

philharmonia orchestra

Julian Johnson:

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'.