

CITY OF DREAMS

VIENNA 1900~1935

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG (1874-1951)

Verklärte Nacht, Op. 4 (1899)

Transfigured Night was originally written for string sextet (2 violins, 2 violas, 2 cellos), but Schoenberg made an arrangement for full orchestral strings in 1917, and a further version in 1943. The score includes a poem by Richard Dehmel (1863-1925), not simply because Schoenberg borrowed its title but because his whole piece is shaped around the form and content of the poem. It describes a man and a woman walking through a cold, moonlit forest. She confesses to him her sadness and shame that she is pregnant with another man's child. He replies that, through the power of their love, the child will be transfigured and become theirs.

Reduced to such a bare account, it seems an odd programme for a piece of chamber music, not least a string sextet that suggested Schoenberg's most immediate models were the sextets of Brahms. But it makes more sense if we remember that the central idea of transformation - or transfiguration - was one that was to preoccupy Schoenberg throughout his life. Indeed, 'Transfigured Night' would make a good title for a study of his entire life and works. Schoenberg's faith in the capacity of music to enact a metaphysical transformation shapes not only individual works, like *Verklärte Nacht* or the Second String Quartet, Op.10 (1908), but also his development as a composer, from the late romanticism of *Gurrelieder*, to atonal works like *Erwartung* (1909) and on to the beginnings of serialism in the 1920s.

Verklärte Nacht has an important place in Schoenberg's output, not only because it proved to be his most popular work but because it was the one that first brought him to public attention. Written in the space of just three weeks in 1899, it did not receive a first performance until 1902. Through his friend and erstwhile teacher, Alexander Zemlinsky, the sextet had been put forward for performance in the series of chamber music concerts promoted by the Wiener Tonkünstlerverein. To the rather conservative members of its jury, Schoenberg's score, for all its supreme craft and essentially romantic musical language, looked dangerously modern. One member of the jury remarked that it was as if the composer had taken the score of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and smeared the ink while it was still wet.

The Wagnerian reference, however, was not entirely inaccurate. While Schoenberg's early works show him absorbing stylistic lessons from Brahms and Dvořák, after his meeting with Zemlinsky in 1895 he was exposed to the music of Wagner and also to contemporary poetry, such as that of Richard Dehmel. For Schoenberg it was a formative convergence of influences, the constructive principles and taut musical argument of Brahms, with the poetic and representational concerns of Wagner. The idea of programme music 'infecting' the pure world of chamber music was no doubt partly what disturbed members of the Tonkünstlerverein.

Ironically, views of Schoenberg today are generally skewed the other way. We so readily assume he was a composer of abstract, technical works we can easily overlook the extent to which his music was shaped by romantic concerns. In early works, such as *Verklärte Nacht* or the tone poem *Pelleas und Mélisande*, Schoenberg was happy to point to the presence of extra-musical content. In later works, in line with a more abstract modernist idea, he tended to avoid doing so but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that, as for

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the music of Berg and Webern, the idea of a programme for instrumental music remained important: it simply went underground.

Schoenberg was at pains to underline that the programme of a work like *Verklärte Nacht* was not a question of telling a literal story, of characters and events, but rather pointed to the inward drama of an emotional or psychological narrative. His concern was with expressing the idea behind the poem. It is this concentration on the inward drama that explains why such a simple plot can lie behind an instrumental work lasting nearly thirty minutes. Egon Wellesz, himself a pupil of Schoenberg, suggested that *Verklärte Nacht* falls into five sections corresponding to the five sections of Dehmel's poem: the couple walking in the forest, her confession, walking in silence, his reassurance, their transfiguration in nature. This broad narrative is certainly marked by the music, though it is perhaps just as effective to take the poem as a single idea, worked out in the music.

The instruments are often given lyrical, almost vocal music, echoing the communication between the two lovers, sometimes written explicitly in the manner of a duet for two singers. But more often, the music reflects interior monologues and private anxieties. It is perhaps worth remembering that in the year this piece was composed another citizen of Vienna, Sigmund Freud, completed one of his definitive works *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Richard Dehmel's poem is similarly concerned with the revelation of a repressed past, a confessional experience that effects some kind of inner and outer transformation.

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