Reviewed Elsewhere: Charles Youmans, Mahler and Strauss in Dialogue

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An oft-told story of the composers Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss is that they represented two sides of a coin, two opposing personalities and, at times, two irreconcilable worldviews. In the nearly forty years since Herta Blaukopf's essay "Rivalry and Friendship" (1980) in her publication of their correspondence, few scholars have probed this relationship deeper. Enter Charles Youmans's recent work, Mahler and Strauss in Dialogue, which offers a balanced account that is a welcome contribution to research on both composers. ... by examining Mahler and Strauss side-by-side, Youmans's book reveals how their personal relationship can offer a lens to view the larger cultural, political, and economic dynamics that shaped the Austro-German musical tradition at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Youmans's thematic overview revisits many well-covered areas of scholarship, such as both composers' "critical appropriation" of Wagner (65) and their differing interpretations of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche; however, it also demonstrates how a comparative approach can push beyond familiar narratives. The chapter "Allusionists" suggests that both composers' experiments with tone painting and intertextuality were grounded in a shared understanding of the fundamental crisis facing the modern subject. ... In his chapter "Programmusiker," Youmans addresses the question of whether Mahler's shifting attitudes toward program music were an attempt to model himself after Strauss, a thesis notably promoted by Blaukopf (1984; 111). While his conclusion, that Mahler was ultimately trying not to appropriate, but rather to find his own definition of program music that would "set him apart" from Strauss (127), is not a new insight as such, his comparative reading of the composers' two "mission statements" on the topic does prove fruitful. ...

In the chapter "Imports," Youmans examines both composers' attempts to translate their musical idioms to an American audience, shedding light on a topic that Blaukopf discusses only in passing in her essay, focusing primarily on Mahler. ...

Finally, Youmans balances such reflections into the composer's public personas with insights into their private worlds. One of the most intriguing chapters is "Husbands," in which he analyzes how both composers "used relationships with women as a laboratory for developing artistic viewpoints" (50). Examining their relationships with the two central women in their lives, Youmans demonstrates the different ways that Alma and Pauline "inhabited" their husbands' works and helped to fashion their understandings of the feminine. His comparative reading offers a fresh perspective on the role that these women, both talented musicians in their own right, played in shaping their husbands' legacies.

In his conclusion, Youmans bring us back to the familiar story of two very strong, very opposite personalities: the confident, self-assured Strauss who unapologetically wrote his life into his works,
and the ever-striving, conflicted Mahler whose work was no less autobiographical, but reflected a more complex "mishmash of irreconcilable selves" (150). Along the way, Mahler and Strauss in Dialogue tells a compelling story of the unexpected ways that their worlds overlapped. In so doing, it provides a model for comparative analysis that enriches our understanding of a relationship that indelibly shaped the musical world of their time and continues to fascinate us today.