

philharmonia orchestra

June 2009 – Podcast Transcription

Tim Gibbs – Philharmonia Orchestra Double Bassist

Hello, and welcome to the final podcast of the season.

In Vienna around 1900, what had been a rather sleepy world of visual art suddenly exploded into the new colours and forms of early modernism.

But what lay behind this eruption in the arts, and can we hear something similar in the music of the period? To find out more, Julian Johnson went to the Belvedere Gallery in Vienna.

Agnes Husslein-Arco – Director, Belvedere Gallery, Vienna

Yes, they still lived totally in a real nineteenth century spirit. Everything: slow, not very internationally focused, not at all – very much focused on themselves – but you also have to understand that at that point Vienna is the centre of a huge empire, and it was a melting pot here in Vienna of different cultures. What happened in Vienna was that there was a radical change suddenly, in architecture, in the paintings, in the visual arts, but also in the music: and it all interacted.

Christoph Grunenberg – Director, Tate Liverpool

If there is a work that maybe does pinpoint the beginning as Klimt and the Secession pronounced a new era, a new moment in history which breaks with the old and brings in the new, it is this painting, *Nuda Veritas*, of course taking the key subject of Klimt – the naked female figure – but doing it in a very different way from the way he did it before. It was shown in the Secession exhibition in 1899 and again caused a scandal and outrage, because it is not some kind of antique Greek goddess or some other allegorical figure. It was seen as a figure from today, it was a kind of an empty female figure which of course is presented to us full frontal, naked: she's holding up the mirror of truth...

Esa-Pekka Salonen – Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor

... towards us...

Christoph Grunenberg

... towards the audience, and of course you do have that very problematic statement, again by Schiller: you can't please everyone through your deeds and through your works of art, just please a few, because pleasing many is bad. Again, elitist to a degree...

Esa-Pekka Salonen

Somewhat!

Christoph Grunenberg

... but also a commitment to quality, to truthfulness, well in some ways to radical truthfulness, to the naked truth, and really not compromising at all and trying to find or realise this objective of creating new modern contemporary art.

The Secession was so successful that they actually from the proceeds of the first exhibition (which happened in 1898 in the spring) managed to build this own exhibition building devoted to the Secession, and that all happened within the space of six months. They sold about half the works in the first Secession exhibition and also had some sponsors to help them finance their own building. Again it's sort of encapsulating what the Secession was standing for, and most importantly is that motto over the entrance: "Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit", "to every age its art, and to art its freedom" – liberating the arts, but also to create an art that is relevant for the age, that is contemporary, that reflects the contemporary concerns.

Ver Sacrum is this other inscription, the 'sacred spring', that something new is blossoming and that there is a new beginning for the arts, and for all the arts really.

Tim Gibbs

Not only were artists and musicians breaking new ground in Vienna at this time; Sigmund Freud was redefining what it was to be human. Michael Molnar tells us more.

Michael Molnar – Freud Museum

It is said it couldn't have happened anywhere else, psychoanalysis, and there probably is reason for that belief. It's not medicine, it's not psychiatry, it's not an interview, and yet it's part of all of these things. And the Austro-Hungarian Empire was a place of transgression, of crossing cultures: it was at the time the most cosmopolitan city in Europe. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was an amazing cultural hotchpotch and everything focused on Vienna. But on the other hand there was a very orthodox establishment in the scientific and medical world. So Freud, at a certain moment when he began to think outside the frame as it were, he found himself being cold-shouldered, he was becoming even more of an outsider than he was naturally. And in a sense all Jews felt themselves to be outsiders in Hapsburg Vienna, there was rabid anti-semitism. The anti-semitism in Freud's Vienna was at first low-key and accepted.

Julian Johnson – City of Dreams Series Consultant

Is there a simple way of explaining why he is such a key modern figure?

Michael Molnar

I think the only way to say that would be to say that he redefined what it is to be human, what it is to be a person, that there's a radical shift in perspective. He uses the example of Copernicus, that the sun was no longer the centre of the universe; in the same way from Freud onwards our consciousness is no longer the centre of being human. The ego is no longer master in its own house. Until that time everybody had assumed that their will, their consciousness, conscious life, is the central fact of being human, of experience, and suddenly consciousness is sidelined, shifted, and the whole area of the unconscious becomes central, is essential.

His writing on art and creation often appears simplistic, but on the other hand he is limiting himself to certain pathologies in art and he's careful to say that this does not exhaust the subject. For instance in his study of Dostoyevsky and parricide, where there is a rich study for psychopathology obviously, he does say that none of this explains the genius of the actual creative aspect. The same with Leonardo – he's very careful to say that he's not being reductive, but he is insisting on some pathology which does contribute to art, and which may lead either to art or to neurosis, in fact, if the art fails.

Julian Johnson

I suppose going back to my question, why Vienna, the extent to which the art of a time and the place might also be a kind of, what's the word I want, cathexis I think is the right word isn't it, some sort of release for what otherwise would turn into some kind of sickness?

Michael Molnar

Yes, although some would say that the sickness was there and this was the expression of it.

Tim Gibbs

City of Dreams concerts take place across Europe this month, details of which can be found at www.philharmonia.co.uk/vienna.

Esa-Pekka Salonen conducts Mahler's 7th Symphony and Berg's *Three Pieces* in London on the 11th of June.

András Schiff conducts and performs in a series of concerts to celebrate the Haydn and Mendelssohn bicentenaries. On the 23rd in Bedford and the 25th in London the programme includes Haydn's *Drum Roll* Symphony, Piano Concerto number 11 and Cello Concerto in C, with cellist Miklós Perényi.

In Oxford on the 27th and London on the 28th the programme includes Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto with violinist Serge Zimmermann, his Second Piano Concerto and the *Italian* Symphony.

And we conclude June's concerts with Christoph von Dohnányi conducting Mozart's 27th Piano Concerto with Maria João Pires and Brahms's Second Symphony in London on the 30th.

For those of you hoping to see an interview with Christoph von Dohnányi this month, this will now appear in October's podcast as part of his 80th Birthday celebrations.

We hope you've enjoyed this season of podcasts and concerts. Join us again from the 1st of September for interviews with artists, listening guides, and more behind the scenes features. Until then, do keep in touch with the Philharmonia Orchestra's summer concerts via our website, and thanks for watching.