Gustav Mahler Music Weeks in Toblach

*By Milijana Pavlović*

While cycling in the Puster Valley in the summer of 1897, Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) could not have known that the unique and fabulous rock faces of the Dolomites that he was seeing for the first time would become his favourite refuge. Every summer between 1900 and 1906, an important phase in his creative achievements, the great composer would travel to the Hochpustertal and spend a few days alone. At this time he was Director of the Vienna Court Opera and already famous. Riding his bike and hiking, particularly in and around Toblach, allowed him to relax and find inspiration in the mountains. Mahler referred to these brief excursions as ‘lightning trips’. Since it was only in the summer that he was able to focus on his own music, these short breaks from working were helpful for Mahler, allowing him to review his latest compositions with a little detachment.

At the time, the spas and resorts of the Hochpustertal were well-known and well-loved holiday destinations for many Viennese. However, the tourists themselves were far from well-loved by Mahler. He might have been seeking peace and quiet, but they often recognised the prominent conductor and would approach him for his autograph. In letters to family and friends Mahler humorously described his encounters with the people who pestered him.

In July 1907, Gustav and Alma Mahler's elder daughter Maria died in the family home in Maiernigg on Lake Wörthersee. She was five years old. Only a few days later, Mahler himself received a diagnosis from his doctor that proscribed any kind of vigorous physical exertion. Hiking at altitude, cycling, swimming - the passionately sporty composer would have to forgo all of this. Not merely restricted in what he could do, Mahler was now a bird without wings. The family did not want to stay in the beautiful house on Wörthersee after Maria's death and sought peace and refuge, which they found in the Hochpustertal. The Mahlers spent the remaining few weeks of vacation between Toblach, Schluderbach, Misurina and Sexten. Two photos remaining from this trip show Gustav Mahler in the Fischleintal valley, walking stick in hand, against a backdrop of the vertical north face of the Einserkofel peak, part of the so-called ‘Sexten Sundial’. The summer had remained creatively barren because of the family tragedy and Mahler returned to Vienna after his vacation. In the winter, he travelled to New York, where he had been employed as Director of the Metropolitan Opera. 1907 had been in every way a year of change for him.

When looking for a summer residence the following year, the Mahlers again chose the Hochpustertal. There, in Altschluderbach, near Toblach, Alma Mahler found a farmhouse for the family. Mahler had a wooden hut constructed about 150 metres from the house, where he would start working as early as six in the morning. It was in this little hut, which is still there in its original form, that Mahler wrote his last great works, *Das Lied von der Erde*, the Ninth Symphony and the unfinished Tenth. The summer of 1910 was the last summer of Mahler's life and he died in Vienna in May of the following year.

*Gustav Mahler Music Weeks: since 1981*

In 1957, the Toblach community and the International Gustav Mahler Society jointly held a ceremony to commemorate the great composer officially for the first time. Plaques were unveiled at Trenkerhof and at Mahler's composing hut. A further milestone was the organisation of the first Gustav Mahler Music Weeks (http://www.gustav-mahler.it) in 1981. The festival week dedicated to Mahler ran from 19 to 26 July 1981, marking the beginning of a long and rich tradition involving key figures from the domains of academic research into Mahler and musical performance. This significant cultural initiative also resulted in the construction of a concert hall (within the Grand Hotel Cultural Centre), which was ceremonially opened in 1999 as the Gustav Mahler Hall.

*Educational talks: a dialogue between Mahler researchers and festival visitors*

This year, the 36th for the Mahler Music Weeks in Toblach (14 July to 4 August 2017), the Festival's educational programme, which has been subject to many changes over the years, is under new management. The Mahler Committee (President Dr. Hansjörg Viertler) has entrusted this part of the Festival to the Institute of Music Studies at the University of Innsbruck under its director, Prof. Federico Celestini. The 2017 programme is based upon the concept of facilitating dialogue between Mahler researchers and festival visitors. This year’s theme, *Das Lied von der Erde*, is eminently suited to interdisciplinary discussions. Three musicologists, a literary scholar, an expert in Chinese culture and a cultural historian will participate in the event, which runs over three afternoons (18 to 20 July). At the end of the series of lectures and discussions, a themed guided hike will take place (21 July), which not only aims to provide deeper understanding of Mahler's relationship with the Dolomites, but also to provide the option for further interaction between experts and festival-goers in a wonderful and inspirational setting. This entire part of the programme culminates in a performance of *Das Lied von der Erde* on the evening of 22 July 2017.

The University of Innsbruck Institute of Music Studies has taken on a further role, involving its students in the organisation of an exhibition focussed on *Das Lied von der Erde*. Under the auspices of EUREGIO – the Austrian-Italian cross-border body – preparatory work is in progress for an international Master’s degree in musicology involving the Universities of Innsbruck, Bolzano and Trento, and the exhibition demonstrates – with the generous support of the Mahler Music Weeks – a symbolic first step in this cooperation. In addition, planning is underway for the creation of a Gustav Mahler archive and research centre in the unique location that is Toblach, and the future of this project is the subject of much joyful anticipation.

For information and tickets: +39 0474 976151

www.gustav-mahler.it

www.festspiele-suedtirol.it

Box

Dr. Milijana Pavlović

Born in Bosnia, musicologist. After studying at the University of Banja Luka (Bosnia), she completed her doctorate at the University of Ferrara (Italy) in 2009. Since 2013, Dr. Pavlović has been active in research and teaching at the Institute of Music Studies at the University of Innsbruck. The composer Gustav Mahler is a particular focus of her research interests.

Above: reproduction of the bust of Mahler by August Rodin, Toblach 2016

Below: View from Ratsberg towards Toblach and the Höhlensteintal valley

Gustav Mahler in the Fischleintal valley, 1907

Alma and Gustav Mahler out for a walk in Altschluderbach, 1909

Statue of Gustav Mahler in the village centre at Toblach. Sculptor: Bojan Kunaver

Gustav Mahler’s composing hut in Altschluderbach

The Grand Hotel Cultural Centre in Toblach and the Neunergruppe

Inaugural concert of the 35th Gustav Mahler Music Weeks, Mahler’s 9th Symphony, Beethoven Orchestra Bonn

Festival banners outside the Grand Hotel

University of Innsbruck Institute of Music Studies