Nexus Conference 2011

The Questor Hero

Gustav Mahler's Ultimate Questions on Man, Art and God

Saturday 14 May 2011
9.40 am — 5.30 pm
Amsterdam Music Theatre

Speakers

Iván Fischer – Yoel Gamzou – Claudio Magris
Katie Mitchell – Antonio Damasio – Lewis Wolpert
Michael P. Steinberg – Nuria Schoenberg Nono
Slavoj Žižek – Carl Niekerk – Allan Janik
Constantin Floros – Adam Zagajewski

KCO

In cooperation with members of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Registration

In order to attend the Nexus Conference, reserving a ticket is required. We kindly ask you to do so through sending an e-mail to info@nexus-instituut.nl, containing your first and last name, address, telephone number and, if you are under the age of 27, a copy of your identity document. When bringing someone, please send us his or her first and last name.

The conference admission fee is € 85. A special rate of € 25 will be charged to those under the age of 27. The conference fee includes lunch and refreshments during breaks.

Those without a Dutch bank account will be asked to pay by invoice. Holders of a Dutch bank account can pay by pre-authorized debit.

Terms and Conditions

Only written cancellations will be accepted. Cancellations received before 5 May 2011 will be free of charge; after that date, the full fee will be charged. If you want to register after 5 May, we advise you to contact us by telephone to check for availability.

The conference will be conducted in English.

Changes in the programme may occur.

Any use of an audio or video recording device during the conference is prohibited, unless specific written permission from the Nexus Institute has been obtained in advance.

By subscribing to the conference you agree to these terms.

The Nexus Conference will be held at the Amsterdam Music Theatre on the Waterlooplein in Amsterdam (parking garage 'Muziektheater'; please find details on www.het-muziektheater.nl/en).

For more information, please contact the Nexus Institute by sending an e-mail to info@nexus-instituut.nl, or by calling to +31 (0)13 466 3450. See our website www.nexus-instituut.nl for more information.

Programme Nexus Conference

Saturday 14 May 2011

9.40 am	Welcome *Rob Riemen*
9.45 am	Keynote lecture *Iván Fischer*
10.45 am	Break
11.30 am	I. COMMEDIA HUMANA Introduction *Claudio Magris* Panel debate with *Iván Fischer*, *Katie Mitchell*, *Carl Niekerk*, *Nuria Schoenberg Nono* and *Michael P. Steinberg*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*
1.00 pm	Lunch
2.00 pm	II. CREATOR SPIRITUS Masterclass *On Mahler's Musical Questions* by *Yoel Gamzou* in cooperation with members of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra
3.30 pm	Break
4.00 pm	III. FAUST OR PERCIVAL? Panel debate with *Antonio Damasio*, *Constantin Floros*, *Allan Janik*, *Lewis Wolpert*, *Adam Zagajewski* and *Slavoj Žižek*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*
5.30 pm	End

On Friday 13 May, on the eve of the Nexus Conference, and on Sunday 15 May, Gustav Mahler's *Ninth Symphony* is performed in the Concertgebouw by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, conducted by Bernard Haitink. See www.concertgebouworkest.nl.

Speakers

ANTONIO DAMASIO (Portugal, 1944) is known for his pathbreaking research on how the brain deals with memories, language, emotions and decisions. He is also world famous for international bestsellers such as *Descartes' Error. Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994) and *Looking for Spinoza. Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (2003). In his most recent work, *Self Comes to Mind. Constructing the Conscious Brain* (2010), he argues that our brain and conscience, like our body, form part of biological evolution. Damasio is David Dornsife Professor of Neuroscience and Director of the Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California. He published an essay on modern Arcadia in *Nexus* 51.

IVÁN FISCHER (Hungary, 1951) has gained international recognition as the conductor of the Budapest Festival Orchestra, which he founded in 1983 and where he is still principal conductor. He was also a founder of the Hungarian Mahler Society and the Budapest Mahlerfest. After studying piano, violin, cello and composition in Budapest and Vienna, Fischer specialized in conducting and studied with Hans Swarowsky and others. Already at a young age, he was assistant to Nikolaus Harnoncourt at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. His breakthrough followed at the age of 25, when he won a conducting competition in London. Ever since, he has conducted the world's most renowned orchestras. He is currently guest conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington, and is regularly invited by the Berliner Philharmoniker, the New York Philharmonic and the Cleveland Orchestra. Fischer is a member of the Nexus Institute's Advisory Board.

CONSTANTIN FLOROS (Greece, 1930) belongs to the select group of top Gustav Mahler experts. His three-volume study on Mahler (1977–1985) made his name as one of the founding fathers of contemporary Mahler investigation. Floros, who is now professor emeritus at the University of Hamburg, studied musicology, art history, philosophy and psychology at the Vienna Music Academy. He investigated Byzantine and Slavic music at the University of Hamburg and published classic studies on Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner, Tchaikovsky, Berg and Ligeti. He was one of the founders of the Gustav Mahler Society of Hamburg, of which he is now honorary president. Last year, the International Gustav Mahler Society awarded him the Mahler Medal in gold. *Nexus* 1 featured an essay by Floros on Gustav Mahler's topicality.

YOEL GAMZOU (Israel, 1985) is a new and rapidly rising star in the Mahler universe. In 2006, he founded the International Mahler Orchestra, of which he is now artistic director and principal conductor. A child prodigy, his talent for playing the cello and conducting impressed many. He studied in Tel Aviv, New York, Paris and Milan, and was the last great student of Carlo Maria Giulini. In 2010, he became principal conductor of the Neue Philharmonie in Munich. Gamzou mostly dedicates himself to the works of Mahler. With the support of the International Gustav Mahler Society, he worked on the 'completion' of Mahler's incomplete *Tenth Symphony* from 2004 onwards. Its much-discussed premiere took place on 5 September 2010 in Berlin.

ALLAN JANIK (United States, 1941) was awarded a PhD in History of Ideas from Brandeis University in 1971. He retired as research fellow of the Brenner Archives at the University Innsbruck in 2006 but remains adjunct professor of philosophy at the University of Vienna as well as adjunct professor in the 'Skill and Technology' PhD program at Stockholm's Royal Institute of Technology. His books include *Assembling Reminders: Studies in the Genesis of Wittgenstein's Conception of Philosophy*; *The Use and Abuse of Metaphor*; *Style, Politics and the Future of Philosophy*; *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (with Stephen Toulmin), *Wittgenstein's Vienna Revisited* and several others including a guide to the Austrian capital *Wittgenstein in Vienna* (with Hans Veigl). He contributed to *Nexus* 9, 12, 15, 21, 37, 50 and 53.

CLAUDIO MAGRIS (Italy, 1939) is, together with Umberto Eco and Roberto Calasso, one of Italian literature's 'Big Three'. His impressive oeuvre contains essays, novels, plays and philosophical pieces. He rose to great fame with *Danubio* (*Danube*, 1986), in which he sketches a wide panorama of Central Europe. Many of his works, such as *Un altro mare* (1991) and *Microcosmi* (1997), have been translated into almost all European languages. Magris has been professor of German literature at the University of Trieste since 1978 and is also well known for his columns and essays in *Corriere della Sera*. In the middle of the 1990s, he was a member of the Italian Senate for some years. His literary and scholarly works earned him many distinctions, the 2001 Erasmus Prize among them. In 1997, Magris held the Nexus Lecture, which was published in *Nexus* 19.

KATIE MITCHELL (United Kingdom, 1964) began her brilliant career as a theatre director with companies such as Paines Plough and the Royal Shakespeare Company. In 1996, her first opera production, *Don Giovanni* with the Welsh National Opera, instantly earned her fame. She showed her range and versatility directing the BBC film based on Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*. In 2009, she succesfully produced Luigi Nono's political opera *Al gran sole carico d'amore* for the Salzburg Festival, and in the same year, she directed a new performance of James MacMillan's *Parthenogenesis*. At the end of this year, Mitchell will direct the world premiere of Manfred Trojahn's opera *Orest* for De Nederlandse Opera.

CARL NIEKERK (Netherlands, 1964) is associate professor of Germanic Languages at the University of Illinois, specializing in music (Gustav Mahler) and German-Jewish literature. After finishing his German studies with honours at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, he obtained his Ph.D at Washington University in St. Louis and went on to teach at a number of American universities. In 2005, he published *Zwischen Naturgeschichte und Anthropologie. Lichtenberg im Kontext der Spätaufklärung.* In his most recent book, *Reading Mahler. German Culture and Jewish Identity in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (2010), he investigates the literary, philosophical and cultural influences on Mahler's thought and music.

NURIA SCHOENBERG NONO (Spain, 1932) plays a unique part in the history of twentieth century music. She is the daughter of Viennese composer Arnold Schönberg and the widow of Italian avant-garde composer Luigi Nono, whom she met in Hamburg in 1954 at the premiere of Schönberg's unfinished opera, *Moses und Aron*. She grew up in California, where her parents had sought refuge upon leaving Berlin in 1933, and in 1955 settled down with her husband in Venice. In that same city, she is now the director of the Luigi Nono Archives, which contain the manuscripts, compositions, studies, recordings and personal documents of the composer, who passed away in 1990. She also made sure her father's legacy, which she had spent years carefully organizing, was moved from Los Angeles to the Arnold Schönberg Center in Vienna. She has been the President of the Board of Trustees of the Center ever since it opened in 1998.

MICHAEL P. STEINBERG (United States, 1956) is professor of History and Musicology at Brown University. He specializes in German cultural history, paying particular attention to its Jewish and musical aspects. He was a visiting professor at universities in the United States, Paris and Taiwan. Steinberg is director of the Cogut Center for the Humanities, editor of *The Musical Quarterly* and *The Opera Quarterly*, and member of the Board of Directors of the Barenboim-Said Foundation. He wrote the much-discussed *Austria as Theater and Ideology. The Meaning of the Salzburg Festival* (2000), *Listening to Reason. Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (2006) and *Judaism Musical and Unmusical* (2007). Steinberg currently serves as a dramaturg to the production of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs* in Milan and Berlin.

LEWIS WOLPERT (South Africa, 1929) is emeritus professor of Biology as Applied to Medicine in the Department of Cell and Developmental Biology at University College, London and a co-chief editor of the *Journal of Theoretical Biology*. He is famous for his decidedly rationalistic views on man and science, which he expounds in works such as *Passionate Minds* (1988), *The Unnatural Nature of Science* (1994) and *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast. The Evolutionary Origins of Belief* (2006). His partly autobiographical *Malignant Sadness. The Anatomy of Depression* (1999) gained him a large audience, which increased thanks to his frequent radio and television appearances. Wolpert is chair of the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science and vice president of the British Humanist Association.

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI (Poland, 1945) is a poet who also writes short stories and essays. His work is characterized by a tragic awareness of the existential tension between individual and politics, between art and modern entertainment. He grew up in Poland, where he studied psychology and philosophy, and moved to Paris in 1982. Twenty years later, he returned to Krakow. Zagajewski is considered one of the greatest living poets of our age, and is mentioned as a Nobel Prize candidate. A Dutch translation of his poetry appeared as part of the Nexus Library. Zagajewski is currently teaching at the University of Chicago, where he is also a member of the prestigious Committee on Social Thought.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK (Slovenia, 1949) is a polemical Marxist sociologist, philosopher and cultural critic known all over the world. He received a Ph.D in Philosophy from the University of Ljubljana and studied psychoanalysis at Vincennes-Saint Denis University in Paris. Žižek made his name with a new interpretation of popular culture, using the work of twentieth-century psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in an innovative way. He is currently professor at the European Graduate School, sociologist in Ljubljana and international director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at the University of London. Žižek published an essay in *Nexus* 54.

The Questor Hero. Gustav Mahler's Ultimate Questions on Man, Art and God

In the life of Gustav Mahler, his student Bruno Walter plays a special role. It was to him that, after his appointment as a conductor with the New York Philharmonic, Mahler wrote: 'We need not waste any words on what we mean to each other. No one I know makes me feel understood the way you do.' After Mahler's death, Walter conducted the premieres of his Das Lied von der Erde *and the* Ninth Symphony, *and he went on to become one of the most famous conductors of the first half of the twentieth century. One of Bruno Walter's best friends was the writer Thomas Mann. Both men migrated to the United States after Hitler came to power in Germany and settled in Los Angeles. In 1947, Thomas Mann publishes his novel* Doctor Faustus*, in which, through the life story of the fictitious composer Adrian Leverkühn, he writes about the fate of German culture, the crisis of an era, the crisis in the arts. As an introduction to the questions which are at the centre of this Nexus Mahler Conference, here follows a reconstruction, based, among other things, on diaries and letters, of the conversation that took place between the two friends in Bruno Walter's house in January 1948.*

Los Angeles, 3 January 1948

'Won't we be late?' the old man asked with a concerned look at his watch, while his daughter maneuvered the car in the evening mist through the busy traffic on Sunset Boulevard. She shook her head and said: 'I'll turn right at the next crossroads and then we'll go through Wilshire toward Bedford Drive. That way, we'll avoid most of the traffic and we'll be sure to get there on time. As we always do!'

Thomas Mann did not fail to notice the soft reproach in those last few words from Erika, his Brünnhilde, the person he had relied on for so many years, showing her concern at her father's obsession with time. His life was governed by the idea of time: his time, this time, the end of an era and, yes, also *Pünktlichkeit*: not wanting to waste any time. And although they were on their way to Bruno Walter, his oldest and most beloved friend, who would be the very last to take offence if they were to arrive past the agreed time, he preferred to be punctual. Reassured, he leaned back in his seat and peered through the dark at the silhouettes of the tall palm trees that lined the sides of the road like Egyptian columns.

'Munich, 1913. A different world, a different era. Living just around the corner from each other in the Herzogpark. Walter was already the famous conductor and *Generalmusikdirektor Münchener Hofoper*, I was no more than a reasonably succesful writer, always doubting myself. The first time we met, the feast of recognition! Our passion for music, literature, German culture, Wagner, Goethe... How many times did I, in a horse-drawn carriage, mind you, attend one of his performances of Mozart, Weber, everything by Wagner. His unforgettable premiere of Pfitzner's *Palestrina*. How innocent life still was on the many nights he sat down at the piano after dinner and initiated us further into the secrets of Beethoven's music and that of his unequalled, beloved Gustav Mahler. Bruno Walter. If anything, he is characterized by innocence and loyalty. His musical qualities are great. Greater still are his human qualities. A few days after the death of his teacher, he wrote in that touching letter to Alma Mahler that from now on his life would be dedicated to being "keeper and preacher of the works of Gustav Mahler". And he has remained true to his words. If Mahler is Socrates, then Walter is Plato. His loyalty to Mahler has caused him the necessary problems with the yellow press in Munich, too. That anti-semitic clique had been challenging him for some time already: "Bruno Walter — Jew — no ear for German Masterpieces — lackey to Jew Mahler with his yodeling music..." It almost made him ill and he publicly launched a counterattack at these gentlemen: "The true greatness of art can only be experienced by an artist's soul. Those who do not have any creative gifts can never make that experience their own, for all their intellectualism!" He is absolutely right, but it was not a very wise thing to do. Critics cannot handle criticism. Not then, not now. It was the beginning of the end of his Munich career. I asked him: "Why would you write a thing like that?" "Because of Mahler!" was his answer. Because of Mahler, too, he had wanted to get his own back. He had not yet forgiven the critics for continuously disparaging Mahler as a composer, for driving him away from Vienna. I believe I even spoke up for him in a newspaper article. When was that again? 1916, 1917. Back then, I suppose I was still an innocent defender of the superiority of German culture myself. But it was to no avail. Walter had to go, just like I eventually was driven away. It did strengthen our friendship. In the end, friendship is nothing other than sharing experiences, your deepest, most fundamental experiences. We would never have become friends if it were not for the fact that I, even if only once, had met Gustav Mahler, and had been present on the night Mahler conducted the premiere of his *Eighth Symphony* in Munich. Walter, oh, he was over the moon when I told him once that as early as 1904 I had attended a performance of the *Third Symphony*. Bernard Stavenhagen was the conductor at that time. It was not very impressive. Justly forgotten, that guy. Mahler. After meeting him I told Katja that for the first time in my life, I had met a genius. It is no coincidence that I gave Von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* his first name and physical appearance. But still, I have always been more impressed with

his personality, his will, the ethics of his life as an artist than with his music itself. His songs and *Das Lied von der Erde*, however, are precious to me. His symphonic works do not touch me the way they touch Walter. We never talked about this to each other. Until two weeks ago, on Christmas Eve. We were having coffee when he softly said: "I read your *Doctor Faustus*. A masterpiece. It is the most important book you have written and the most moving book I have ever read. And yet I hope it is not true." Surprised, I asked him what he meant. He answered: "Your world. Without Mahler. I could not live in it." I was surprised and wanted to continue talking about it, but Walter said: "Not now. Not here, with your other guests around. Come to my house as soon as you have the time." Ah, there we are! Good, we're just on time.'

In Bruno Walter's study — to which he and Thomas Mann retired until supper would be served — both of their books were on a table beside the armchairs they had sat down in: *Doctor Faustus* and Walter's autobiography *Theme and Variations*, which had also appeared in 1947. Walter poured Mann a martini and himself a glass of white wine, and the two friends drank a toast to the new year. Then the host said, pointing at the two books: 'We have been best friends for half a lifetime. Together we have experienced so much, shared so many things, we live near each other in the new world like we did in the old world, and almost at the end of our lives — for how many years will yet be given us? — we publish our autobiographies in the same year!'

'Autobiography? Your book, yes, but I happen to regard mine as a novel,' Mann remarked, smilingly.

'Then let's call it an "autobiographical novel", because I, with all due respect, my dear friend, know you too well not to see that this novel is your most personal work. And precisely because it is a novel, and some novel it is, your work will be read long after the story of my life, and perhaps even my name, has been forgotten.'

Mann wanted to contradict him, but Walter stopped him and said: 'I don't mind. It was never about me. I have always wanted to serve music, specifically *his* music. As long as *he* is not forgotten.'

For a moment he was silent, looking at Mann as if to find out if it was safe to say the things that had been, Mann felt, weighing down his heart.

'I believe in music. All the things that happen in the world, all the things that happened in my life — my daughter's murder, my wife's death, the hatred of my critics, my exile — all of that has not taken away that faith from me. That is "my theme". My book, me, let us be forgotten. But a world without music…'

'Have I disappointed you with *Doctor Faustus*?' asked Mann.

'No, you did what you had to do. Apparently, it's your fate to write end-books, to ring out old eras. In *Buddenbrooks* you bade farewell to civilian society, in *The Magic Mountain* to European humanism and in *Doctor Faustus*

you had to say goodbye to music. Because if music can no longer be anything but a complaint, anything but criticism, if music can no longer be beautiful, I no longer consider it art. You describe how Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* is taken back because there is no place anymore on earth for what is good and noble. You might as well have taken back Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*! My God, Tommy, you were there yourself when he let that symphonic universe sound for the first time, that ode to eternal love, to creative power, to divine mercy! The way he...'

Bruno Walter suddenly rose, sat down at the piano and sang:

Accende lumen sensibus / Infunde amorem cordibus
(*Illuminate our senses / Let love flow into our hearts*)

'This, sung by that choir of thousands! The boys! The soloists! Here, these two lines of the *Veni creator spiritus*, they are the very essence of his identity as an artist. This is what Mahler's faith in art is based on, or rather, *that faith* is the foundation of his art. Wagner! Wagner's art-religion is that *his* art saves. In that respect, by the way, Wagner is indebted to Beethoven. With him the fall from grace set in that caused artists to take the fate of the world upon themselves, to become the heroes who would save mankind and the world from evil through their art. I agree with you when you write that art damned itself when it became a cult. It should have remained the heavenly free play of forms of Bach or Haydn, a divine game not pretending to govern the fate of man. But there is no turning back after a fall from grace. Is, then, the destiny of our culture either aestheticism, Wagner's amoral flight into beauty and death, or anti-art, Nietzsche's nihilism, in which nothing can be eternal, nothing can be true, nothing has any kind of meaning? If that is the fate of European culture, it had best disappear. It already has, and with it the arts. Another martini?'

Walter got up, filled the glass, then, after some hesitation, filled his own glass with wine, and when he sat back down in his armchair, he continued his argument.

'Gustav Mahler was more than a great artist. He was a man with a mission. That is why he had to go his own way. He could not follow in Wagner's or Nietzsche's footsteps. We now live in a world where the word is hardly known, is, in fact, no longer allowed to exist, but anyone who knew Mahler personally knows he was a God-seeker. Mahler sought God in this world, he sought the good in people, the eternal in the transitory. More than many others, he experienced the tragedy of existence, but believed in redemption, in an eternal existence. He has met the angel of death, but always relied on the angel of love. And all his symphonies are nothing other than worlds, immortalized worlds of beauty in which he expresses all this, so that we, too, know of this, are touched, included, elevate ourselves. All he wanted was for his music, in spite of the heaviness of our existence, to make the

sun burst through the clouds. That is the power of beauty. And there is no true beauty without eternity, there is no beauty without love, love for life. I have dedicated my life to his life and works, so that they will live on. In that regard, the best thing that happened to me here in America is that young fellow, Leonard Bernstein. I took him under my wing because he understands Mahler. He will continue my work after me — in a world that seems to have lost a love for life. But spiritual and moral values that were once the heart and soul of our culture, and that now have been damaged so much by all the terrible events, have lost none of their vitality in Mahler's creations. That is why *his music* must be heard, and not... And you! No, not you. I do not mean this personally. Your composer, Adrian Leverkühn, that mix of Percival and Faust, Nietzsche and our friend Schönberg... You write that human suffering has become too great, that it does not tolerate outward appearance, beauty, the beautiful work may not exist! All that is left is dissonance, atonality, technical intellectuality. There is no longer any warmth, any feeling, any expression in music. And then Leverkühn sells his soul to the devil in order to come to a breakthrough; out of the spiritual cold of his anti-art, to regain new, vital, emotional strength! Dear friend, that is not possible! And do you know why? Because your composer, as the price for the inspiration given him by the devil, may no longer love. But no beauty can exist without love. I'm telling you! I greatly respect Schönberg — alter ego to Leverkühn — as a person, but his "music" is no music. Your "breakthrough" does not exist! Do you know what Mahler once told me? "The interesting is easy, beauty is difficult." With all due respect to modern artists, including your Adrian Leverkühn, what they make is *interesting* — but there is no beauty in it. I know that they, and maybe you too, regard me as a "reactionary", "not up to date", "naive"... So be it. I had rather be those things than renounce music, than be unfaithful to *his* work.'

'But, my dear friend,' Mann interrupted his excited monologue, 'have you really not read the end of my novel? About the hope that, past the intellectual coldness of modernity, art will be expressive once again, will offer comfort?!'

'Certainly, I have read with emotion about "the longing that can spring from the deepest fatality, the transcendence of despair, the hope of mercy for us...", and, naturally, I didn't fail to notice that exactly here, at the end of his cantata *The Lamentation of Dr. Faustus*, his music sounds like the final bars of Mahler's *Ninth Symphony*, the slow dying-out of the music, the being lost in silence. But the question that remains, is: *who* will show us mercy? And *why*? Mahler's *Eighth Symphony* is also a musical expression of mankind, of the spiritually striving human being who is delivered from his suffering by divine mercy. But Mahler was Jewish enough to realize that God needs people. He was against religious dogmas, but at the same time rejected the emptiness of nihilism and hedonism. That is why he composed his *Eighth Symphony* so that the expression of faith in the first part and the expression of being human in the second part flow together into a whole: man and God,

thrown back onto each other. In your *Doctor Faustus*, the devil is present in this world, not God. Why would God show mercy to a world in which he does not exist? Is not all art that is not an expression of the human soul, only an illustration of a loveless, godless world?'

'Dear Bruno, based on all the things you are saying now, is it not clear to you that I could write no other book than I did? That my work and your work do not exclude, but complete each other?'

'So you can't imagine a world without Mahler, either!' he said, noticeably relieved.

'Is Schubert good, too?' Mann answered cheerfully.

'Schubert! For sure. Did you know that Mahler was just as much in love with his string quintet as you are? Its adagio, according to Mahler, was nothing other than a musical expression of all our questions. You know, Mahler was essentially a Percival. That is what made him such a unique human being. Always he was seeking. Always he was asking the great questions: why are we on earth? What gives life its meaning? Are we free? What is our answer to suffering? Anyone who does not ask these unanswerable questions cannot live meaningfully. I have nothing against America. On the contrary. This country has given Mahler a warm welcome, it is good to us. But in this society, in which money, materialism, technology are so important, the great questions are no longer asked, as if they do not matter anymore. I sometimes think that our world is the way it is because we have stopped seeking, stopped asking. And do you know what the biggest taboo is here in sunny California? Death. Death is not allowed to exist: *life is good, everybody is happy*. Mahler was constantly aware of death, and one of his biggest questions was whether death will reveal the meaning of existence. His *Ninth* is a long anticipation of death, a farewell to the world; in that loving farewell — because loving it is —, he reveals to us the secret of... Oh, we're being called downstairs. Supper's ready.'

'Is that not also a secret of life: that we must know how to enjoy it?' Mann said smilingly, while he got up to go to the dining room.

Walter, still full of his uninterrupted argument on Mahler and death, remained seated and said: 'That might be my biggest concern, that people go out to listen to Mahler and do not understand him. That he will be popular in the future because of his, as they say here, fan-tas-tic sound — but not because they hear what he expresses. And neither do the gentlemen of the press, just as foolish and stupid over here as their counterparts who terrorized my life in Munich, want the audience to really hear Mahler: "It's all about the music." As if music is no more than *allegro con brio*, as if it does not want to express any meaning. Wouldn't that be just as idiotic as admiring your novels for *how* you write and not *what* you write? As Goethe wrote to Schiller: "*Ein Buch wird doch immer erst gefunden, wenn es verstanden wird*"; that goes just as well for music. But anyway, none of the critics know Goethe anymore, and that says enough about their level of understanding.'

'Aren't you too gloomy? Did not Mahler himself state that his time is still to come? I assume he meant more by that than the mere recognition of his musical qualities,' said Mann, putting his arm around Walter's shoulders.

'Let's hope it's not too late,' Walter sighed, and while he and Mann walked out of the room, he cast a glance at the bust of Mahler that was always on his piano, as if hoping for it to say: 'My time is certainly still to come!'

Amsterdam, May 14, 2011

'My second home', that is how Mahler characterized the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam, and that is no wonder. Beside Bruno Walter he had found another kindred spirit in Willem Mengelberg, and the Concertgebouw Orchestra may look back with pride on having played a crucial part in the start of a Mahler tradition. In 1920, Mengelberg and his friends organized a Mahler celebration for this purpose, which in 1995 served as the inspiration for a festival at which the great orchestras performed all his works under the title: 'Gustav Mahler. The World Listens'.

Now, however, one hundred years after Mahler's death, the concerns Bruno Walter voiced in his conversation with Thomas Mann in distant Los Angeles are more relevant than ever. Because Mahler has become immensely popular, the whole world *listens* to him, his music is considered *fan-tas-tic* and there is no end to the musical analyses. But do we *hear*, do we understand, do we want to hear what Mahler expresses in his music? Is his search our search, too? Are his questions our questions? His values, do we share them? Does art mean the same to us as it did to him?

A century after Mahler's death it is more necessary than ever to do justice to what was most important to Mahler himself: asking the metaphysical questions, the ultimate questions about man, art and God. Because only by asking these questions can we find an answer to the question: what is the meaning of Mahler's music — to us?

First Debate: Commedia Humana

To the question what inspired Mahler, the answer is: everything! In his music, he gave voice to mountains, flowers, birds, the earth, the cosmos, heaven, life, death, life after death. But above all it is man in all his greatness and tragedy he expresses; our experiences of love and happiness, loss and pain, of being defeated, disengaged, elevated.

To live is to ask questions, the great questions, because, as Mahler wrote to a friend who asked him about the meaning of his *Second Symphony*, without an answer to our life questions, we cannot live on. And so each era has its own culture, its own ideas about humanity and the world, expressing its attempt at an answer.

Now that Mahler's music wants us to be conscious of the great questions

of life, how does our view of human existence differ from Mahler's, and why? What is our answer to questions such as: why do we live? Why do we suffer? What do we strive for? How do we give our lives meaning? What knowing, what knowledge do we long for? What do we see as the essence and the destination of our human existence?

According to Bruno Walter, the spiritual and moral values Mahler cherished and expressed in his music have been damaged — perhaps even, we may add so many decades later, destroyed. But why? Or is that not the case, is it just that we have learned to value different values? Which values do we cultivate regarding ourselves, nature, our fellow humans? Is the question that was so urgent to Mahler, 'how can one be happy when someone else is unhappy', still urgent to us? What does compassion mean to us?

Mahler was a God-seeker, searching for an answer to his questions there. We live after the death of God, in a godless world, viewed through Nietzsche's eyes. What are the political, moral, and cultural consequences of that? When we, twenty-first century Europeans, listen to Mahler now, what do we hear? What does his music still have to say to us — if only we were willing to hear it?

Masterclass: Creator Spiritus. On Mahler's Musical Questions

The conviction that was at the core of Mahler's identity as an artist, both as a composer and as a conductor, namely that beauty can elevate us, can save the world, that it reveals, for 'there are more things in heaven and earth / than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*); a conviction that Mahler derived from Socrates, Goethe and Dostoevsky — is no longer ours.

In the first place, we have not forgotten German Romanticism's lessons: art is also a demonic, death-related, intoxicating, amoral power, and where it enters into a pact with politics, it is a deadly power. No one can doubt the greatness of Wagner as an artist, but his art-religion has not exactly made the world better.

In the second place, we have not forgotten Nietzsche's lessons: 'It is not without the deepest sorrow that one confesses to oneself that the artists of all times in their highest flight have raised up precisely those images to a heavenly glorification of which we now see the error: they are the glorifiers of the religious and philosophical mistakes made by mankind, and they could not have been that if they had not believed in their absolute truths. If faith in such a truth lessens, if the colours of the rainbow are fading around the far limits of human knowledge and delusion: then the art genre can never again blossom that, like the *Divina Commedia*, Rafael's paintings, Michelangelo's frescos, the gothic cathedrals, thinks not only in terms of a cosmic, but also of a metaphysical meaning of its objects.' (*Menschliches, Allzu Menschliches*)

In the third place, we have not forgotten Thomas Mann's lessons in his novel *Doctor Faustus*: beauty is inappropriate in a world so full of suffering and evil. *Beautiful* art has become a lie. Art can only be criticism, complaint.

Living in an age in which we have started to think that anything can be art — and therefore, nothing is art anymore —, in which, moreover, 'art' is overshadowed by the great interest we attach to science and technology, ours is the responsibility to ask again: what is art's assignment? What are art's possibilities? What is the essence of art and how does it relate to the essence of being human? What meaning do we attach to art and what does art demand from us, in order for us to know its meaning?

Beauty: what is true beauty? How can we recognize true beauty? Why do we long for beauty? Is there a connection between the beautiful, the good, and the true? How? Why — or why not? Can art be, is art allowed to be beautiful? Or, if it wishes to be true, should it not be shocking? Why is so much contemporary art 'difficult'? What does it aim for? Our modern culture, mirror of our era, what does it express?

Why art? Does art have a moral meaning? Does it have a social meaning? What does it have to offer that science and religion do not have? Why do 'masterpieces' no longer mean a lot to us? Is Nietzsche right when he states that with the death of God, the loss of transcendence, great art is no longer possible? But what will there be left?

In his *Eighth Symphony*, Mahler calls to the '*Creator spiritus*', the creating spirit. But what is creating? Why do we want to create? What has creative power? Eternal love, answered Socrates, Goethe and Mahler. But what does love have to do with art?

Second Debate: Faust or Percival?

Two seekers, questors, two symbols of the Occident. Faust, the learned man searching for absolute knowledge, willing to sell his soul to the devil to obtain it. Percival, the ignorant, the fool, searching for the Grail, eternal life, the immortal soul, the *meaning* of life.

Mahler's life was centered around Percival: art over science; mind over matter; believing over knowing. Why? The answer is: death. All his life, ever since his childhood, he had been surrounded by death. Brothers and sisters dying at a young age, his favourite brother committing suicide, his daughter dying so young; knowing he will not live long himself, and fully aware of the fact that no science will ever answer the questions that have become most important to him: will death reveal the meaning of existence? How, and why? Does man have a soul? Is the soul immortal? Is there life after death? Is there a God? Is there mercy, will our souls be saved? What does our transitory existence derive meaning from? What is eternal? Is there anything that remains or is everything transitory? Are there transcendental, spiritual values or are all values historical, the work of men? In a godless world, is a dignified existence possible? Is death the final word or is it possible to defeat death? Is there in art, through art, already a 'resurrection'?

To a sceptic these questions are, at best, unanswerable, and the answers that are given cannot be proven. Why, then, do we ask ourselves these questions?

Is it not better — more efficient and more useful — to limit ourselves to searching for more certain knowledge?

D.H. Lawrence once remarked in a letter to his friend Ernest Collings: 'One has to be so terribly religious, to be an artist' — and unmistakably, the fact is that almost all great art contains a confrontation with the great metaphysical, religious questions. Why? Why does art, of all things, concern itself with the human soul? How does art relate to the absolute? Why does the artist, of all people, search for what remains among the transitory? How can art be an expression of what we, mortal creatures, do not know: the absolute? Can art even be an expression of it? If beauty can be absolute, can the good and the true also be absolute? What effect would that have on our image of man? And what causes that human longing for the absolute, the transcendent? And was it not precisely the twentieth century that taught us to stay away from the absolute, because it will destroy us? That we need to learn, on the contrary, to accept the transitory, the tragic and fragmentary? And on what grounds do we decide to be either Faust or Percival?

Mahler once wrote to Bruno Walter: 'How curious! When I hear music, even when I'm conducting, I often hear a clear answer to all my questions — I experience clarity and certainty. Or rather, I very clearly experience that there are no questions at all.'

And so our last question is: when we have asked all questions and then listen to Mahler again, what do we hear?

Rob Riemen
Founder & President Nexus Institute

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The Nexus Institute would like to thank the following groups and organizations for their support:

Tilburg University

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
Province of Noord-Brabant, City of Tilburg
KPMG Accountants – KPMG Meijburg & Co
and The Friends of the Nexus Institute

Design: Buro Kaaiman, Tilburg