

CITY OF DREAMS

VIENNA 1900~1935

ALBAN BERG (1885-1935)

Three Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6 (1913-15)

- i. *Präludium*
- ii. *Reigen*
- iii. *Marsch*

Berg had the highest regard for Gustav Mahler, and the première of the Ninth Symphony, in 1912, made a profound and lasting impression upon him. It was almost certainly this work that was still reverberating in his mind when he turned his attention to a large orchestral project of his own in 1912. For a while he was considering a Mahlerian style symphony, possibly including a setting of the end of Balzac's mystical novel, *Seraphita*. Though that did not transpire, the Mahlerian debts are everywhere in Berg's *Three Pieces* - most obviously in his use of March rhythms, *Ländler* and waltz styles, but also in his orchestration and the characteristic shape of his melodic ideas.

In June 1913, Berg was deeply wounded by Schoenberg's criticisms of his recent music, and more generally of Berg's lifestyle and attitude. Reeling from his former teacher's disapproval, he returned to Vienna from Berlin and immediately set about writing a large one-movement symphony. The miniature forms of his aphoristic pieces for clarinet and piano, Op. 5 and the *Altenberg Lieder*, Op. 4 seemed to be consciously rejected here for the dramatic possibilities of a larger musical canvas. Further evidence for that is given by the fact that in 1914, as he was completing the first and third of these pieces, he was also making tentative beginnings on his opera *Wozzeck*.

The dramatic instinct that Berg was eventually to demonstrate in the opera is already latent in the *Three Pieces for Orchestra*. The first of these, significantly, is a *Prelude*. Like the beginning of Mahler's Ninth, this piece constitutes itself slowly, with a melodic line emerging only gradually from the fragments presented in the opening bars. The faint, indistinct rustling of the percussion, more noise than musical tone, gives way to the tentative beginnings of an expressive voice - a few high notes in the upper registers of the bassoon and trombone make a fragile opening which is immediately crushed by a forceful gesture of the whole orchestra. The violins take up the idea of a lyrical melodic line, but constantly at odds with the rather threatening, growling interjections of the rest of the orchestra. This opposition characterises the whole piece - time and again, the attempt to expand an expressive voice is silenced by a forceful rhythmic figure that recalls the death motive Berg identified in Mahler's Ninth Symphony.

Berg's title for the second piece, *Reigen*, inevitably recalls Schnitzler's play of 1896, *La Ronde* (or *Reigen*). The idea of a 'round dance' is used with deliberate irony by Schnitzler in his analysis of a hypocritical and hierarchical society in which sex becomes a common denominator, the means of crossing the boundaries of social status. Berg's 'round dance' is also deliberately addressed to Viennese society and equally unflinching in its critical stance. Rather like Mahler, in the scherzo of the Seventh Symphony, Berg deploys familiar dance materials (above all, the waltz and *Ländler*) but makes them unfamiliar through distortion and fragmentation. The movement as a whole lurches from one familiar yet distorted scene to another, like the unfolding of a dream. A Viennese audience would undoubtedly have recognised the musical world portrayed here, but

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recoiled at the grotesque version they were being given. There are moments of nostalgia and sentimentality, but swept away in the constant flux of the music.

The third piece, a March, is based on one of Mahler's most recurrent musical materials. It foregrounds the sheer power of the modern orchestra and its capacity for regimented violence. Berg completed this piece on 23 August, 1914, two months after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife at Sarajevo and against the backdrop of the opening hostilities of the First World War. It is hard to imagine a more trenchant musical representation of modern technology turned into an overwhelming and brutal force. As in the first two pieces, a lyrical voice protests but to little avail. The force of the march, the sheer deafening roar of the orchestra, becomes too much. Repeatedly, it asserts a brutal sort of order in the face of an overwhelming plurality of musical elements. Like a complex machine malfunctioning the orchestra is at odds with itself here, in the same way that Europe was at odds with itself. The music often sounds like a battle, but as much an internal, psychological one as a foreshadowing of the actual physical violence that was about to overtake Europe.

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