

philharmonia orchestra

Julian Johnson:

In Vienna around 1900, what had been a rather sleepy and parochial 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 I went to the Belvedere Gallery in Vienna.

Agnes Husslein-Arco:

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:

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:

... 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.