

Bruckner, Mahler and anti-Semitism

IN HIS recently published book, *Why Mahler?* Norman Lebrecht writes, on page 40: “Mahler calls Bruckner his “father-in-learning”, overlooking his repeated disparagements of Mahler’s Jewishness. It is the price he has to pay for having a mentor.”¹

Lebrecht gives no reference as to the source that leads him to make this unprecedented assertion about Bruckner’s behaviour towards Mahler, but the sentence does have one footnote, referring to Paul Stefan’s early Mahler biography, where you will read that it was Guido Adler’s² expression, not Mahler’s: “Adoptiv-Lehrvater” - (adoptive/adopted father-in-learning) - and ‘Adoptiv’ could suggest the action of adopting was Bruckner’s as much as Mahler’s.³ But in Stefan’s book you will find only descriptions of Bruckner’s respect, exaggerated respect even, towards Mahler: Stefan reports Theodor Rättig telling him Bruckner *always* spoke of Mahler with extreme respect or deference, [außerst Achtung]. Indeed, you will find the same memoir recycled in Lebrecht’s own book, *Mahler Remembered*, p.27, footnote: “Bruckner’s publisher, Theodor Rättig, told Paul Stefan that ‘Bruckner always spoke of Mahler with the greatest respect ... whenever Mahler visited, he always insisted on accompanying the young man down the four flights of stairs, hat in hand.’⁴

Searching the biographical literature of both composers and a variety of memoirs, I can find no evidence whatever that Bruckner ever once said anything to Mahler disparaging his Jewishness, let alone repeatedly. The only suggestion that Bruckner might have had any reservations on that account comes in a letter written by Krzyzanowski’s sister-in-law, Marie Lorenz. Krzyzanowski was Mahler’s friend, and they were both amongst the small band of enthusiasts who applauded Bruckner at the end of the disastrous performance of the 3rd Symphony in December 1877, and they shared the task of making the 4-hand piano transcription of the symphony, this transcription being Mahler’s first published work. Lorenz had some spiteful comments to make about Mahler, whose confidence, ambition, success and friendship with Bruckner she obviously resented. One suspects she would have loved to have quoted disparaging comments by Bruckner of Mahler’s Jewishness, but this even she was unable to do. She writes of Mahler and of his relationship with Bruckner,

“I knew Mahler from his modest times (when he was a student at the conservatory) and even at that time he could not bear being put in the shade in any way. Step by step seeking the heights, limb by limb, good fortune easing his path. Tyrannical to the verge of heartlessness, stepping on all obstacles in his way, accessible only if one happened to find him in good humour and at a propitious moment, he could still act obsequiously at times. Did he have time to devote to Bruckner? If the question of playing a work was involved! Yes, but for how long? And what was left for Bruckner’s personal, marvellous, divinely-gifted nature? And even so, Bruckner, who had the pure naivety of a child, would be overjoyed to receive a letter from his one-time pupil!”⁵

As La Grange points out, Mahler did not conduct any Bruckner until many years later, so Lorenz’s comment that Mahler had time to devote to Bruckner only if there was a work of his to be performed is obviously untrue.

This appears in the 9 part biography of Bruckner by Göllicher-Auer, published between 1922 and 1937 *Anton Bruckner - Ein lebens- und Schaffens-Bild*. Göllicher quotes Lorenz again, this time where she makes explicit mention of Bruckner’s alleged dislike of Mahler’s Jewishness and of Bruckner’s anti-Semitism, but one wonders how much this might be an expression of her own, not to mention Göllicher’s, anti-Mahler, anti-Semitic, views rather than a true reflection of Bruckner’s feelings for Mahler:

¹ Norman Lebrecht, *Why Mahler? How one man and ten symphonies changed the world*. Faber & Faber 2010, p.40

² Guido Adler, 1855-1941, musicologist, friend and promoter of Mahler, attended Bruckner’s university courses.

³ Paul Stefan, *Gustav Mahler - Eine Studie über Persönlichkeit und Werk* München 1912, p.27

„Bruckner kam meist mit Mahler in den Hörsaal und verließ ihn von Mahler begleitet; wie denn der ehrwürdige Meister, nach Guido Adlers gutem Wort, Mahlers „Adoptiv-Lehrvater“ genannt werden kann.“ [Bruckner usually arrived at the lecture hall and left it accompanied by Mahler, so that indeed the venerable Master, in the apt words of Guido Adler, can be called Mahler’s “Adopted Father-in-learning”. Trans. KW]

⁴ Norman Lebrecht, *Mahler Remembered* Faber & Faber, London 1987

⁵ Henry-Louis de La Grange *Mahler* Gollanz London 1974 p.41, La Grange’s translation from Göllicher-Auer *Anton Bruckner - Ein lebens- und Schaffens-Bild* IV/1, p.450. (Trans. expanded and completed to include fuller quotation.)

Ich kenne Mahler noch aus seiner bescheidenen Zeit (noch als Konservatoriums-Schüler) und schon damals hat er nichts vertragen, was nur irgend gewagt hätte, ihn in den Schatten zu stellen! Von da ab Stufe zu Stufe in die Höhe jagend, Glied um Glied, Glück am Weg. Tyrannisch bis zur Herzlosigkeit und niedertretend, was ihm im Wege stand. Nur zugänglich in Augenblicken, wenn jemand die richtige Zeit und Stimmung ihn zu rühren das Glück hatte, dann war er auch imstande am Boden zu liegen. Hatte er Zeit für Bruckner? In Momentum, wo es zu Aufführungen kam ja, aber wie lange? Und was fiel ab für sein (Bruckners) persönliches fabelhaft gottbegnadetes Wesen? Und doch hat Bruckner, der das naiv Reine eines Kindes an sich hatte, ein Brief seines einstigen Schülers so sehr gefreut!

“He [Bruckner] took Krzyzanowski to his heart, as opposed to Mahler the Jew, who he valued as an extraordinary musician, but by whom, reports Krzyzanowski’s sister-in-law Frau Marie Lorenz, he was disturbed. ‘The Jews’, she further reports, ‘were to him altogether unlikeable and he was horrified by the word ‘Jew’ as though he had committed a great insult against them should the word accidentally slip out, and he corrected himself with a more delicate description, where he would say, ‘the Israelite gentlemen’.”⁶

Göllerich continues: “His dislike of the Jews differentiates itself nevertheless from the indiscriminate hate of anti-Semites, so that for reasons of his sincere and deep religiousness this feeling was transformed into deep compassion...” This uneasy distinction is then illustrated by the story from Kerschagl’s reminiscences of attending Bruckner’s lectures in the Vienna Conservatory, the occasion when Bruckner entered the classroom and noticed a small Jewish boy sitting in the front row, gazed a while at him, then put a hand upon his head and said to him, “almost compassionately, ‘Dear child, do you really believe that the Messiah has not yet come to earth?’”⁷ According to Kerschagl’s memoir as retold by Göllerich, the whole place burst into laughter, but Bruckner was altogether serious.

August Göllerich was a virulent anti-Semite, so much so that, even though he was Bruckner’s ‘official’ biographer, the University of Vienna asked him to withdraw from the celebration of Bruckner’s receipt of an honorary doctorate in December 1891 at which he had been due to speak.⁸ That such a man was Bruckner’s biographer, and an enormous proportion of the biographical information we have about Bruckner’s life comes from his work, renders it necessary to treat his anecdotes and reports with some circumspection, and it is perhaps surprising, and even reassuring, that he found nothing more blatantly anti-Semitic in Bruckner’s attitude and behaviour to report in that lengthy biography than the extracts I quote in this essay.

There is a further reference to Bruckner’s view of Mahler and Mahler’s Jewishness in Göllerich-Auer. Wilhelm Zinne (1858-1934), a friend and supporter of Mahler in Hamburg, who shared Mahler’s love of Bruckner and cycling, visited Bruckner in 1892 at the time of the Vienna Theatre and Music Exhibition. Göllerich-Auer quotes Zinne’s own report of his meeting with Bruckner. In the rather bare, modest room, with manuscript paper and scores lying on the piano and harmonium, he sat down with Bruckner who “soon asks after ‘his beloved Mahler’, who he appeared to regard very highly. Let him prepare his symphony - the Seventh above all, which to Bruckner himself was the dearest.”⁹ They drank a bottle of red wine, the conversation became more convivial. “He expressed great joy over the enthusiasm of the Viennese for his works. He was pleased too by the Berliners and the performance of the *Te Deum* under Siegfried Ochs, who was probably a Jew, but that doesn’t matter; Mahler is also a Jew but he rails terribly against the Jews. All this in jest, as he was on this day uncommonly cheerful and in the mood for joking.”¹⁰ It is hard to read into this reminiscence an anti-Semitism so unforgiving and mean-minded as would have expressed itself in repeated disparagement of ‘his beloved Mahler’s’ Jewishness.

Alma Mahler and Max von Oberleithner both write of Bruckner’s preference for the expression ‘the honourable Israelites’¹¹. Our consideration of what to make of this preference must include the likelihood that Bruckner was actually at pains not to be anti-Semitic. As Dermot Gault points out, ‘Bruckner was ... known for his tolerance and friendship with Jews.’¹² His long-term friendship with his student Friedrich Eckstein,¹³ not to mention his consideration of a proposal of marriage to his pupil Marie Pohoryles, a Polish Jewish young woman who seems to have taken lessons from Bruckner for almost ten years,¹⁴ are both witness to affections that were free of any of that restraint as would have arisen had Bruckner been anti-Semitic. And beyond that, he was prepared to rebuke those, like Lebrecht, who would label him in print as anti-Semitic:

⁶ Göllerich-Auer *Anton Bruckner - Ein lebens- und Schaffens-Bild* Vol. 4/1 p.532

Besonders Krzyzanowsky hatte der Meister ins Herz geschlossen, dagegen störte ihn bei Mahler, den er als Musiker außerordentlich schätzte, wie Frau Marie Lorenz, die Schwägerin Krzyzanowskys berichtet, der Jude. ‘Die Juden’, so berichtet sie weiter, ‘waren ihm überhaupt unsympathisch und er erschrak vor dem Ausdruck ‘Jude’ wie vor einer großen Beleidigung gegen diese wenn ihm derselbe zufällig entschlüpfte, und verbesserte sich in zarterer Umschreibung, indem er sagte ‘die Herren Israeliten’... Seine Abneigung gegen die Juden unterschied sich jedoch von dem wahllosen Haß der Antisemiten, so daß er auf Grund seiner wahren und tiefen Religiosität diese Gefühl in tiefes Mitleid wandelte...

⁷ Göllerich-Auer, op. cit

⁸ Margaret Notley, “Bruckner and Viennese Wagnerism” in *Bruckner Studies*, ed. Jackson & Hawkshaw, CUP 1997 p. 67

⁹ Ibid Vol.4/3 p.247 „Bald fragte er nach seinem ‚lieben Mahler‘, den er sehr zu schätzen schien. Er möge doch mal seine Symphonie - die ‚Siebente‘ vor allem, die ihm selbst die liebste sei.“

¹⁰ Ibid p. 250 „Er äußerte große Freude über den Enthusiasmus der Wiener an seinen Werken. Er freute sich auch über die Berliner und die Aufnahme des *Te Deums* unter der Leitung von Siegfried Ochs, der sei wohl ein Jude, aber das macht nichts; auch Mahler ist ein Jude, aber er schimpft schrecklich auf die Juden. Das alles scherzend, wie er gerade an dem Tage ungemein heiter und zu Scherzen aufgelegt war.“

¹¹ Stephen Johnson *Bruckner Remembered* Faber & Faber, London 1998, p.128

¹² Dermot Gault *The New Bruckner* Ashgate 2011, p.235

¹³ Frederick Eckstein, 1861 - 1939 industrialist, philosopher, musician, a student of Bruckner’s at the Conservatory 1880 and later privately from 1884. Provided Bruckner financial support, including for the publication of the *Te Deum*.

¹⁴ Göllerich-Auer, op. cit Vol 4/2 p.228 Entries in Franz Scheder, “Anton Bruckner Chronologie Datenbank” for Pohoryles from 1880 - 1890.

Generally he was, as Marschner¹⁵ reports, not really in sympathy with the anti-Semitism of some of his most outstanding students, since he currently saw himself strongly promoted by several noble representatives of that race. One thinks only of what Eckstein and Levi had done for him!

That circle, which should have recognised and supported the prophets in their ranks, ... at that time did absolutely nothing positive for the Master - but he was, however, good enough to become set up by the newspapers as an anti-Semite, which could only damage him. One day at The Red Hedgehog, just when he had again been denounced in the newspaper as an anti-Semite, he met Dr Königstein, the critic of *Extrablatt*. "So, Mr. Doctor," he addressed him, "what it says in the newspapers is absolutely not true - I have absolutely nothing against the Israelite gentlemen!"¹⁶

He also fought against anti-Semitism on behalf of the requirements of his students. Bruckner arranged for the purchase of a fine 'Organ-harmonium' from the firm of Bernhard Kohn in Vienna for the students of the organ-playing course - the Conservatory had no instrument for the students of the course to play on! - but after its installation the Conservatory administration said they could not use it because the Conservatory would not take an organ from a Jewish firm. The students were outraged, and Bruckner took it upon himself to report this outrage to the administration: the following week the 'organ-harmonium' was back in service - and that instrument stayed with Bruckner until his final year.¹⁷

That the Conservatory should have sought to forbid the use of a fine instrument because it was obtained from a Jewish firm gives an idea of the extraordinary prevalence of anti-Semitism at that time. Tanya Tintner, who describes the anti-Semitism in Vienna in her book *Out of Time: The Vexed Life of Georg Tintner*,¹⁸ gives the background which helps to place Bruckner's reported relations with Mahler and Jews in context. In an email exchange she wrote:

In Bruckner's time anti-Semitism was endemic in Austria, and was even to be found in "mild-mannered" and intelligent and otherwise perfectly reasonable Austrians; it was so much part of the fabric of Austrian life that if you weren't on the receiving end of it you simply didn't notice it. Low-level anti-Semitism was not only regarded as perfectly acceptable, it wasn't even seen as any sort of negative prejudice at all. It was just the way you dealt with Jews, the way you saw them. Non-Jews had dealings with Jews in Vienna all the time, but that didn't mean that the former had anything other than contempt for the latter, entirely because of their Jewishness. Alma Mahler is a good example of this: she married two Jews but it didn't stop her writing and saying the most vile things about Jews in general (see Oliver Hilmes's book, *Witwe im Wahn*, Siedler Verlag, München, 2004). In Austria at the time, there was nothing contradictory about this. Nowadays Alma's behaviour would be utterly unacceptable; at the time it was just pretty normal. So it would be perfectly *possible* for Bruckner to admire Mahler, be grateful to Mahler, and despise Jews all at the same time.

The question is whether Bruckner was just your regular Austrian - an anti-Semite by current standards, not an anti-Semite by late 19th-century standards, background anti-Semitism as it were - or something rather worse. Most likely Bruckner was one of the more tolerant Austrians (and being non-Viennese makes it yet more likely - it was in Vienna, home to a quarter of a million Jews, where the hatred was so extensive), and anti-Semitism, *if any*, that might be attributed to him would be of the endemic, 'common-or-garden', background variety.

It is perhaps difficult to see Bruckner as at all anti-Semitic, but even if his attitude to Jews fell within the pale of this 'background' variety of anti-Semitism, the same cannot be said of some of those with whom he was associated. The primary agency by which Bruckner's works were promoted in Vienna in the 1880s and 1890s was the Vienna Academic Wagner Society (Wiener akademischer Wagner-Verein). Josef Schalk was active in this society on Bruckner's behalf and many of Bruckner's works received piano transcription performances under the auspices of this society.¹⁹ Margaret Notley writes, "Indeed, the Wiener akademischer Wagner-Verein ... included many Jews. This organization, which Helm likened in 1891 to "a miniature Bayreuth for Bruckner,"

¹⁵ Dr Franz Marschner, 1855-1932 - Pianist, organist and music theorist, Bruckner pupil in the Conservatory 1883-1885

¹⁶ Göllerich-Auer, op. cit Vol 4/2 p.228

Überhaupt war er, wie Marschner berichtet, mit dem Antisemitismus einiger seiner hervorragendsten Schüler nicht recht einverstanden, da er gerade von einigen edlen Vertretern dieser Rasse sich stark gefördert sah. Man denke nur, was Eckstein und Levi für ihn getan!

Jene Kreise, die den Propheten in ihren Reihen hätten erkennen und unterstützen sollen, ... taten damals für den Meister gar nichts Positives, wohl aber war er gut genug, in den Zeitungen als Antisemit hingestellt zu werden, was ihm nur schaden konnte. Beim 'Roten Igel' traf Bruckner eines Tages, als er eben in der Zeitung wieder als Antisemit verschrien worden war, Dr Königstein, den Kritiker des 'Extrablatt'. „Sö, Herr Doktor,“ redete er ihn an, „was in dö Zeitungen g'redit wird, is' gar nix wahr - i' hab' ja gar nix gegen dö Herrn Israeliten!“

¹⁷ Ibid Vol.4/1 pp 33-38

¹⁸ Tanya Buchdahl Tintner *Out of Time: The Vexed Life of Georg Tintner* University of Western Australia Press 2011

¹⁹ Andrea Harrandt "Preparation for the Public - Piano Transcriptions of Bruckner's Music" in *The Bruckner Journal*, Vol. 14 / 1, March 2010

declined to support the anti-Semitic politics that began to pose a serious threat to Viennese Liberalism in the 1880s.”²⁰ But in 1890 the extreme Pan-German nationalist and anti-Semite, Georg von Schönerer, together with a splinter group of sympathisers, left the Wiener akademischer Wagner-Verein to form the New Richard Wagner Society (Neuer Richard-Wagner-Verein).

The society declared “As national artist Richard Wagner was an anti-Semite, so must every Wagner society be uncontaminated German, so that it does not become a caricature of an artistic association that bears the name of ‘Wagner’.”²¹

The event was reported in the anti-Semitic newspaper, *Deutsches Volksblatt*, 27 March 1890,

The first motion now put by the board, that Meister Anton Bruckner, the heir to Beethoven’s genius long silenced to death by the press, be appointed honorary member, and the spiritual creator of the New Richard Wagner Society, Mr August Göllerich be appointed honorary Chairman, was unanimously adopted and called forth a storm of true German enthusiasm.²²

Both Wagner societies promoted talks about and performances of Bruckner’s works, which didn’t happen elsewhere in the conservative music establishment, which leads Dr. Robert Hirschfeld to comment in *Die Presse*, 24 December 1890,

The conservative critics have always treated Anton Bruckner with ridicule and scorn. So he fell into the hands of political partisans who took pains to take in the ‘abandoned man’ in all spheres, in order in the end to discredit him altogether.²³

Although this group of anti-Semitic supporters was keen to claim Bruckner as a great German Meister, and described such a being as free from Jewish influence, nowhere is there a word or action of Bruckner’s that records him as ever being active in their cause. We have no evidence of any response from him to his appointment as honorary member, not even in Göllerich’s biography, nor any evidence of him taking an active role in the Neuer Richard-Wagner-Verein at all. Although their programme was anti-Semitic, and they chose Bruckner as their artistic mascot, they seem to have found him totally unusable to follow in Wagner’s footsteps in the vanguard of anti-Semitism. Bruckner continued his association with Jews, including Mahler, Friedrich Eckstein, Ferdinand Löwe and Herman Levi, and with the somewhat more liberal Wiener akademischer Wagner-Verein of which he had also been appointed honorary member in 1885.

Bruckner’s letters to Göllerich are fulsome in their statements of sympathy and friendship, but in the ones that have come down to us, and indeed in all the other letters in the collected letters, there are no anti-Semitic sentiments expressed. Not even when he complains about his fate and that of his music, does he choose to blame ‘the Jews’, or even ‘the honourable Israelites’. They don’t get a mention. Just as he skirted around the word ‘Jude’, referring ‘politely’, as Alma Mahler describes it, to ‘the honourable Israelites’, he seems to have deliberately avoided any involvement in the prevalent and increasing anti-Semitism of his times, possibly seeing it as repugnant and probably an irrelevance or even a hindrance to his own concerns, which were primarily to advance his success as a composer. There is, indeed, to my knowledge no record of him having been involved in the promotion of or opposition to *any* social or political cause, beyond personal representations with regard to his own career and reputation or his music’s reception. There is no record of him being remotely involved in the battle within the Wagner Verein that led to the defection of Göllerich et al, both societies presumably retaining him as an honorary member, but nor do we know how he responded to the example provided by Rudolf Weinwurm, his very close friend since 1856, who resigned from the Akademischer Gesangverein in 1887 because of its increasing anti-Semitism.²⁴ Surely it cannot be, as Thomas Leibnitz speculates, that “Bruckner was unaware of the polemical and aggressive aspects of nationalistic German rhetoric”,²⁵ but he does seem to have acted on the whole as if none of it was anything to do with him nor anything that he had to be explicitly involved with - and I think we can take him at his word: he had absolutely nothing against the Israelite gentlemen.

²⁰ Margaret Notley “Bruckner and Viennese Wagnerism” in *Bruckner Studies*, ed. Jackson & Hawkshaw, CUP 1997, p65

²¹ Herwig (Eduard Pichl) *Georg Schönerer und die Entwicklung des Alldeutschtumes in der Ostmark* Vienna 1923, p 587

Der Verein erklärte: “Wie Richard Wagner als nationaler Künstler selbst Antisemit war, so muß auch jeder Wagner-verein unverfälscht deutsch sein, so er nicht zur Karikatur einer künstlerischen Vereinigung werden, die den Namen „Wagner“ trägt”

²² Franz Scheder, “Anton Bruckner Chronologie Datenbank” *Deutsches Volksblatt*, 27 March 1890:

Der nun zunächst vom Vorstände gestellte Antrag, Meister Anton Bruckner, den von der Presse so lange todteschwiegene Erben des Beethoven’schen Genius, zum Ehren-Mitgliede und den geistigen Schöpfer des neuen Richard-Wagner-Vereines, Herrn August Göllerich, zum Ehren-Obmanne zu ernennen, fand einhellige Annahme und rief einen wahren Sturm echt deutscher Begeisterung hervor.

²³ Göllerich - Auer, op. cit. Vol 4 /3, p.98 Der konservativen Kritik hat Anton Bruckner stets zum Horn und Spott gedient. So geriet er in die Hände politische Parteigänger, welche auf allen Gebieten sich des ‚verlassenen Mannes‘ anzunehmen pflegten, um ihn schließlich gänzlich zu diskreditieren.

²⁴ Crawford Howie *Anton Bruckner - A Documentary Biography*, Edwin Mellen, 2002, Vol. II, p. 583

Wiener Sonn- und Montags-Zeitung - Monday 7th November 1887, p.4 Weinwurm resigned over the refusal of the committee to accept an exceptional young tenor into the choir because he was a Galician Jew.

²⁵ Thomas Leibnitz, “Anton Bruckner and ‘German Music’: Josef Schalk and the Establishment of Bruckner as National Composer,” *Perspectives on Anton Bruckner*, ed Hawkshaw, Howie and Jackson, Ashgate 2001, p.333

Most of these events post-date the days in the second half of the 1870s when Mahler was a student in Vienna and Bruckner became his 'adopted father-in-learning' but none of the reports, certainly none from Mahler himself, nor even any from avowedly anti-Semitic sources, justifies Lebrecht's distasteful invention that Mahler had to put up with repeated disparagements of his Jewishness from his friend Anton Bruckner.

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