

# philharmonia orchestra

## **February 2009 – Podcast Transcription**

### **Michael Turner – Viola**

Welcome to the podcast. This month sees the launch of the Philharmonia's first major project with Esa-Pekka Salonen. The series, entitled *City of Dreams*, focuses on the remarkable creativity in Vienna between 1900 and 1935, presenting the music against the backdrop of Vienna's cultural history

We spoke to Esa-Pekka to find out more

### **Esa-Pekka Salonen – Principal Conductor**

This is one of the most interesting periods in all of music. I've always been fascinated by the fact that in such a short space of time so much that was new was being born and developing into lots of different directions, not only within music but also in literature, the visual arts and applied arts. There was so much going on in that one place and time that it is almost a miracle. I don't think there is any place or time in history that would quite compare; for a couple of decades there were no rules.

The fact that we have these two masterpieces as bookends of the series is, of course, a symbol for the journey. You can very clearly see where it's coming from and you can easily hear and discern the diagonals from all the great predecessors: the Beethovens, the Mozarts, the Haydns and Schuberts and so on and so forth. You can follow how the language – the principles – of musical language dissolve first, and then something new crystallises out of this liquid state, and I think this is one of the most fascinating processes in music: to see how old becomes the new.

The guiding principal in these programmes is not necessarily a didactic one. I am not trying to teach anybody anything in particular; it is about the music. I put together works that I love deeply, that I admire and that have a very profound and powerful effect on me. It is a very mysterious thing why Schoenberg still poses this problem, but in all honesty, I have to say that the ugliest Schoenberg pieces are formidably ugly; they possess this very impressive ugliness that you cannot ignore. It is not like some pimple on the skin, it is like a crocodile in your bedroom: you really cannot ignore it. It is right there, it is rather dangerous and will eat you up if you're not careful.

When you think of the best works of Schoenberg they are as good as anybody's best works, and in his very best music he's a visionary: a deeply emotional and very exciting composer. I would say the *Gurrelieder* is a particularly fascinating piece when you think of the journey of Schoenberg. This was a bank clerk who envisioned the hugest piece of repertoire in the classical canon and it is terribly touching and moving to think about this. I'll never forget the first time I heard *Gurrelieder* in a concert, never ever as long as I live. The moment when the chorus comes in for the first time – this almost animal scream that the men produce – I practically fell off the chair, and even though I've conducted it a few times I'm always anticipating when the chorus comes in because it is such a dramatic moment.

#### *Audio Extract – Schoenberg's Gurrelieder*

It starts from a very post Wagnerian or Straussian place. As it took such a long time for him to complete it, it ends up on a completely different planet and all this happens within one piece. You would think that the music wouldn't hang together, that it would just fall apart in terms of form and expression but it doesn't. Somehow, despite the fact that Schoenberg is already saying goodbye to a lot of guiding principals there is something about his personality which is so powerful. Whatever he does is always Schoenberg and therefore belongs together, and this is the mystery and miracle of *Gurrelieder*.

The second string quartet starts off as any old post-Romantic chamber music piece. It is very good music but there is nothing special about it. Then the quartet starts going to places where music hadn't been going. He somehow hits the limits of the medium of the string quartet and decides to add a soprano to this. The first line the soprano sings is this very famous line: *Ich fühle luft von anderem planeten* – "I feel air from other planets".

#### *Audio Extract – Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 2*

This marks the beginning of a very fascinating and extraordinary period in Schoenberg's production – this free, atonal music that is for me, amongst the most extraordinary music ever written by anybody. My own, guiding principal in terms of putting all this music together is the idea that what moves me is likely to move quite a lot of other people. What I find exciting is very likely to have the same effect on other people as well because we are not that different and I believe that at the end of the day there is something universal about a deep musical

experience. I think these are wonderful compositions – amongst the best compositions written by anybody – and that is why we want to perform them.

### **Michael Turner**

High art and popular culture often overlapped in this period. Series consultant Julian Johnson went to Vienna to find out what affect this had on the music of the time.

### **Julian Johnson – Series Consultant, City of Dreams: Vienna 1900-1935**

The Prater is basically a pleasure park. Mahler would have come for a walk here at the weekend. It's what the Viennese did, and it's where one would have heard band music, marching bands, where one would have heard buskers playing on the corner. All the kind of folk music and popular music that found its way into the symphonies you would have heard here at the weekend.

One of the other ways the Viennese had of getting out of the city when they'd done with the Prater park and they'd taken the rack railway up the Kahlenberg, was come into a Heuriger tavern. Heuriger is this early wine made from the grapes within a few weeks, it's very strong, and the taverns often like this one have a beautiful view over the vineyards. It's a wonderful thing to do in early September. People would leave the city on a hot day like this to come out to the edge of the city nearly in the countryside, perhaps also in these places to listen to music, typically a little ensemble of a couple of violins, an accordion, a clarinet – exactly the kind of musical ensemble you hear in Berg's *Wozzeck*, and occasionally in Mahler.

I asked Bernhard Kerres whether Mahler's Viennese audience would have recognised these references to popular music.

### **Bernhard Kerres – Wiener Konzerthaus**

Yes, definitely, because it was a music they had around them all the time. We shouldn't forget that at that time there was almost no radio or no CDs, no iPods, nothing, so the only music they could hear was actually in halls like that, or at home making music at home, or music in coffee shops or in bars. And you also had the Strauss family – the 'waltz' Strauss family is a wonderful example. They played in the thirteenth district in the Café Dommayer – which is still in existence today – they played every Sunday, and people came there and danced. So this was the kind of music which was always around and this was the music people knew. So yes, when they heard a Mahler symphony definitely they picked up on it, which we then later forget, because today we hear jazz and pop music and we have our iPods on and we hear world music which is great too, but we lose the reference. On the other hand, the rhythm is so strong, this is how we feel there must be a dancing element in there.

### **Susanne Schedtler – Wiener Volksliedwerk**

There were no concert halls in Vienna in 1900 as we understand the term now.

Only inns, taverns, ballrooms; the balls & concerts took place there.

The original Schrammel Quartet- we know that they played in an upmarket inn in Dornbach [a suburb of Vienna]. There are photos, they played in the garden, people milled around eating and drinking and the Quartet played all through the night, until the guitarist's hand became bloody!

### **Julian Johnson**

Sitting here in a café at lunchtime, one could be in any major European city: but in Vienna there's a special importance attached to the coffee house, enjoying an apple strudel and a coffee, passing the time with some friends. It was hugely important to the group of Modernists at the beginning of the twentieth century as a meeting place, so I asked Bernhard Kerres to tell me a bit more.

### **Bernhard Kerres**

Most of the composers, most of the artists, and many other people in Vienna, considered actually that the coffee house is their extended living room. And so they actually even got their mail there. And Vienna is still today actually a pretty small city. All these people met all the time at these coffee houses, and you know if I wanted to see you I knew, normally this is your favourite coffee house, there you get your mail, if I go there and sit there for two hours I'd probably have a good chance to meet you. All the artists actually met there, it didn't matter who it was; and it's not only the artists, it's also the industrialists and also some of the workers and some politicians, they met all the time at the coffee houses.

Funnily enough, you still find this culture a bit in Vienna today. You still have a lot of old fashioned coffee houses where this is exactly happening, and some big chains which are very modern nowadays have a problem coming into Vienna, because selling coffee fast in a paper cup is not Viennese culture. You still can sit here for hours drinking a small coffee, paying probably a pound or so for it, and spend the rest of the afternoon there: so you're actually not paying for your coffee, you're paying a rental fee for your chair.

## **Michael Turner**

The works of Arnold Schoenberg exemplify the changes of compositional technique in this period. One of the opening works of the series is Schoenberg's massive *Gurrelieder*. Here's Julian Johnson to tell us more.

## **Julian Johnson**

The name Arnold Schoenberg still evokes strong antipathy for some listeners. He was, after all, the man who took music into the realm of atonality, and worse still, then developed a method of composing apparently by numbers. I can see how such a view arises, but the closer you look, the more contradictory becomes the picture. Schoenberg was a radical, but he was also a conservative and a traditionalist. A teacher throughout his life, he always based his teaching method on Viennese Classicism, and he always understood the direction his own music took, not as some personal whim – why would anyone choose to become unpopular? – but as a necessary development in music history.

I spoke to Christian Meyer.

## **Christian Meyer – Arnold Schonberg Center**

Schoenberg says, 'what I know, I've learnt from my ancestors who are Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Wagner, Richard Strauss', and then he numbers them, and in this aspect he sees himself in this tradition. And he says, 'as I'm standing in this tradition I am already destined to become tradition for the future', and he's visionary. It sounds... If you meet someone now who tells this to you, you think 'let's hope he's right!', but now from a distance of 100 years one can see that Schoenberg is right, because the effects of what he has achieved can be felt also today.

## **Julian Johnson**

So Bernhard, thank you very much for talking with us. How do you see Schoenberg's music today?

## **Bernhard Kerres**

I think many people are still very careful. It's interesting I think, many people if they read or see there's a Schoenberg concerto or something like that they think, oh, shall I go, will it be tonal, won't it be tonal, and so on – they really get very concerned about it. We are still so much used to listening to any kind of tonal Classical or Romantic music. But the radical movement Schoenberg initiated was very very important for everything else to come. And I do hope that many people today say, 'I'll experience that because I don't want to look just at such a small period of music which is Classical and Romantic, but I want to listen to the whole broadness of music and experience new things in there'.

And for me I'm fighting, I'm saying: "don't understand music, just enjoy it, just open up your ears and feel it in your emotions". That's much more important: if you let yourself into that, it's much more emotional music than some of the Beethoven symphonies for example. If you look at the Berg Violin Concerto for example, what happens with you if you listen to that is amazing, it just carries you away to another world.

## **Michael Turner**

You can find out more about *Vienna: City of Dreams* by visiting the Philharmonia's new interactive website, [www.philharmonia.co.uk/vienna](http://www.philharmonia.co.uk/vienna).

The site features early 20<sup>th</sup> century maps and postcards, an extensive range of films detailing all aspects of Viennese music and culture, complete listings and even a virtual notepad to invite all your friends to concerts.

*City of Dreams* begins on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February in Basingstoke with a performance of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* and Mahler's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony and continues with performances of Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* in Birmingham on the 27<sup>th</sup> and London on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

Other concerts in February include 2 performances by pianist Noriko Ogawa. The newly commissioned *Ampere-Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* by Dai Fujikura and Mozart's 24<sup>th</sup> Piano Concerto in London and Leicester on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, conducted by Martin Brabbins.

Sir Charles Mackerras joins the orchestra for 3 concerts in London on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, with programmes including Mozart Piano Concertos numbers 20 and 24, and symphonies by Tchaikovsky and Elgar.

Gustavo Dudamel conducts Prokofiev's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony in Bedford on the 15<sup>th</sup>, London on the 17<sup>th</sup> and Cardiff on the 19<sup>th</sup>. He also returns to London on the 21<sup>st</sup> for a performance of Mahler's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony and Mozart's Piano Concerto number 17 with Emanuel Ax.

Join us next month, as Julian Johnson takes a further look into the art and design of Vienna. Thanks for watching.