

philharmonia orchestra

Julian Johnson:

The writer Stephan Zweig once said it was impossible to tell where the city ended and the countryside began. As you look down this hillside, as the woods give way to vineyards which produce the famous Heuriger, you can see it merge into the city and in the distance the Prater park, the other great wooded area and great escape into the green for the Viennese.

If you really want to understand Schoenberg and his music, then you probably need to come out to the Prater park and think about the Viennese taste for simply enjoying themselves. Because this culture is not really that serious! The Viennese were much happier going to balls, enjoying themselves on a Sunday evening, going to the operetta, than they were taking life too seriously. It's worth remembering that all the serious stuff needs putting in some kind of context, which is this: pleasure, enjoyment, amusement.

This giant Ferris wheel was built in 1897, which is the same year that Mahler arrived in Vienna to become Music Director of the opera. It's the same year that Brahms died, it's the same year that the popular mayor Karl Lueger took over in Vienna. It's a wonderful symbol of the new modern age that came to Vienna, but instead of being industrial – because Vienna was busy ignoring its industrialisation – it has to do with this great pleasure park. So here we are in a great big Ferris wheel, and down below are lots of fairground rides and all the things that you would expect to entertain people on a Bank Holiday or a weekend.

Agnes Husslein-Arco:

I think you have to understand that in Vienna, you have the centre where everything happens and then you have these wonderful parks in Vienna. That's a painting of the Prater, and that's also a wonderful look at Vienna: it's actually a small city, very green surrounded by wonderful areas, so you're immediately in the woods or in the Prater, and that was open to the public.

Julian Johnson:

Am I also right in thinking that it suggests a wonderful balance of different people within society too? I mean, the lady on the right seems very elegant, but there's children playing in the pond.

Agnes Husslein-Arco:

That's true, very simple children, but this was a private garden: the Prater was always private and it was only opened to the public at the end of the nineteenth century. So that's new, but it was still used by the elegant lady with nurse, and on

the other hand you have the simple, because now they're allowed to go to the Prater as well.

Julian Johnson:

But in fact in reality there was.. but wasn't there at the end of the nineteenth century increasingly a popular movement in politics to reclaim some of the power, I suppose? This suggests that life was peaceful, that there wasn't any political tension.

Agnes Husslein-Arco:

Of course there were a lot of political tensions but in Vienna you didn't feel it so much. More, maybe, some intellectual groups felt it. Of course life became more and more complicated because a lot of people as I explained came from the different parts of the monarchy and it was not always easy to find a job; but the real revolution took place in the different Kronländer - the Crown Lands.

Julian Johnson:

The Schloss Belvedere behind me is a great example of old Vienna. It's a Baroque palace built in the early eighteenth century. The architecture is mirrored in the very formal gardens that run all the way down the hill into Vienna and another matching palace at the bottom of the hill. The gardens are all straight lines, box hedges, formal fountains and statues: a great image of Vienna's sense of order, classical control. Even the Ringstrasse, when they built it in the 1860s, was more about control and order. The Emperor was so worried about political uprisings that he thought a much wider street would let the army in quicker, in case of riot.

The Ringstrasse pretty much defines modern Vienna. It was started in the 1860s by clearing out what were the old city defences and opening up this very wide boulevard of a road. The opposition of the younger generation was that these buildings were all built in a historicist style, they didn't reflect the modern times at all. They were drawn from Greek classical architecture, from Renaissance and Baroque architecture: in other words they pretended to be something they weren't.

At the same time as this ancient, heavy, monumental style of the imperial architecture, you have within a stone's throw the beginnings of new Vienna. Just round the Michaelerplatz, you have one of the most controversial buildings of new Vienna. This green building behind me was designed by the architect Adolf Loos and was hugely controversial in its day. Designed and built in 1910, it caused controversy because it stripped back all of the detail and all of the ornament of the old style. The Emperor called it the 'house without eyebrows' because it doesn't have the decorative features above the windows. It doesn't look so controversial, but the contrast between that and the older style of buildings next to it caused something of a furore.

A few years earlier, Loos had written a pamphlet entitled *Ornament as Crime*, in which he set out the theory that a culture which overdecorated everything and made everything more elaborate than it needed to be was a rather unhealthy, sick culture. What he thought the modern should represent is something stripped back and functional: things should be what they are, and not pretend to be something different.