(((1)))

THE GOLDEN AGE

Strauss, Mahler, and the Fin de Siècle

When Richard Strauss conducted his opera *Salome* on May 16, 1906, in the Austrian city of Graz, several crowned heads of European music gathered to witness the event. The premiere of *Salome* had taken place in Dresden five months earlier, and word had got out that Strauss had created something beyond the pale—an ultra-dissonant biblical spectacle, based on a play by a British degenerate whose name was not mentioned in polite company, a work so frightful in its depiction of adolescent lust that imperial censors had banned it from the Court Opera in Vienna.

Giacomo Puccini, the creator of *La Bohème* and *Tosca*, made a trip north to hear what "terribly cacophonous thing" his German rival had concocted. Gustav Mahler, the director of the Vienna Opera, attended with his wife, the beautiful and controversial Alma. The bold young composer Arnold Schoenberg arrived from Vienna with his brother-in-law Alexander Zemlinsky and no fewer than six of his pupils. One of them, Alban Berg, traveled with an older friend, who later recalled the "feverish impatience and boundless excitement" that all felt as the evening approached. The widow of Johann Strauss II, composer of *On the Beautiful Blue Danube*, represented old Vienna.

Ordinary music enthusiasts filled out the crowd—"young people from Vienna, with only the vocal score as hand luggage," Richard Strauss

noted. Among them may have been the seventeen-year-old Adolf Hitler, who had just seen Mahler conduct Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in Vienna. Hitler later told Strauss's son that he had borrowed money from relatives to make the trip. There was even a fictional character present—Adrian Leverkühn, the hero of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, the tale of a composer in league with the devil.

The Graz papers brought news from Croatia, where a Serbo-Croat movement was gaining momentum, and from Russia, where the tsar was locked in conflict with the country's first parliament. Both stories carried tremors of future chaos—the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, the Russian Revolution of 1917. For the moment, though, Europe maintained the facade of civilization. The British war minister, Richard Haldane, was quoted as saying that he loved German literature and enjoyed reciting passages from Goethe's *Faust*.

Strauss and Mahler, the titans of Austro-German music, spent the afternoon in the hills above the city, as Alma Mahler recounted in her memoirs. A photographer captured the composers outside the opera house, apparently preparing to set out on their expedition—Strauss smiling in a boater hat, Mahler squinting in the sun. The company visited a waterfall and had lunch in an inn, where they sat at a plain wooden table. They must have made a strange pair: Strauss, tall and lanky, with a bulbous forehead, a weak chin, strong but sunken eyes; Mahler, a full head shorter, a muscular hawk of a man. As the sun began to go down, Mahler became nervous about the time and suggested that the party head back to the Hotel Elefant, where they were staying, to prepare for the performance. "They can't start without me," Strauss said. "Let 'em wait." Mahler replied: "If you won't go, then I will—and conduct in your place."

Mahler was forty-six, Strauss forty-one. They were in most respects polar opposites. Mahler was a kaleidoscope of moods—childlike, heaven-storming, despotic, despairing. In Vienna, as he strode from his apartment near the Schwarzenbergplatz to the opera house on the Ringstrasse, cab-drivers would whisper to their passengers, "*Der Mahler!*" Strauss was earthy, self-satisfied, more than a little cynical, a closed book to most observers. The soprano Gemma Bellincioni, who sat next to him at a banquet after the performance in Graz, described him as "a pure kind of German, without poses, without long-winded speeches, little gossip and no inclination to talk about himself and his work, a gaze of steel, an indecipherable expression." Strauss came from Munich, a backward place in the eyes of sophisticated Viennese such as Gustav and Alma. Alma underlined this impression in her memoir by rendering Strauss's dialogue in an exaggerated Bavarian dialect.

Not surprisingly, the relationship between the two composers suffered from frequent misunderstandings. Mahler would recoil from unintended slights; Strauss would puzzle over the sudden silences that ensued. Strauss was still trying to understand his old colleague some four decades later, when he read Alma's book and annotated it. "All untrue," he wrote, next to the description of his behavior in Graz.

"Strauss and I tunnel from opposite sides of the mountain," Mahler said. "One day we shall meet." Both saw music as a medium of conflict, a battlefield of extremes. They reveled in the tremendous sounds that a hundred-piece orchestra could make, yet they also released energies of fragmentation and collapse. The heroic narratives of nineteenth-century Romanticism, from Beethoven's symphonies to Wagner's music dramas, invariably ended with a blaze of transcendence, of spiritual overcoming. Mahler and Strauss told stories of more circuitous shape, often questioning the possibility of a truly happy outcome.

Each made a point of supporting the other's music. In 1901, Strauss became president of the Allgemeiner deutscher Musikverein, or All-German Music Association, and his first major act was to program Mahler's Third Symphony for the festival the following year. Mahler's works appeared so often on the association's programs in subsequent seasons that some critics took to calling the organization the Allgemeiner deutscher Mahlerverein. Others dubbed it the Annual German Carnival of Cacophony. Mahler, for his part, marveled at *Salome*. Strauss had played and sung the score for him the previous year, in a piano shop in Strasbourg, while passersby pressed against the windows trying to overhear. *Salome* promised to be one of the highlights of Mahler's Vienna tenure, but the censors balked at accepting an opera in which biblical characters perform unspeakable acts. Furious, Mahler began hinting that his days in Vienna were numbered. He wrote to Strauss in March 1906: "You would not believe how vexatious this matter has been for me or (between ourselves) what consequences it may have for me."

So *Salome* came to Graz, an elegant city of 150,000 people, capital of the agricultural province of Styria. The Stadt-Theater staged the opera at

the suggestion of the critic Ernst Decsey, an associate of Mahler's, who assured the management that it would create a succès de scandale.

"The city was in a state of great excitement," Decsey wrote in his autobiography, *Music Was His Life*. "Parties formed and split. Pub philosophers buzzed about what was going on . . . Visitors from the provinces, critics, press people, reporters, and foreigners from Vienna . . . Three more-than-sold-out houses. Porters groaned, and hoteliers reached for the keys to their safes." The critic fueled the anticipation with a high-flown preview article acclaiming Strauss's "tone-color world," his "polyrhythms and polyphony," his "breakup of the narrow old tonality," his "fetish ideal of an Omni-Tonality."

As dusk fell, Mahler and Strauss finally appeared at the opera house, having rushed back to town in their chauffeur-driven car. The crowd milling around in the lobby had an air of nervous electricity. The orchestra played a fanfare when Strauss walked up to the podium, and the audience applauded stormily. Then silence descended, the clarinet played a softly slithering scale, and the curtain went up.

In the Gospel of Saint Matthew, the princess of Judaea dances for her stepfather, Herod, and demands the head of John the Baptist as reward. She had surfaced several times in operatic history, usually with her more scandalous features suppressed. Strauss's brazenly modern retelling takes off from Oscar Wilde's 1891 play *Salomé*, in which the princess shamelessly eroticizes the body of John the Baptist and indulges in a touch of necrophilia at the end. When Strauss read Hedwig Lachmann's German translation of Wilde—in which the accent is dropped from Salomé's name—he decided to set it to music word for word, instead of employing a verse adaptation. Next to the first line, "How beautiful is the princess Salome tonight," he made a note to use the key of C-sharp minor. But this would turn out to be a different sort of C-sharp minor from Bach's or Beethoven's.

Strauss had a flair for beginnings. In 1896 he created what may be, after the first notes of Beethoven's Fifth, the most famous opening flourish in music: the "mountain sunrise" from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, deployed to great effect in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The passage draws its cosmic power from the natural laws of sound. If you pluck

a string tuned to a low C, then pluck it again while pinching it in half, the tone rises to the next C above. This is the interval of the octave. Further subdivisions yield intervals of the fifth (C to G), the fourth (G to the next higher C), and the major third (C to E). These are the lower steps of the natural harmonic series, or overtone series, which shimmers like a rainbow from any vibrating string. The same intervals appear at the outset of *Zarathustra*, and they accumulate into a gleaming C-major chord.

Salome, written nine years after *Zarathustra*, begins very differently, in a state of volatility and flux. The first notes on the clarinet are simply a rising scale, but it is split down the middle: the first half belongs to C-sharp major, the second half to G major. This is an unsettling opening, for several reasons. First, the notes C-sharp and G are separated by the interval known as the tritone, one step narrower than the perfect fifth. (Leonard Bernstein's "Maria" opens with a tritone resolving to a fifth.) This interval has long caused uneasy vibrations in human ears; medieval scholars called it *diabolus in musica*, the musical devil.

In the *Salome* scale, not just two notes but two key-areas, two opposing harmonic spheres, are juxtaposed. From the start, we are plunged into an environment where bodies and ideas circulate freely, where opposites meet. There's a hint of the glitter and swirl of city life: the debonairly gliding clarinet looks forward to the jazzy character who kicks off Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. The scale might also suggest a meeting of irreconcilable belief systems; after all, *Salome* takes place at the intersection of Roman, Jewish, and Christian societies. Most acutely, this little run of notes takes us inside the mind of one who is exhibiting all the contradictions of her world.

The first part of *Salome* focuses on the confrontation between Salome and the prophet Jochanaan: she the symbol of unstable sexuality, he the symbol of ascetic rectitude. She tries to seduce him, he shrinks away and issues a curse, and the orchestra expresses its own fascinated disgust with an interlude in C-sharp minor—in Jochanaan's stentorian manner, but in Salome's key.

Then Herod comes onstage. The tetrarch is a picture of modern neurosis, a sensualist with a yearning for the moral life, his music awash in overlapping styles and shifting moods. He comes out on the terrace; looks for the princess; gazes at the moon, which is "reeling through the clouds like a drunken woman"; orders wine, slips in blood, stumbles over the

body of a soldier who has committed suicide; feels cold, feels a wind—there is a hallucination of wings beating the air. It's quiet again; then more wind, more visions. The orchestra plays fragments of waltzes, expressionistic clusters of dissonance, impressionistic washes of sound. There is a turbulent episode as five Jews in Herod's court dispute the meaning of the Baptist's prophecies; two Nazarenes respond with the Christian point of view.

When Herod persuades his stepdaughter to dance the Dance of the Seven Veils, she does so to the tune of an orchestral interlude that, on first hearing, sounds disappointingly vulgar in its thumping rhythms and pseudo-Oriental exotic color. Mahler, when he heard *Salome*, thought that his colleague had tossed away what should have been the highlight of the piece. But Strauss almost certainly knew what he was doing: this is the music that Herod likes, and it serves as a kitschy foil for the grisliness to come.

Salome now calls for the prophet's head, and Herod, in a sudden religious panic, tries to get her to change her mind. She refuses. The executioner prepares to behead the Baptist in his cistern prison. At this point, the bottom drops out of the music. A toneless bass-drum rumble and strangulated cries in the double basses give way to a huge smear of tone in the full orchestra.

At the climax, the head of John the Baptist lies before Salome on a platter. Having disturbed us with unheard-of dissonances, Strauss now disturbs us with plain chords of necrophiliac bliss. For all the perversity of the material, this is still a love story, and the composer honors his heroine's emotions. "The mystery of love," Salome sings, "is greater than the mystery of death." Herod is horrified by the spectacle that his own incestuous lust has engendered. "Hide the moon, hide the stars!" he rasps. "Something terrible is going to happen!" He turns his back and walks up the staircase of the palace. The moon, obeying his command, goes behind the clouds. An extraordinary sound emanates from the lower brass and winds: the opera's introductory motif is telescoped—with one half-step alteration—into a single glowering chord. Above it, the flutes and clarinets launch into an obsessively elongated trill. Salome's love themes rise up again. At the moment of the kiss, two ordinary chords are mashed together, creating a momentary eight-note dissonance.

The moon comes out again. Herod, at the top of the stairs, turns

around, and screams, "Kill that woman!" The orchestra attempts to restore order with an ending in C minor, but succeeds only in adding to the tumult: the horns play fast figures that blur into a howl, the timpani pound away at a four-note chromatic pattern, the woodwinds shriek on high. In effect, the opera ends with eight bars of noise.

The crowd roared its approval—that was the most shocking thing. "Nothing more satanic and artistic has been seen on the German opera stage," Decsey wrote admiringly. Strauss held court that night at the Hotel Elefant, in a never-to-be-repeated gathering that included Mahler, Puccini, and Schoenberg. When someone declared that he'd rather shoot himself than memorize the part of Salome, Strauss answered, "Me, too," to general amusement. The next day, the composer wrote to his wife, Pauline, who had stayed home in Berlin: "It is raining, and I am sitting on the garden terrace of my hotel, in order to report to you that 'Salome' went well, gigantic success, people applauding for ten minutes until the fire curtain came down, etc., etc."

Salome went on to be performed in some twenty-five different cities. The triumph was so complete that Strauss could afford to laugh off criticism from Kaiser Wilhelm II. "I am sorry that Strauss composed this *Salome*," the Kaiser reportedly said. "Normally I'm very keen on him, but this is going to do him *a lot of damage*." Strauss would relate this story and add with a flourish: "Thanks to that damage I was able to build my villa in Garmisch!"

On the train back to Vienna, Mahler expressed bewilderment over his colleague's success. He considered *Salome* a significant and audacious piece—"one of the greatest masterworks of our time," he later said—and could not understand why the public took an immediate liking to it. Genius and popularity were, he apparently thought, incompatible. Traveling in the same carriage was the Styrian poet and novelist Peter Rosegger. According to Alma, when Mahler voiced his reservations, Rosegger replied that the voice of the people is the voice of God—*Vox populi, vox Dei*. Mahler asked whether he meant the voice of the people at the present moment or the voice of the people over time. Nobody seemed to know the answer to that question.

The younger musicians from Vienna thrilled to the innovations in

Strauss's score, but were suspicious of his showmanship. One group, including Alban Berg, met at a restaurant to discuss what they had heard. They might well have used the words that Adrian Leverkühn applies to Strauss in *Doctor Faustus*: "What a gifted fellow! The happy-go-lucky revolutionary, cocky and conciliatory. Never were the avant-garde and the box office so well acquainted. Shocks and discords aplenty—then he good-naturedly takes it all back and assures the philistines that no harm was intended. But a hit, a definite hit." As for Adolf Hitler, it is not certain that he was actually there; he may merely have claimed to have attended, for whatever reason. But something about the opera evidently stuck in his memory.

The Austrian premiere of *Salome* was just one event in a busy season, but, like a flash of lightning, it illuminated a musical world on the verge of traumatic change. Past and future were colliding; centuries were passing in the night. Mahler would die in 1911, seeming to take the Romantic era with him. Puccini's *Turandot*, unfinished at his death in 1924, would more or less end a glorious Italian operatic history that began in Florence at the end of the sixteenth century. Schoenberg, in 1908 and 1909, would unleash fearsome sounds that placed him forever at odds with the vox populi. Hitler would seize power in 1933 and attempt the annihilation of a people. And Strauss would survive to a surreal old age. "I have actually outlived myself," he said in 1948. At the time of his birth, Germany was not yet a single nation and Wagner had yet to finish the *Ring of the Nibelung*. At the time of Strauss's death, Germany had been divided into East and West, and American soldiers were whistling "Some Enchanted Evening" in the streets.

Richard I and III

The sleepy German city of Bayreuth is the one place on earth where the nineteenth century springs eternal. Here, in 1876, Wagner presided over the opening of his opera house and the first complete performance of the four-part *Ring* cycle. The emperors of Germany and Brazil, the kings of Bavaria and Württemberg, and at least a dozen grand dukes, dukes, crown princes, and princes attended the unveiling, together with leading composers of various countries—Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Grieg, Gounod—and journalists from around the globe. Front-page reports ran for three

straight days in the *New York Times*. Tchaikovsky, not a Wagner fan, was captivated by the sight of the diminutive, almost dwarfish composer riding in a carriage directly behind the German Kaiser, not the servant but the equal of the rulers of the world.

Bayreuth's illusion of cultural omnipotence is maintained every summer during the annual Wagner festival, when the cafés fill with people debating minor points of the *Ring* libretto, the composer's visage stares out from the windows of almost every shop, and piano scores for the operas are stacked on tables outside bookstores. For a few weeks in July and August, Wagner remains the center of the universe.

Until the advent of movies, there was no more astounding public entertainment than the Wagner operas. *Tristan*, *Die Meistersinger*, and the *Ring* were works of mind-altering breadth and depth, towering over every artistic endeavor of their time. Notwithstanding the archaic paraphernalia of rings, swords, and sorcery, the *Ring* presented an imaginative world as psychologically particular as any in the novels of Leo Tolstoy or Henry James. The story of the *Ring* was, in the end, one of hubris and comeuppance: Wotan, the chief of the gods, loses control of his realm and sinks into "the feeling of powerlessness." He resembles the head of a great bourgeois family whose livelihood is destroyed by the modernizing forces that he himself has set in motion.

Even more fraught with implications is Wagner's final drama, *Parsifal*, first heard at Bayreuth in the summer of 1882. The plot should have been a musty, almost childish thing: the "pure fool" Parsifal fights the magician Klingsor, takes from him the holy lance that pierced Christ's side, and uses it to heal the torpor that has overcome the Knights of the Grail. But *Parsifal*'s mystical trappings answered inchoate longings in end-of-century listeners, while the political subtext—Wagner's diseased knights can be read as an allegory of the diseased West—fed the fantasies of the far right. The music itself is a portal to the beyond. It crystallizes out of the air in weightless forms, transforms into rocklike masses, and dissolves again. "Here time becomes space," the wise knight Gurnemanz intones, showing Parsifal the way to the Grail temple, as a four-note bell figure rings hypnotically through the orchestra.

By 1906, twenty-three years after his death, Wagner had become a cultural colossus, his influence felt not only in music but in literature, theater, and painting. Sophisticated youths memorized his librettos as Amer-

ican college students of a later age would recite Bob Dylan. Anti-Semites and ultranationalists considered Wagner their private prophet, but he gave impetus to almost every major political and aesthetic movement of the age: liberalism (Théodore de Banville said that Wagner was a "democrat, a new man, wanting to create for all the people"), bohemianism (Baudelaire hailed the composer as the vessel of a "counter-religion, a Satanic religion"), African-American activism (a story in W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* tells of a young black man who finds momentary hope in *Lohengrin*), feminism (M. Carey Thomas, president of Bryn Mawr College, said that *Lohengrin* made her "feel a little like my real self"), and even Zionism (Theodor Herzl first formulated his vision of a Jewish state after attending a performance of *Tannhäuser*).

The English composer Edward Elgar pored over the Meister's scores with desperate intensity, writing in his copy of *Tristan*, "This Book contains . . . the Best and the whole of the Best of This world and the Next." Elgar somehow converted the Wagnerian apparatus—the reverberating leitmotifs, the viscous chromatic harmony, the velvety orchestration—into an iconic representation of the British Empire at its height. As a result, he won a degree of international renown that had eluded English composers for centuries; after a German performance of his oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* in 1902, Richard Strauss saluted Elgar as the "first English progressivist."

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, in Russia, rummaged through Wagner for useful material and left the rest behind; in *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh*, the tale of a magical city that disappears from view when it comes under attack, *Parsifal*-like bells ring out in endless patterns, intertwined with a tricky new harmonic language that would catch the ear of the young Stravinsky. Even Sergei Rachmaninov, who inherited a healthy skepticism for Wagner from his idol Tchaikovsky, learned from Wagner's orchestration how to bathe a Slavic melody in a sonic halo.

Puccini came up with an especially crafty solution to the Wagner problem. Like many of his generation, he rejected mystic subjects of the *Parsifal* type; instead, he followed Pietro Mascagni and Ruggero Leoncavallo, composers of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, into the new genre of verismo, or opera verité, where popular tunes mingled with blood-and-thunder orchestration and all manner of contemporary characters—prostitutes, gangsters, street urchins, a famously jealous clown—invaded the stage. Almost nothing on the surface of Puccini's mature operas sounds unmistakably Wagnerian. The influence is subterranean: you sense it in the way melodies emerge from the orchestral texture, the way motifs evolve organically from scene to scene. If Wagner, in the *Ring*, made the gods into ordinary people, Puccini's *La Bohème*, first heard in 1896, does the opposite: it gives mythic dimensions to a rattily charming collection of bohemians.

The most eloquent critic of Wagnerian self-aggrandizement was a self-aggrandizing German—Friedrich Nietzsche. Fanatically Wagnerian in his youth, the author of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* experienced a negative epiphany upon delving into the aesthetic and theological thickets of *Parsifal*. He came to the conclusion that Wagner had dressed himself up as "an oracle, a priest—indeed more than a priest, a kind of mouthpiece of the 'in itself' of things, a telephone from the beyond—henceforth he uttered not only music, this ventriloquist of God—he uttered metaphysics." Throughout his later writings, most forcefully in the essay *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche declared that music must be liberated from Teutonic heaviness and brought back to popular roots. "*Il faut méditerraniser la musique*," he wrote. Bizet's *Carmen*, with its blend of comic-opera form and raw, realistic subject matter, was suggested as the new ideal.

By 1888, when Nietzsche wrote *The Case of Wagner*, the project of mediterraneanization was well under way. French composers naturally took the lead, their inborn resistance to German culture heightened by their country's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. Emmanuel Chabrier presented his rhapsody *España*, a feast of Mediterranean atmosphere. Gabriel Fauré finished the first version of his *Requiem*, with its piercingly simple and pure harmonies. Erik Satie was writing his *Gymnopédies*, oases of stillness. And Claude Debussy was groping toward a new musical language in settings of Verlaine and Baudelaire.

Wagner himself wished to escape the gigantism that his own work came to represent. "I have felt the pulse of modern art and know that it will die!" he wrote to his comrade-in-arms Liszt in 1850. "This knowledge, however, fills me not with despondency but with joy . . . The monumental character of our art will disappear, we shall abandon our habit of clinging firmly to the past, our egotistical concern for permanence and immortality at any price: we shall let the past remain the past, the future—the future, and we shall live only in the present, in the here and

now and create works for the present age alone." This populist ambition was inherent in the very technology of the music, in the vastness of the orchestra and the power of the voices. As Mahler later explained: "If we want thousands to hear us in the huge auditoriums of our concert halls and opera houses," he wrote, "we simply have to make a lot of noise."

Richard Strauss—"Richard III," the conductor Hans von Bülow called him, skipping over Richard II—grew up almost literally in Wagner's shadow. His father, the French-horn virtuoso Franz Strauss, played in the Munich Court Orchestra, which reported to King Ludwig II, Wagner's patron. The elder Strauss thus participated in the inaugural performances of *Tristan*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Parsifal*, and the first two parts of the *Ring*. Strauss *père* was, however, a stolid musical reactionary who deemed Wagner's spectacles unworthy of comparison to the Viennese classics. Richard, in his adolescence, parroted his father's prejudices, saying, "You can be certain that ten years from now no one will know who Richard Wagner is." Yet even as he criticized Wagner, the teenage composer was identifying harmonic tricks that would soon become his own. For example, he mocked a passage in *Die Walküre* that juxtaposed chords of G and C-sharp—the same keys that intersect on the first page of *Salome*.

Franz Strauss was bitter, irascible, abusive. His wife, Josephine, meek and nervous, eventually went insane and had to be institutionalized. Their son was, like many survivors of troubled families, determined to maintain a cool, composed facade, behind which weird fires burned. In 1888, at the age of twenty-four, he composed his breakthrough work, the tone poem *Don Juan*, which revealed much about him. The hero is the same rake who goes to hell in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The music expresses his outlaw spirit in bounding rhythms and abrupt transitions; simple tunes skate above strident dissonances. Beneath the athletic display is a whiff of nihilism. The version of the tale that Strauss used as his source—a verse play by Nikolaus Lenau—suggests that the promiscuous Don isn't so much damned to hell as snuffed out: ". . . the fuel was used up / The hearth grew cold and dark." Strauss's ending is similarly curt: an upward-scuttling scale in the violins, a quiet drumroll, hollow chords on scattered instruments, three thumps, and silence.

Don Juan was written under the influence of the composer and

philosopher Alexander Ritter, one of many mini-Wagners who populated the Kaiser's imperium. Around 1885, Ritter had drawn young Strauss into the "New German" school, which, in the spirit of Liszt and Wagner, abandoned the clearly demarcated structures of Viennese tradition—first theme, second theme, exposition, development, and so on—in favor of a freewheeling, moment-to-moment, poetically inflamed narrative. Strauss also befriended Cosima Wagner, the composer's widow, and it was whispered that he would make a good match for the Meister's daughter Eva.

In 1893, Strauss finished his first opera, *Guntram*. He wrote the libretto himself, as any proper young Wagnerian was expected to do. The scenario resembled that of *Die Meistersinger*: a medieval troubadour rebels against a brotherhood of singers whose rules are too strict for his wayward spirit. In this case, the hero's error is not musical but moral: Guntram kills a tyrannical prince and falls in love with the tyrant's wife. At the end, as Strauss originally conceived it, Guntram realizes that he has betrayed the spirit of his order, even though his act was justifiable, and therefore makes a penitential pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

In the middle of the writing process, however, Strauss invented a different denouement. Instead of submitting to the judgment of the order, Guntram would now walk away from it, walk away from his beloved, walk away from the Christian God. Ritter was deeply alarmed by his protégé's revised plan, saying that the opera had become "immoral" and disloyal to Wagner: no true hero would disavow his community. Strauss did not repent. Guntram's order, he told Ritter in reply, had unwisely sought to launch an ethical crusade through art, to unify religion and art. This was Wagner's mission, too, but for Strauss it was a utopian scheme that contained "the seeds of death in itself."

Seeking an alternative to Wagnerism, Strauss read the early-nineteenth-century anarchist thinker Max Stirner, whose book *The Ego and Its Own* argued that all forms of organized religion, as well as all organized societies, imprison individuals within illusions of morality, duty, and law. For Strauss, anarchist individualism was a way of removing himself from the stylistic squabbles of the time. Near-quotations from *The Ego and Its Own* dot the *Guntram* libretto. Stirner criticizes the "beautiful dream" of the liberal idea of humanity; Guntram employs that same phrase and contemptuously adds, "Dream on, good people, about the salvation of humanity."

Guntram was a flop at its 1894 premiere, mainly because the orchestration drowned out the singers, although the amoral ending may also have caused trouble. Strauss responded by striking an antagonistic pose, declaring "war against all the apostles of moderation," as the critic and Nietzsche enthusiast Arthur Seidl wrote approvingly in 1896. A second opera was to have celebrated the happy knave Till Eulenspiegel, "scourge of the Philistines, the slave of liberty, reviler of folly, adorer of nature," who annoys the burghers of the town of Schilda. That project never got off the ground, but its spirit carried over into the 1895 tone poem *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, which is full of deliciously insolent sounds—violins warbling like fiddlers in cafés; brass instruments trilling, snarling, and sliding rudely from one note to another; clarinets squawking high notes like players in wedding bands.

In his songs, Strauss made a point of setting poets of questionable reputation—among them Richard Dehmel, infamous for his advocacy of free love; Karl Henckell, banned in Germany for outspoken socialism; Oskar Panizza, jailed for "crimes against religion, committed through the press" (he had called *Parsifal* "spiritual fodder for pederasts"); and John Henry Mackay, the biographer of Max Stirner and the author of *The Anarchists*, who, under the pen name "Sagitta," later wrote books and poems celebrating man-boy love.

Through the remainder of the 1890s and into the early years of the new century, Strauss specialized in writing symphonic poems, which were appreciated on a superficial level for their vibrant tone painting: the first gleam of sunrise in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, the bleating sheep in *Don Quixote*, the hectic battle scene in *Ein Heldenleben* (*A Hero's Life*). Debussy commented presciently that *Ein Heldenleben* was like a "book of images, even cinematography." All the while, Strauss continued to pursue the underlying theme of *Guntram*, the struggle of the individual against the collective. The struggle always seems doomed to end in defeat, resignation, or withdrawal. Most of these works begin with heroic statements and end with a fade into silence. Latter-day Strauss scholars such as Bryan Gilliam, Walter Werbeck, and Charles Youmans assert that the composer approached the transcendent ideals of the Romantic era with a philosophical skepticism that he got from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Wagnerism implodes, becoming a black hole of irony.

There are, however, consoling voices in Strauss's universe, and more often than not they are the voices of women. Listeners have never ceased to wonder how a taciturn male composer could create such forceful, richly sympathetic female characters; the answer may lie in the degree to which Strauss submitted to his domineering, difficult, yet devoted wife, Pauline. His operatic women are forthright in their ideas and desires. His men, by contrast, often appear not as protagonists but as love interests, even as sexual trophies. Men in positions of power tend to be inconstant, vicious, obtuse. In *Salome*, Herod is nothing more than a male hysteric who hypocritically surrounds himself with Jewish and Christian theologians and pauses in his lust for his teenage stepdaughter only to comment on the loveliness of a male corpse. John the Baptist may speak in righteously robust tones, but, Strauss later explained, the prophet was really meant to be a ridiculous figure, "an imbecile." (The musicologist Chris Walton has made the intriguing suggestion that *Salome* contains a clandestine parody of the court of Kaiser Wilhelm, which was prone both to homosexual scandal and to censorious prudishness.) In a way, Salome is the sanest member of the family; like Lulu, the heroine of a later opera, she does not pretend to be other than what she is.

Strauss delivered one more onslaught of dissonance and neurosis: *Elektra*, premiered in Dresden in January 1909, based on a play by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in which the downfall of the house of Agamemnon is retold in language suggestive of the dream narratives of Sigmund Freud. The music repeatedly trembles on the edge of what would come to be called atonality; the far-flung chords that merely brush against each other in *Salome* now clash in sustained skirmishes.

But this was as far as Strauss would go. Even before he began composing *Elektra*, he indicated to Hofmannsthal, the poet-playwright who was becoming his literary guide, that he needed new material. Hofmannsthal persuaded him to go ahead with *Elektra*, but their subsequent collaboration, *Der Rosenkavalier*, was an entirely different thing—a comedy of eighteenth-century Vienna, steeped in super-refined, self-aware melancholy, modeled on Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*. The same complex spirit of nostalgia and satire animated *Ariadne auf Naxos*, the first version of which appeared in 1912; in that work, an overserious composer tries to write grand opera while commedia dell'arte players wreak havoc all around him.

"I was never *revolutionary*," Arnold Schoenberg once said. "*The only*

revolutionary in our time was Strauss!" In the end, the composer of *Salome* fit the profile neither of the revolutionary nor of the reactionary. There was constant anxiety about his de facto status as a "great German composer." He seemed too flighty, even too feminine, for the role. "The music of Herr Richard Strauss is a woman who seeks to compensate for her natural deficiencies by mastering Sanskrit," the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus wrote. Strauss was also too fond of money, or, more precisely, he made his fondness for money too obvious. "More of a stock company than a genius," Kraus later said.

And was there something a little Jewish about Strauss? So said the anti-Semitic French journal *La Libre Parole*. It did not go unnoticed that Strauss enjoyed the company of Jewish millionares. Arthur Schnitzler once said to Alma Mahler, with ambiguous intent: "If one of the two, Gustav Mahler or Richard Strauss, is a Jew, then surely it is . . . Richard Strauss!"

Der Mahler

Berlin, where Strauss lived in the first years of the new century, was the noisiest, busiest metropolis in Europe, its neoclassical edifices encircled by shopping districts, industrial infrastructure, working-class neighborhoods, transportation networks, and power grids. Mahler's Vienna was a slower, smaller-scale place, an idyll of imperial style. It was aestheticized down to its pores; everything was forced to glitter. A gilt sphere capped Joseph Olbrich's Secession building, a shrine to Art Nouveau. Gold-leaf textures framed Gustav Klimt's portraits of high-society women. At the top of Otto Wagner's severe, semimodernistic Post Office Savings Bank, goddess statues held aloft Grecian rings. Mahler provided the supreme musical expression of this luxurious, ambiguous moment. He knew of the fissures that were opening in the city's facade—younger artists such as Schoenberg were eager to expose Vienna's filigree as rot—but he still believed in art's ability to transfigure society.

The epic life of Mahler is told in Henry-Louis de La Grange's equally epic four-volume biography. Like many self-styled aristocrats, the future ruler of musical Vienna came from the provinces—namely, Iglau, a town on the border of Bohemia and Moravia. His family belonged to a close-

knit community of German-speaking Jews, one of many pockets of *Judentum* scattered across the Austro-Hungarian countryside in the wake of imperial acts of expulsion and segregation. Mahler's father ran a tavern and a distillery; his mother gave birth to fourteen children, only five of whom outlived her.

The family atmosphere was tense. Mahler recalled a time when he ran out of the house in order to escape an argument between his parents. On the street, he heard a barrel organ playing the tune "Ach, du lieber Augustin." He told this story to Sigmund Freud, in 1910, during a psychoanalytic session that took the form of a four-hour walk. "In Mahler's opinion," Freud noted, "the conjunction of high tragedy and light amusement was from then on inextricably fixed in his mind."

Mahler entered the Vienna Conservatory at the age of fifteen, in 1875. He launched his conducting career in 1880, leading operettas at a summer spa, and began a fast progress through the opera houses of Central Europe: Laibach (now Ljubljana in Slovenia), Olmütz (now Olomouc in the Czech Republic), Kassel, Prague, Leipzig, Budapest, and Hamburg. In 1897, with seeming inevitability, but with behind-the-scenes help from Johannes Brahms, he attained the highest position in Central European music, the directorship of the Vienna Court Opera. Accepting the post meant converting to Catholicism—an act that Mahler undertook with apparent enthusiasm, having more or less abandoned his Judaism in Iglau.

Strauss, who had known Mahler since 1887, worried that his colleague was spreading himself too thin. "Don't you compose at all any more?" he asked in a letter of 1900. "It would be a thousand pities if you devoted your entire artistic energy, for which I certainly have the greatest admiration, to the thankless position of theatre director! The theatre can never be made into an 'artistic institution.' "

Mahler accomplished precisely this in Vienna. He hired the painter Alfred Roller to create visually striking, duskily lit stagings of the mainstream opera repertory, thereby helping to inaugurate the discipline of opera direction. He also codified the etiquette of the modern concert experience, with its worshipful, pseudo-religious character. Opera houses of the nineteenth century were rowdy places; Mahler, who hated all extraneous noise, threw out singers' fan clubs, cut short applause between numbers, glared icily at talkative concertgoers, and forced latecomers to

wait in the lobby. Emperor Franz Joseph, the embodiment of old Vienna, was heard to say: "Is music such a serious business? I always thought it was meant to make people happy."

Mahler's composing career got off to a much slower start. His Symphony No. 1 was first played in November 1889, nine days after Strauss's *Don Juan*, but, where Strauss instantly won over the public, Mahler met with a mixture of applause, boos, and shrugs. The First begins, like Strauss's *Zarathustra*, with an elemental hum—the note A whistling in all registers of the strings. The note is sustained for fifty-six bars, giving the harmony an eternal, unchanging quality that recalls the opening of Wagner's *Ring*. There is a Wagnerian strain, too, in the theme of falling fourths that stems from the primeval drone. It is the unifying idea of the piece, and when it is transposed to a major key it shows an obvious resemblance to the motif of pealing bells that sounds through *Parsifal*. Mahler's project was to do for the symphony what Wagner had done for the opera: he would trump everything that had gone before.

The frame of reference of Mahler's symphonies is vast, stretching from the masses of the Renaissance to the marching songs of rural soldiers—an epic multiplicity of voices and styles. Giant structures are built up, reach to the heavens, then suddenly crumble. Nature spaces are invaded by sloppy country dances and belligerent marches. The third movement of the First Symphony begins with a meandering minor-mode canon on the tune "Frère Jacques," which in Germany was traditionally sung by drunken students in taverns, and there are raucous interruptions in the style of a klezmer band—"pop" episodes paralleling the vernacular pranks in Strauss's *Don Juan* and *Till Eulenspiegel*. Much of the first movement of the Third Symphony takes the form of a gargantuan, crashing march, which reminded Strauss of workers pressing forward with their red flags at a May Day celebration. In the finale of the Second Symphony, the hierarchy of pitch breaks down into a din of percussion. It sounds like music's revenge on an unmusical world, noise trampling on noise.

Up through the Third Symphony, Mahler followed the late-Romantic practice of attaching detailed programmatic descriptions to his symphonies. He briefly gave the First the title "Titan"; the first movement of the Second was originally named "Funeral Ceremony." The Third was to have been called, at various times, "The Gay Science," "A Summer Night's Dream," and "Pan."

With the turning of the century, however, Mahler broke with pictorialism and tone poetry. The Fourth Symphony, finished in 1900, was a four-movement work of more traditional, almost Mozartean design. "Down with programs!" Mahler said in the same year. Concerned to differentiate himself from Strauss, he wished now to be seen as a "pure musician," one who moved in a "realm outside time, space, and the forms of individual appearances." The Fifth Symphony, written in 1901 and 1902, is an interior drama devoid of any programmatic indication, moving through heroic struggle, a delirious funeral march, a wild, sprawling Scherzo, and a dreamily lyrical Adagietto to a radiant, chorale-driven finale. The triumphant ending was perhaps the one conventional thing about the piece, and in the Sixth Symphony, which had its premiere on May 27, 1906, eleven days after the Austrian premiere of *Salome*, Mahler took the triumph back. Strauss's opera had been called "satanic," and, as it happens, the same adjective was applied to Mahler's symphony in the weeks leading up to the first performance. Mahler, too, would see how far he could go without losing the vox populi.

The setting for the premiere of the Sixth was the steel town of Essen, in the Ruhr. Nearby was the armaments firm of Krupp, whose cannons had rained ruin on French armies in the war of 1870–71 and whose long-distance weaponry would play a critical role in the Great War to come. Unsympathetic listeners compared Mahler's new composition to German military hardware. The Viennese critic Hans Liebstöckl began a review of a subsequent performance with the line "Krupp makes only cannons, Mahler only symphonies." Indeed, the Sixth opens with something like the sound of an army advancing—staccato As in the cellos and basses, military-style taps of a drum, a vigorous A-minor theme strutting in front of a wall of eight horns. A little later, the timpani set forth a marching rhythm of the kind that you can still hear played in Alpine militia parades in Austria and neighboring countries: *Left! Left! Left-right-left!*

The first movement follows the well-worn procedures of sonata form, complete with a repeat of the exposition section. The first theme is modeled on that of Schubert's youthful, severe A-Minor Sonata, D. 784. The second theme is an unrestrained Romantic effusion, a love song in homage to Alma. It is so unlike the first that it inhabits a different world, and

the entire movement is a struggle to reconcile the two. By the end, the synthesis seems complete: the second theme is orchestrated in the clipped, martial style of the first, as if love were an army on the march. Yet there is something strained about this marriage of ideas. The movement that follows, a so-called Scherzo, resumes the trudge of the opening, but now in superciliously waltzing three-quarter time. A sprawling, songful Andante, in the distant key of E-flat, provides respite, but Mahler's battery of percussion instruments waits threateningly at the back of the stage. (During the rehearsals in Essen, Mahler decided to switch the middle movements, and retained that order in a revised version of the score.)

As the finale begins, the march rhythm—*Left! Left! Left-right-left!*—comes back with a vengeance. No composer ever devised a form quite like this one—wave after wave of development, skirling fanfares suggesting imminent joy, then the chilling return of the marching beat. The movement is organized around three "hammerblows" (or, in the revised version, two), which have the effect of triggering a kind of collapse. For the premiere, Mahler had a gigantic drum constructed—"the hide of a fully grown cow stretched on a frame a meter and a half square," one critic wrote in sarcastic wonder—which was to have been struck with a mallet of unprecedented size. In the event, the drum produced only a muffled thump, to the amusement of the musicians. Like Strauss in *Salome*, Mahler is employing shock tactics on his audience, and he saves his biggest shock for the very end. The work is poised to die away to silence, with a three-note figure limping through the lower instruments. Then, out of nowhere, a *fortissimo* A-minor chord clangs like a metal door swung shut. Correctly performed, this gesture should make unsuspecting listeners jump out of their seats.

After the last rehearsal, Mahler sat in his dressing room, shattered by the power of his own creation. Alma reported that he "walked up and down . . . sobbing, wringing his hands, unable to control himself." Suddenly Strauss poked his head through the door to say that the mayor of Essen had died and that a memorial piece needed to be played at the beginning of the program. Strauss's only comment on the symphony was that the final movement was "over-instrumented."

Bruno Walter observed that Mahler was "reduced almost to tears" by the episode. How could Strauss have misjudged the work so completely?

Or was Strauss possibly right? That summer, Mahler lightened the orchestration of the Sixth's finale considerably.

After the events of May 1906, the friendship between the two men cooled. Mahler's envy of Strauss metastasized, affecting his conception of music's place in society. All along, in his letters to Alma and others, Mahler had recorded various indignities to which his colleague had subjected him, probably exaggerating for effect. "I extend to [Strauss] respectful and friendly solicitude," Mahler wrote to his wife on one occasion, "and he doesn't respond, he doesn't even seem to notice, it is wasted on him. When I experience such things again and again, I feel totally confused about myself and the world!" In a letter the very next day, Mahler described Strauss as "very sweet," which suggests not only that he had forgotten the snub of the previous day but that he had invented it.

In an essay on the relationship between the composers, the musicologist Herta Blaukopf cites the lopsided friendship of two young men in Thomas Mann's story "Tonio Kröger." Mahler is like the dark-haired Tonio, who thinks too much and feels everything too intensely. Strauss is like the fair-haired Hans Hansen, who sails through life in ignorance of the world's horror. Indeed, Strauss could never comprehend Mahler's obsession with suffering and redemption. "I don't know what I'm supposed to be redeemed from," he once said to the conductor Otto Klemperer.

Mahler was still trying to answer the question that he had pondered on the train from Graz: Can a man win fame in his own time while also remaining a true artist? Doubt was growing in his mind. Increasingly, he spoke of the insignificance of contemporary musical judgment in the face of the ultimate wisdom of posterity.

"I am to find no recognition as a composer during my lifetime," he told a critic in 1906. "As long as I am the 'Mahler' wandering among you, a 'man among men,' I must content myself with an 'all too human' reception as a creative figure. Only when I have shaken off this earthly dust will there be justice done. I am what Nietzsche calls an 'untimely' one . . . The true 'timely one' is Richard Strauss. That is why he already enjoys immortality here on earth." In a letter to Alma, Mahler spoke of his relationship with Strauss in terms borrowed from John the Baptist's prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ: "The time is coming when men will see the wheat separated from the chaff—and my time will come

when his is up." That last remark has been widely bowdlerized to "My time will come"—a statement of faith often quoted by composers who place themselves in opposition to popular culture.

With Mahler, though, the "untimely" stance was something of a pose. He cared mightily about the reception of his works, and danced on air if they succeeded, which they usually did. No Mahler myth is more moth-eaten than the one that he was neglected in his own time. The First Symphony may have baffled its first audience, but the later symphonies almost always conquered the public, if not the critics. "In his mature years," the scholar and conductor Leon Botstein writes, "Mahler experienced far more triumph than defeat and more enthusiasm than rejection by audiences." Even at the premiere of the "satanic" Sixth, a critic reported that the composer "had to return to the platform to receive the congratulations and thanks of the crowded audience."

In the summer of 1906, Mahler sought to cement his relationship with the public by sketching his life-affirming, oratorio-like Eighth Symphony, which he called his "gift to the nation." The first part was based on the hymn "Veni creator spiritus"; the second part was a panoramic setting of the last scene of Goethe's *Faust, Part II*. The Eighth inspired earthshaking applause on the occasion of its premiere, four years later. "The indescribable here is accomplished," hundreds of singers roar at the end; the storm of applause that followed might as well have been notated in the score.

The glowing optimism of the Eighth belied the fact that the composer was growing sick of Vienna, of the constant opposition of anti-Semites, of infighting and backstabbing. He announced his resignation in May 1907, conducted his last opera performance in October, and made his final appearance as a conductor in Vienna in November, bidding farewell with his own Second Symphony. To his ardent fans, it was as though he had been driven out by the forces of ignorance and reaction. When he left the city, at the end of the year, two hundred admirers, Schoenberg and his pupils among them, gathered at the train station to bid him farewell, garlanding his compartment with flowers. It seemed the end of a golden age. "*Vorbei!*" said Gustav Klimt—"It's over!"

The reality was a bit less romantic. Throughout the spring of 1907, Mahler had been negotiating secretly with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and not the least of the management's enticements was what

it called "the highest fee a musician has ever received": 75,000 kronen for three months' work, or, in today's money, $300,000. Mahler said yes.

The New World

There was no lack of music in the American republic at the beginning of the twentieth century. Every major city had an orchestra. International opera stars circulated through the opera houses of New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. Virtuosos, maestros, and national geniuses landed in Manhattan by the boatload. European visitors found the musical scene in the New World congenially similar to that in the Old. The orchestral repertory gravitated toward the Austro-German tradition, most musicians were immigrants, and many rehearsals took place in German. Operatic life was divided among the French, German, and Italian traditions. The Metropolitan Opera experienced a fad for Gounod, a cult of Wagner, and, finally, a wave of Puccini.

For the rich, classical music was a status symbol, a collector's delight. Millionaires signed up musicians in much the same way they bought up and brought home pieces of European art. Yet the appeal of composers such as Wagner and Puccini went much wider. In 1884, for example, Theodore Thomas led his virtuoso orchestra in a cross-country tour, playing to audiences of five, eight, even ten thousand people. And, as the historian Joseph Horowitz relates, Anton Seidl conducted all-Wagner concerts on Coney Island, his series advertised by means of a newfangled "electric sign" on Broadway. Enrico Caruso, who began singing in America in 1903, was probably the biggest cultural celebrity of the day; when he was arrested for groping the wife of a baseball player in the monkey house in Central Park, the story played on the front pages of newspapers across the country, and, far from ruining the tenor's reputation, it only augmented his already enormous popularity. In the *New York Times*, advertisements for classical events were jumbled together with myriad other offerings under the rubric "Amusements." One night the Met would put on John Philip Sousa's band, the next night the *Ring*. Elgar's oratorios rubbed shoulders with midget performers and Barnum's Original Skeleton Dude.

New technologies helped bring the music to those who had never

heard it live. In 1906, the year of *Salome* in Graz, the Victor Talking Machine Company introduced its new-model Victrola phonograph, which, though priced at an astronomical two hundred dollars, proved wildly successful. Caruso ruled the medium; his sobbing rendition of "Vesti la giubba" was apparently the first record to sell a million copies. Also in 1906, the inventor Thaddeus Cahill unveiled a two-hundred-ton electronic instrument called the Telharmonium, which, by way of an ingenious if unwieldy array of alternators, broadcast arrangements of Bach, Chopin, and Grieg to audiences in Telharmonic Hall, opposite the Met.

The hall closed after two seasons; local phone customers complained that the Telharmonium was disrupting their calls. But the future had been glimpsed. The electrification of music would forever change the world in which Mahler and Strauss came of age, bringing classical music to unprecedented mass audiences but also publicizing popular genres that would challenge composers' long-standing cultural hegemony. Even in 1906, ragtime numbers and other syncopated dances were thriving on the new medium. Small bands made a crisp, vital sound, while symphony orchestras came across as tinny and feeble.

What classical music in America lacked was American classical music. Composition remained in the condition of cultural subservience that Ralph Waldo Emerson had diagnosed in his essay "The American Scholar" back in 1837: "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." American writers answered Emerson's call: by the turn of the century, libraries contained the works of Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Whitman, Dickinson, Twain, and the brothers James. The roster of American composers, on the other hand, included the likes of John Knowles Paine, Horatio Parker, George Whitefield Chadwick, and Edward MacDowell—skilled craftsmen who did credit to their European training but who failed to find a language that was either singularly American or singularly their own. Audiences saved their deepest genuflections for European figures who deigned to cross the Atlantic.

Strauss came to America in 1904. Notwithstanding his mildly dangerous aura—the American critic James Huneker labeled him an "anarch of art"—he was greeted almost as a head of state. Theodore Roosevelt received him at the White House, and Senator Stephen B. Elkins, a powerful operator in the pro-business Republican Party, invited him onto the floor of the Senate. In return, Strauss granted America the honor of hosting the premiere of his latest work, the *Symphonia domestica*. The program stirred controversy: it described a day in the life of a well-to-do family, including breakfast, the baby's bath, and connubial bliss. Despite some extended patches of note-spinning, the new work gave vigorous expression to Strauss's belief that anything could be set to music as long as it was felt intensely. Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation*, observed that music could find as much pathos in the disagreements of an ordinary household as in the agonies of the house of Agamemnon. There in one sentence was Strauss's career from *Domestica* to *Elektra*.

Demand for Strauss in New York grew so strong that two additional orchestral performances were arranged. They took place on the fourth floor of Wanamaker's department store, which was one of the original American superstores, occupying two blocks along Broadway between Eighth and Tenth streets. Wanamaker's felt that it had a duty to provide cultural uplift: its piano showroom, like the Steinway showroom uptown, regularly featured recitals by celebrated artists. "They do things sumptuously at the Wanamaker store," the *Times* wrote of the first Strauss concert. "There was, of course, an eager desire on the part of many people to hear the great German composer conduct his own compositions, and though there were fully five thousand people accommodated at the concerts last evening, there were many applicants who had to be refused, and every inch of space was occupied, many people standing." In the European press, however, Strauss was promptly pilloried as a moneygrubbing vulgarian who so desperately wanted to add to his coffers that he performed in supermarkets.

The *Symphonia domestica* entertained Manhattanites; *Salome* scandalized them. When the Metropolitan Opera presented the latter work in January 1907, there was a kerfuffle in the Golden Horseshoe, as the elite ring of boxes was known. Boxes 27 and 29 emptied out before the scene of the kissing of the head. J. P. Morgan's daughter allegedly asked her father to shut down the production; *Salome* did not return to the Met until 1934. A physician vented his disgust in a letter to the *New York Times*:

> I am a man of middle life, who has devoted upward of twenty years to the practice of a profession that necessitates, in the treatment of

> nervous and mental diseases, a daily intimacy with degenerates . . . I say after deliberation, and a familiarity with the emotional productions of Oscar Wilde and Richard Strauss, that *Salome* is a detailed and explicit exposition of the most horrible, disgusting, revolting and unmentionable features of degeneracy (using the word now in its customary social, sexual significance) that I have ever heard, read of, or imagined . . . That which it depicts is naught else than the motive of the indescribable acts of Jack the Ripper.

The greater part of the audience couldn't turn away. One critic reported that the spectacle filled him with "indefinable dread."

Giacomo Puccini arrived for his first American visit just a few days before the *Salome* affair. When his ship was trapped for a day in a fog bank off Sandy Hook, bulletins of his progress went out to opera-loving readers of the *New York Times*. Puccini's operas had lately become runaway hits in the city; during his five-week stay, all four of his mature works to date—*Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*—played at the Metropolitan Opera, and *La Bohème* ran concurrently at Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House.

Puccini was keen to write something for his American fans, and in the customary shipside press conference he floated the idea of an opera set in the Wild West. "I have read Bret Harte's novels," he said, "and I think there is great scope in your Western life for operatic treatment." He also looked into African-American music, or "coon songs," as the *Times* called them. Black musicians were summoned to the home of Dr. and Mrs. William Tillinghast Bull, so that the maestro could hear them.

Puccini returned to Italy with the plan of making an opera out of *The Girl of the Golden West*, by the playwright-showman David Belasco, who had also written the play on which *Butterfly* was based. The score branched out in a couple of new directions. On the one hand, Puccini demonstrated what he had absorbed from several encounters with *Salome*, as well as from a study of Debussy. Act I begins with blaring whole-tone chords, which must have alarmed the hordes who had fallen for *La Bohème*. Act II culminates in a "tritone complex" of the kind that had often appeared at climactic moments of *Salome* and *Elektra*—chords of E-flat minor and A minor in minatory alternation. At the same time, *The Girl of the Golden West* gamely tries to do justice to its classic American setting; intermittent strains of the cakewalk echo whatever it was that Puccini heard at Dr. and Mrs. Bull's, while a Native American Zuni song furnishes material for (oddly) an aria by a black minstrel. The most remarkable thing about the work is that a fearless, independent woman occupies the center of it; in an age when women in opera almost invariably came off as diseased and deranged, Puccini's Minnie is a bringer of peace, a beacon in a darkening world.

Mahler arrived in New York on December 21, 1907, taking up residence at the Hotel Majestic on Central Park West. His performances at the Met went splendidly, but trouble was brewing behind the scenes. Heinrich Conried, who had hired Mahler, was forced out, partly because of the *Salome* debacle, and the board expressed a desire to "work away from the German atmosphere and the Jew." Giulio Gatti-Casazza, of La Scala, became the new manager, bringing with him the firebrand conductor Arturo Toscanini. But another opportunity arose. The society figure Mary Sheldon offered to set Mahler up with a star orchestra, and the New York Philharmonic was reconstituted to meet his needs. Mahler believed that this arrangement would allow him to present his own works and the classics under ideal conditions. "Since [New Yorkers] are completely unprejudiced," he wrote home, "I hope I shall here find fertile ground for my works and thus a spiritual home, something that, for all the sensationalism, I should never be able to achieve in Europe."

Things did not turn out quite so rosily, but Mahler and America got along well. The conductor was no longer so addicted to perfection, nor did he hold himself aloof from society as he had done in Vienna. On a good night, he would take all seventy of his musicians out to dinner. He went to dinner parties, attended a séance, even poked his head into an opium den in Chinatown. When traveling to a concert, he refused the assistance of a chauffeur, preferring to use the newly constructed subway system. A Philharmonic musician once saw the great man alone in a subway car, staring vacantly like any other commuter.

A New York friend, Maurice Baumfeld, recalled that Mahler loved to gaze out his high window at the city and the sky. "Wherever I am," the composer said, "the longing for this blue sky, this sun, this pulsating activ-

ity goes with me." In 1909, at the beginning of his second New York season, he wrote to Bruno Walter: "I see everything in such a new light—am in such a state of flux, sometimes I should hardly be surprised suddenly to find myself in a new body. (Like Faust in the last scene.) I am thirstier for life than ever before . . ."

In his last New York season, Mahler ran into trouble with Mrs. Sheldon's Programme Committee. A streak of adventurous programming, encompassing everything from the music of Bach to far-out contemporary fare such as Elgar's *Sea Pictures*, met with a tepid response from traditional concertgoers, as adventurous programming often does. Meanwhile, Toscanini was ensconced at the Met, winning over New York audiences with, among other things, a Puccini premiere—the long-awaited *Girl of the Golden West*. For a time, it looked as though Mahler would return to Europe: the local critics had turned against him, as their Viennese counterparts had done, and he felt harried on all sides. In the end, he signed a new contract, and retained his equanimity of mood.

On the night of February 20, 1911, Mahler announced to his dinner companions, "I have found that people in general are better, more kindly, than one supposes." He was running a fever, but thought nothing of it. The following night, against his doctor's advice, he led a program of Italian works that included the premiere of Ferruccio Busoni's *Berceuse élégiaque*, a beautifully opaque piece that seems to depict a soul entering a higher realm. This was Mahler's final concert; a fatal infection, in the form of subacute bacterial endocarditis, was moving through his body. The remaining Philharmonic concerts were canceled. Mahler returned to Vienna, and died there on May 18.

European commentators made an anti-American cultural parable out of Mahler's demise, as they had in the case of *Symphonia domestica* at the Wanamaker store. The conductor was a "victim of the dollar," one Berlin newspaper said, of "the nerve-wracking and peculiar demands of American art." Alma Mahler helped to foster this impression, perhaps as a way of diverting attention from her affair with Walter Gropius, which had caused her husband more angst than any of Mrs. Sheldon's memos. "You cannot imagine what Mr. Mahler has suffered," she told the press. "In Vienna my husband was all powerful. Even the Emperor did not dictate to him, but in New York, to his amazement, he had ten ladies ordering him about like a puppet."

Mahler himself did not blame the dollar. "I have never worked as little as I did in America," he said in an interview a month before his death. "I was not subjected to an excess of either physical or intellectual work."

Resting on Mahler's desk was the manuscript of his Tenth Symphony, which must have been the work that he described to Maurice Baumfeld as "something entirely new"—a reflection of certain things he saw and felt in America. One American feature of the score is well known: the funeral march at the beginning of the finale—a dirge for tuba and contrabassoons, interrupted by thuds on a military drum—was inspired by the funeral procession of Charles W. Kruger, deputy chief of the New York Fire Department, who had died in 1908 while fighting a blaze on Canal Street.

There might also be an American impression in the symphony's first movement, the climax of which contains a dissonance of nine notes. This awe-inspiring, numbing chord is usually associated with the crisis in Mahler's marriage, but it may also point to a natural phenomenon, some craggy, sublime feature of the American continent. Like the chords at the beginning of Strauss's *Zarathustra*, it is derived from the overtones of a resonating string. The relationship becomes clear at the end of the movement, where the harmonic series is spelled out note by note in the strings and harp, like a rainbow emerging over Niagara Falls.

Stunned by his rival's death, Richard Strauss could barely speak for days afterward. He commented later that Mahler had been his "antipode," his worthy adversary. By way of a memorial he conducted the Third Symphony in Berlin. In a more oblique tribute, he decided to resume work on a tone poem that he had begun sketching some years before—a piece called *The Antichrist*, in honor of Nietzsche's most vociferous diatribe against religion. Mulling over this project in his diary, Strauss wondered why Mahler, "this aspiring, idealistic, and energetic artist," had converted to Christianity. Each man misunderstood the other to the end; Strauss suspected Mahler of surrendering to antiquated Christian morality, while Mahler accused Strauss of selling out to plebeian taste. The split between them forecast a larger division in twentieth-century music to come, between modernist and populist conceptions of the composer's role.

In the end, Strauss's last big orchestral work carried the more prosaic

title *An Alpine Symphony*. It depicts a daylong mountain climb, complete with sunrise, storm, a magical moment of arrival at the summit, descent, and sunset. Beneath the surface, it may be partly "about" Mahler, as the critic Tim Ashley has suggested. In the section "At the Summit," the brass intone a majestic theme, recalling the opening of *Zarathustra*. At the same time, the violins sing a Mahlerian song of longing in which one pleading little five-note pattern—two steps up, a little leap, a step back down—brings to mind the "Alma" theme of the Sixth. The intermingling of Mahlerian strings and Straussian brass suggests the image of the two composers standing side by side at the peak of their art. Perhaps they are back in the hills above Graz, gazing down at the splendor of nature while the world waits for them below.

The vision passes, as joyful scenes in Strauss tend to do. Mists rise; a storm breaks out; the climbers descend. Soon they are shrouded in the same mysterious, groaning chord with which the symphony began. The sun has set behind the mountain.

(((2)))

DOCTOR FAUST

Schoenberg, Debussy, and Atonality

One day in 1948 or 1949, the Brentwood Country Mart, a shopping complex in an upscale neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, was the scene of a slight disturbance that carried overtones of the most spectacular upheaval in twentieth-century music. Marta Feuchtwanger, wife of the émigré novelist Lion Feuchtwanger, was examining grapefruit in the produce section when she heard a voice shouting in German from the far end of the aisle. She looked up to see Arnold Schoenberg, the pioneer of atonal music and the codifier of twelve-tone composition, bearing down on her, with his bald pate and burning eyes. Decades later, in conversation with the writer Lawrence Weschler, Feuchtwanger could recall every detail of the encounter, including the weight of the grapefruit in her hand. "Lies, Frau Marta, lies!" Schoenberg was yelling. "You have to know, *I never had syphilis!*"

The cause of this improbable commotion was the publication of *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*. Thomas Mann, a writer peculiarly attuned to music, had fled from the hell of Hitler's Germany into the not-quite paradise of Los Angeles, joining other Central European artists in exile. The proximity of such renowned figures as Schoenberg and Stravinsky had encouraged Mann to write a "novel of music," in which a modern composer produces esoteric