

Book Review

Tesler-Mabé, Hernan. 2020. *Mahler's Forgotten Conductor: Heinz Unger and His Search for Jewish Meaning, 1895–1965*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

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Biographical narratives are often based on the idea of historical influence: they aim at demonstrating how individuals altered the course of history ("made history") and how they were affected by it. Yet the concept of historical "influence" does not emanate from the stratum of historical facts; rather, it is a construct that is imposed upon historical knowledge while assuming a distinction between particular agencies and general historical trajectories. Hernan Tesler-Mabé's *Mahler's Forgotten Conductor: Heinz Unger and His Search for Jewish Meaning, 1895–1965* seems to question this assumption. Taking his cue from Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980 [1976]) – which explores popular culture in sixteenth-century Italy through the eyes of a common miller – Tesler-Mabé sets out to write a "contextual history" [sic.] in which a "single historical subject can open up an entire universe of understanding that otherwise would have remained unexplored" (5). This means that the differentiation between the personal history of a protagonist and a generalized historical context is replaced by the idea of historical embodiment; the historical subject, in turn, is construed as a site whose actions, demeanors, and dispositions weaves a web of mediators and contiguities. Untangling the knots of that web constitutes the act of historization.

The intention of producing the microhistory of Heinz Unger can certainly add significant insights into what the author labels "the search for Jewish meaning" in his title. After all, Unger's story involves a personal and cultural journey that begins with the emancipated and assimilated Jewish communities of the Old World and ends with the integration into the formerly East European Jewish communities of the New World. But as Tesler-Mabé clarifies, Unger's Jewishness should not be perceived in relation to that of figures like Gershom Scholem and Franz Rosenzweig, who formulated their German-Jewish identity within "the traditional bounds of intellectual history." Unger, he writes, demonstrates the "complex, non-monolithic nature" of the German-Jewish experience that lies in the "interaction with and negotiation of ideologies, trends, and personalities" (5). And thus, it would seem that this chronicle of Unger's life promulgates a non-identarian perception of Jewishness as a lived experience that entails a flux of religious, national, and cultural configurations.

But inasmuch as this biography is underpinned by historical interest, it also aspires to commemorate a forgotten artist. Justifiably or not, Unger did not gain international fame during his lifetime. Shortly after his career took off, he was forced to leave Germany yet did not develop any long-lasting position in any of the countries he lived in afterwards. Unger also received scant attention from future generation; this neglect was sustained not only by

his limited success, but also by the fact that he hardly recorded during his lifetime. According to Tesler-Mabé, neglecting Unger's artistic achievements is a historical wrong that should be righted and he therefore explicitly aims at restoring Unger's "professional achievements to their rightful place in the public consciousness" (3).

And this puts Tesler-Mabé on a problematic path. Even if the intentions of rehabilitation and contextualization can be combined – which is doubtful – the entanglement of these intentions in *Mahler's Forgotten Conductor* unfortunately undermines its critical and historical value. On the one hand, the book provides the reader with numerous accounts of Unger's so-called accomplishments, including countless flattering citations of contemporaneous critics and references to testimonials of Unger and his wife – and devotes almost half its pages to a long list of Unger's known concerts or performances. On the other hand, Tesler-Mabé does not delve into the more specific contexts pertaining to Unger or discuss the broader implications of his findings. Regarding Unger's Canadian experiences, for example, Tesler-Mabé briefly discusses the precarious position of German-Jews in the context of Canadian Jewry in general, yet he does not clarify how this specifically bears on Unger. The assertion that Jewishness played a key role in Unger's life in Canada is insufficiently backed by historical facts that could attest to the possible roles, functions, and the effects of Jewishness in his personal conduct and professional environments. In this regard, the book fails to produce the contextual history it sets out to provide. Eagerly striving to establish the artistic importance of Unger's work, the book does not stray from the path of Unger's professional Odyssey; yet in doing so, it often projects simplistic and uncritical perception of Unger's figure.

Since the scope of this review does not allow to address the multitude of factors affected by the conflict of commemoration and contextualization, it will suffice here to focus on the role the figure of Mahler plays in Tesler-Mabé's narrative. Mahler surely looms large in Unger's history: Unger decided to "devote his life to music making" after hearing Mahler's *Lied von der Erde*; he participated in the Mahler-fest held in Amsterdam in 1920; and he was appointed as a member on the honorary board of directors of the Gustav Mahler Society of America (19, 21, 79). Moreover, Unger nurtured his reputation as a Mahler specialist throughout his career – from the debut concerts whose programs revolved mainly around Mahler's music to the repeated efforts to perform Mahler in Canada. But Unger's attachment to Mahler, according to Tesler-Mabé, is not only a musical and personal issue. Mahler, he argues, deeply affected Unger because he musically expressed a shared German-Jewish experience of "highly destabilizing social and cultural reality" (12). Unger, in other words, seems to have perceived Mahler's music as a site of Jewishness, and for this reason, his increasing allegiance to Mahler and the dissemination of his music is interpreted as a performance of his Jewish identity (8).

In defining Mahler's music as a "site of formation and maintenance of Jewish identity", Unger's biography arguably abandons the "frustrating model" of categorical inclusion or exclusion from Jewishness and embrace the idea that "all spaces represented different yet still equal negotiations of Jewish identity" (11). It follows, then, that Mahler's work is construed as a part of a "more broad-minded and inclusive" sphere of Jewish music because it expresses the cultural reality experienced by Jews in this period and functioned

as “a form and reflection” of Jewish identity (11). But while Tesler-Mabé proclaims a non-essentialist and critical approach toward Jewishness, his analysis proves otherwise.

To avoid essentialist modes of thinking it is necessary to adopt elastic, mutable, and contingent formulations that transcend categories like Jewish identity and Jewish music (with Jewish being an obstinate adjective). Identity, in such a framework, should carry scare quotes as it conveys a disarrayed constellation of actions, situations, and experiences placed in specific contexts. Similarly, the *locus* of Jewish music should be relocated in the specific configurations in which it is performed and the functions it fulfills. Following this, the issue at hand is not whether Mahler fulfilled the function of Jewish self-positioning for Unger, but how Unger positioned himself as a Jew through Mahler. And so we may ask: how did Unger’s allegiance to Mahler affected the way he was perceived? What links did he try to establish between Mahler’s music and potential Jewish venues? Such questions do not animate Tesler-Mabé’s book nor are they even addressed.

Whereas the author aspires to position Unger, Mahler, and the performance of Jewishness within an intricate network, he neutralizes that very network by fixing the position of its constituents. In a rather tautological manner, Mahler’s music becomes a site of Jewishness because it was performed by Jews such as Unger, and Unger performed his Jewishness because he conducted Mahler. But as Adam J. Sacks sensibly pointed out, Mahler also straddles the ground between romanticism and modernism and, following the revival of his oeuvre in the sixties, has also come to embody tropes like the “psychologically therapeutic,” the “torment of pathology,” and “the kitsch of sacrificial transcendence.” (Sacks 2013, 113). These aspects are excluded from Tesler-Mabé’s view, most likely because they extend beyond the performance of Jewishness. But Mahler probably played a role in Unger’s attempt to situate himself as a modernist, especially in the fairly peripheral context of Toronto in the fifties and sixties. By the same token, it is certainly possible that the adherence to Mahler in North American contexts also solidified Unger’s self-positioning as German, and not only in relation to Jewish communities, but also to Canadians in general.

That being said, the fixation of Mahler’s figure in relation to Jewishness is by no means unintentional; it serves a central purpose in the broader conflict of commemorating and contextualizing Unger. After all, the polite praises of unknown critics in local publications in addition to the emotional testimonials of the Ungers are not enough to establish the Jewish significance and the artistic importance of Unger’s work. To do so, Unger needs to be backed by a figure that is “greater than life,” one that “made history”. Mahler appears to play that role wherein he functions as a monolithic myth that bestows Jewish meaning and tragic significance upon Unger. The opening lines of the book demonstrate this mythization most lucidly when Tesler-Mabé equates the “three blows of fate” the hit Mahler – which were allegedly represented by the three hammer blows in the finale of his Sixth Symphony – and the supposedly key three misfortunes of Unger (Mahler-Werfel 1990 [1971], 70; Tesler-Mabé 2020, 3). But there is nothing tragic about Mahler’s “blows of faith” just as there is nothing historical in Alma Mahler’s description of them. These blows of faith are part of the Mahler myth, which relies on history to the extent that it serves to idolize Mahler and is projected as a metaphysical aura upon the historical narrative of Unger.

Still, is there something wrong with idolizing Unger? If we acknowledge that historicization unavoidably constructs a narrative, why cannot it be heroic? It can, but not in a context whose mode of narration overlooks the figure it commemorates and the history it seeks to depict. Unger, so it seems, becomes part of an agenda to validate Canadian and Jewish-Canadian culture by placing it in an international arena in which he is casted as the Canadian counterpart of Leonard Bernstein, Arturo Toscanini, and John Barbirolli. Only that Toronto, especially at the time, is not New-York, and Unger is certainly no Bernstein. In this fictitious international competition, Unger loses. Based on the information Tesler-Mabé provides, Unger's emigration to Canada was the stage on which Unger's international career started to falter. In this local, Unger could not land any substantial position and was therefore impelled to conduct small community orchestras and later on a provisional orchestra organized by his "supporters" (63). These venues, it should also be added, were inherently related to the local Jewish community who sought to establish its own cultural presence. Likewise, Unger's guest performances with more established orchestras dwindled over time and were usually restricted to the Canadian Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the CBC Symphony Orchestra.

Paradoxically, Unger's marginality is doubled the more Tesler-Mabé situates him in relation to world-renowned conductors. This naturally defeats the purpose of studying Unger's life since it glosses over some of the unique facets of his story, especially the confrontation of the romanticized aspirations of a German-Jewish conductor with the music market of post-World War II and the north-American cultural environment. In this regard, Tesler-Mabé surely deserves credit for shedding new light on the way in which Unger promoted the dissemination of European art within small communities in Canada, his advancement of non-professional communal musical production, or his negotiation of artistic modernism within relatively conservative environments. Yet to give these experiences the due attention one must rise above comparisons with conductors who left their mark on the international stage and situate Unger at the center of *his* stage. Tesler-Mabé does not do so; instead, he inadvertently renders Unger a provincial figure, a forgotten composer that stands in the shadow of international conductors while conducting a holy quest for Jewish meaning under the auspices of a Mahlerian titan.

References

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