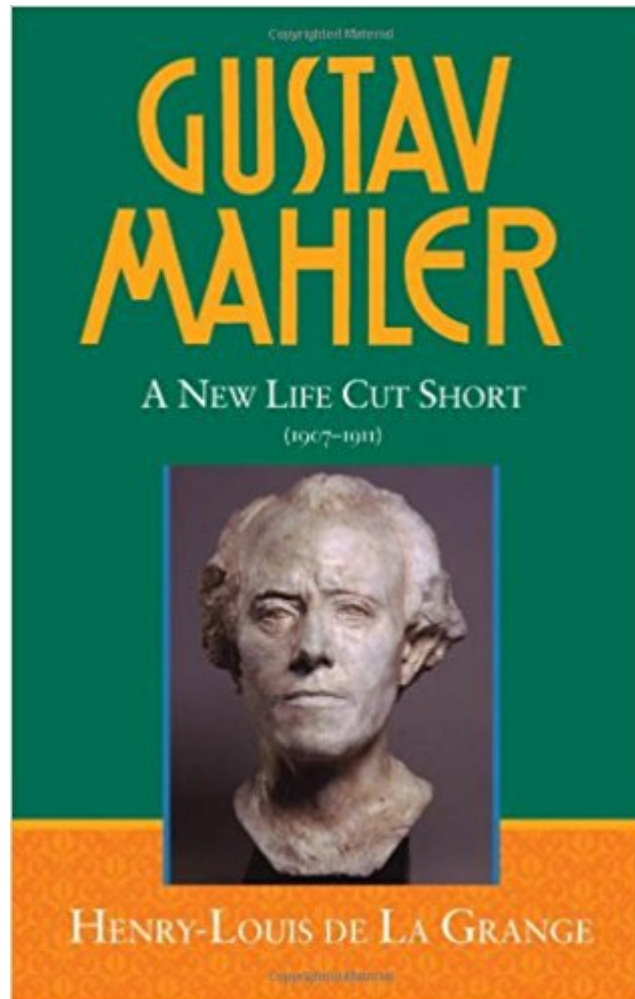


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Gustav Mahler, Vol. 4: A New Life Cut Short, 1907-1911



Synopsis

When the earlier volumes of de La Grange's monumental study of Gustav Mahler appeared, they were hailed across America--in *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and many other publications--as an indispensable portrait of one of the greatest figures in the history of music. Here at last is the final volume of this magisterial work. The fourth volume illuminates the composer's American period, when he was conductor for the Metropolitan Opera in New York. It contains a treasure trove of new material, in particular many unknown letters from Alma Mahler to her lover, Walter Gropius, and many articles and interviews about the composer and the performances he conducted while in New York. This detailed biography of the composer also includes new and valuable insights into the final year of his life, when he returned to Europe to die. The crowning point of a decades-long project, during which the author has personally translated each volume from his original French into English, this scrupulously researched and insightfully written biography brings to a triumphant close the definitive account of Mahler's life and work.

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Customer Reviews

This final installment of Henry-Louis de La Grange's massive four volume biography advances the idea that Mahler was not a death-driven broken man in his final years; rather he was about to embark on a "new life" that was cut short by an unexpected illness. Thus the unfinished 10th Symphony should be heard as a new beginning whose final bars are a paean to love, not a farewell. I will not pretend that I've read the entire book so soon after publication (it is actually 1758 pages!

not the 1072 that lists). I will focus on the chapter that describes Alma Mahler's "betrayal": by doing so I will hopefully give an idea of rest of the book. The style of writing and presentation is identical to previous volumes. De La Grange assembles what seems to be every fact he could discover about Mahler and weaves them into a chronological narrative. The chapter covers July and August 1910 and is 118 small print pages long, including 411 footnotes of even smaller print. De La Grange quotes extensively from recently unearthed letters between Alma Mahler and the budding architect Walter Gropius (the lover with whom she betrayed Mahler) to further show how willfully deceiving Alma's published memoirs were about the affair. These give insight into the depth of Mahler's despair when he discovered what had happened through a letter that Gropius, in writing to Alma, mistakenly addressed to Mahler himself. De La Grange attempts to give an in-depth analysis of Alma's personality, quoting from unpublished diaries and letters. He also spends 40 pages on Mahler's interview with Sigmund Freud, quoting extensively from all the available sources in which Freud discussed the meeting, as well as present-day psychologists and analysts who have commented on it.

Mahler devotees (and I'm certainly one of them)--people who have come to see Mahler as more than a great composer and conductor, have an almost religious reverence for all things related to Gustav Mahler. For many of us, his music contains a view of mankind, life and the universe that goes beyond what science and art can tell us. Although technically, he spoke German, Mahlerians know that he "spoke music." He used his music to go beyond what words say, and carry listeners to a higher level of feeling for, and understanding of, life. This can be undertaken just by listening to his music. Yet many of us believe that appreciation for it can be enhanced by knowing more about Mahler the man, the people around him, and his world. This is where Henry-Louis de la Grange enters the picture. Imagine yourself as one of those who wants to know more and more about Mahler and his world. You can read any of the various books on Mahler; some by his wife, some by scholars. Often, these books merely raise more questions. Where do you go for the facts and well-thought-out opinions and theories? From an early age, Henry-Louis was captivated by Mahler's music. Most fortunately for Mahler devotees, he has enjoyed the extremely rare and felicitous conjunction of gifted scholarly diligence and financial independence that gave him the time and opportunity to pursue his deep interest in Mahler. As you may have read in the descriptions of this volume, it concerns the last four years of Mahler's life, and it corrects the popular and mistaken notion that a neurotic Mahler died a broken-hearted man in despair over the setbacks he had faced. The 1758 pages in this volume thoroughly support La Grange's contention that Mahler's death was

"a new life cut short.

Having read a total of about two and a half volumes so far of the towering four (one does need to leave time for reading other things), this last volume is a supreme summation of so much of what has gone before. The other reviewers have pretty well summarized their contents, so I'll just add the following: I was surprised--as have been others to whom I've related this--that Mahler requested that his heart be pierced by a sharp object after his death, and that this was dutifully carried out on his body by a local physician the morning after his death. No reason was ever given by Mahler for this instruction, and De La Grange speculates that it was the result of the fear, given wide currency at the time, of being buried while still alive, and so the piercing was to ensure he was truly dead. Perhaps. Perhaps it was that Mahler sought finally to quell the pain in his heart--of his wife's betrayal, indeed of the pain of the world which he felt so acutely, and with which he infused so much of his music. In any event, even this enigmatic, post-mortem, extraordinarily potent act is, like his music, evocative of so much about the human condition. Reading La Grange is a combination of fascination and bemusement: fascination because it is virtually Mahler day-by-day; a total immersion in the minutiae Mahler's daily life both from his own words, the words of others, and extensive excerpts from the many different and ideologically-varied newspapers that covered his nightly concerts. Bemusement, because De La Grange manages to sustain the "just the facts, ma'am" style over so long a multi-thousand page span--no interpretation, no analysis, no conclusions, no overarching theories, patchy historical and artistic context, nothing but the dry facts.

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