

philharmonia orchestra

Julian Johnson:

One of the reasons that modernity emerged with such force in Vienna is that it had to break through such a weight of history. As the capital city of the Hapsburg Empire, Vienna was the home of the Emperor, the aristocracy and the imperial bureaucracy – a world that imagined it would never change. The experience of the new was thus all the more intense for its proximity to the old. It makes for a fascinating combination, as Esa-Pekka Salonen explains.

Esa-Pekka Salonen:

There's something terribly attractive about this period, it's the kind of sense of the old and the new. And the old is very much Europe at this point. They have complete control over the expression and the means of it, and yet you get the sense that there is something new happening, and the old and the new – they kind of co-exist.

Julian Johnson:

Especially in Vienna I think, which in some ways was a very backward city until the late nineteenth century, until suddenly there's this explosion... And I still think one of the strange, very hard things to explain is why Vienna at that time becomes in some ways the most productive and most creative and most advanced city in the whole world.

Agnes Husslein-Arco:

What happened in Vienna was that there was a radical change suddenly, and in all areas: in architecture, in the paintings, in the visual arts, but also in the music, and it all interacted.

Julian Johnson:

One of the things the younger generation were really objecting to was that this city that lived so much off its past, its history, became false: so the new art was self-consciously critical. It was meant to challenge the old, it was meant to ask questions of it; and it was meant to provoke, to provoke reflection about how people represented themselves and how people represented the world around them. It's still here today, this tension between the old and the new, modern Vienna still wrestling with its past.

You can hear this mix of old and new in the music of quite different composers. In Schoenberg's music of the 1920s, despite the novelty of his musical language, he went back to the forms of Baroque and Classical music. In fact, Schoenberg was

scathing about composers he thought were just playing at being modern, without a real grounding in tradition. Some modernists embraced the new wholeheartedly and were not afraid to shock their audience or to deny them the comfort of the familiar. Others were haunted by the past, even though they knew they were irrevocably separated from it. What seems to have been shared by this generation is a sense that art was never merely decorative but a powerful means for exploring the very nature of modern life.