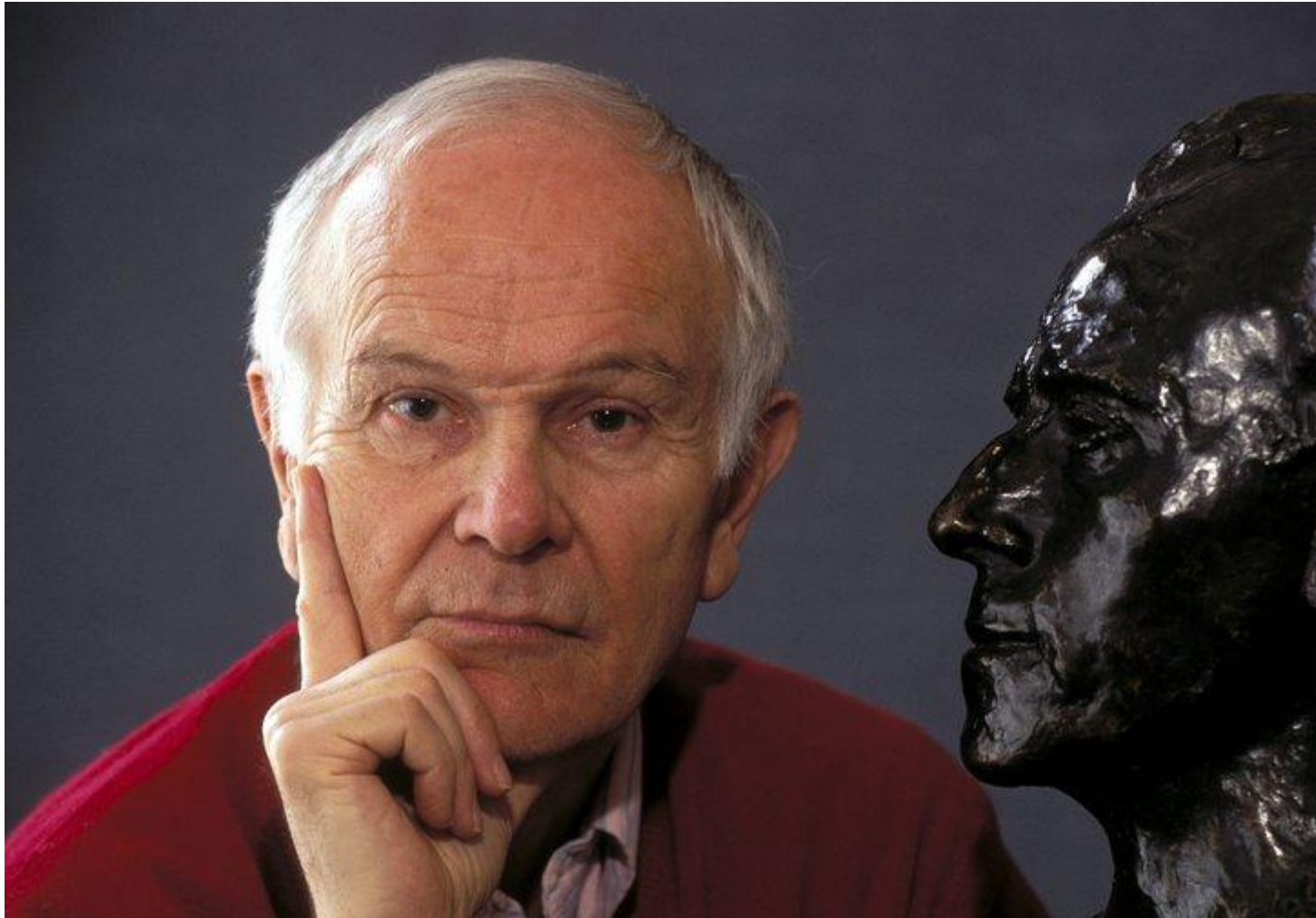


Henry-Louis de La Grange, Mahler Authority, Is Dead at 92

By [SAM ROBERTS](#) FEB. 8, 2017



Henry-Louis de La Grange in Paris in 1995. Credit Alain Buu/Gamma-Rapho, via Getty Images

Henry-Louis de La Grange, who was so captivated by a Mahler symphony he heard at Carnegie Hall in 1945 that he devoted the rest of his life to researching the tempestuous Viennese composer's biography, died on Jan. 27 in Lonay, Switzerland, near Lausanne. He was 92.

His death was announced by the Médiathèque Musicale Mahler in Paris, a scholarly resource center that he founded with his fellow musicologist Maurice Fleuret.

Professor de La Grange, the son of a French politician who was once held prisoner by the Nazis and an American heiress to a furniture-store fortune, inherited the title of baron on his 21st birthday but dispensed with it.

“I did not earn it,” he said in 1989. “I was simply born to it. I use the title of Professor because the Austrian government has given me that title. I feel that I have earned it.”

Professor de La Grange began earning his scholarly credentials in 1973 when, after 15 years of research, he published Volume I of his biography, simply titled “Gustav Mahler.” It became a heroic 3,600-page saga, still being revised, that distinguished him as the dean of Mahler biographers.

He also went on to direct or collaborate on concerts, exhibitions, festivals, and film and television documentaries — including one in 2015 on his own obsession with Mahler — that prompted a critical rediscovery of the composer and a popular appreciation of his music by contemporary audiences.

The cultural historian Carl E. Schorske, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, described Volume I as “a massive chronicle” largely of facts rather than interpretation, in which the author’s “conscientious positivism opens new avenues to the understanding of Mahler and his time.”

Professor de La Grange might never have become a musicologist had his parents gotten their way. They wanted him to enter the family furniture business.

“My mother and father intended me for Harvard Business School,” he told *The Times* in 1974, “but someone there had the very good sense to turn me down.”

Instead he was educated in France and later in the United States, in New York City and at Yale, and frequently traveled between the countries.

He was in New York when he heard the symphony that piqued his infatuation with Mahler, an encounter that was completely by chance. He had decided to attend the Carnegie Hall concert — on Dec. 20, 1945, the day after he returned from France with his family following World War II — only because Bruno Walter, his favorite, was conducting.

He was unaware that Walter, a Mahler disciple, would open the New York Philharmonic’s program that evening with the composer’s Ninth Symphony in D [major](#), which Mahler wrote after the death of his daughter and after he had learned that he had fatal cardiac disease.

Mahler died in 1911, a month after returning to Europe from New York and before the symphony’s first public performance.

Leonard Bernstein once likened the Ninth’s nearly 90 minutes of mercurial music to an irregular heartbeat. He pronounced it “the greatest farewell symphony ever written by anybody.”

The day after the concert, the Times critic Olin Downes sanguinely concluded that “there is a degree of ostentation in this music which would be funny if it were not so vulgar.” But 21-year-old Henry-Louis was enraptured.

“His devotion to Mahler gradually grew into almost an obsession,” Sybille Werner, the editor who is completing the revised biography, wrote in an email.

In an interview on the website classicalsource.com in 2008, Professor de La Grange said that hearing the symphony for the first time had been a revelation. “I was extremely surprised, perhaps even shocked to hear a huge symphony in a style that was quite unknown to me,” he said. “I couldn’t understand how and why this music had been written in this way.”

He later wrote: “I believed in Mahler from the moment I heard his music. Something in me happened, and it made clear the fact that I work for him.”

Henry-Louis de La Grange was born in Paris on May 26, 1924. His father was Amaury de La Grange, a French nobleman, military aviation pioneer, senator and, in 1940, an undersecretary in Premier Paul Reynaud’s cabinet. The Nazis held him prisoner for five years during World War II.

His mother was the former Emily Sloane, whose grandfather, William, founded W. & J. Sloane, the high-end Fifth Avenue household furnishings store, in the 1840s. (He had a box at the old Metropolitan Opera House, for which he had supplied the upholstery.)

Henry-Louis attended the Lycée Français in New York and, inspired by his sister’s piano playing and discovering that he had perfect pitch, began taking piano lessons when he was 18.

He graduated from the University of Provence in Aix-en-Provence and the Yale School of Music and studied piano in Paris under Nadia Boulanger and Yvonne Lefébure. Before embarking on his Mahler opus, he was a music critic for The Times and other publications in the early 1950s.

Delving into Mahler’s final years in New York, after the composer had left Vienna, where his daughter died and where anti-Semitism was growing, Professor de La Grange was more forgiving than other Mahler authorities.

“Mahler was not the morbid, tormented neurotic he is so often depicted to have been,” he said at a 1994 symposium at Carnegie Hall — although he acknowledged that Mahler “was a difficult man” and later said that the composer had “made other people suffer as much as he suffered himself.”

Reviewing Volume IV of the biography in The Journal of the Society for American Music in 2009, Joseph Horowitz wrote, “The net effect is a vigorously positive assessment of what Mahler achieved in New York, and of what he might have further achieved had he not died at the age of 50.”

A revised English-language version of Volume I is still forthcoming, which means that the project will have taken nearly as long as Mahler's life lasted — on the order of a prolonged excavation to unearth the ruins of some ancient city.

Indeed, his “first ambition had been to be an archaeologist,” Professor de La Grange said in 1974.

“Ultimately, though,” he said, “I found the job of reconstructing the life of a man more interesting than reconstructing a dead civilization.”

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/books/henry-louis-de-la-grange-dead-mahler-biographer.html>)