

Book 'Why Mahler' celebrates a composer with many followers

By **James R. Oestreich**
New York Times News Service

Norman Lebrecht, in his new book, "Why Mahler?: How One Man and 10 Symphonies Changed Our World" (Pantheon Books, 326 pages, \$27.95) speaks of "Mahler's

capacity to pierce human defenses." And it is certainly true Mahler's music can unhinge the susceptible.

Lebrecht

But Lebrecht, bless him, stops a few paces short of idolatry. And he turned his fixation, which he dates to 1974, to excellent use with an earlier book, "Mahler Remembered" (W.W. Norton

& Co., 1987), consisting mostly of extended quotations from players in Mahler's biography: fellow composers and conductors, singers, family members, acquaintances. But Lebrecht, too, has difficulty maintaining perspective and a tendency to inject himself into the story.

"Leaving home at 15 is a defining act," he writes of Mahler in the new book. "I left at 16 to study in another country, a foreign language."

"Like Mahler," he adds, "I felt no homesickness, no regret at leaving tragedy and faith behind."

Who, reading a biography of a historical personage, hasn't occasionally identified in some way with the hero? But who does it out loud? A book about Lebrecht's "search for Gustav Mahler," as he calls his obsession, this is also

a book about Lebrecht, a far less compelling subject.

In "Why Mahler?" Lebrecht travels much of the same ground he trod in "Mahler Remembered." Mahler's biography, dispatched there in an introduction, is here heavily laced with snippets of quotations from "Remembered" and elsewhere, and spun out in a breathless historical present as the main body of the book. Although the heavy emphasis on gossip and scandal grows tiresome, Lebrecht writes with flair, at times, and shows a good command of source material.

But to reach the biography, you have to get past a scene-setting chapter, "Some Frequently Asked Questions," which stopped me in my tracks repeatedly. One question is es-

pecially revealing: "Am I related to Mahler?"

Lebrecht is projecting his own proclivities here, as he reveals later: "In my occasional role as the Record Doctor on WNYC's 'Soundcheck' show, I have prescribed the finale of the Ninth Symphony and the Adagietto of the Fifth for callers in situations of grief and loss."

In his eagerness to establish irony as a defining quality of Mahler's music, one that defines it in particular as being Jewish, Lebrecht, as he does so often, goes too far. "Music, before Mahler, had a lexicon of simple emotions: joy, sorrow, love, hate, uplift, downcast, beauty, ugliness and so on." This discounts not only the Wagnerian leitmotif, a tool virtually made for irony, but also any number of poignant,

bittersweet moments in Mozartean opera and so much other earlier music.

Lebrecht can turn a nice phrase at times, as when he speaks of Mahler's plunging "into an oblivion of work." And you never doubt, reading him, that he knows a lot, but he doesn't know everything, as

he would have you believe.

His chronic overstatement and striving for effect, a kind of forced informality (he calls Bernstein "Lenny," Otto Klemperer "Klemp") and a certain looseness in the handling of facts make it hard to put much faith in any particular pronouncement.