

philharmonia orchestra

Julian Johnson:

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 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. One needs to remember this was pretty cutting edge in the 1890s, this idea of a huge wheel, the technological capability of riding in comfort up to this height of 64 metres or something, seeing the city from a completely new perspective; and although it's part of the pleasure park, part of the entertainment of the Viennese weekend if you like, it was also at exactly the same time as the artists of the Viennese Secession in 1897 started insisting on seeing life from a very different perspective.

Vienna modernised much later than many European capitals, so when it did catch up in the closing years of the nineteenth century, it was a much bigger shock to the system. People's experience of the city became much more abrupt and broken up. It's astonishing to listen to some of the music of the early years of the twentieth century: that sense of crisscrossing lines and dissonant counterpoint comes very close to that sense of standing in the middle of a modern city with things coming at you from every direction. What that does to your sensibility, to your consciousness, is completely different.

Listen to the opening section of a work like Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony: the dense counterpoint and the speed of the lines I think comes really close to this experience of being at the heart of a modern traffic system.