

philharmonia orchestra

May 2009 – Interaction in the Arts

Julia Rumley – Philharmonia Orchestra Violinist

Hi, welcome to May's podcast. This month we continue the Philharmonia's *City of Dreams* series, with performances of Gustav Mahler's 6th symphony. Series consultant Julian Johnson tells us more about Mahler's Vienna

Julian Johnson – City of Dreams Series Consultant

At the age of 36, Gustav Mahler managed to bag what was probably the top musical job in Europe: Musical Director of the Court Opera in Vienna. His employment was viciously opposed on anti-Semitic grounds, and in fact Mahler converted to Catholicism early in 1897. Anti-Semitic criticism dogged Mahler through the ten years in which he was director of the opera here, and he divided opinion in all sorts of ways. He changed the nature of the opera house: one of his famous sayings was 'tradition is *schlamperei*', tradition is sloppiness or laziness.

Not surprisingly, Mahler had something of a love/hate relationship with the city of Vienna. Here he was at one of the most prestigious institutions in the city, a symbol of imperial power and wealth, and Mahler was part of that establishment. On the other hand, he was attacked on all corners by anti-Semitic critics, and in many ways didn't feel at home here at all.

But Mahler didn't spend all his time in Vienna. For three months of the year he got out of the busy city centre and spent his time by one of his favourite countryside haunts, the Attersee in the Salzkammergut, and later by the Wörthersee where he had a house built. And in those summer months he did most of his composing, and the importance of nature to his music is absolutely central. The Third Symphony, the so-called 'Flower Piece', the *Blumenstück*, has a subtitle 'What the flowers in the meadow told me'. You hear it in the Sixth and Seventh symphonies where the music suddenly cuts from this hectic, busy, dense, urban music to something much more spatial and peaceful. You hear it in the slow movement of the Sixth Symphony and you hear it in the Serenade movements of the Seventh. There's a particular moment in the first movement of the Sixth where the very driving, march rhythms suddenly stop and all the energy drains out of the music, and all you can hear is the sound of cowbells: always in Mahler a sign for distant, empty landscapes. And against that backdrop of cowbells and static chords in the strings, individual instruments pick out little melodies.

So throughout Mahler's music, you can hear this shift, shift of gear really, from something that's much more urgent, much faster paced music, to this sudden, often unprepared opening-out to what in Mahler is the space of nature, something utterly different, often with a sense of release: everything that the city didn't provide, the opposite of the city, and above all a sense of freedom.

By 1907 things had become so bad, the opposition against him was mounting to an unbearable level, that in the end his resignation was effectively forced. Mahler saw it coming, and was in negotiation with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and finally gave way to the inevitable and left for New York in 1907. Gustav Klimt was one of the many supporters of Mahler who saw him off at the Westbahnhof, the West Station in Vienna, and is reputed to have said as Mahler left '*Es ist vorbei*, it's all over'.

Julia Rumley

Esa-Pekka Salonen conducts Mahler's 6th symphony in Brighton on the 22nd, Leicester on the 27th and in London on the 28th of May.

In music and painting, we tend to fix our attention on a few astonishing individuals. But the nature of Viennese culture around 1900 was one of collective energy and vision.

Michael Hoffmann – Philharmonia Orchestra Trustee

At the age of twenty-three my grandfather became a member of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and also an active participant in the State Opera Orchestra. In addition to the world of music he was very interested in art and also literature; he wrote poetry and was interested in literary works. Mainly, he painted and I have a lot of his works where you can really see two sides: the more traditional painting of members of the orchestra and artistic world that

he knew – and there was a period of influence of Klimt and then Schiele which he certainly was struck by and that got him involved in some of the later Secessionist artistic exhibitions.

A lot of his friends from that world mixed with the musical world, and therefore, quite naturally they would not only attend each other's conference but also buy each other's works.

Bernhard Kerres – Wiener Konzerthaus

Many of these people were not only one artist, but had lots of artistic ideas and were artists in many respects, and exchanging these views was extremely important for them. There was influence going on all the time.

Michael Hoffmann

In addition to music, painting and literature my grandfather's family had a great interest in new decorative arts of the period. They were collectors of decorative art and great supporters of the Wiener Werkstätte and the interesting, unusual pieces that were being put together.

Berhard Kerres

All these very intelligent, extremely interesting, creative people came together and they lived in an environment which was not easy for them. Nevertheless, they shared a lot of ideas, and they had this coffeehouse culture where they met and shared this interest together. They had lots of discussions, they spoke together and they worked together which must have been a really intense and rich time.

Michael Hoffmann

These people all seemed to influence each other, and in fact, the interactive nature of their relationships probably helped to create such a dynamic world and to encourage the acceptance of a changing world.

Julia Rumley

To see the full range of films dedicated to the series *City of Dreams*, please visit the orchestra's interactive Vienna website at www.philharmonia.co.uk/vienna

Joji Hattori joins the Philharmonia this month for performances of the Bruch Violin Concerto with Sarah Chang, in Basingstoke on the 5th, Bedford on the 6th and in London on the 7th, and with Jennifer Pike in Norwich on the 12th.

The orchestra's Honorary Conductor for Life Christoph von Dohnányi conducts Dvorak's 9th symphony and Brahms's 1st Symphony in London on the 10th and 14th. The concert on the 10th is preceded by the Philharmonia's free Music of Today concert, dedicated to the work of composer Salvatore Sciarrino.

Paavo Järvi conducts the Brahms Violin Concerto with Viktoria Mullova and Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony in London on Saturday the 16th.

Join us in June for our last podcast of the season as we take a look at Brahms's second symphony with Christoph von Dohnányi. Thanks for watching.