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Saving the dead: memory's impossible project in *Austerlitz* and "Marginalia in Mahler"

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to investigate the energy of resumption that memory is efficient of in reconfiguring the dead in W G Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Theodor Adorno's "Marginalia in Mahler". Sebald in *Austerlitz* and Mahler in *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) manifest their attempts with the instrumentality of memory to rescue the dead from the amnesia of existence. The absent is the domain that Sebald and Mahler engage themselves with. Both of them in their respective fields aspire to reconstruct the absent. They challenge through art the fog of forgetting.

Keywords:

Anti-Semitism, violence, history, forgetting, memory, migration, photography

This paper intends to investigate the restorative power of memory which reconfigures the dead in W G Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Theodor Adorno's "Marginalia in Mahler". Sebald in *Austerlitz* and Mahler in *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) embark upon memory as an instrument to rescue the dead from forgetting. This paper is an attempt to explore the extent to which the above artists could succeed in that restorative and reparative process. Can memory and art rescue the forgotten multitude? Can memory resist the invasive force of forgetting? This paper would address such questions. Art is a field of experimentation where exteriorisation of the intricate interiority of memory happens. In "Marginalia in Mahler" Adorno demonstrates the function of memory in his appreciation of Mahler's compositions, "The rescue of what is possible, but has not yet been – this is the aim of remembrance." (612) *Austerlitz*, the eponymous character, meanders in the dark, indistinct and amorphous lanes of memory to arrive at an identity that is quintessentially his own. This arrival is impossible without revisiting the vague horizons of his childhood. The protracted discontinuity in the succession of memory has enlarged the gulf to an unbridgeable length. The dislocated temporality suddenly seems to be the source that carries the key to his identity mystery. The early demise of his foster parents initiates his odyssey to his *really* own in the dead world of documents survived from the flames of anti-Semitic history. *Austerlitz*'s odyssey to obtain the image and information of his diseased parents consumed in the horror of hunger, labour and humiliation of the concentration camps makes Sebald break down the generic specificity giving space to multiple disciplines. *Austerlitz* sojourns in the forgotten world by virtue of recollection in order to reconnect. His is a battle with his memory and a battle amid the lifeless bundles of official papers and objects. From the lifeless remains of a disappeared time *Austerlitz* seeks a speech, an

echo and a hint. The burial of the dead is the site of restitution. His is an attempt to save the dead with the mediation of memory from the cannibalism of history.

Adorno begins his essay "Marginalia in Mahler" with an emphasis on the transfiguring power of memory, "It (Memory) strokes the hair of the helpless, gives sustenance to the destroyed mouth, watches over the sleep of those who will never again awake." (612) The possibility of restoration of the physically vanished is memory's magic. Memory is achronological. It is achronological because it is non-consecutive. It breaks down the chronological character of temporality. It requires a stimulus to organise the vast body of silent world into an imaginative visualisation. It grants speech to the silent mouth. It moves the lips which fell frozen. It opens up the gates of graveyards. Here the dead needs the living to resurrect and to rebreathe. This is the alchemic energy of memory. The *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children) by Friedrich Rückert and Gustav Mahler is an attempt both in poetry and music to resuscitate the dead children. It is love that overpowers death. The loss that death inflicts is compensated through memory. The tragedy that befell both in the families of Rückert and Mahler in terms of the death of children is reconstructed in poetry and music in order to resurrect the dead in the domain of art. This reconstruction is an attempt towards the immortalisation of the materials of memory. Austerlitz likewise collects the factual and verifiable memory preserved in the museums, libraries, camps and ghettos and the shapeless and indefinite substances of his childhood from the betraying unconscious to compile an identity and also to reconstruct the forgotten. He hands over his collection which enfolds the deducible history of his obscure identity to Sebald. Sebald scripts the story from the narrative of Austerlitz and by doing so Sebald rehabilitates the dead. Sebald makes this resurfacing possible.

Adorno himself has experienced the grim atmosphere that death inflicts. Therefore, he connects with the irreparability of loss and the heaviness of the ensuing consequence that compelled both Mahler and Rückert to compose in order to rescue them from the digesting world of forgetting. It is through memory they are saved from the teeth of forgetting, "As they are defenceless, at the mercy of our memory, so our memory is the only help that is left to them ..." (612) The dead is dependent. It becomes the substance of memory – the memory of the other. The dead is helpless because it is reduced to some sediments in someone's memory. It is in the memory of others the dead receives another life. It incarnates into another dimension. From memory comes art and art immortalises. Mahler's compositions will be played for centuries to come and so would the dead be remembered. The continuity of the dead depends on the remembrance performed by the living. Here remembrance is an act of resurrection. It is a dependent resurrection. This resurrection is an exercise of the will of the living. It is also in another sense the duty of the living to perform that ritual and consistency of remembrance, "They pass away into it, and if every deceased person is like someone who was murdered by the living, so he is also like someone whose life they must save, without knowing whether the effort will succeed. The rescue of what is possible, but has not yet been – this is the aim of remembrance." (612) If the living is the instrument of annihilation of those once alive, the same too is the resource of resumption. It too is the duty of the living to save the deceased. A different configuration of the dead is possible

in the domains of art and memory. Art and memory are the possible fields where the reappearance of the departed happens. That is a human attempt towards redeeming humanity from the guilt of remaining helpless at the sight of the siege of death. Here remembrance is an act of rescue. It hardly matters whether this process of resumption leads to success or ends in frustration. Here the process is more primary than what it ultimately gains. Austerlitz does more or less the same. It is not important to see what he arrives at but what he does. The attempt towards saving the dead through the elusive territories of memory and forgetting is a ceaseless process. Mahler, Rückert and Austerlitz pioneer the process of re-emergence of the silent. Mahler and Rückert engage with the remembrance of the silent known but for Austerlitz it is with silent vaguely known. The hungry tongue of forgetting seems to have swallowed the infantile memory of Austerlitz.

The aura that the music of Mahler engenders does not make one feel the absence of the children. It seems that the children are not dead but they have only gone out. It does not give any sense of complete loss. The absence seems transitory. The possibility of immediate return is very likely. That is the kind of atmosphere, in Adorno's opinion, music of Mahler generates. The transforming magic of his music revives the dead children, "Not because they were children but because uncomprehending love can only comprehend death as if the last farewell were that of children who will come home again." (612-13) The spell of Mahler's music makes the supposed majesty of death so meaningless. It is love that defeats death. Mahler's variant is its potential to conjure up the silent from the interiority of memory. The landscape of late Mahler is best evoked in "Der Trunkene im Frühling" (The Drunkard in Spring) from *Das Lied von der Erde*, "And sing until the moon shines bright in the black firmament." (614) It is hope that brightens the bleak background. The difference of Mahler's music rests on the ability to summon the forgotten to the foreground and make the vanquished bear the badge of honour, "The men who otherwise simply forced to die when they fell out of line, the line above Strasbourg's trenches; the night-time sentry, the soldier who laid to rest in the beauty of the cornets, and the poor little drummer boy – Mahler forms them out of freedom. He promises victory to the losers." (617) Mahler befriends with the deserted. The vagabonds and derelicts are his companions.

Austerlitz restores his childhood in fragments when the forgotten resurfaces owing to certain associationisms. The radio broadcast featuring the discussion by two women of the Summer 1939 when they were transported to England on the ferry named *Prague* as part of the Kindertransport. Such narrative immediately brings the waves of hazy memories of his childhood. The content of the broadcast sounds similar to the story of Austerlitz. The word 'Prague' unsettles him to arrive at a decision of his movement to the Czech capital. Such a hasty movement eventually makes him discover his old nanny Věra Ryšánová to uncover the stories of his parents' abbreviated lives. From the broadcast concerning the kindertransport begins his journey into his memory and into the preserved memory of the institutions such as museums, libraries and public offices. Through Sebald we see Austerlitz's obsessions, anxieties and breakdowns owing to his ceaseless endeavour to arrive at his source. It is the enigma of the source that engages

him throughout. His is a desperate Odyssey to arrive at a source that becomes more evasive as approached. Austerlitz lives a different life that is not normal in the quotidian sense. His life can never be pretty normal because his normality rests on his arrival. For him there is only continual quest and the prospect of arrival is very remote. He consigns his life to the world of the dead. In his reverse movement into the domain of the vanished he hears the echoes indistinct and sourceless, footsteps of arrival of the dead from their exile. The split that the kindertransport did separated him from his identity. Therefore, Mark R McCulloh in *Understanding W.G Sebald* writes, "What he recounts is a reconstructive Odyssey in search of himself." (110)

The impossible is Austerlitz's quest. The time has reified the lived life of the protagonist into lifeless objects and documents preserved in the libraries, museums and depositories. Austerlitz, the page boy, demands his past from Austerlitz, the lecturer. The photograph of the child reminds him of the difference that has come upon his life. That photograph awakens him to the realisation of discontinuity. It is his past that is revealed through that photograph. The photograph can only accommodate a moment. In the absence of totality there develops a need for it. That photograph intensifies his need of finding the forgotten. His is as much a battle with his own memory as with reified memories existent outside him. Photography is not painting. It is therefore not metaphoric. Exactitude is its duty. The eye of a camera is not the brush of an artist. A camera never enjoys the liberty of an artist. It captures as the object is. The boy and the background in the photograph are not fictive but a piece of reality. From the barbaric ruins of history Austerlitz expects a hint, and a signifier to unlock the unknown. From the still gaze of the figure in the photograph he seeks indications to hold the thread that connects to the intricate web of the inaccessible. In time, time is forgotten. Time consumes what we neglect by inflicting oblivion upon it. It is difficult to recover the forgotten from the ash-chamber of time. All that Austerlitz collects are mere hints which dubiously direct. Forgetting is time's weapon against time's negligence. Austerlitz's dissociation is the cause of his forgetting. At a different point in history Austerlitz looks back but the hazy horizon behind does not allow penetration. When he looks back he finds Nazi brutalities and erasure. That hysteria of erasure seems to have devoured his parents. The anti-Semitic killing technologies instituted by the Nazi obliterated even the evidences of their barbarism. Nothing survives against their clinical cleansing.

It is difficult to explain in human language the experience of explosive revelation of the time that was long forgotten, "No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open." (33) For Austerlitz the childhood terror is Nazi atrocity and the compulsive split from his parents. The memories of his childhood were long buried owing to the geographical dislocation and substitute parenting by the English kind-hearted couple. Austerlitz loses his sense of balance when his entombed past surprises him by a sudden uncover. This uncover does not present the sweet lullaby of Austerlitz's past but the most gruesome trajectory of history under Nazi dispensation. His past presents him the horror of history which is ominously bedecked with exile, anti-Semitism, ghetto, murder, gas chamber, concentration camp, inhumanity, starvation and bone-crushing labour.

At Stower Grange he was told by Penrith-Smith not to write Dafydd Elias but Jacques Austerlitz on the exam application. His foster parents expected the school to reveal the boy's identity in good time before the examination. Penrith-Smith revealed nothing explicitly except his actual name and the fact of his fosterage that began at the beginning of the war. He can neither return to his foster parents for a response because they are no more nor find any sense and meaning from the name that is now attached to him. He is just left with a word to dissolve the frozen mystery of his past, "I could connect no ideas at all with the word Austerlitz. If my new name had been Morgan or Jones, I could have related it to reality. I even knew the name Jacques from a French nursery rhyme. But I had never heard of an Austerlitz before, and from the first I was convinced that no one else bore that name, no one Wales, or in the Isles, or anywhere else in the world." (94-95) The word 'Austerlitz' sounds to him extremely unreal and an impossible signifier. It is a frosted and unresponsive signifier. He moves agitatedly in the signifying circles to find a link or a correspondence. But he finds none to establish a connection or to arrive at a meaning. The submarine garden of his childhood is too deep from the surface of his consciousness he cannot tract a way to reach. Such is the impossibility the unconscious poses on him. Therefore, Austerlitz frantically rummage through the rescued remains of the war history to find a stimulus that would engage the unconscious to offer hints of the buried past.

The more he wishes to get rid of the spectre of his past, more shadows of surreal kind fall upon him, "One evening, said Austerlitz, I gathered up all my papers, bundled or loose, my notepads and exercise books, my files and lecture notes, anything with my writing on it, and carried the entire collection out of the house to the far end of the garden, where I threw it on the compost heap and buried it under layers of rotted leaves and spadefuls of earth. For several weeks afterwards, while turned out the rooms of my house and repainted the floors and walls, I did think I felt some relief from the burden weighing down on my life, but I soon realised that the shadows were falling over me." (176) Austerlitz erases the representative repertoire both linguistic and non-linguistic which may evoke a thought or inflict anxiety owing to their close or remote correspondence with his impenetrable past. The burial of corresponding objects, evidences and papers etc which might trigger a flight to the domain of his slippery past is not *real* burial. Unconscious is not will's subordinate. This kind of reactionary rejection is a kind of repression. Any repression is unnatural. Austerlitz's inability to percolate deep into the psychic interior because of the protracted discontinuity with the flow of successive memory formation imposes on him some kind unavoidable complexity. He finds himself in a state of limbo – neither can he escape nor the way to proceed. The impossibility of correspondence with the forgotten happens due to chronic dissociation. The urgency to uncover does not go in consonance with the mnemonic disobedience. Mind is not monochromatic. There is no harness that controls mind. Its incredible complexity is its mystery. The 'will' that is just the vapour of mind still remains ignorant to the functions of mind. Austerlitz's battle against his mind to enter into its darker recesses to hear an echo of his past is an impossible Odyssey. Such impossibility induces in him some kind of frustration which agitated him to such a height that he decided to do away with those acquired evidence available with him.

Such a decision does not serve the purpose. The purpose is to move away from the tentacles of his past not because he does not wish to explore it but because of his inability to do so. His failed attempts make him despondent and dejected. A chunk of his life that is too different and too dear seems to be unreachable. The willingness to deny as the burden appears to be too heavy to bear implies deep involvement. There is no exit from remembrance. Remembrance is not an act of choice. It is not will's monopoly. Memory and existence are co-existent and co-terminus. They are interdependent not mutually exclusive. Suicide seems to be apparently a solution towards the erasure of memory and existence. But the willingness for erasure brings the prospect of suicide. Such a prospect is a prospect from the vantage point of being alive. The prospect that supposedly fulfils the will can also be a problem. It can be a problem because what suicide offers is yet unknown. Therefore, Albert Camus in his *Myth of Sisyphus* explains suicide as a philosophical problem, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." (11)

Austerlitz explains the prospect of forgetting his childhood days as a matter of long dissociation from the root. It is distance from his people, land, language etc seems to have turned him completely away from the continuity of connection with his early life, "I could still apprehend the dying away of my native tongue, the faltering and fading sounds which I think lingered on in me at least for a while, like something shut up and scratching and knocking, something which, out of fear, stops its noise and falls silent whenever one tries to listen to it." (195) Austerlitz as a child could comprehend the slow yet consistent erasure of his native tongue that was his inheritance from his original source. The lingering shadow of that inheritance could not combat the ebb of oceanic contradiction. He surrendered to the different as the different that he carried seemed unnecessary to him. He in the process buried unknowingly the irreparable substance of his earlier life. The substance that he lost is what he thinks later possesses the answer to his identity ambiguity. But he feels the effect of that closure, the consequence of that unknowing fortification against the fluidity of the consecutiveness of things. From that garrison of unconscious where lay buried the essence of his early life Austerlitz often hears the noise of scratching and knocking. But when he shows inclinations towards deciphering the code and content of that noise, they cease to recur. This obdurate non-cooperation from the interior agencies lands Austerlitz in the island of ambiguity. The impenetrable silence that ensues after a brief interrupted moment of transitory noise envelops him in darkness.

The fire and fury of the war enmeshed everything. Even the evidence of Austerlitz's transport to England which might have given certain direction towards tracing the root of his origin seems to have permanently lost owing to several moves and evacuations, "... the social-services offices in Wales, or the Foreign Office, or the Aid Committee under whose auspices the transports of refugee children had come to England and who had lost a number of files during their several moves and evacuations, carried out during the bombing of London in very difficult circumstances and almost entirely without trained staff." (202) The blitz and blizzard of bombs in the London skies and measureless smouldering debris consumed the documents and records of such

transports. Those agencies which conducted such crucial transports during such cataclysmic crisis lost almost everything owing to the involvement of amateurs in the process of important services and more importantly the intensity of the war that prioritised the lives of people over the meticulous recording and provision of preservation. The conflagration of war was so engulfing that it reduced everything into ashes. Austerlitz's efforts to find a link also get shattered as he finds none to cling to.

Anything tangible representing his mysterious past is his possession of a picture taken when he was just five. It is not just a piece of photograph. It is his past. It is his identity. It is his life. This photograph is the foundation which prepares him to take a fictive flight into the time that has fallen silent. This black and white photograph is a signifier that helps him to recollect quite faintly the frozen realities of his past, "... as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives. Yes, and the small boy in the other photograph, said Vera after a while, this is you, Jacquot, in February 1939, about six months before you left Prague. You were to accompany Agatha to a masked ball at the house of one of her influential admirers, and she had the snow-white costume made for you especially for the occasion. On the back of it says *Jacquot Austerlitz, paze ruzove kralovny*, in your grandfather's handwriting," (258-9) The picture stills a moment of history. It is a frozen moment. It retains a little of history but it implies a whole of that which made the picture possible. The picture is just a hint but this hint suggests a horizon. It grants motion to the memory to chisel shapes from the shapeless frozen multitude. By virtue of that the dead crosses the temporal barrier to appear in our visual memory. They are our constructs dependent on our recollection. This photograph engages Austerlitz in recollection. The alchemy of recollection makes this reconstruction possible. This photograph reminds Austerlitz the sacrifice of many for his survival. It also reminds of a time when certain historical forces determined the destiny of humanity. A series of activities and events are evoked from every inch of the photograph. It begins a process that is unending. Life is compressed in a square-sized piece of paper. The frozen instant bubbles up the associated events and the invisible phenomena which the frame could not accommodate. The invisible is still powerfully evoked by the visible exterior. The photograph is the site that directs Austerlitz to his source. The empirical enriches the imaginative.

It is in time time is forgotten, "... all memory was extinguished in me by an overwhelming sense of the long years that had passed." (259) The burden of the years seems to have made the memories silent. His preoccupations with different areas of interest and of necessity neglected the time that he could have nourished. But how much a child of five can remember and how much can he retain for the time that follows? The memory that could not receive the climate for its continuity gets extinguished within Austerlitz. He knows that he has forgotten the significant content of his early childhood but he cannot visualise that. That is his tragedy. The faces of his parents which he always wished to recollect are never reconstructed. Whatever he could reconstruct is just by virtue of his random association with the photographs he could collect from

different govt offices which preserved as much as possible the images and relics of war. In the Imperial War Museum he comes across a copy of the cassette which carries the clips of the lives in the ghettos. Austerlitz visits to see the screening of that film which in his notion might show his mother though he recollects nothing about her face, "I imagined seeing her walking down the street in a summer dress and lightweight gabardine coat, said Austerlitz: among a group of ghetto residents out for a stroll, she alone seems to make straight for me, coming closer with every step, until at last I thought I could sense her stepping out of the frame and passing over into me. It was wishful fantasies such as these which cast me into a state of great excitement when the Imperial War Museum finally succeeded, though the Federal archives in Berlin, in obtaining a cassette copy of the film of Theresienstadt for which I have been searching. I remember very clearly, said Austerlitz, how I sat in one of the museum's video viewing rooms, placed the cassette in black opening of the recorder with trembling hands, and then, although unable to take in any of it, watched various tasks being carried out at the anvil and forge of a smithy, in the pottery and wood-carving workshop, in the handbag-making and shoe-manufacturing sections – a constant pointless to-do of hammering, metal-beating and welding, cutting, gluing, and stitching; I saw an unbroken succession of strangers' faces emerge before me for a few seconds, I saw workers leaving the huts when the siren had sounded and crossing an empty field beneath a sky filled with motionless white clouds, a game of football in inner court of one the barrack buildings, with hundreds of cheerful spectators crowding the arcades and the galleries on the first and second floors, ... it only a patchwork of scenes cobbled together and lasting some fourteen minutes, scarcely more than an opening sequence in which, despite the hope I had entertained, I could not see Agata anywhere, however often I ran the tape and however had I strained to make her out among those fleeting faces." (343-4-5) In the house of his imagination he could visualise the life of his mother living in a ghetto along with many Jews in a cramped and restricted environ. When he enter the museum's video-viewing room, all his imaginative certitude of recognising a familiar face whom he may recognise as his mother faded inconsolably seeing the surreal rawness of labour. From the strange chaos of faces Austerlitz could recognise none except a bizarre admixture of sweat, toil and struggle. From the patchwork of scenes there features the fleeting faces. But none he finds that resembles his mother though he had no knowledge of how his mother looked. He knows the impossibility of such fruitless endeavour but still he cannot quit the quest. The knowledge of impossibility cannot quarantine the quest. When it involves a matter of one's identity, the sense of the impossible is not a limiting factor. He shifts from one abstraction to another never arriving at any certitude. More he gazes into the photographs, he meets more ambiguities. The crisscrossing of familiarity and strangeness shrouds him in the mist of anonymity. But the photograph that carries the vividness of life passed is a miniature of the vastness of the past. The micro particularity compresses the boundless beyond the frame. It also enacts the imaginative regimentation of the dead multitude.

Austerlitz intends to get rid of the burden that he seems to have been shouldering owing to prolonged pretences that he practiced by embracing the other. He goes in search of

his father who was reportedly vanished in his last visit to Paris, "... he was now about to go to Paris to search for traces of his father's last movements, and to transport himself back to the time when he too had lived there, in one way feeling liberated from the false pretences of his English life, but in another oppressed by the vague sense of that he did not belong in this city either, or indeed anywhere else in the world." (354) He undertakes such a journey with a hope of reconfiguring his memory by reacquainting with the place where he spent time with his parents. Such a visit might reinvigorate his memory to the ecstasy establishing some connection that may offer some hint of his past. The false pretences of English life which he has naturalised as his own with the cost of losing the one that is real disturb him. Even Paris does not make him feel at home. He neither belongs to Paris nor London nor anywhere. He seems to have accepted the different as his own. But it is an ambiguous acceptance because it involves neither affirmation nor disapproval. Therefore, it is an act of pretence. He sees more past in present. And Austerlitz is that human site where such invasion occurs. The reverberation of indistinct in Austerlitz inclines him more towards the past because of its amorphousness and anonymity. It is his inability to arrive at the revealing point of his mystery makes him more engaged in the nebulous interiority of his past. The underlying paradox of his quest is that the necessity of unconcealment of his identity is in dissonance with the scanty resources he has in his possession. The will to arrive does not match the material of arrival. That disappoints him maximally.

This novel is a personal journey of a Jew who has forgotten his Jewish past. Austerlitz undertakes two types of journey – one the exterior and the other the interior. His interior journey commences in the domain of memory. He presses hard to reach the point of that past break-up when he at the age of five was sent to England to escape the Nazi atrocities against the Jews. But to his disappointment his memory turns out to be quite intransigent to co-operate with him. Through memory he wishes to reach and to reconstruct his past. But the burden of time that piles up too heavily after his very early departure from his parents does not allow him to percolate into that forgotten world. By an imaginative reconstruction of the dead depending upon the materials of memory Austerlitz intends to reconstitute them. But forgetting does not permit such reconstitution. Austerlitz seeks to rescue his past from the digesting dynamics of forgetting. Failed by his efforts to revive his memory he depends on the exterior – the domain of evidence – to find some association which might trigger the resurfacing of the forgotten. To unfold the closed Austerlitz depends on the external – relics of war history. But such associationism does not materialise his intent of arriving at certain conformity of his identity. Austerlitz's Odyssey to reconfigure his past does not seem to be a fulfilling one. The memory that might have reconfigured the dead under a different reality seems to be indifferent. By remembering Austerlitz could reconstruct the absent. It is an imaginative reconstruction mostly sourced upon the materials of probability. But Mahler by contrast finds music as the most aesthetically reliable mode to reconstruct the absent in its own way. It is the sound of music that resurrects the lost. That is the alchemic magic that Mahler performs in music. It is not just music for aesthetic entertainment. It is an awakening. It is an act of presencing. That's what Austerlitz searches Mahler shows.

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BIO-NOTE

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