# *Witnesses and Scholars*

## *Studies in Musical Biography*

HANS LENNEBERG

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# *WITNESSES AND SCHOLARS*
## *Studies in Musical Biography*

Hans Lenneberg
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*To Johanna for enduring many monologues*
*and for just being there*

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# CHAPTER I
# BIOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

At this time there is no history of musical biography and none of the standard musical encyclopedias has an entry under that subject. Whether this is because biography does not have an independent history or merely a matter of snobbery remains to be examined. What snobbery there is might go back to Guido Adler although it is hard to believe that his contempt for the subject could still prevail after the many great achievements in the genre.[1] Just the same, when Adler placed biography low in the hierarchy of the proper subjects for scholarly musical study, dismissing it as an auxiliary endeavor, he may have kept serious historians away at least for a while. Adler's main interests lay in the study of paleography, history, theory, and stylistic analysis. Eventually, however, other scholars must have realized that serious biography makes use of all these categories, that in fact, style analysis is hardly possible without the knowledge of individual techniques of composition. That Adler had such a low opinion of the uses of biography in 1885 is understandable in view of a then rising tide of popular works. Of the early serious biographers such as Friedrich Chrysander, Otto Jahn, and Philipp Spitta, as well as the pioneer, Ludwig von Köchel, only Spitta and Chrysander were still alive and in a position to protest.[2] Instead they became

1. Guido Adler, "Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft," *Vierteljahrschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 1 (1885): 5ff.
2. Friedrich Chrysander, *Georg Friedrich Händel*, 3 vols. (incomplete) (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, v.1 1858; v.2 1860; v.3 1867). Otto Jahn, *W. A. Mozart*, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1856–59). Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf

co-editors of the *Vierteljahrschrift für Musikwissenschaft*, the journal in which Adler's manifesto was published. We do not really know what prompted Adler's disdain for biography as a serious aspect of musicology; perhaps he only meant that other categories of the discipline should have higher priority. It is now certain in any case that genuinely scholarly biographies make use of paleography, the study of manuscripts, as well as printed editions, historical documents, and stylistic analysis; in fact, one might consider these fields auxiliary to the writing of good biography. That almost mythical historical creature, *Zeitgeist*, for example, can never be captured except by means of biography. This applies especially prior to the nineteenth century when the interests of musicians were much narrower than later. To demonstrate that the Enlightenment touched composers in their work, or that *Sturm und Drang* resulted in an increase in music in minor keys, requires finding some evidence showing how composers absorbed such trends.

Thirty-five years after Adler another great scholar, Hermann Abert, was quite unashamed to acknowledge the rôle of biography as a part of musical scholarship. Abert even devoted his inaugural address upon taking the chair of musicology at the University of Leipzig to the subject.[3] "It would pay," he said, "to clarify and examine whether musicology has anything more to gain from biography," and thus launched into a survey of past biographies and into recommendations for their future. To consider biography passé, he concluded, is only thinking of its outdated methods, not its essence. As a special category of research, biography is not only possible, it is even essential. To do without it would leave a painful gap in our knowledge.

A skeptic might consider Abert's defense of biography special pleading, since he was then in the process of rewriting Otto Jahn's *Mozart*.[4] Such a suspicion, however, is dispelled by reading his work,

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und Härtel, 1873—80). Ludwig Ritter von Köchel, *Chronologisch-thematisches Verzeichnis sämtlicher Tonwerke Wolfgang Amadeus Mozarts* ((Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1862).

3. Hermann Abert, "Über Aufgabe und Ziel der musikalischen Biographie," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 2 (1920). Reprinted in *Gesammelte Schriften und Vorträge von Hermann Abert*, ed. by Friedrich Blume (Tutzing: Schneider, 1968): 562.
4. Hermann Abert, *W. A. Mozart*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1919—21).

actually an entirely new biography rather than just an edition. Abert's is a truly great biographical study that reads as if it had been intended to be a response to Adler. Carefully weaving Mozart's life and personality into his time, Abert wrote a comprehensive history of music in the eighteenth century. In order to set Mozart's accomplishment off against a background and to show how and by what Mozart may have been influenced, his biography presents studies of the sonata, symphony, opera, and other forms in such great detail that one can read these sections for their separate value.

In his essay on the aims and the mission of biography the only argument Abert does not present is the need of the public to place the work of art in a context. Adler had chosen not to address in his low ranking of biography the inability of the listener to hear (or to look at or read, for that matter) a work as if it were an object of nature; to leave out of account who created it and when. Until the end of the eighteenth century it had mattered little. As long as the artist was primarily a craftsman and all the works to be heard or seen were primarily contemporary, neither personality nor historical circumstances had been important. But as art became some sort of personal statement and the past was no longer dismissed, the public rightly began to take the creator and his time into account. The public's curiosity grew, in fact, as this knowledge seemed ever more essential, and it was also applied retrospectively. Josquin des Prez's contemporaries may not have been sufficiently interested in him to create and preserve a portrait of the master. We, however, are not happy with the absence of virtually any knowledge of the man and his life. (His contemporaries did not lack respect for Josquin's work; in fact it was highly admired far and wide.) Nor are we incapable of perceiving the power of his music without knowing the composer. Were we to discover that Josquin had a highly dramatic life, full of amorous escapades and all the other trappings of a modern script, would it really affect how we hear his music? In which sense does it matter whether or not Bach was as devout as his devotional music leads us to believe? The aesthetic implications of these questions are very profound, too profound to be addressed in this context. But whether they are answered or not, there is no question that biography has seized our imagination; and that it cannot be ignored. To pretend that modern man's compulsion to find out about the artist is a childish irrelevance would do away with more than half of the criticism of the last two hundred years, since we would have to pretend that iconographical, symbolic, psychiatric, and other types of

interpretation in the arts are possible without knowing anything about artists.

To acknowledge biography as a valid topic of aesthetics and history, on the other hand, does not mean that it is necessarily a separate field of historiography; it is part of it. It can be considered either as part of the history of biography in which it is a latecomer, or as part of the history of musicology, another young discipline. In the context of musicology it reflects the advances history and analysis have made in the last one-hundred years even if biography has special problems some of which may remain unsolved. The most obvious question, one so far not satisfactorily answered, is the relationship between life and work. Another consists of the difficulty of writing and reading musical description. More serious is the problem of what kind of musical description truly illuminates what composers were doing, what they were trying to say. Even the great biographers sometimes take recourse to metaphor. Is there anything wrong with Abert's description of the opening of Mozart's Quintet in G minor (KE 516) other than possibly its late romantic hyperbole?

> Its main theme immediately expresses in all its aspects the basic mood of the work; a half-nervous climb and descent, first as stabbing pain, then in sobbing sorrow. In its second half comes a stronger charge bordering on despair followed by a fatalistic plunge.[5]

As the youngest branch of biography the description of musical lives hardly existed before the middle of the eighteenth century. The earliest accounts of musicians not intended as eulogies upon their death, are factual resumés listing the basic data about family, childhood, teachers, and travels. In the main, they concern themselves with their subjects' professional accomplishments by merely recounting positions and works, with an emphasis on those works that were printed. Near the end of the eighteenth century the tone changes. That change is manifested chiefly in the generous interweaving of anecdotes and the personal recollections of relatives and acquaintances. While this hints at the interest in personality that soon flourished, it also marks the beginning of a new era, visible at first in the lives of Haydn and Mozart. Haydn's earliest biographies consist of little more than anecdotes, most of them designed to show him as a warm and humorous man without affectations, anecdotes that were

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5. Ibid. 7th ed., ed. by Anna Amalia Abert, 1955. 2: 321f.

in part ultimately responsible for his nickname, "Papa." Since his development had been relatively normal, the Haydn anecdotes are quite unlike those about Mozart which deal mainly with his incredible facility. Few are about Mozart as a person and he is certainly not depicted as especially warm and humorous. A kind of apotheosis of personal recollection, Nissen's Mozart of 1828 makes one wonder whether he married Constanze because he admired Mozart, or whether she married Nissen because she needed a biographer for her late husband.[6] What is new in Nissen is his extensive use of letters, unprecedented in earlier biographies. (Yet Otto Jahn criticized Nissen for the use of so many letters, accusing him of not supplying a proper narrative.) What had made Forkel's earlier biography of Bach (1802) pioneering was his attempt to deal for the first time with a subject's music.[7]

It is Guiseppe Baini, however, who should get the credit for the first scholarly biography.[8] His life of Palestrina (1828) made a virtue of necessity. To write about a composer of the distant past meant to use archival sources for the mute testimony to be found there. Baini is thus the first successful student of a much earlier composer and his musical environment. Nissen and Baini published in the same year. Nissen's use of letters was a kind of documentary approach, but since he otherwise relied on personal recollections, his is still the old kind of biography; Baini's represents the new.

As the nineteenth century advances, the romantic interests in history as well as in personal development merge in the learned biography which also now always relies heavily on documentation to recapture the past. In popular as well as in scholarly biographies the genius is now regarded as an extraordinary person in whom the historian sees the personification of progress, while popular biographers are inclined to turn artists into romantic heroes. The degree of romanticizing varies. The best popular biographers always tended to adhere closely to reality. Thus in the last third of the century we

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6. Georg Nikolaus von Nissen, *Biographie Wolfgang Amadeus Mozarts nach den Briefen* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1928).
7. Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig: Hoffmeister und Kühnel, 1802).
8. Giuseppe Baini, *Memorie storico-critiche della vita e delle opere di Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina*, 2 vols. (Rome: Societa tipografica, 1828).

encounter the first full-fledged professional biographer in the person of La Mara whose real name was Ida Maria Lipsius.[9] Although her biographies catered to growing popular demand, La Mara never stooped to excessive sentimentality. Her biographies were competent, literate, musical, and highly responsive to the facts. While her descriptions of musical works remained on a superficial niveau, this worked well when she was writing about living composers, those whose music she could assume her readers had heard. The scholar, on the other hand, became more concerned with the work of art. In fact, for want of much personal information about Bach, Spitta deduced Bach's personality from his music, something Forkel had also done. This may also have been a result of personal prejudice. Spitta could hardly have failed to see Bach's truculence or his pettiness in financial matters.

An almost opposite approach was taken by Alexander Wheelock Thayer whose biography of Beethoven placed most of the emphasis on the life rather than the music.[10] By the time Thayer began his work, Beethoven's life had already been encrusted with so much mythology that it was Thayer's primary task to get at the true story. There was no need at the time to deal with the music in detail. For the most part it belonged to the repertoire of public as well as private performers. It would be there for more detailed study later. Gustav Nottebohm was in fact at work on more technical musical studies at the same time.

Not until recent times have we begun to understand that an artist's work does not necessarily have much in common with his character or personality. We can be fairly certain at this point that Mozart was not as warm, wise, and orderly as his music suggests, or that Beethoven was not the flaming revolutionary one might take him to be on the basis of his departure from classical composure or on such a work as *Fidelio*. That we now find it easier to accept the schism between some lives and their works is only partly due to the greater realism of recent decades; we also owe it to having come to know such a man as Wagner. Between the idealism of Wagner's music and the shabbiness of his personality lies a seemingly unbridgeable gulf.

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9. La Mara's many biographies were collected under the title *Musikalische Studienköpfe*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Schmidt, 1868—82).
10. Alexander Wheelock Thayer, *Ludwig van Beethovens Leben*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1866—1908).

The rise of psychoanalysis, whatever else it teaches, or whether its applicability is controversial or not, has shown us that nobody lives perfectly, that purity does not exist, and that absolute evil is as rare as absolute goodness.

It was precisely when general interest in the lives of artists of all kinds surged toward a climax at the end of the nineteenth century that Adler in effect dismissed it. In his own biographical studies Adler was quite consistent, so consistent that his monograph about his close friend, Gustav Mahler, contains little that is personal.[11] While he thus tried to remain "scientific", Adler seemed not to have noticed to what an extent it was Ludwig von Koechel who had carried the impersonal scientific biographical study as far as one could. What else was his catalogue after all, but the use of documentation, biographical information, and stylistical analysis, put in the service of a chronology that would be the ultimate Adlerian biography, a preliminary study for Mozart's purely artistic development? (How decisively our attitude has changed may be inferred from the biographical work of Alfred Einstein who saw no contradiction between revising the Koechel catalogue and his own neo-romantic biography of 1945 in which the glassy surface of Mozart's music is forever being ruffled by "daemonic" undercurrents.)[12]

The logical compromise between Adler's implied view and subsequent biographies was eventually reached in the now common compartmentalization of biographies into separate sections: first the life, then the work. That division has not often been integrated with complete success. Hermann Abert's radical revision of Jahn's *Mozart* is one of the true successes because Abert manages to blend life, history, environment, and analysis so convincingly that we accept the totality as a vivid portrait of Mozart in his time. This is due at least in part to Abert's almost novelistic talent by means of which he recreates a person even when his means include the detailed scholarly procedures of the most pedantic historian. Perhaps no more than two-thirds of his work is still factually acceptable, as Abert would have been the first to admit, but his work is to biography what the Ninth is to symphonies.

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11. Guido Adler, *Gustav Mahler* (Vienna: Universal, 1916). See also Edward R. Reilly, *Gustav Mahler und Guido Adler: zur Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Vienna: Universal, 1978).
12. Alfred Einstein, *Mozart. His Character, His Work* (New York, London: Oxford University Press, 1945).

A more recent achievement of the scope of Abert's is H. C. Robbins Landon's *Haydn* which differs, however, in its more restricted historical depth and in its somewhat lesser emphasis on Haydn as a person.[13] Instead Landon recreates the various social settings in which Haydn moved and the musical environments in which he functioned. He too separates his sections; in fact, he makes distinctions between the cultural background, the "chronicle," and the chronology of Haydn's compositions, from detailed discussions of his music. The amount of detail his book digests would be unmanageable in any other way.

Landon's work could not have been conceived before Otto Erich Deutsch invented the documentary biography, yet another impersonal approach that Guido Adler would have found acceptable.[14] It is the achievement of Deutsch to have gathered those documents that would be permanently available for ever new interpretations. His kind of book can never become dated; it can only be supplemented or emended.

Abert had insisted that a biography ought to be rewritten every fifty years, a proposal, Walther Vetter writes, that was met with some coolness in scholarly circles at the time.[15] Inevitably, says Abert, we are so conditioned by our own times, our biases and fads, that we cannot ever be entirely objective. Mozart's life and work is an ideal example of changing views, since in two-hundred years his image has gone from that of an amazing prodigy, to superlative craftsman, to somewhat passé master of purity and serenity, to poverty-stricken and misunderstood tragic genius, to his present popularity as perhaps the greatest — though not the most lovable — composer who ever lived.

Biographical dictionaries and other forms of collective biography also had their beginning in the eighteenth century, a fact that should surprise us only when we compare it with the visual arts. Earlier on, musicians seem to have been of little interest as personalities. Their status grew over the centuries along with that of other artists, but not necessarily always at the same pace. Why should the composer of

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13. H. C. Robbins Landon, *Haydn: Chronicle and Works*, 5 vols. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1976—80).
14. See, for example, Otto Erich Deutsch, *Franz Schubert: Die Dokumente seines Lebens und Schaffens*, 2 vols. (Munich and Leipzig: G. Müller, 1913—14).
15. Walther Vetter, "Gedanken zur musikalischen Biographik," *Die Musikforschung* 12 (1959): 132.

chants have had any greater right to an identity than the master-builders of Romanesque and early Gothic churches? When composers' names were at last attached to polyphonic works (albeit not always reliably) and architects identified, one would expect a parallel growth in status from then on. Instead, the visual artist found a chronicler of his work as well as his personality in Vasari as early as 1550, while musicians had to wait nearly one hundred fifty years for similar recognition.[16] What is even more remarkable is that in the meantime, Vasari enjoyed several new editions and that Benvenuto Cellini rightly assumed that there was enough interest in him for an autobiography.

The question of why artists should have had biographers earlier than musicians is of course a very interesting one (see Chapter 3). In the absence of an overview of the history of biography other than Abert's brief essay, it seems not to have been noticed. And Abert, like many of his contemporaries, was inclined to look to Germany and Austria first. To our scholarly grandfathers and fathers, it looked for a while as if all the significant musical developments were coming from Germany and Austria. In his view of the history of biography and autobiography Abert was able to see clearly the influence of Herder and Goethe. Since he did not look abroad, however, Abert failed to see that Jean-Jacques Rousseau must have affected such men as André Grétry and Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart.[17] The latter's memoirs come closer to the turbulence of Benvenuto Cellini than any other musical autobiography.

Relatively few musicians have left us formal memoirs or autobiographies although many of them were avid correspondents. Not surprisingly they usually have an ear for language and are often well informed. That they were not professional writers makes their letters all the more revealing. As most artists became aware of posterity and worked with an eye to the future, musicians on the whole assumed that it was their music that would speak to future generations. They tended to be much less self-conscious in their letters than were professional writers.

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16. Giorgio Vasari, *Vite de' piu eccellenti architetti, pittori e scultori italiani* (Rome: [Lorenzo Torrentino], 1550).
17. André Ernest Modeste Grétry, *Mémoires ou essais sur la musique* (Paris: Author, 1789). Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, *Schubarts Leben und Gesinnungen von inhm selbst im Kerker aufgesetzt*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Gebrüder Mäntler, 1791—93).

With the rise of greater subjectivity and greater stylistic differences among composers in the nineteenth century came the view that music is autobiographical. We anthropomorphize absolute music, as it were. In popular biographies, journalism, even in scholarly monographs, writers about music have often linked the mood of a work to an event in the composer's life or to secret programs. This is so pervasive a trend that some composers have even succumbed themselves. While one modern memoirist, Stravinsky (1936), denies that music can say anything, Shostakovich, in the somewhat dubious memoirs smuggled out of Russia, reproaches his audiences for not seeing through wartime propaganda.[18] The public, Shostakovich says, continues to believe that his seventh symphony was about the battle of Leningrad, whereas it was really about good and evil as well as being a part of his own requiem. In fact, as one reads Shostakovich, it becomes clear that not one of his abstractly titled works was free of literal and autobiographical meaning and that he thinks we have consistently failed to understand him.

The difference between the attitudes of Stravinsky and Shostakovich is quite apparent in the tone of their respective memoirs. Stravinsky's are so devoid of personal elements that, except for certain modern touches and for his acerbity, it might as well be an eighteenth-century autobiography. Stravinsky is entirely preoccupied with composition and performance. Shostakovich carries nineteenth-century emotionalism to its extreme in a melancholy response to a twentieth-century society in which he lived with fear and hatred. His is a paradoxical success-story since he received immediate recognition for the right reasons, but by the wrong people at the wrong time. If he carried the idea that music is message to an extreme, his audience, at least the official part of it, went even further, treating it as propaganda for or against the establishment.

While professional scholarly biographies were characteristically divided into two sections, the life and the work, the biographies intended for laymen also split into different directions. One traditional approach was novelistic although very few biographies went so

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18. Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: 1936), also published as *Chroniques de ma vie* and *Chronicle of My Life.* Dmitri Shostakovich, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, ed. by Solomon Volkov and trans. by Antonia W. Bouis (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

far as Möricke's.[19] The newer, the psychoanalytical method, presumes that the reader will gain a deeper understanding via a category of biography called "psychohistory." The term is relatively new but the method goes back to Freud's monograph on Leonardo da Vinci and his *Moses and Monotheism*, studies that carry conviction because Freud either separated the work from its creator or wrote about character in terms of the various causes of a historical legend.[20] Freud did not write under the illusion that the uncovering of Leonardo's possible latent homosexuality explained his work, but he theorized about the psychological causes of his relatively small output of paintings. Freud's interest lay in recreating Leonardo on the basis of what seemed hidden in his work. His controversial work on Moses digs at the roots of mythology, historical timeliness, peoples' perception of their leaders, as well as the psychological foundations of a modern religion.

In music a superficial relationship between psyche and creative work sometimes seems obvious. We tend to accept the notion that Mahler, for example, alternated between banal tunes and tragic passages because he heard a barrel-organ on the street while his parents were engaged in a (to him) traumatic quarrel. But it does not explain why Shostakovich uses similar juxtapositions, or the humor of the silly tune that emerges at the end of Bartók's fifth quartet, or the dramatic use of lullaby, march, and folk-song parodies in *Wozzek*. All of these later composers were probably very much influenced by Mahler without knowing the psychic basis for his contrasts which they most likely took to be an extreme form of romantic irony. "Romantic irony" gains little from psychiatric insight although psychiatry may make other contributions to our understanding of the composer. Maynard Solomon has written an admirable work about Beethoven, analyzing his ambivalence toward the changing social order and telling us that Beethoven's story of royal descent, so clearly in conflict with his general views of either egalitarianism or intellectual aristocracy, is a typical "family romance," not at all uncommon in psychiatric case histories.[21] But Solomon can

19. Eduard Möricke, *Mozart auf der Reise nach Prag* (Prague, 1856).
20. Siegmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci*, trans. by A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1922). *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Knopf, 1939).
21. Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Schirmer, 1977).