Many of Gustav Mahler’s biographers have acknowledged the difficulties encountered by the composer throughout his career because of his Jewish heritage. Anti-Semitic attacks on his works were particularly virulent from 1897 to 1907, during his appointment as conductor of the Hopofer. As Henry-Louis de la Grange writes, “[T]he anti-Semitic papers savagely attacked Mahler” and left “no hyperbole unused in their condemnation” of the composer.¹ K. M. Knittel’s Seeing Mahler: Music and the Language of Antisemitism in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna, published in 2010, mainly addresses this Viennese decade of the composer’s life and the anti-Semitic reviews and critical texts that surrounded him. Instead of focusing solely on the openly anti-Semitic attacks, however, Knittel examines the texts of seemingly neutral critics and observes the biases they present. Her unique approach therefore aims to show how Mahler was victim of more pervasive, discreet manifestations of anti-Semitism.

This 201-page book is divided into six chapters followed by two appendices, a bibliography and an index. In the first chapter, "Mahlers Metamorphosen," Knittel explains that to understand the underlying belief system of the Viennese critics, it is necessary to grasp how Jews were perceived in the Austrian capital at the time of

Mahler’s appointment as director of the court orchestra. Knittel offers background information about the subject of anti-Semitism and nuances she claims are missing from most studies about Mahler’s reception history. According to her, anti-Semitism is not only a hatred towards Jews, but also the phenomenon of seeing them as outsiders and believing they are fundamentally different. She also stresses the importance of Jewish "self-hatred" (8); as some of Mahler’s critics were Jewish, Knittel wishes to demonstrate how they would themselves rely on stereotypes and imagery that would, at the time, bear anti-Semitic connotations. Finally, she explains how extremely anti-Semitic views have been somewhat over-exploited in discussions about Mahler’s music, concealing the more common and restrained prejudices towards Jews found therein.

In this introductory chapter, Knittel does not attempt to analyze Mahler’s works or to judge his reactions towards criticism, nor does she focus on the content of openly and extremely anti-Semitic newspapers. By examining "not [the] extremes but...the everyday" (11), she wishes to show how some critics such as Theodor Helm, Max Kalbeck, and Eduard Hanslick resorted to beliefs in Jewish difference without being overtly anti-Semitic when writing about Mahler. By using this “language of anti-Semitism,” they were able to present explicit anti-Semitic information while simply appearing to describe and review music. Knittel’s book, in short, attempts to reconstruct what the Viennese saw in Mahler, given the biases of the turn of the century, and to present how anti-Semitic images and metaphors might have been hidden in the language surrounding him.

In the second chapter, “Die Bildnisse von Gustav Mahler,” Knittel examines two writings that address Mahler’s physical appearance. First, a 1922 essay by Alfred Roller describes Mahler’s body in great detail. Knittel explains that the author avoids representing Mahler as a Jew by insisting on particular body traits, such as the nose, the gaze, and the general body shape, and describing them as typically "non-Jewish." The second text she analyzes is Alma Mahler’s Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters. Mahler’s wife modified some information while assembling these writings, and Knittel warns they might not be entirely reliable. However, she notes that Alma’s description of Mahler prior to their engagement is very negative. Mahler’s wife wrote that “so much irritates her: his smell…the way he speaks” (41). According to Knittel, these characteristics are related to Jewish stereotypes. Roller and Alma Mahler were then both expressing their belief in Jewish difference, although in an implicit manner.

In the third chapter, Knittel discusses how Richard Wagner’s infamous Das Judenthum in der Musik, first published under a pseudonym in 1850, might have served as a basis for the anti-Semitic language of many of Mahler’s early critics. Although Wagner does not give concrete musical examples in his essay, the author believes his sayings illustrate many beliefs that surrounded the music of Jewish composers in the
19th century: lack of creativity, inability to truly express themselves, and a tendency to mimic others. According to Wagner, “the Jew has no true passion, and least of all a passion that might thrust him on to art-creation.” Knittel explains that in describing Mahler’s music as commonplace and trivial, Mahler’s critics echoed Wagner's claims without explicitly referring to Mahler as a Jew.

The fourth chapter, “Die Wiener Kritiker,” focuses on reviews of the Viennese premiere of Mahler’s first six symphonies, ranging from 1899 to his departure for America in 1907. Knittel examines how various aspects of Mahler’s music, such as his occasional use of a program, the formal aspect of his works, the musical unity, the orchestration, and the melodic reminiscences were addressed by critics. She then states that a great portion of the criticism Mahler received can be tied to beliefs about the inferiority of Jewish music, as articulated by Wagner. In his article, "Critic"/"Reader," George Steiner writes that “there is no such thing as impartial…criticism”, but that in good criticism, the “bias is made visible…lucid to itself.” By uncovering the biases that animated the Viennese critics, Knittel shows that partiality. And yet, the critics were not honest about their preconceptions. Without explicitly admitting their anti-Semitic attitude, they were influenced, even if only on a subconscious level, by the stereotypes permeating Viennese society.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to discussing the relationship between Mahler and Richard Strauss, colleagues and rivals. Knittel chose to compare the two composers because although they led similar careers, Mahler was of Jewish heritage, and Strauss was not. Knittel compares the critical reception of the two composers and notes that while both were referred to as modernists (an adjective which, at the time, might have had a Jewish undertone), Mahler received the majority of the negative criticism while Strauss was given more leeway. She also analyzes various caricatures of the two composers, as both were often depicted among large groups of instrumentalists, random objects, and even animals, to show the gigantic proportions of their work. Even so, Knittel writes that in these cartoons Strauss always seems composed and in control of the situation while Mahler is pictured as sweating, angry, and disheveled. All of these adjectives, of course, have anti-Semitic connotations. I will return to her treatment of these caricatures later in my review.

In the final chapter, “Eine Musikalische Physiognomik,” Knittel wonders if we still, today, write and speak about Mahler with the language of anti-Semitism. She suggests different ways of looking at the composer's music, citing Theodor Adorno as an ideal example. Adorno saw in Mahler's symphonies a critical commentary of his
time, as they represent a "revolt against bourgeois music." \(^{2}\) Adorno also describes Mahler's fragmentation and mix of styles as a potpourri of genres and styles, where "the lower music irrupts into the higher." \(^{3}\) By proposing these alternative methods of discussing Mahler’s music, Knittel suggests his career could be observed through a new lens. Without always thinking about his "Jewishness," it would be possible to "rethink what makes Mahler's music unique, thought-provoking, and valuable." (168)

The goals that Knittel sets for herself are daring and original, and she generally succeeds in showing how anti-Semitism took on subtler forms than blatantly declared prejudice. *Seeing Mahler* is a truly unique book in the way it looks at the composer’s critical reception. As previously mentioned, Mahler scholar, La Grange, mainly focuses on openly anti-Semitic reviews in his thorough biography of Mahler. Johnathan Carr, in a most recent biography, sees things differently. While he admits Mahler received anti-Semitic criticism, he writes that “more often than not, criticism of Mahler's performances was based neither on personal vendetta nor racial prejudice but on real differences of taste and sometimes of principle.” \(^{4}\) Carr therefore acknowledges that while some critics were clearly anti-Semitic, others were simply judging Mahler's music based on their taste. Knittel’s approach takes this argument one step further, managing to show how the line between openly anti-Semitic and unprejudiced reviews is not clear.

Furthermore, Knittel's work can be placed in a broader context in studies about anti-Semitism. In *The Essential 'Other' and the Jew: From Anti-Semitism to Genocide*, Henri Zukier states that in the nineteenth century, “the Jew [became] the most universal and most intimate outsider in the Western mind, the consummate carrier of 'differentness.'” \(^{5}\) Knittel shows how this phenomenon is present in Mahler's critical reception, and her claim that the anti-Semitic stereotypes are often present in subtle ways fits perfectly with Zukier's concept of the “invisible outsider”: Jews, while being a physical part of the society, are also alienated from it.

The most effective part of the book is manifestly the fourth chapter. Knittel includes many lengthy excerpts of critics of Mahler's works, separating them into thematic categories, and explaining very clearly after each excerpt how they might be

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3 George Steiner, “‘Critic’/‘Reader,’” *New Literary History* 10/3 (1979), 428.

4 Adorno, *Physiognomy*, 35.


read in an anti-Semitic fashion. Her choice of critical texts is also very relevant to her point because the ones she chooses bear no open mention of anti-Semitism or general prejudice.

Another positive aspect of Knittel’s work is that although she describes views of Mahler’s first six symphonies, it is not essential for the reader to be very familiar with the music itself. Her claims are understandable and logical even for someone who is new to Mahler’s music. This causes a slight disadvantage, because a reader who is not familiar with Mahler’s symphonies will have to take for granted what the critics and Knittel say. As is stated in her introduction, the musical content of the symphonies is not an element Knittel intended to analyze, and yet it might have been helpful to include some information about the music itself, to give a broader context to what was being said by the critics. For example, Knittel cites Helm who writes that Mahler’s first symphony is full of reminiscences and “citations from Beethoven, Wagner, Bruckner, Mendelssohn, Weber, etc.” (92) She then explains that this is a stereotype, which finds its roots in Wagner’s assertion that “Jews hurl together diverse forms and styles from every age and every master.” An acknowledgment, at least, of Mahler’s musical borrowings and influences (the usage of the Frère Jacques Round in the third movement, for instance) might have been helpful to the reader, who could then personally judge if critics were biased toward Jews or simply acknowledging and critiquing an aspect of Mahler’s style.

Another potentially off-putting element of Knittel’s work was her choice to include an essay so overtly anti-Semitic as Wagner’s Das Judentum in der Musik as a basis for the more discreet “language of anti-Semitism.” As she claims, Wagner’s essay is indeed very vague, primarily because he does not give precise musical examples. Knittel nevertheless presents convincing evidence that the stereotypes expressed by Wagner were part of fin-de-siècle Viennese culture. That said, the connection between Wagner’s claims and early twentieth century critics’ prejudices can appear questionable, because the way they wrote about Jews was fundamentally different. Wagner is so overt in his opinions that he appears like one of the openly anti-Semitic critics that Knittel refused to review. Unsurprisingly, it can be difficult to relate his extreme opinions to the hidden anti-Semitism of the Viennese journalists.

In his article “Mahler, Victim of the New Anti-semitism,” Edward F. Kravitt offers an interesting explanation of the political context of the time that may clarify this confusion. Kravitt disagrees with Knittel, who cites in her 1995 article, “Ein hypermoderner Dirigent’: Mahler and Anti-Semitism in Fin-de-siècle Vienna,” numerous stereotypes to support her claim that anti-Semitism remained unchanged for centuries. Kravitt counters this, arguing that following the liberal era in Vienna, in the

1870s, Jews were given more freedom. As these changes took place, a new, more discreet anti-Semitism emerged, one that was more racial than cultural. According to him, a comparison of Mahler's and Mendelssohn's (the subject of Wagner's anti-Semitic comments) experiences show they were not victim of the same anti-Semitism. A broader look, then, at the political and social context in which Wagner had written his essay and how it differed from the one Mahler lived in might clarify the apparent discrepancies between Wagner's essay and the criticism Mahler received.

Moreover, the topic of the “self-hating” Jew, an intriguing phenomenon mentioned by Knittel in the introduction (8), could have been somewhat more developed. Although she takes the time to explain it clearly, it is not really discussed throughout the book. There is, nevertheless, a lot to say about the topic that might have enriched Knittel's arguments. In Mahler, a Biography, Carr explains that prior to his Catholic conversion, Mahler "had not been a zealous Jew," showed no interest in Jewish matters, and even wondered how he was supposed to identify himself with other Jews.8 Jeremy Barham, in the introduction to Gustav Mahler – New Insights into His Life, Times and Work observes how Mahler felt "alienated from the other Jews," and how this feeling of estrangement might be seen as a form of Jewish anti-Semitism.9 Elsewhere, Sander Gilman shows that Mahler would instruct Alma to stop him when he used characteristic hand-gestures and expressive body language that could have reminded others that he was Jewish.10 Knittel clearly stated at the outset of her text that her goal was not to analyze Mahler's feelings towards anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, an investigation of how the language of anti-Semitism and underlying Jewish stereotypes were used and acknowledged by Mahler himself might have been a useful way to show how pervasive these stereotypes were.

On the other hand, one very strong point of the book is the comparison between the Strauss and Mahler caricatures. Knittel offers detailed descriptions of the illustrations included in the book, and her attention to the details present in these depictions is impressive. Her interpretation of what is implied in these caricatures is very insightful. At first sight, these drawings appear all very similar, as both composers are represented amidst hordes of instruments. However, she notes that the composed Strauss's cacophonous ensemble is always organized, while a jerking and twitching

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9 Carr, Mahler: A Biography, 84-85.


Mahler barely has control over the performers. These details are subtle, but Knittel brings them out with great attention. In addition to Jewish stereotypes, these caricatures could also be seen as a reference to Mahler’s conducting technique, which, as Carr put it, was often furious and even “demonic.”

In conclusion, although Knittel’s work could have occasionally gained more clarity by offering a broader look at the evolution of anti-Semitism throughout the nineteenth century and by giving some general information about Mahler's music and Mahler’s own attitude towards anti-Semitism, Knittel ultimately achieves the goals she had set for herself. Her book truly stands out in the field as an insightful study of Mahler's reception history, as she analyzes the writings of Viennese critics and of Mahler’s friends and family in an unprecedented way. By showing how various anti-Semitic biases were often found in seemingly innocent reviews and by describing how critics relied on the audience’s expectations towards Jews, Knittel unveils a "language of anti-Semitism," giving her readers a unique insight into Fin-de-Siécle Vienna's culture.

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For further reading:


