

# CITY OF DREAMS

VIENNA 1900~1935

## **ARNOLD SCHOENBERG (1874-1951)**

### ***Gurrelieder* (1900-03, 1910-11)**

In 1900, Schoenberg began a song cycle for soprano, tenor and piano, intending to enter it for a composing competition. A year later, he found he had composed a massive cantata for five soloists, a narrator, three male choruses of four parts each, an eight-part mixed chorus, and an orchestra of about 150. The poems that had inspired such a vast work were drawn from a collection by the Danish poet, Jens Peter Jacobsen (1847-85), itself based upon medieval legends. Both the text, and Schoenberg's response to it, reflect the powerful influence of Wagnerism at the *fin-de-siècle* to which few young composers, writers and artists were immune. Indeed, Schoenberg's friend Alexander Zemlinsky had begun setting part of the same text in 1899.

The 'songs of Gurre' tell the tale of two lovers - King Waldemar and Tove. When their love is discovered by Waldemar's wife, Queen Helwig, she has Tove killed, a blow from which Waldemar never recovers. He rails against God himself, accusing him of being a tyrant to allow Tove to die and thus to be separated from Waldemar. As punishment for this blasphemy, Waldemar is compelled to ride every night on a wild hunt with the ghostly figures of his dead vassals. This apparently interminable cycle, however, is broken by the return of Spring. As new life blossoms throughout the world, the souls of Waldemar and Tove find release in the renewal of nature, and thus the eternal union that Tove once promised Waldemar.

It is an astonishing work for many reasons, not least that while its composition was begun in 1900, when Schoenberg's musical language was still essentially late-romantic, it was not completed until 1911, by which time he had written some of his key atonal works in a more modernist idiom. In January 1910, it was performed with the orchestral parts in a six-handed piano reduction by Webern. The fully orchestrated version was premièred in Vienna on February 23, 1913, conducted by Franz Schreker. Schoenberg was dismissive of its positive reception, stung by the fact that his earlier style was enthusiastically acclaimed while his more recent works were rejected.

Over a decade earlier, when he began the work, it had little chance of any performance. Indeed, like the tone poem, *Pelleas und Melisande*, which interrupted his work on *Gurrelieder* in 1903, it was an extremely ambitious project for an almost unknown composer still in his twenties, with virtually no formal instruction. Apart from the limited success of a String Quartet from 1897 and some songs performed to little acclaim in 1900, Schoenberg had no professional performances to his name, and yet *Gurrelieder* shows complete mastery of the techniques of musical narrative and tone painting of Wagner and Strauss.

Perhaps it was Gustav Mahler who provided Schoenberg with a model. *Gurrelieder* finds some parallels in Mahler's youthful cantata *Das klagende Lied*, completed in 1880 at the age of just twenty. Mahler revised the work several times before it was finally premièred in Vienna, conducted by himself, on 17 February, 1901. Alban Berg was at the concert and wrote to Schoenberg (then in Berlin) describing it as 'a magnificent work'. The comparison is a useful one for other reasons. Both composers were wrestling with a hybrid musical form, caught between the idea of operatic and theatrical music on the one hand, and instrumental, symphonic music on the other. *Gurrelieder* is certainly hard to locate in terms of genre; Part I seems to work like an orchestral song cycle, whereas Part III often seems more like opera.

*Contd.*

But it is undoubtedly Wagner whose voice is most readily heard behind Schoenberg's in this work. Like Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* traces the downfall of the mighty, reflected in the all-encompassing cycle of nature. Like *Tristan und Isolde*, it charts a yearning for the loss of individual identity in the ecstatic union of two lovers. Waldemar and Tove know that only in death will their desire, forged out of their separateness in life, finally be reconciled and find resolution. The beginning of the piece takes place at dusk, leading into an intense love duet at midnight, passes through the nocturnal hunt of the ghostly riders and ends at dawn with the promise of new life on the arrival of the summer wind, a year and a day later. For all the medieval origins of the text, this blurring of the world of nature and the erotic is typical of the artistic concerns of the fin-de-siècle.

Part I consists of nine songs, sung alternately by Waldemar and Tove, seamlessly joined by orchestral transitions. They fall into clear pairs, with each character giving their account of successive stages in the unfolding narrative. The first two songs depict the landscape and atmosphere, as evening turns into a moonlit night. Waldemar is riding out to the castle of Gurre, where Tove awaits him. Songs 3 and 4 depict his journey and arrival, an ecstatic moment reflected in the whole of nature. Songs 5 and 6 express the lover's meeting and their declaration of love. Songs 7 and 8 are preceded by a darker tone of foreboding (heard in a brooding cello figure); the midnight hour is eerily signalled by twelve repeated tones in the double basses. Waldemar anticipates with horror that, at some point in the future, they will inevitably be parted, concluding in despair that 'Our time is over'. But Tove answers in a radiant tone, assuring Waldemar that death will not be an end but merely a threshold to an eternity together. The final song is Waldemar's response - 'Du wunderliche Tove' (You wondrous Tove) - in which the lovers' desire gives way to a profound peace.

An orchestral interlude leads to the 'Song of the Wood Dove' (mezzo soprano), which narrates the aftermath of what we have just witnessed. With mounting grief, the Wood Dove describes Tove's death and burial, and Waldemar's utter distraction. Only at the conclusion of her account does she tell us how Tove died on the orders of Waldemar's jealous Queen. 'Helwig's falcon it was, who cruelly tore apart Gurre's dove.'

In the very brief Part II, Waldemar not only curses God but threatens to storm heaven itself if the souls of himself and Tove are kept apart. It was wrong, he cries to God, to take Tove's life and thus rob him of the one thing he cherished. As he does so, the orchestral music is full of thematic echoes of the earlier love songs, like an obsessive presence in his mind.

Waldemar's curse, and subsequent punishment, is a turning point in the work. It separates the lush romanticism of Part I (the love of Tove and Waldemar) and the grotesque but thrilling ride of death in Part III. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was also the point at which Schoenberg broke off the initial period of composition in 1903. By the time he resumed work, in 1910, his compositional style had changed dramatically. In works like *Erwartung* and the Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 16, written in 1909, Schoenberg had fully explored an atonal, expressionistic musical language that sounds worlds apart from Part I of *Gurrelieder*. His skill in binding together the earlier and later material is remarkable, but his task was undoubtedly helped by the peculiar nature of the story itself.

The Wild Hunt of Part III depicts a rather ghoulish riding out of Waldemar and his dead vassals, raised from the grave each night. It opens with a reference back to the start of the seventh song in Part I, Waldemar's anticipation of the lovers' parting in death. Schoenberg unleashes the massive power of his orchestra here, with an overpowering use of the brass section to capture the jangling of armour and horses as the vassals assemble. What follows has the character of Mahler's most austere march movements, the macabre world of his equally ghostly military songs, 'Der Tambours' sell' and 'Revelge'. The more fragmentary modernist style suits the subject matter well in the narration of this supernatural scene by a terrified Farmer.

Three male choirs take the role of the vassals. Schoenberg's most obvious model is Wagner's spectral chorus of sailors in *Der fliegende Holländer*. Indeed, the parallel is an important one, because just as the crew of the Dutchman's ship is compelled to sail endlessly around the world until their captain finds salvation in love, so too will Waldemar's vassals not rest until he recovers Tove. Schoenberg's use of three choirs, each divided into

*Contd.*

four parts, allows him to construct dense and powerfully dramatic music. Also riding with the vassals is Klaus the Fool, the King's jester, who speaks in riddles. In some ways, his chattering provides some relief from the horror of the Wild Hunt; in other ways, it merely adds to the sense of madness. The Fool's apparent nonsense acts as a kind of sidestep, a strategy that exacerbates the sense that the emotional burden here is too great to be properly expressed. Klaus recalls some of the simpletons in Mahler's use of the folk poetry of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, but it also anticipates another fool, the prescient Idiot that appears in the first tavern scene of Berg's *Wozzeck*.

Waldemar pleads with God not to separate him from Tove, threatening that if his soul goes to Hell while hers goes to Heaven, his passion would give him the strength to storm heaven itself. With the coming of dawn, the ghostly ride comes to an end and the vassals return to their graves. In their last chorus, longing to sleep in peace, they briefly anticipate a return of life before the music descends into a dark abyss.

This nadir acts as a foil to what follows: *The Wild Hunt of the Summer Wind*. Schoenberg marks it as a Melodrama, narrated by a Speaker which, in some ways, anticipates a kind of film music with voice-over. Except, that is, that the Speaker's part is notated musically, using the technique of 'Sprechstimme' that Schoenberg brought to fruition in his *Pierrot Lunaire* of 1912. This involves the singer/speaker shaping each line notated with musical pitches but in a voice that lies somewhere between singing and speaking.

The Melodrama opens mysteriously, like a sort of detuned version of the opening of Mahler's First Symphony, with bare octaves high in the woodwind, revealing a rich tapestry of scurrying figures. The Speaker's descriptions of the renewal of nature are wonderfully detailed and Schoenberg's music seems to pick up on the sense of the internal working of nature - the rustling and microscopic activity of growth rather than with some grand outpouring of emotion. A rich web of musical reminiscences offer fragmentary glimpses of the more substantial forms of Part I, as Waldemar searches to regain what he has lost. Similarly, the rich orchestral tone of Part I gives way to more transparent textures as accompaniment to the Speaker. It makes for an astonishing inversion of the earlier music, something like a photographic negative's relation to the full colour image.

Though the Speaker's words are allusive, it is clear that Tove and Waldemar are reunited in this burgeoning of new life ushered in with the summer wind. There are echoes of their love music as the wind bears them upwards into the canopy of budding leaves. Schoenberg's central theme of transfiguration finds a key statement here, as the individual figures of Tove and Waldemar find their union in the renewal of the whole of nature. A final affirmative chorus (crucially, a mixed chorus this time), like a secular version of the end of Mahler's Resurrection Symphony, hails the dawn.

Critics have often been divided by *Gurrelieder*. While some regret that he did not continue to write in this late-romantic style, others have dismissed the work as a peripheral example of romantic excess before Schoenberg showed his real modernist credentials. But another way of hearing it suggests that such an either/or choice is a false one. Schoenberg's music as a whole underlines that what we call romantic and modern are like two sides of the same coin. All his music is located on the axis between two musical worlds, at the threshold where one turns into the other. What defined that historical moment around 1900, and what the First World War was to make palpable to everyone, was a catastrophic sense of loss, followed by a yearning to recover what was lost. The story of Waldemar and Tove is an allegory of just that story - the story of the modern, reflected in a single work.

© Julian Johnson 2008