday* (Aldeburgh Studies in Music, vol. 3), Woodbridge: Boydell 1995.
- 4 Stephen C. Downes, “Naïve and Sentimental: Britten and Mahler,” in: *After Mahler: Britten, Weill, Henze, and Romantic Redemption*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013, 60–130.
- 5 For instance, Donald Mitchell links a passage in Britten’s first “Sea Interlude” from *Peter Grimes* with a theme from Mahler’s Eighth Symphony (Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler: Songs and Symphonies of Life and Death*, London: Faber 1985, 605); or again, Hans Keller hears a recurring motif across several works by Britten to derive from a melodic fragment from Mahler’s Second Symphony (Hans Keller, “Peter Grimes: The Story, the Music not Excluded,” in Philip Brett, *Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* [Cambridge Opera Handbooks], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983, 105–120).

Mahlerian encounter took place. One particularly noteworthy facet of this encounter is how much of it was technologically mediated. Britten's knowledge of Mahler was necessarily posthumous (he was born in November 1913, two and a half years after Mahler's death), but it was also dependent on the new technologies of the 1930s, the wireless broadcast and the gramophone record.

First Encounter: September 1930

The days between Saturday 20 and Tuesday 23 September 1930 were momentous ones for the sixteen-year-old Britten. On the Saturday he left his parental home in Lowestoft, Suffolk, together with his mother, and travelled to London to enrol at The Royal College of Music, having previously studied composition with Frank Bridge at Bridge's home at Friston, near Eastbourne, and already having begun to make a name for himself as a promising young composer. Britten's diary entries testify to the excitement of the constant stream of new experiences:

—LONDON

Saturday 20

Pack all morning & then Beth [Britten's sister] takes Mummy & me in car to station to catch 1.15. Arrive 25 mins late and get to Miss Thurlow Prior's at about 5.0. It is rather a nice place but rather full of old ladies. A respectable boarding house. Go to coffee at Barbara's flat [Barbara is Britten's other sister]. Miss Hurst and she were coming to dinner but Barb. is in bed with chill.

Sunday 21

Breakfast at 9.0. Go with Mummy, after arranging my rooms & books, at 11.0 to St. Matthews Bayswater. Quite a nice simple service, with a very dramatic sermon. Walk until lunch. 1.0. Write letters; see Barbara for tea at 4.0. Bus home in time for supper at 7.30. Write letters after lunch & supper.⁶

The breathless tone continues on Monday, his first day at the College, still accompanied at all times by his mother:

Monday 22

Go directly after breakfast with Mummy to College. Make stupid mistake in ridiculously easy entrance exam. All matters are simplified extraordinarily by us Meeting Mr Voke, who shows us all over the place. Lunch with him at Pontings 11.30. Sir H. Allen's address. 1 o'clock. Tea at Prince's Square. Walk after to find practice rooms (New School of Music).

⁶ Britten's diaries are held at the Red House Archive, Aldeburgh. Many of the extracts used in this chapter are reproduced either in Mitchell et al, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 1 (1991) and vol. 2 (1998) or in John Evans and Andrew Mellor (eds.), *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928–1938*, London: Faber 2009. Here and below, where diary entries differ from published sources, they are my own transcription.

Barbara to dinner. Find out that a Miss Prior (who lives here) is a member of the National Chorus & knew Mummy at Lowestoft.⁷

The point of quoting these diary entries in full is to emphasise the context of the experience Britten had the very next day, as soon as his mother had left him to his new life as a student of The Royal College of Music:

Tuesday 23

Get my time table from the College in morning. I am with J. Ireland & A. Benjamin. Shop with Mummy in morning, and go to college at 12.0. I have no lessons to day. See Mummy off at the bus for the 3.10 train. Oh, God, I wish she were here. Practice Pft after that & after tea go for a drive with Miss May Prior, & a German man. Go to Queen's Hall Prom. [on facing page: With Howard Ferguson–] Mozart concerto (K. Long) delicious, & Mahler 4th. Much too long, but beautiful in parts.⁸

This was Britten's first encounter with Mahler's music, and a memory that never left him. The programme of the concert was:

BBC Promenade Concerts 1930, Prom 39, Tuesday 23 September, Queen's Hall, London

Engelbert Humperdinck: *Königskinder* Prelude Act 2

Joseph Haydn: *The Creation* No. 9 Aria "Nun beut die Flur das frische Grün"

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 18 in B-flat major, K 456

Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 4 in G major

INTERVAL

Edward Elgar: *The Wand of Youth*, Suite No. 1, Op 1a

Granville Bantock: 5 *Celtic Songs*, No. 5 "The Reed Player"; No. 3 "At the Rising of the Moon"

George Frideric Handel: Chandos Anthem No. 2 "In the Lord put I my trust", HWV 247 (arr. Edward Elgar): Overture in D minor

Performers

BBC Symphony Orchestra

Henry Wood, conductor

Elsie Suddaby, soprano

Kathleen Long, piano

Berkeley Mason, piano⁹

⁷ Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 53.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Data from the BBC Proms Archive, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/events/ew6p5v> (30/06/2026).

Britten's inevitable letter home of the next day reports to his parents that the pianist and composer Howard Ferguson had been added to the number of his new acquaintances ("a very nice boy, and he payed [*sic*] for my ticket").¹⁰ Ferguson was another student at the College, who knew Frank Bridge, and so had probably sought Britten out. Britten also confesses that he found the seats uncomfortable, and had left the concert at the interval because "one of the works [the Mahler] was very long [and] the second part was all Elgar." The Mahler, therefore, was the last work he heard, and the one he remembered. The formative nature of the encounter, coming as part of a complete change of life, is demonstrated by the massaging of memory evident in Britten's description of it in his article of 1942, "On Behalf of Gustav Mahler":

[...] when I was at a concert soon after leaving school, specially to hear an exciting new piano concerto, and saw from the programme that I had first to hear a symphony by Mahler, I naturally groaned in anticipation of forty-five minutes of boredom. But what I heard was not what I had expected to hear. First of all, in spite of a slack, under-rehearsed and rather apologetic performance, the scoring startled me. It was mainly "soloistic" and entirely clean and transparent [...].¹¹

The "exciting new piano concerto" seems to be an invention for dramatic effect, as is Britten's remembered inward groaning. But the criticism of the standard of performance, and the description of Mahler's sound as something "entirely clean and transparent," are both reactions that feature time and again in his diary entries concerning Mahler's music, and are projected here onto this first encounter. Significant, too, is Britten's summing up of his response to Mahler's sound:

After that concert, I made every effort to hear Mahler's music, in England and on the continent, on the radio and on the gramophone, and in my enthusiasm, I began a great crusade among my friends on behalf of my new god – I must admit with only average success.¹²

Britten recalls his reliance on technology – the radio and the gramophone – in his search for Mahler's sound. It is on the mediation of that sound that I now want to focus.

Britten Reads Mahler Scores

Before turning to the new media of the twentieth century, the point needs to be made that Britten first relied on printed scores to get to know new works. It is easy to forget, in an age of ubiquitous recording, downloads and streaming technology, that Britten must first have heard many of Mahler's works through playing them at the piano while reading from the

¹⁰ Benjamin Britten to Mr and Mrs R. V. Britten, 24 September 1930 (Mitchell et al., *Letters from a Life*, vol. 1, 140–142: 140).

¹¹ Benjamin Britten, "On Behalf of Gustav Mahler," *Tempo* [American series] 2 (1942), no. 2, reprinted as. "Benjamin Britten: On Behalf of Gustav Mahler," *Tempo* no. 120 (1977), 14–15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

orchestral score (Britten never bought or made a piano reduction of any Mahler work), or simply reading the score on its own. Britten's diary entries often refer to "reading" scores in exactly the way he refers to reading books. For instance, the entry for 11 June 1936 concludes, "I am reading Butlers Erewhon, & enjoying it immensely. Other recreation is solely playing Beethoven piano sonatas & reading Mahler scores. Symp. I, V, & Lied von der Erde." The extremely well-handled state of many of Britten's Mahler scores attests to very frequent use (see for instance **FIGURE 1**, Britten's score of the Fifth Symphony) and their dates of purchase, where these can be established, indicate a systematic attempt by Britten throughout the 1930s to acquire scores of all of Mahler's works.

The earliest reference in a diary entry to purchasing a Mahler score is from 24 January 1931, just four months after the Prom concert on his first evening alone in London. The entry reads, "I go down to Harold Reeves [a music shop in Shaftesbury Avenue] about 11:30, to get a Mozart Symphony (E $\flat$) that I hope to hear tomorrow. I also get Mahler's Wayfarer songs."¹³ The purchase of a score to read before hearing a work in concert is typical of Britten; but there is no indication that he was going to hear any of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* imminently; he appears to have picked up the Mahler score on a whim. Further purchases of the songs followed, all in small "pocket score" format. Those of both *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and the *Sieben Lieder aus letzter Zeit* (a 1905 Kahnt edition of the five Rückert songs and the two last *Wunderhorn* songs, entitled *Seven Last Songs* in the international edition) are inscribed "Benjamin Britten '35" on the flyleaf, and are stamped "Boosey and Hawkes sole agents" with their prices in shillings (5/- and 5/6 respectively, along with "Temporary increase: 25%"). The score of *Kindertotenlieder*, in the same handsome red leather binding as the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, has no purchase date indicated, but we know that Britten had gramophone records of this work by Christmas 1935 (see below). The score of *Das Lied von der Erde* is inscribed "Benjamin Britten 1936." The scores of the Second and Eighth Symphonies look as if they probably also date from the 1930s.

The value that Britten placed on these scores is attested to by the inscriptions on two of them. The score shown in Figure 1 has, on the title page, a touching dedication from Frank Bridge, who, according to John Evans, was "sceptical" of Mahler's music:¹⁴ "Benjy / Love from me / F. B. / Xmas 1936."¹⁵ (**FIG. 2**)

And again, the score of the Ninth Symphony was also a Christmas present; significantly enough, from Peter Pears in the year before he and Britten left Britain for their tour of America, during which they became life partners. It bears the inscription "An meinen liebsten Ben. Weihnacht. 1938 / Peter." (**FIG. 3**)

The picture emerges that Britten began to pick up Mahler scores soon after that first encounter, and that from 1935, he was making an effort to complete his collection of Mahler's works. This testifies to another formative experience in 1934: Britten's first trip to Vienna. Once again, it was the Fourth Symphony, which as far as one can tell had remained the only work by Mahler that Britten had heard live in concert, that formed a crucial part of the experience. Once again, Britten was accompanied by his mother, recently bereaved of Britten's

¹³ Mitchell et al, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 1, 156.

¹⁴ Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 49.

¹⁵ The fact that the diary entry just quoted dates from June 1936 suggests either that Britten had borrowed the score of Mahler's Fifth Symphony, or that this one had been an early Christmas present.

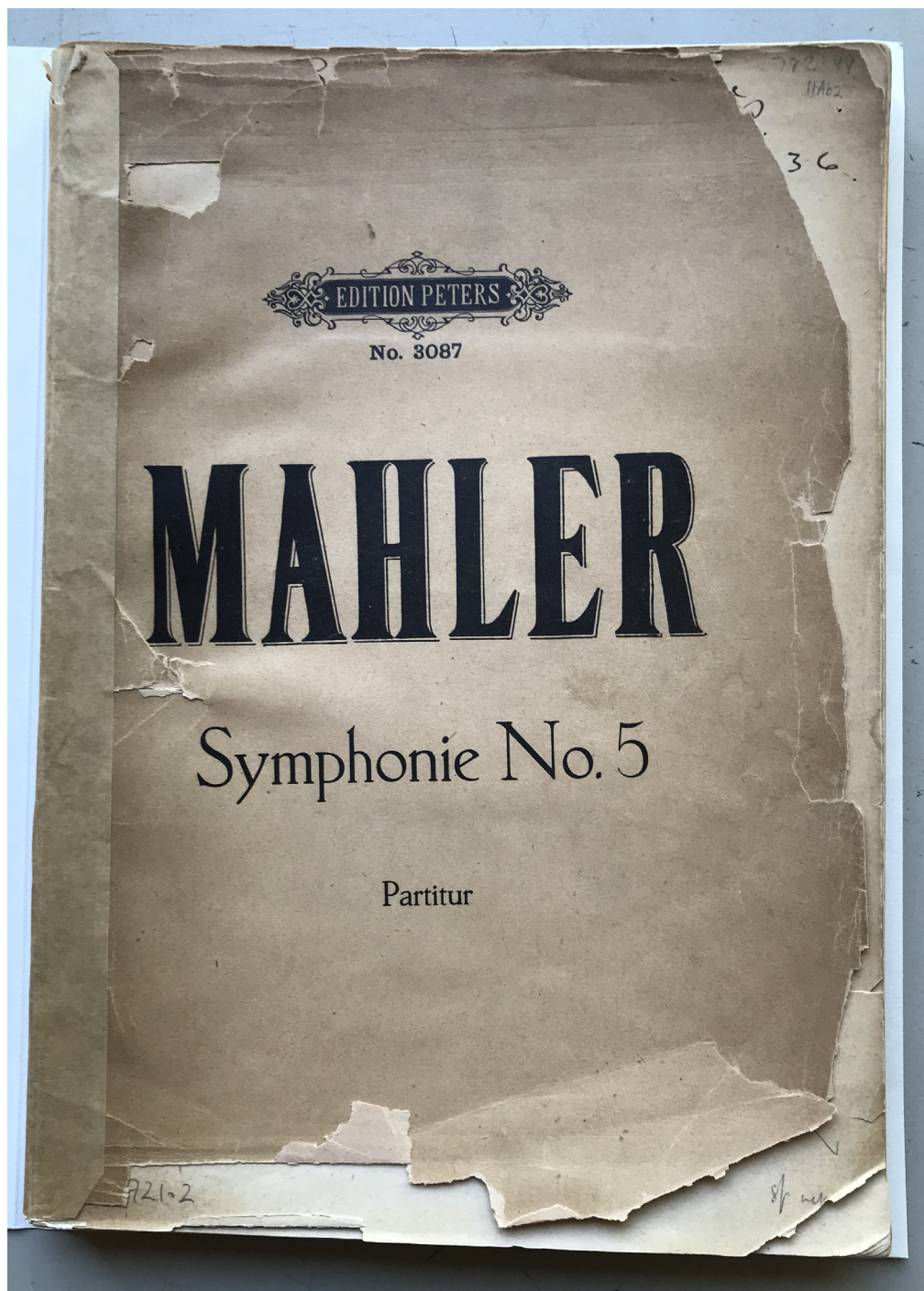


FIGURE 1: Mahler, Fifth Symphony, Peters edition of 1904.
Image: the author, by permission of the Britten-Pears archive.



FIGURE 2: Mahler, Fifth Symphony, Peters edition of 1904. Inscription on title page.
Image: the author, by permission of the Britten-Pears archive.

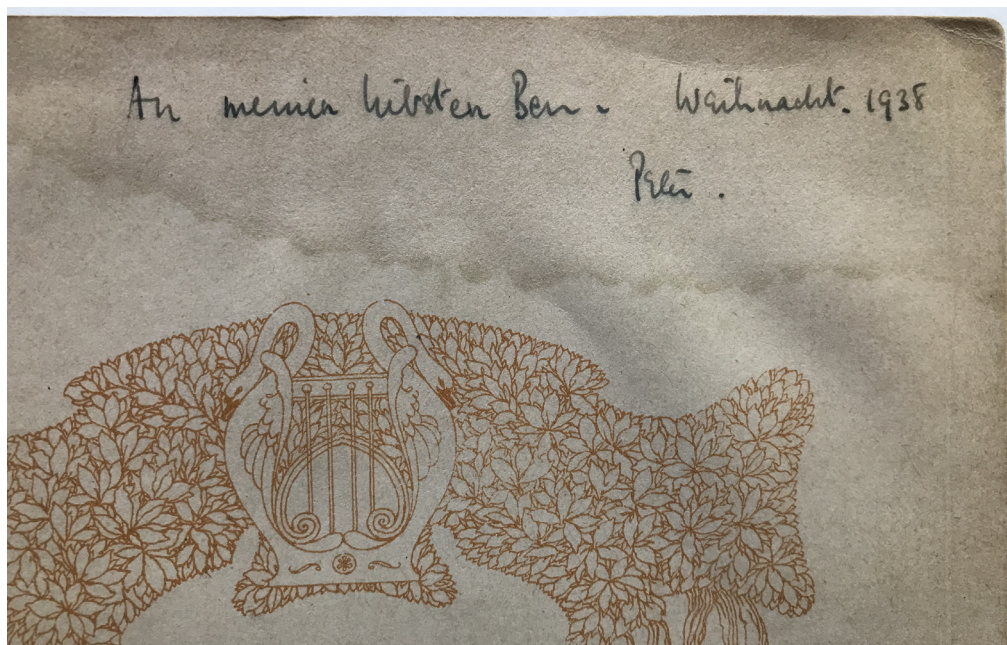


FIGURE 3: Mahler, Ninth Symphony, Universal-Edition of 1912. Inscription on title page.
Image: the author, by permission of the Britten-Pears archive.

father, who had died in April after a long illness. They travelled by train, staying in Basel and Salzburg, before arriving in Vienna on 2 November. Britten's diary records a similar feeling of excitement to the entries describing his arrival at the Royal College of Music:

Saturday 3 November 1934 [Vienna]

Mum & I walk about town in morning – seeing people and missing others – shopping (I buy Mahler 4th Symphony). Read in aft. and walk after tea. Early dinner & we go to Opera at 7.0 to see *Fledermaus* (J. Strauss). Superb show – never have I heard an orchestra play like that – incredible rhythm, precision, & eagerness. And the singing too. Everything was worthy of the inimitable, delightful work – inspired from beginning to the end. A marvellous introduction to the Wiener Oper.¹⁶

The reason Mahler's Fourth Symphony was the score Britten bought on his first day in the Austrian capital is evident in the entry for the following day:

Sunday 4 November 1934 [Vienna]

Mum has a very nasty fall in her room while washing. She comes down to breakfast, but goes to bed soon after for the rest of the day. So I have to go to the Philharmonic Orch. concert alone – this at 11.30 – conducted by Mengelberg. Little can be said abt. the orchestra – I've never heard the like. M. doesn't impress me so much. He rescues Beethoven's lovely Pastoral Symphony in places almost out of recognition – & even Mahler's 4th Symphony (M. of all people knew to the nth degree what he wanted). But I enjoyed this work enormously – I know it's long – but not too long (except perhaps the 3rd movm.) for me. Elizabeth Schumann sings the lovely solo incomparably.¹⁷

The score Britten had bought the day before was a small "pocket score"; one suspects it was what he had read in the afternoon. Once again, Britten is motivated to comment on the standard of orchestral playing, which he clearly thinks far superior to what he was used to hearing in London; and as usual, he is critical of the conductor. It is extremely rare for any conductor of a Mahler work to impress Britten throughout the 1930s; from the beginning, he feels that he understands Mahler in a way that others do not. Years later, Britten was to discover that Mengelberg's "rescoring" of the Mahler was in fact using alterations to the score made by Mahler himself after its first publication. Britten wrote them into the score he bought in Vienna, and used them himself when he conducted the work (the only Mahler symphony he ever conducted) at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1962, and again in 1969. The Britten-Pears archive contains two later editions of the score (the 1952 and 1963 revised editions issued by Universal), presumably purchased for these performances. They each have conducting directions added by Britten.

Although this trip was the first time that Britten had heard the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, which, fewer than thirty years earlier, had been under the directorship of Mahler himself, it was not the first time he had heard a Mahler symphony conducted by a personal

¹⁶ Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 231.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

associate of the composer. His most similar previous experience to that Viennese concert had been via the technological medium that most defines the dissemination of music in the 1930s.

Britten Listens to the Wireless

Britten's student years and those that came after coincided with the rapid growth of public broadcasting in the UK following the establishment of the BBC in 1922: what its principal historian terms "the golden age of wireless."¹⁸ In this period, in which the BBC held a legal monopoly on public broadcasting, and provided only one service (with regional variations), its schedules were dominated by music broadcasting, with a very high percentage of orchestral and other "classical" music. Live music broadcasting clearly fulfilled the Reithian requirement to "educate" as much as to "entertain" the listener.

A sense of the importance of live music to the BBC's schedule can be gauged from **FIGURE 4**, the schedule for the evening of Sunday 23 April 1933. The whole central column is given over to the orchestral concert to be broadcast between 21:05 and 22:30, in which one of the several BBC orchestras is conducted by Anton Webern. They perform Mahler's Fourth Symphony, preceded by Beethoven's *Prometheus* overture and Webern's orchestration of Schubert's German Dances. In addition to this, the broadcast is singled out as a highlight of the day in the column "Picked from the Programmes" (p. 131), and a whole page is devoted to an article on the symphony by Gerald Abraham, "Mahler in Heaven" (p. 134). On this Sunday, Britten was at home in Lowestoft, and naturally tuned in:

Sunday 23 April 1933 [Lowestoft]

Listen to Webern conducting Mahler's lovely 4th Symphony from London Regional. This work seems a mix up of everything that one has ever heard, but it is definitely Mahler. Like a lovely spring day. The orch. seemed to have caught the spirit but not over many notes of it!

A new medium, then, and another encounter with the Mahler symphony he had heard live in October 1930. The following year, the medium of the wireless afforded Britten another first encounter with a Mahler symphony. On Thursday 4 October 1934, a month before his departure for Vienna, his diary reads:

Thursday 4 October 1934 [Lowestoft]

Listen to Concertgebouw orch. from Hilversum, evening – simply perfect orchestra under Bruno Walter – I am not a worshipper of Walter – many things he does I don't like. But as an interpretation of Walter's ideas it was a consummate show. Mozart's superb G. min (surely the loveliest bit of music ever conceived) & Mahler's 5th Symphony – Enormously long but I was interested & thrilled for the full 1 hr & 10 mins.¹⁹

¹⁸ Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*. Volume II: *The Golden Age of Wireless (1927–1939)*, New Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995.

¹⁹ Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 226.

146 RADIO TIMES April 21, 1933

SUNDAY LONDON REGIONAL

843 kc's (356 m.)

SUNDAY ORCHESTRAL CONCERT 23

ELSIE SUDDABY, Soprano
THE B.B.C. ORCHESTRA
 (Section B; Leader, Arthur Catterall)
 Conducted by
ANTON WEBERN

10.50-12.15 A RELIGIOUS SERVICE
 In Memory of the Men of the Dover Patrol who fell in the Naval Action off Zeebrugge, on St. George's Day, 1918
 Relayed from the Parish Church, Dover
 Conducted by the Reverend Canon ELMOR, Vicar and Rural Dean

Bells
 Voluntary (Organ, Brass, and Drums)
 March: Solemnity (Maidly)
 National Anthem
 Hymn, Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven (Ancient and Modern, No. 298)
 The Vicar's Greeting to those who served in the Dover Patrol
 Lesson
 Psalm 46
 Prayers
 Hymn, O valiant hearts (Songs of Love, No. 165)
 Address by the Right Reverend the Lord BISHOP of DOVER
 Hymn, Through the night of doubt and sorrow (Ancient and Modern, No. 275)
 Blessing
 Voluntary
 Eight Bells struck by the MAYOR of DOVER on the Zeebrugge Bell
 The Last Post
 Reveille
 The Quartet of Brass Instruments, Drums and Bugles from the 1st Battalion Southport Highlanders (By kind permission of Lieut.-Col. H. W. F. Stewart, D.S.O.)
 Organist and Choirmaster, H. J. TAYLOR (Dauntsey National Programme)

12.30 Violin Recital
 by
MARIE HALL
 Liedes (Love Song), Schubert, arr. J. Marsh
 Serenade, Debussy
 Romance, Mendelssohn
 Fantasia Dance, Sarasate
 Romance, Kreisler
 Reel, Strindberg
 (Dauntsey National Programme)

1.0 Dauntsey National Programme

3.55 THE SERGE KRISH SEPTET
JOHN COLLINGS (Tenor)
 SEPTET
 Mendelssohn Fantasy, Foulds
 JOHN COLLINGS
 Reverie, Leslie Woodgate
 So we'll go no more a-roving, Marie, Valerie White
 Life and Death, Coleridge-Taylor
 SEPTET
 Serenade, Elgar
 Marches on Capri's Maria, Mari, Krish
 Introduction and Tarentello, Sarasate
 (Solo Violin, ALFRED CARROLL)
 McCurry-headed Baby Chanters, arr. Krish
 JOHN COLLINGS
 To Mary, Marie, Valerie White
 Down the Vale, Marie
 In men all maid, Sadler
 SEPTET
 London-Letter Air, arr. Coleman
 Norwegian Dance, No. 2, Grieg
 La Lettre de Marie, Gillet
 Hungarian Dance, No. 6, Brahms

5.0-5.30 Readings from Classical Literature—XIV
 'The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles'
 Read by ROBERT FARQUHARSON

7.55 A RELIGIOUS SERVICE
 Relayed from Spurgeon's Tabernacle
 Organ Voluntary, Prelude (Hollins)
 Hymn, Crown Him with many crowns (Baptist Church Hymnal, No. 151; Ancient and Modern, No. 304)
 Scripture Reading
 Hymn, Christ is risen, Hallelujah! (Baptist Church Hymnal, No. 133; Ancient and Modern, No. 135)
 Prayer
 Anthem, God so loved the World (Stainer)
 Address by the Reverend H. TYDMAN CHILVERS
 Hymn, Souls of men why will ye tarry? (Baptist Church Hymnal, No. 216; Ancient and Modern, No. 634)
 Benediction
 At the Organ, Dr. J. E. GREEN

8.45 Dauntsey National Programme

8.50-9.0 'The News'
 WEATHER FORECAST, GENERAL NEWS
 BULLETIN
 Time Signal, Greenwich, at 9.0

9.5 Sunday Orchestral Concert
 (Third Season—XXIII)
 (See centre column)

10.30 Epilogue

NATIONAL PROGRAMME

1.147 kc's (London Region) (281.6 m.)

3.55 For the Children
 (Dauntsey National Programme)

4.15 Orchestral Concert
 Ellen Hannevig (Soprano)
 The B.B.C. Orchestra
 (Section C)
 Conducted by Joseph Lewis
 (Dauntsey National Programme)

5.30-6.15 Dauntsey National Programme

8.0 'GOD AND THE WORLD THROUGH CHRISTIAN EYES'
 (Dauntsey National Programme)

8.45 The Week's Good Cause
 (Dauntsey National Programme)

8.50-9.0 'The News'
 WEATHER FORECAST, GENERAL NEWS
 BULLETIN

9.5 THE BOURNEMOUTH MUNICIPAL ORCHESTRA
 THEA PHILIPS (Soprano)
 DENNIS NOBLE (Baritone)
 (Dauntsey National Programme)

10.30 Epilogue

THE CHARACTER OF THIS CONCERT IS WHOLLY VIENNESE.
 The composers who contribute to the programme all lived and died in Vienna, while the conductor is a native of Vienna and still resides there.
 When Beethoven composed his ballet of *Prrometheus* in 1800-1 he had been some four years in Vienna, and was gradually becoming known as a composer of importance. He had given his first concert at the Burg Theatre a year before, followed by others, and had spent the winter months composing this ballet, the first really big work, excepting the First Symphony, he had yet attempted. It was put on at the Burg Theatre on March 28, 1801, and scored a great and immediate success. It had a run of sixteen nights, almost a triumph. Haydn heard it, and liked it; he confessed as much to Beethoven.
 Schubert spent the summer and autumn of 1824 at Zselitz, the country seat of the Esterhazy, busily composing, restoring his health and curbing as best he could his tender feelings for his seventeen-year-old pupil, Caroline Esterhazy. These dances, which are based upon the peasant tunes of Southern Germany and include the Ländler, forerunner of the Waltz, were composed towards the end of his life.
An article on Mahler and his Fourth Symphony appears on page 134.
ANTON WEBERN, tonight's conductor, was born in Vienna in 1883, and early in his career came under the influence of Schönberg, the first and one of the most distinguished of whose pupils he was, and the most loyal of whom he has remained. His compositions, which are few in number—some of them have been heard by listeners—are concentrated in structure, intensely expressive, and subdued in tone, and have earned for him the description of 'composer of the pianissimo expressive.' As a conductor in Vienna, particularly of the well-known Werk-People's Concerts, he has made a big reputation, both in the ultra-modern music of which he is a disciple and in the great classics.

FIGURE 4: Radio Times 39 (23–29 April 1933), no. 499, 146
 (<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/issues>).

Hilversum was the centre of Dutch public broadcasting, located about 30km from Amsterdam, transmitting on short wave. Evidently, Britten's family home on the Suffolk coast was ideally placed to receive these broadcasts. The Concertgebouw orchestra was a frequent provider of live performances for the station. Before his trip to Vienna, then, Britten had heard Mahler's Fourth Symphony twice, the Fifth Symphony once, and, in addition, some Mahler songs (for instance, his diary records "3 delightful Mahler songs" at a Queens Hall concert by the BBC orchestra on 16 November 1932).

Britten's relationship with wireless broadcasts must shadow that of many other young musicians of the period. At first, he did not possess a set himself; indeed, the diary entry for 17 December 1930, in Lowestoft, records "Go to B.B.C. Symph. Concert at St Luke's Hospital – Dr Colvin's Wireless,"²⁰ implying that his parents did not yet have a set (St Luke's Hospital was in Lowestoft; the concert was broadcast from the Queen's Hall in London). Britten frequently records making use of the wireless set owned by Miss Prior in the boarding house, or listening with his sister Barbara at her flat (for instance, listening to a Schoenberg broadcast on 9 January 1931, when he "could not make head or tail" of *Erwartung*).²¹ On evenings that the student Britten was not at a concert in person, he was usually found next to the wireless. Even his concert-going was connected to broadcasts, dominated as it was by BBC orchestras, especially if conducted by Frank Bridge, with whom he spent as much time as he could. The wireless afforded some significant encounters quite apart from Mahler: the Schoenberg concert just mentioned, or one devoted to Stravinsky later the same month, in which he hears *Le Sacre du printemps* for the first time.²² In February 1933, at home in Lowestoft (Britten's parents had clearly invested in a wireless set by now), Britten's diary records, "Listen to the Kolisch Quart. playing astoundingly, Alban Berg's astounding *Lyric Suite*. The imagination & intense emotion of this work certainly amaze me if it not altogether pleases me"; another significant encounter through a BBC broadcast.²³ Britten nearly always comments in his diary on the quality of the performance in any concert he attends, and the medium of radio rather than live performance makes no difference to this. The evening prior to the one on which he heard the Berg concert just described, Britten had tuned into the BBC broadcast of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* conducted by Adrian Boult, to which the cover of *Radio Times* was devoted; he had listened only to the overture, describing Boult's conducting as "a disgrace".²⁴ His dislike of Boult, whom he considered unfairly preferred over Frank Bridge by the BBC, grows ever more evident throughout the diary entries.

One feature of Britten's engagement with the new technology of broadcasting is his frequent frustration with its sonic quality. He complains at missing the recapitulation of the first movement, and half the second movement, of Brahms's Second Piano Concerto when the accumulator of Miss Prior's wireless ran down and had to be replaced (an accumulator was a large, heavy kind of rechargeable battery used by early wireless sets).²⁵ Quite apart from batteries running down, Britten acknowledges frequently in his diary the shortcomings of radio at this time. For instance, the entry describing the concert mentioned above, heard on "Dr Colvin's wireless," which featured Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, ends (after criticism of the conductor, Hermann Scherchen) with "Orchestra respectable – what I could hear of it – it didn't come through too well – I thought."²⁶ Or again, hearing a BBC broadcast devoted to Hindemith on 21 December 1934, he writes, "a new Symphony. hard to judge, thro' wireless."²⁷ Sometimes, the quality, especially of short wave broadcasts from Europe,

20 Ibid., 58, and Mitchell et al, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 1, 306.

21 Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 60.

22 28 January 1931; Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 62.

23 Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 131, *Radio Times*, no. 489, 10 February 1933.

24 Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 131.

25 18 February 1931; Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 64.

26 Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 58.

27 Ibid., 239.

defeats him altogether: “listen to a bit of Hänsel & Gretel – from Berlin, but wireless is v. bad. Beethoven’s Mass in D comes over better from Hilversum at 8.0–9.45” (23 December 1934).²⁸ The consequence of the poor quality of broadcast sound is that it affects the kind of judgments Britten makes about the music he encounters. He frequently criticises tempo and phrasing decisions on the part of the conductor, much less often comments on the timbre of the orchestral playing (as the comment above on Scherchen’s performance of the *Missa Solemnis* exemplifies).

To return to that seminal trip to Vienna in 1934: Britten and his mother stayed in the Austrian capital more than three weeks, returning by train to Paris and (to Britten’s great excitement) by aeroplane to London. The stay had included Britten’s twenty-first birthday on 22 November, and two of the gifts he lists in his diary neatly encapsulate a coming change in his reception of musical works. On the day itself, his mother gave him a score of *Fledermaus*, the work that had so impressed him at the *Wiener Oper* on his first day. And on 1 December, when he lists in his diary the presents he receives after his return to England, he notes “Gram. records from Lazy, & Laurence Sewell.” Sewell was the junior partner in the dental practice owned by Britten’s father, who had taken it over after Robert Britten’s death; the two families knew each other well. What gramophone records these were, Britten’s diary does not say; but by Christmas of 1934, he treasured a recording of the Mahler work he came to value most of all.

Britten Listens to the Gramophone

Britten’s first encounter with a gramophone was at boarding school in 1928. The diary entry for 10 October (his fourth week at the school) reads “Gramophone Records and Practice Piano in Mr Greateorex’s room.”²⁹ Britten, who was generally unhappy and often unwell at school, clearly found comfort in this new way of consuming music. The entry for 6 November 1929 reads, “return to Music rooms, & have a play & gramophone with Floud & thereupon Gog [the boys’ nickname for Mr Greateorex, the Music Director] finds us together & is livid.” As with the wireless, adoption of the new technology of gramophone recording was increasing rapidly at this time. On 22 April 1931, back at home from London during his first year at The Royal College, he notes, “Go to John Nicholson’s to tea at 2.45 & to hear Gramophone records on his new Radio-Gram.”³⁰ The Nicholsons lived almost next door to the Brittens, and John had been a friend since schooldays. The very next day, Britten’s diary reads, “to Morlings getting – on approv. – 2 records of Temple Choir (Hear my prayer; & I waited for the Lord etc.) from which to choose one – Heaven only knows which. They are both v. beautiful; personally I think the 4th singing in ‘O come everyone that thirsteth’ to be superb.”³¹ Morlings was the local music shop; presumably Britten intended to play these records on his friend’s Radio-Gram (a combination of wireless and gramophone player). It is notable that, having heard the two records, Britten immediately comments positively on an aspect of the performance, rather than negatively on its direction, as was almost always the case on hearing

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 14.

³⁰ Ibid., 70.

³¹ Ibid.

a wireless broadcast. The new technology of the gramophone record was considerably superior in quality to the unreliable medium of wireless. The following Christmas, Britten's parents rented a Radio-Gram themselves, and Britten and his sister Beth chose a selection of records to be played during a party for more than thirty people at their parents' home on 29 December. The diary entry for the following day reads, "Morlings don't fetch back Radio Gramophone so spend much of day listening to all our records & to wireless."³² The following year, Britten's parents decided to invest in the new technology themselves; on 12 September 1932, Britten writes "We have a Radio- Gramophone on approval – Pop is going to buy one. But it is anything but satisfactory."³³ One suspects, however, that Britten's dissatisfaction was much more with the wireless than the gramophone. A month later, on 6 November, he notes "Listen to wireless all afternoon (Mum & Pop are having a Marconiphone on approval.). Mengelberg from Hilversum. An excellent performance of Mozart G min." The Marconiphone (at the time, a state-of-the-art wireless receiver) may have been tried in response to Britten's criticism.

Certainly, by the Christmas following Britten's return from Vienna, he was looking forward to hearing his new records again when he returned home from London:

Wednesday 19 December 1934

[...] Phone people, arr. matters, & pack before catching 4.54 home. Beth brings a parcel for me to take back – arr. only 3 mins before time! Tea on train. Mum meets me. After dinner, have on my new Mahler *Kindertodten* [*sic*] records, which are very lovely.³⁴

It is unfortunate that these discs do not survive in the Britten-Pears archive. However, they can be identified, since there was only one recording of the *Kindertotenlieder* released before 1934, the performance by Heinrich Rehkemper with the Berlin State Opera Orchestra conducted by Jascha Horenstein, released in 1928 by Polydor and distributed in the UK by Decca.³⁵ These discs were precious to Britten. The day following his return to Lowestoft, he records:

Thursday 20 December 1934

Stay in bed until 3.0 of the afternoon, with a practically immovable neck – stiffness doesn't describe it. It eases a bit before tea, so I come down – do some pft work, and gram. (the heavenly Mahler songs).³⁶

And a few weeks later, the same discs provide consolation after a difficult rehearsal with the local amateur orchestra Britten was conducting at this time:

Wednesday 16 January 1935

Charles Coleman takes me over to Bungay rehearsal at 5.30. Owing to Fog very few are there – 9 only – and the playing is execrable. It is no use trying to rehearse them – the only advice worth giving them is 'Go away & learn to play your instruments'. Dreadful journey

³² Ibid., 94.

³³ Ibid., 115.

³⁴ Ibid., 238.

³⁵ Péter Fülöp, *Mahler Discography*, New York: Kaplan Foundation 2010, 233.

³⁶ Red House archive.

back – running out of water, in the thick fog. However, a good dinner, and the Mahler gram. records (Kindertodtenlieder [*sic*]) restores my faith in life.³⁷

This was not the only time the Bungay orchestra tried Britten's patience. On 6 March he writes, "Usual day – usual unsuccess of work. Dreadful Bungay rehearsal – end of day cheered by Mahler's glorious Kindertodtenlieder [*sic*]."³⁸ And at the end of the year, when Britten is profoundly shaken by news of the death of Alban Berg on 24 December, it is this recording he turns to again:

Sunday 29 December 1935

After much housework for me Henry Boys arrives at 11:30 & we then go for a very long walk to Hendon where Bridges tell me the Marguerite recording studios are. Eat at Hendon & bus back here & spend afternoon talking (Berg), gramophoning (Mahler, Kindertotenlieder) & playing (Berg – Wozzeck).³⁹

It is worth noting the impact that the technology of gramophone recording has on Britten's consumption of music: for the first time, he can hear (rather than have to read in a score) music of his choice at a time of his choice. This is particularly evident in a remarkable letter to the friend he turned to on hearing of Berg's death, recounting Britten's first opportunity to hear the sound of a work he knew only from its score.

It is now well past mid-night & society dictates that I should stop playing the Abschied. Otherwise I might possibly have gone on repeating the last record indefinitely – for 'ewig' keit of course.

It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful. It has the beauty of loneliness, & of pain: of strength & freedom. The beauty of disappointment & never-satisfied love. The cruel beauty of nature, and everlasting beauty of monotony.

And the essentially 'pretty' colours of the normal orchestral palette are used to paint this extraordinary picture of loveliness. And there is nothing morbid about it. The same harmonic progressions that Wagner used to colour his essentially morbid love-scenes (his 'Liebes' is naturally followed by 'Tod') are used here to paint a serenity literally supernatural. I cannot understand it – it passes over me like a tidal wave – and that matters not a jot either, because it goes on for ever, even if it is never performed again – that final chord is printed on the atmosphere.

Perhaps if I could understand some of the Indian philosophies I might approach it a little. At the moment I can do no more than bask in its Heavenly light – & it is worth having lived to do that.

– Do come and hear it again soon. I'll be back on Saturday – hear it then & we'll talk about it all Sunday at the Bridges.⁴⁰

³⁷ Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 243

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁹ Mitchell et al, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 1, 394.

⁴⁰ Britten to Henry Boys, 29 June 1937, Mitchell et al, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 1, 493–494.

As far as can be ascertained, Britten had never heard *Das Lied von der Erde* broadcast, and his first chance to hear it in concert appears to have been in 1944 when Peter Pears performed it in London.⁴¹ His copy of the score in the Britten-Pears Archive bears the inscription "Benjamin Britten 1936," and reading the score must have been his only way to engage with the work. Small wonder, then, at the impact of hearing Mahler's sound for the first time, via his own gramophone (no longer did he have to wait to return to his parent's sitting-room in Lowestoft to listen to records). This was the first commercial recording of the work, featuring Bruno Walter conducting the Vienna Philharmonic, with Kerstin Thorborg and Charles Kullman as soloists. It was recorded in May 1936 at the Musikvereinssaal in Vienna, and released by Columbia (ROX165–71) in June 1937;⁴² Britten purchased it almost at once, on 22 June.⁴³ The set of 78 rpm records contained seven discs; the last movement, "Abschied" occupies several, and Britten had clearly spent the late evening of 28 June, after listening to it with Boys, repeatedly playing the fourteenth side (FIG. 5). Indeed, the mark visible on the disc next to the label, probably caused by the label of another disc on top of this one sticking to it, is testament to its many repeated playings.

Britten was clearly bowled over by the quality of the sound coming from his gramophone; it is revealing to compare his words to Boys with his comments quoted above on hearing the same conductor's performance of the Fifth Symphony. Then, Britten was listening to a short-wave broadcast from Hilversum. Now, there is no trace of the adverse comments on the conductor ("I am not a worshipper of Walter"). Such comments, as has already been noted, were an almost invariable feature of Britten's diary entries concerning radio broadcasts (and, to be fair, of live concerts as well). But on occasions that Britten feels to be of the highest significance, such as his first visit to the Vienna Opera, or this encounter with *Das Lied von der Erde*, it is the quality of the sound itself, and the reaction it inspires in him, which seem to diminish the conductor's role to that of irrelevance. The remarkable enthusiasm of Britten's letter to Boys must in part reflect the superiority of recorded over broadcast sound. In addition, he could play the part he found most arresting, the very end, over and over again: something impossible before the advent of gramophone records.

There are, in fact, two sets of these discs in the Britten-Pears archive. One set, including the disc in FIGURE 5, is in plain paper sleeves; the other, which appears much less played, is still in its handsome presentation box (FIG. 6). It is not known why Britten had two copies of this set of discs; one may have belonged to Peter Pears, or may have been a present to Britten, since gramophone records were known by his friends and family to be welcome gifts, as has already been seen. In a letter of 17 October 1937 to Mary Behrend, in response to her invitation to attend a performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony with her the following February, Britten writes, "Incidentally, if you want to borrow my 'das Lied von der Erde' records while I wander the country, I should love to let you have them," although such an offer hardly proves that he possessed both sets at that time.

41 Mitchell et al., *Letters from a Life*, vol. 2, 1200.

42 Fülöp, *Mahler Discography*, 159.

43 Mitchell et al., *Letters from a Life*, vol. 1, 494.



FIGURE 5: Side 14 of Columbia recording of Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde* conducted by Bruno Walter. Image: author, by permission of the Britten-Pears archive.

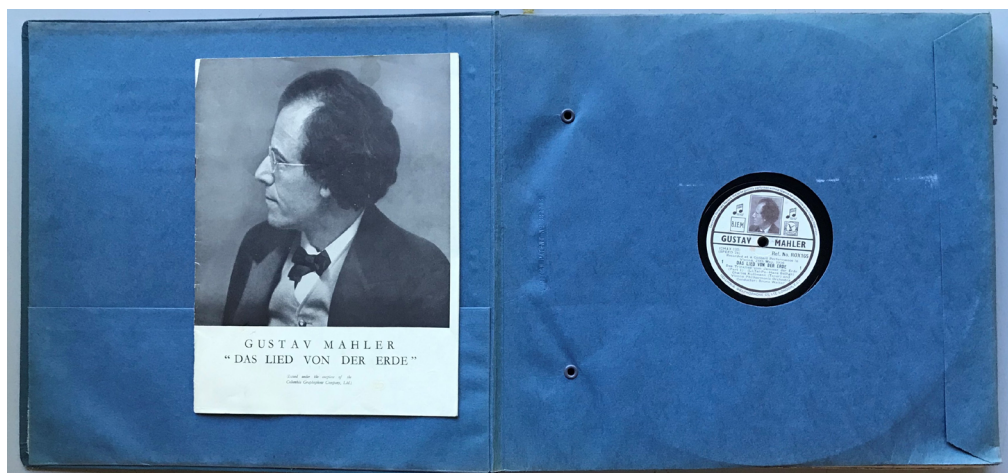


FIGURE 6: Columbia recording of *Das Lied von der Erde* in its presentation box. Image: author, by permission of the Britten-Pears archive.

FIGURE 7: Side 1 of HMV recording of Mahler, Ninth Symphony, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Bruno Walter. Image: author, by permission of the Britten-Pears archive.



Whatever the provenance of the pristine box set of *Das Lied*, the fragility of 78 rpm gramophone records is perhaps why the beloved set of *Kindertotenlieder* discs is no longer in the archive. It does contain one other Mahler recording on 78 rpm discs, that of Bruno Walter conducting the Ninth Symphony, issued by HMV in Britain in June 1938; but of that ten-disc set, only two discs survive. This was clearly also a much-played possession, as the wear to the label of one of the surviving discs (FIG. 7) attests.

Britten had heard the Ninth Symphony in 1935, in a wireless broadcast of a performance conducted by Oskar Fried and broadcast by the BBC (with a prominent photograph of Fried on the page with the listing of the concert, in the *Radio Times* for 27 January). His diary records, "I could listen to this for hours. The End is really very moving." One can imagine that, as with *Das Lied von der Erde*, the final disc of the set may have been played many times. His score of the work, as mentioned above, was a present from Peter Pears at Christmas 1938, either shortly before or shortly after he acquired the set of gramophone records.

In the years before Britten and Pears left Britain for their three-year stay in America, then, Britten acquired gramophone recordings of *Kindertotenlieder*, *Das Lied von der Erde*, and the Ninth Symphony; in all cases, the earliest commercially-available recordings. These works, along with the Fourth Symphony he had heard live both in London and Vienna (and twice more in wireless broadcasts), were undoubtedly the Mahler pieces that formed the basis of his reception of Mahler's sound. Of these, *Kindertotenlieder* and the Fourth Symphony remained the works he turned to again and again. For instance, in a letter to Peter Pears in March 1943, while doing military service as a conscientious objector in Grove Hospital, Britten writes, "The Graham Greene that Enid sent is a very good tale, with a strong atmosphere. But awfully disturbing! I had to be comforted by the Mahler after reading it last night – what a miracle that work is – I think I have almost more affection for that piece than for any I know."⁴⁴ The following day, he writes in the same vein to Erwin Stein, confirming which Mahler score he meant, saying he was reading (among many other works, including Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Debussy's *Monsieur Croche, antidilletante*) "my precious Mahler 4th (which I think I have more genuine affection for than for any other piece in the world."⁴⁵

Given the eagerness with which Britten had acquired these recordings on 78 rpm discs, the evident value he placed upon them, and the crucial role they played in forming his experience of the sonic effect of Mahler's music, perhaps the most surprising feature of the record collection held by the Britten-Pears archive is the paucity of Mahler recordings from later than 1939. By the time that Britten and Pears returned from America, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm LPs were replacing 78 rpm releases; Britten and Pears seem to have bought (or been given) recordings by Hermann Scherchen of the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, released in 1953 and 1954 respectively, a recording of the Eighth made at the Holland Festival in 1954, conducted by Eduard Flipse, and a recording of the First, with the inclusion of the "Blumine" slow movement, conducted by Eugene Ormandy in 1969. The two Scherchen albums are unsurprising discoveries, given that in 1938–1939 Britten had a passionate involvement with Wulff Scherchen, Hermann's son. He maintained a strong affection for him after forming his relationship with Pears.⁴⁶ In a letter of

44 Vicki P. Stroeher, Nicholas Clark, and Jude Brimmer (eds.), *My Beloved Man: The Letters of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears* (Aldeburgh Studies in Music, vol. 10), Martlesham: Boydell 2016, 56.

45 Mitchell et al, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 2, 1130.

46 Paul Francis Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, London: Allen Lane 2013, 153–155.

8 October 1940 to Wulff, who had been interned in Canada, Britten asks after his father and other members of the family.⁴⁷ But there is nothing like the appetite for buying LPs – despite the enormous increase in the number of Mahler recordings issued in the 1950s and 1960s – that there was for 78 rpm discs, or for Mahler scores, in the 1930s.

“Mahlers Klang” in Britten

Britten’s enthusiasm for Mahler arose and developed in a way reflective of the reception of the composer’s music in the three decades after his death. Several of the most popular symphonies in concert repertoire today – the First, Second, Third, Sixth, and Seventh – Britten knew only from their scores. The Eighth he had heard just once (in an “execrable performance” conducted by Henry Wood on 9 February 1938).⁴⁸ What impressed him most in the works he heard – significantly, those he heard live, or, especially, through repeated listening to the superior quality of gramophone reproduction rather than wireless broadcast – was Mahler’s sound itself; what he calls “clean and transparent” in his article of 1942, or “the normal orchestral palette [...] used to paint this extraordinary picture of loveliness” when he enthuses to Boys about his recording of *Das Lied von der Erde*.

The most significant effect of Mahler’s sound on Britten is heard in Britten’s own works. I am going to conclude by considering two pieces in which Mahler’s sound can be heard to resonate. The first is the piece that occupied Britten over the Summer of 1936, a period in which his main exposure to Mahler’s sound was through repeated hearings of his gramophone records of *Kindertotenlieder*. It is *Our Hunting Fathers*, a politically-engaged work to a text written and compiled by W. H. Auden. The choice of medium is significant: a song cycle for voice and chamber orchestra, just as was *Kindertotenlieder*. Mahler’s orchestration adds glockenspiel, “little bells” (*Glöckchen*), and harp to woodwind and strings; Britten also uses a harp, alongside a percussion section that includes a xylophone. A preoccupation with Mahler accompanied Britten’s compositional process: on 23 March, visiting Frank Bridge in Friston, his diary notes, “[...] I show him Auden’s stuff for me and he is impressed. Also find he is very sympathetic towards my socialist inclinations, in fact we are in complete agreement over all – except Mahler! – though he admits he is a great thinker.”

It is notable that in this period, Britten repeatedly mentions Mahler in his diary as a standard against which other composers should be measured. On 14 April, in Frinton on the Essex coast with his mother, he listens to a wireless broadcast of one of his own works, the *Simple Symphony*, and finds it programmed with Schoenberg’s *Suite for Strings* (later retitled *Suite in the Old Style*), written in 1934, a neoclassical work in G major, far removed in style from the dodecaphony with which Schoenberg is usually associated:

⁴⁷ Mitchell et al, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 2, 875–876

⁴⁸ Evans and Mellor, *Journeying Boy*, 464.

Tuesday 14 April 1936 [Frinton]

[...] After dinner listen to Boyd Neel & his strings doing my Simple Symphony. They play alot [*sic*] of it well, tho' too much Con Abandone! Sarabande was miles too slow. After that they play the new Schönberg Suite. It is a delightful work to listen too & I should imagine a good deal more. It might be a Hommage to Mahler both in matter & manner – but that doesn't detract from its value – rather adds to it. This seems an unexpected development for Schönberg – but quite natural.⁴⁹

By June, work was well under way on the new song cycle, as a diary entry already partly quoted shows:

Thursday 11 June 1936 [Frinton]

Work at Hawking morning & afternoon & on a walk after tea. Lovely day, tho cold evening. Work goes much better, indeed I feel quite cheerful – almost excited – about it later in the day. After dinner I play it over alot [*sic*] & describe it in detail to Mum. She disapproves very thoroughly of 'Rats' – but that is almost an incentive. –no actual insult to her tho'.

Walks are splendid along beach in the evening. Sea & light are gorgeous & one is kept alive by dodging cricket balls from the youth of Walton & Frinton! I am reading Butlers Erewhon, & enjoying it immensely. Other recreation is solely playing Beethoven piano sonatas & reading Mahler scores. Symp. I, V, & Lied von der Erde.⁵⁰

"Hawking" refers to the fourth of the movements of *Our Hunting Fathers*, "Hawking for the Partridge (Dance of Death)"; "Rats" is the second, "Rats Away!".

The following month, Britten was on holiday in Newquay in Cornwall with Lennox Berkeley, with whom Britten had developed a close friendship, and who was clearly sexually attracted to Britten (Britten resisted his advances during this holiday, but the two remained lifelong friends). Britten spent the holiday working on *Our Hunting Fathers* and discussing music with Berkeley. On 8 July his diary notes that he "was pouring over Mahler symphonies & Beethoven later Quartets & there is a tremendous amount in common in them I feel":⁵¹ on 28 July, they "pull to pieces" symphonies by Vaughan Williams (his Fourth, in F minor) and Walton (his First, in B flat), Britten commenting, "It isn't that one is cruel about their works which are naturally better than a tremendous amount of English music – but it is only that so much is pretended of them, & they are compared to the great Beethoven, Mozart, Mahler symphonies."⁵² As Britten entered what he felt to be compositional maturity (he later referred to *Our Hunting Fathers* as "my true Opus One"), those three last-named composers were his Holy Trinity in terms of compositional merit.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 346.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 358–359.

⁵¹ Mitchell et al, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 1, 432.

⁵² Ibid., 437.

There is no doubt that the work by Mahler that Britten had in his ears over this Summer was, above all, the *Kindertotenlieder*. In October, by which time his new song cycle was finished, a diary entry neatly encapsulates Britten's fondness for reading musical scores like books, and for turning to the new medium of the wireless for access to music:

Sunday 18 October 1936 [London]

Spend day doing nothing but read – Compton Mackenzie (Carnival – very entertaining), & endless Mahler Berg & Schönberg – & also listen to wireless, deadly programmes except for the *Kindertotenlieder* in the evening & a very bad show of that, Kipnis being far too clumsy and too close to mike, & Boult as slow, dull & ignorant as is his wont. Even then they stand as supreme – music that I think I love more than any other.⁵³

Small wonder that the Alexander Kipnis, Adrian Boult, and the BBC Orchestra, heard over the wireless, could not compete in Britten's estimation with the gramophone sound of Rehkemper, Horenstein, and the Berlin Staatsorchester. Small wonder, too, that the sound of Mahler's song cycle can be heard through the sound of Britten's. It is worth considering the vocal entry in "Rats Away!", the song which so outraged Mum (Ex. 1).

There is very little here that recalls *Kindertotenlieder* in terms of harmony, gesture or mood; the vocal gymnastics of Britten's work are quite unlike the emotional intensity of Mahler's soloist. And yet there are, certainly, resonances of Mahler's sound. The sonority of the orchestra is very similar, as noted above; the use of string harmonics, accented harp notes, and contrasting dynamics in different parts also recall Mahler's attention to detail (Mahler calls for *pianissimo* in the violins together with *fortissimo* in the harp at rehearsal number 8 of the first song, "Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n"). And the ambition to create strikingly new sounds with "the normal orchestral palette" definitely connects the two works. The use here of cello and viola harmonics with harp interjections, and the culminating cymbal stroke in the final measure, sound not unlike a moment cited elsewhere in this volume: the transition to the final stanza of "In diesem Wetter," where a *ff* > *pp* A natural on cello harmonics is reinforced by piccolo, *sforzando* octaves on the harp, and *piano* strokes on the "little bells".⁵⁴ Those bell strokes, like the single notes on the glockenspiel in "Nun seh' ich wohl, warum so dunkle Flammen," are very clearly audible on the gramophone recording of the work, but likely to be lost in the distortion of a wireless broadcast.

⁵³ Ibid., 456. The concert is listed in *Radio Times* as a BBC broadcast between 21:05 and 22:30.

⁵⁴ See Karol Berger's chapter in the present volume.

soprano solo *f* ^{hard} *sempre f*

Ra

va. *f* *pp* hp. vc.

ob. 1 fl.

cresc. *ff* *sf* ts!

2 fl. hp. *f* + ob., cl. cymb. *ff*

str. *f* *cresc.* *sf*

EXAMPLE 1: Britten, *Our Hunting Fathers*: "(A) Rats Away!," rehearsal no. 6.

[Very Slow (♩ = 44–50). *Andante molto lento*]

with movement (*con moto*)

soprano solo *p* rather animated *3*

Who nur - tur'd in that fine tra-di - tion — Pre - dic - ted the re -

vn. I (1st half muted)

fl. *pp* *3* *pp* *dolciss. e tranquillo*

va., vc., bn. 1+2 + fl.

sult, Guess'd love by nat - ure sui - ted to The in - tri - cate ways of guilt;

vn. I (All muted)

fl. *3* *p* *dolciss.* *3* *p* *3*

p/pp *hp., 2 cl.* *eng. hn., 2 bn., va., vc. (1 half)*

EXAMPLE 2: Britten, *Our Hunting Fathers*: "Epilogue and Funeral March,"
two measures after rehearsal no. 61.

[m. 73: Stetig steigend]

voice *f* 89 —————

ich durf - te nichts da-zu sa - - - gen!

pic., *ff* *p*
vc. (flag.)

hp., bells *sf*
p

ob., cl. *ff* *f* *ff* *ff*

hn. *f*

eng hn., vn. *f* *ff* *ff*

f

94 Allmählich langsamer *ff* *p*

vn. I *pp*

pic. *p*

vn. I *pp*

vn. I+II *f/ff* *p*

vn. II *f* *p*

hp., bells *p* *pp* *sempre*

va., 2 bn. *f* *sf* *pp*

f *sf* *pp*

EXAMPLE 3: Mahler, *Kindertotenlieder*, vi, "In diesem Wetter," mm. 89–100.

In addition to Britten's recall of Mahler's orchestral textures, there are moments where *Our Hunting Fathers* comes close to quotation of motives from *Kindertotenlieder*. One is a passage from the final movement, which has the very Mahlerian title "Epilogue and Funeral March" (EX. 2).

The chromatic descending line on muted violins is a distinctively Mahlerian gesture, heard in the oboe and clarinet line of the passage from "In diesem Wetter" just mentioned (EX. 3).

These Mahlerian habits were to remain with Britten throughout his career. I will end with a major work, begun by Britten in 1942 while he was still in America, and finished in 1943: the opera *Peter Grimes*, set on the Suffolk coast where Britten had grown up and to which he returned to live permanently. One of its best-known sections is the second of the orchestral "Sea Interludes" which punctuate the opera (and are often performed as an orchestral suite). The interlude depicts the storm in Act I, in which Peter Grimes is thought lost at sea (EX. 4).

The fiery pace, the rhythm of the aggressive orchestral writing, and indeed the musical depiction of a storm, all recall the opening of "In diesem Wetter." As with the passage from "Epilogue and Funeral March" (EX. 2), EXAMPLE 4 has echoes of Mahler's motivic vocabulary (EXX. 5 and 6).

Presto con fuoco ($\text{♩} = 108$)

cl., 2 bn., va., vc.

ff < >

hp., timp., db.

ff

EXAMPLE 4: Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Second Sea Interlude (Storm), mm. 1–3.

Mit ruhelos schmerzvollem Ausdruck

2 ob., eng. hn., bass cl.

p molto espr. *f*

vn. II, fl., cl., hp.

mf

mf *mf* *mf* *mf* *p*

ff *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff*

vc., db., cl., bass cl., cbn.

+ 2 bn.

EXAMPLE 5: Mahler, *Kindertotenlieder*, vi, "In diesem Wetter," mm. 1–3.

Hn. 1+3

a2

f *sf* *sf* *f* *p* < *sf* *sf* *sf* *f* *p* *p*

EXAMPLE 6: Mahler, *Kindertotenlieder*, vi, "In diesem Wetter," mm. 71–74.

Britten, along with his much-mourned mentor Berg, must rank among the most striking emulators of Mahler's sound in 20th-century modernism. A legacy heard through the media of the new technologies of the 1930s, filtered through the predominance of vocal works in Mahler performances, and sealed by Britten's avowed love for *Kindertotenlieder*, *Das Lied von der Erde*, and the Fourth Symphony in particular. Britten's encounter with Mahler, at the outset of his professional career and before Mahler had become the staple of the concert repertoire that he is today, reminds all of us that it is Mahler's sound that survives him.

It is accepted that Mahler was a significant influence on the British modernist composer Benjamin Britten, but the nature of that influence has rarely been explored in depth. This chapter draws on materials held in the Britten-Pears Archive in Aldeburgh, and investigates the history of the young Britten's reception of Mahler in the 1930s, specifically, his reception of Mahler's sound through the new technologies of wireless broadcasts and gramophone recordings. Britten first heard Mahler's music at the age of 16, in 1930, just after arriving in London to study at the Royal College of Music. The occasion was a BBC Proms concert that included the Fourth Symphony, and the experience was formative for Britten. He developed an enormous regard for Mahler, especially after a visit to Vienna in 1934, during which he again heard the Fourth Symphony and bought its score. During the 1930s, he purchased scores of nearly all of Mahler's works, and refers to reading them in the same way he refers to reading books. He heard wireless broadcasts of Mahler performances, especially those of the BBC, but also short-wave broadcasts from Europe, significantly those from Hilversum in the Netherlands. The most significant medium of reception of Mahler's sound by Britten, however, was early gramophone recordings. His recordings of *Kindertotenlieder* and *Das Lied von der Erde*, on sets of 78 rpm discs, led to the sound of these works having the clearest influence on Britten's own music, seen through analysis of examples from *Our Hunting Fathers* and *Peter Grimes*.

Schlagworte/Keywords: Benjamin Britten, Einfluss, Gustav Mahler, influence, reception, Rezeption, Technologie, technology

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