

**BEYOND BORDERS:
GUSTAV MAHLER AS A DRIVING FORCE**

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Austrian composer Gustav Mahler was a celebrity even during his lifetime. At the centre of the Viennese cultural life, leading its golden age, the director of the Hofoper was the second most important person in the city, as the Viennese used to say, immediately after the Emperor. The fame he achieved as a conductor was unprecedented, but it is his composer side that secured him a place in the music history. His principal job being that of the opera director, the only time Mahler had to dedicate himself completely to his own music was during his summer holidays. As a rule, he spent his summers away from the city, mostly in the mountains.

Mahler was known as a man who didn't know the meaning of the word impossible. In his mind, when music demanded something, it needed to be done and there was no discussion about it. No compromise, no excuses. He gave his orchestras everything and he demanded everything in return. Not everyone was ready to embrace that. Strict, disciplined, radical, passionate, Mahler wanted even his summer holidays to be put to use and he insisted on not being disturbed while he worked. For that purpose, he had composing huts built at his summer residences. The first one was erected at Steinbach am Attersee, in the 1890s. The second at Maiernigg am Wörthersee, in 1901,

near the only piece of land he ever owned. The third and last, the only still completely authentic, in Toblach, in 1908.

Mahler's deep necessity to be surrounded by nature while working on his music had its essential extension in his practice to take a short trip on his own at an important stage of his work on a symphony. These trips lasted at most three or four days and included solitary hikes and bike rides, during which Mahler would contemplate the work accomplished by that time and observe it from the distance, as well as gather new ideas, apart from enjoying the activities. He would also deeply inhale the nature, take every single inspired moment it gave to him, and he would ardently hate the tourists who disturbed him in the process (although he too was one). The most prolific period of Mahler's creativity, as well as professionally most successful, was inside the last fourteen years of his life (until 1911). These years, or should we say the summers in particular, have been marked by Mahler's trips and stays in the historic Tyrol.

The composer didn't live to see the World War I, which brought the end of the Habsburg Empire, and the subsequent border changes. The only border he would cross on his lone wanderings was the one with the Kingdom of Italy, south of Hochpustertal. He liked going up into the mountains, but he hated having to come down. He always pushed his limits, be it at the rostrum, or in managing the altitude. In 1907, when his beloved daughter Maria died at the age of five, Mahler sought refuge and peace in the Dolomites. Distraught and shattered, he immersed himself into the Dolomite ridges and woods and the year later, his first whole summer in Toblach, he wrote one of his most profound works, *Lied von der Erde* (Song of the Earth).

His music went far beyond borders of states and nationalities even during his lifetime. Now, in the age of global media, there is hardly a place on the planet where absolutely nobody heard about Gustav Mahler and his music.

In these strange times, when with every day we wake up in we find out there is a new wall somewhere, a new prejudice, an old one renewed, when people are frantically insisting on protecting whatever it is they call their own and authentically, traditionally theirs, the Music Department of the University of Innsbruck and the Mahler Musikwochen Toblach have decided to take a different course, ignore borders and build for the future. The bricks we are going to use cannot be better suited than Gustav Mahler and his legacy. In the following minutes, I will try to explain why that is so.

Culture has always been a way to remove borders, or at least jump over them. If given a chance, the power that music has, given its specific way of communicating its message, is a perfect tool to connect different areas of life, as well as different disciplines, scholarly and non. Gustav Mahler's cultural and musical legacy is priceless, and the fact that he used to spend his holidays in the Alpine parts of the Habsburg Empire, especially the Dolomites, where he wrote some of his most important music, opens a door towards connecting people in other ways, not only through performances of the composer's works. Apart from a close contact with Mahler experts all over the world, the ideas behind the vision are rooted in the specificity of Mahler's music, which has an intense connection with nature, thus enabling scholarly, cultural, nature-preserving and touristic-economic directions to converge and work for a common goal.

With all this in mind, the Gustav Mahler Musikwochen in Toblach and the Music Department of the University of Innsbruck perceived the potential of joint efforts and started developing a project on a larger scale, which should demonstrate a multi-layer benefit for the regions involved and, with time, elsewhere as well.

In June 2016, the two institutions mentioned above organised the first International Gustav Mahler Workshop, with the aim to gather Mahler scholars from across the world and enable them to work closely in a unique environment. The results brought great satisfaction both to the organisers and the participants, and helped make important decisions, which are at the basis of the project presented here. In the fruitful exchanges of ideas, it was decided to start working on the concept for an *Interreg* programme, in the axis Culture & Nature. We named our project “Gustav Mahler’s cultural legacy in the Alps”. Its principal scope is to prepare the ground for the foundation of a Gustav Mahler Research and Documentation Centre in Toblach, as well as to spread the activities of Mahler field across disciplines and different areas of life. This institution is thought as a forum and a reference point for Mahler research and the composer’s cultural legacy.

The structure of the project in development is divided into three different sectors, which are as follows:

1. Research activities: through the organisation of scholarly workshops, conferences, master classes etc. (which will take place on different locations, in collaboration with partners and crossing the regional and state borders), we intend to constitute a first network, a sort of think tank for exchange,

development of ideas and visions, decisions, reinforce existing co-operations and forge new ones; these activities are planned interdisciplinary, with the goal to ensure that the network is built upon firm ground;

2. Nexus and networking: this part comprises a second network, the aim of which is to establish a link between all the places which were important to Gustav Mahler, with focus on Tyrol and South Tyrol, as well as an initiative which is to link all three composing huts (Steinbach am Attersee, Maiernigg am Wörthersee, Toblach) through different activities;

3. Cultural-touristic initiatives: in this part of the project, the development of a third network is planned. This network should make a link between cultural institutions and initiatives from the areas of tourism and economy (events, guided tours etc.). This would be an important contribution to the further development of the participating regions; Gustav Mahler's legacy is of significance worldwide and the composer's place in the history of music enables us to highlight also the value of this great treasure we happen to have in our regions.

This initial concept starts from the fact that the Music Department in Innsbruck has Gustav Mahler's music as one of its focal research interests and a wide network of international contacts, and Mahler Musikwochen Toblach are an established festival with three and a half decades of tradition and reputation, and excellent prospects for collaboration. Both these institutions have done important work related to Mahler separately, but we quickly recognised the potential certain visions would have if we worked on them together. A further development in the collaboration has been marked by the new concept of the

scholarly part of the festival in Toblach, as of next year under the guidance of the head of the Music Department in Innsbruck, Prof. Dr. Federico Celestini. This concept too has been developed having in mind interdisciplinary approach and bringing together the speakers and the audience in a more direct contact with one another and with the world of Mahler's landscape. Precisely this dimension is in the core of the Interreg project: Gustav Mahler's way of thinking, of understanding art, nature, music, is very much reflected in the mountains he so loved. The values and philosophy represented in his music are lasting and universal, and as such cannot be confined, which is precisely why we intend to let that be our guiding light towards building an institution and a network of international reach, thought to bring the world to us and ourselves to the world, all the while remaining faithful to the principles of openness and collaboration. The fact that the mountains, which were the birth place of a lot of the music we know today, are here, within our reach, are a perfect incitement to construct and connect, to help show appreciation for the priceless natural heritage which surrounds us and bring people closer to the world of one of the greatest composers history has ever known.

Gustav Mahler's visionary enterprises, both in his own music and in his work as the Hofoperndirektor, have remained to this day an important example of interdisciplinary insight and approach to enriching not only a work of art, but also rendering cultural life multidimensional and intertwined with other areas of living and existing. In a mountain environment, high up, where everything rather depends on the will of nature, the sensation of the infinite is particularly present. Mahler built it

into his music, highly aware of its meaning. In order to see better, we have to leave the village and the valley and make a few steps upwards, as that way we can see the next village too, and the next, and a road perhaps, and another rock and so on. We have a better overview. Higher up, we will meet people coming from a different direction and we will sit together on a rocky carpet, share the lunch and put our experiences together to have a broader insight into what surrounds us. We met at the same spot, but we came from different directions and on the way, we saw different things, or same things, but from different perspectives. Seeing only one side of a mountain, and through this metaphor also a work of art or any other discussed topic, doesn't mean knowing the mountain, as we have absolutely no idea what is on the other side. The experience of the person who came from the other side can help us decide in which direction to proceed, because over there, the trail can be more spectacular than on our side, or more dangerous. In order to know that, we need to cross over and consider the possibility that a different perspective on something we have worked on so much can bring a whole new level to it and give it a dimension we would never have known, had it not been for the meeting and the shared lunch, high up. So the mountains, so Gustav Mahler and, for instance, his employing the Sezession artists in the Opera, and so we here today.