

Christopher Hailey:

Franz Schreker
and
The Pluralities of Modernism

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Vienna's credentials as a cradle of modernism are too familiar to need rehearsing. Freud, Kraus, Schnitzler, Musil, Wittgenstein, Klimt, Schiele, Kokoschka conjure up a world at once iridescent and lowering, voluptuously self-indulgent and coolly analytical. Arnold Schoenberg has been accorded pride of place as Vienna's quintessential musical modernist who confronted the crisis of language and meaning by emancipating dissonance and, a decade later, installing a new serial order. It is a tidy narrative and one largely established in the years after the Second World War by a generation of students and disciples intent upon reasserting disrupted continuities. That such continuities never existed is beside the point; it was a useful and, for its time, productive revision of history because it was fueled by the excitement of discovery.

Revision always entails excision, and over the decades it became increasingly obvious that this narrative of Viennese modernism was a gross simplification. The re-discovery of Mahler was the first bump in the road, and attempts to portray him as Schoenberg's John the Baptist were subverted by the enormous force of Mahler's own personality and a popularity which soon generated its own self-sustaining momentum. In recent years other voices have emerged that could not be accommodated into the narrative, including Alexander Zemlinsky, Franz Schmidt, Egon Wellesz, Karl Weigl, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and most vexing of all Franz Schreker. Long banished out of hand, Schreker was subsequently marginalized as a late Romantic and allotted a mini-orbit of his own. But a strange thing happened. With the experience of his music, music history - that history created by our ears - began to change. Received notions could no longer account for a simple and defining feature of Viennese modernism: its remarkable pluralism. Before 1914 Vienna was a cosmopolitan intersection of cultures and ideas, its music the reflection of that multicultural diversity that was the Hapsburg Empire's glory and its doom. After 1918 Austrians, shorn of their empire, sought to compensate their loss by a fatal identification with German culture. It was this crisis of identity that prompted Schoenberg's triumphant and defiant proclamation of a discovery that would assure Germany musical hegemony for the next hundred years; at about the same time another Austrian proclaimed a Reich ten times that span. Schoenberg's prophecy proved only marginally more accurate.

Schoenberg's pronouncement was more than cultural opportunism. His conservative temperament, his outsider status - as an Austrian, a Jew, an autodidact, and a modernist - all reinforced his need for identification and it was an identification that sought its roots [above all] in history. Schoenberg claimed the legacy of Bach, the mantle of Brahms, and

the revolution of Wagner, and [above all] the heritage of the Viennese classical tradition. As an historical concept, "Second Viennese School" hovers somewhere between an inspired marketing strategy and a bold *coup d'Etat*. It posits a dynasty where none existed and then usurps for itself the right of succession. The existence of either "school" is debatable, and neither can lay claim to being particularly "Viennese". On its face the concept is nakedly fraudulent and its fraudulence lies in its exclusivity, although one should hasten to add that the term itself (and the exclusivity it implies) was less Schoenberg's creation than that of his students and the generation of disciples that followed.

Co-opting history was a pendant to Schoenberg's obsession with organic continuity. The breakthrough to atonality was justified as historical necessity, while the method of pitch organization purporting to tame these unleashed forces derived its authority from an abstraction of historical practice. To be sure, organicism such as one finds in Schoenberg's vaunted developing variation is present in certain works by Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms but it was Schoenberg who made it an article of faith, a moral category - and a cornerstone of Viennese tradition. To do this required ignoring other, equally characteristic aspects of Viennese and Austrian culture including the love of gaudy display, sensuous theatricality, lyric breadth, epic structure, and a fondness for the absurd, the inorganic, the unmediated, the very idea of disruption. Disruption was in fact a central category of the Viennese experience. As a microcosm and cultural crossroads of the Hapsburg Empire, Vienna was accustomed to juxtaposed incongruities, examples of which are evident in its art, literature, theater, and architecture over at least a millennium. In music this quality is demonstrably present in the works of its classical masters, as well in music by Gluck and Dittersdorf, Schubert and Bruckner, and others who fit less comfortably into the "classical" mold. The most significant challenge to Schoenberg's narrow definition of Viennese tradition lay still closer at hand: Gustav Mahler.

Familiarity and relentless marketing have blunted our appreciation of Mahler's radical challenge. We forget how very shocking and, yes, tasteless, his music can be and we would do well to read with empathy the reviews of uncomprehending contemporary critics for they, far more than Mahler's acolytes, tell us why this music is still so vital and, if it is to remain so, how to recapture something of its affront. Evidence of that affront can be found in the difficulty it presented for Arnold Schoenberg, whose music is so very antithetical to that of Mahler. Schoenberg's music is centrifugal, it aspires to self-sufficiency, to a kind of hegemonic control; Mahler's music is centripetal; it makes no proclamations of cultural supremacy, but instead sends reports from the provinces. There is irony, even a tinge of betrayal in the fact that this ambitious outsider clawed his way into the center, to the directorship of the Vienna Court Opera, where he ruled like a pope; he exercised powers Schoenberg could only envy.

Mahler is a useful starting point for approaching Franz Schreker. Like Mahler, Schreker came from the periphery. He was born in

Monaco in 1878, his father, a Bohemian-born Hungarian Jew converted to Protestantism, was an established portrait photographer accredited to numerous European courts. Schreker's mother, an Austrian Catholic, was the scion of minor nobility; her marriage to Ignaz Schrecker scandalized her family. The dissonance of his parentage, the itinerant life of his childhood (Monaco, Brussels, Spa, Paris, Pola, Linz), the early death of his father, the family's sudden impoverishment, and the death of a beloved sister, explain much about Schreker's aesthetic proclivity toward disjunction, reversal, and abrupt contrast. As an aurally and visually impressionable child Schreker came to consciousness in a series of widely disparate cultural, linguistic, and musical environments that defied seamless integration.

Schreker was 10 when his newly-widowed mother moved with her four children to Vienna in 1888. Four years later Schreker entered the Vienna conservatory where his principle teachers were the violinist Arnold Rosé and the composer Robert Fuchs, who had also taught Mahler, Wolf, and Zemlinsky. Schreker graduated with distinction in 1900 but as he shed the thin Brahmsian veneer of his training what emerged was a seething concoction of influences at least as much Italian and French as German in origin. A first opera, *Flammen* (1901-1902), points the way to the breakthrough that came with his second, *Der ferne Klang* (c. 1903-1910). *Der ferne Klang* is a radical departure from Wagner, both in musical language and subject matter. Its stylistic and aesthetic multiplicity contrasts evocative Romanticism with seedy Naturalism, mystical symbolism with penetrating psychoanalytical insight. The juxtaposition of musical worlds, most notably in the opera's second act, suggests an aesthetic affinity with Mahler, although there is no evidence of direct influence. Indeed, Schreker had little early appreciation of Mahler's music and no love for Mahler as a cultural icon. There are occasional reminiscences - the *Ländler* that accompanies the Schmierenschauspieler's scene in the first act of *Der ferne Klang* has a certain *Wunderhorn* feeling - although they are fleeting and may even be instances of ironic allusion. But as with Mahler there is an unmistakable compositional identity behind Schreker's stylistic multiplicity. His orchestration, harmonic language, motivic design, and structural organization are uniquely his own and owe little to Brahms or Wagner, or to that synthesis of the two that we hear in the early works of Zemlinsky and Schoenberg. One is tempted to posit the influence of French Impressionism but aside from Charpentier's *Louise* the composer knew little contemporary French music at this time. Schreker seems to emerge from nowhere with a wholly idiosyncratic musical language, whose originality lies less in a fusion of impulses than in a daring montage of often clearly identifiable sources. It is a creative phenomenon that recalls not only Mahler but Hector Berlioz, another voice from the periphery whose individuality lies more in juxtaposition than in synthesis.

Der ferne Klang - the distant sound - is a fitting metaphor for Schreker's own struggle to find his voice because it captures something essential about the nature of his search, the quality of his aural experience. More diffident than Schoenberg, he is a composer straining to hear from afar, a detached but

empathetic observer, a stenographer of the soul. Schreker's title also evokes his links to Romanticism, although it is Romanticism filtered through turn-of-the-century sensibilities. Schreker is fully cognizant of that crisis of language and authenticity so powerfully formulated by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in his Lord Chandos Letter of 1902.

In the traditional narrative of Viennese modernism that crisis in language is equated with the crisis of tonality in which the emancipation of dissonance was a courageous recognition of necessary consequence. The explosive energy of Schoenberg's dissonance thus came from within the materials of music itself and by a process of abstraction the composer would eventually create a constructive syntax to harness its eruptive force and relativize its expressive meaning. But dissonance can take many forms. Schreker's music, though often verging on atonality, remains referential and derives its tension from the contrast of existing elements, refusing both synthesis and resolution into a higher abstraction. His approach, like that of Mahler, is paratactic rather than syntactic, an aesthetic of allusion and plurality involving structural strategies far removed from those of Schoenberg and his circle. It is, in short, a radically different kind of Viennese modernism.

Not surprisingly, given his childhood experiences, Schreker's frame of cultural reference is much broader than that of Mahler. Mahler's music is geographically and temporally focused - Bohemia and Austria through the lens of German Romanticism and folklore. Schreker's music lacks fixed geographic, even temporal orientation and as a result it also lacks Mahler's deep-seated nostalgia. For all its luscious opulence, this music is surprisingly unsentimental, its extravagance undercut with bitter irony. This makes Schreker difficult. He is not Strauss or Korngold (for whom nostalgia is likewise a potent aesthetic category) and he sabotages the easy listening they encourage by withholding the affirmative pleasure of melodic gratification. It is not true that Schreker cannot write melodies; they exist in profusion but are usually broken off, abandoned, as it were, at birth. Think of the third act reunions between Grete and Fritz in *Der ferne Klang*, or of Smee and his wife in *Der Schmied von Gent*. What wouldn't Strauss have done with the very musical material Schreker provides - what duets they would have become! Strauss would have given us what Schreker, in the interest of dramatic truth, steadfastly refuses. In this regard Schreker and Schoenberg share a belief in concentrated experience and the unrepeatable moment. This imposes upon the listener a new sense of temporal urgency and results in a nervous density of ideas that requires attentive listening.

But Schreker is no stern ascetic and for this the purists (the prudish Adorno) charged him with pubescent indulgence. Schreker does indulge and enjoin (though usually in vain) the gorgeous moment to abide, and because he is above all a man of the theater he does so with all the extra-musical resources at his disposal. Schreker embraces beauty but also admonishes us - for he, too, is at core a moralist - that it is fleeting. His famous *Klangrausch*, like E.T.A. Hoffmann's aeolian harp, is a *fata morgana*, a mirage that contains within itself a prickly

warning that its allures are evanescent. Schreker is both the wily Wizard of Oz and the impish Toto who draws back the curtain to reveal the artifice of art. Art, divorced from life, Schreker cautions, is hollow magic. He does not condemn sensuous indulgence; rather, it must be the highest expression of our humanity. It is naked humanity, shivering, vulnerable, betrayed by art and stripped of its illusions, that we encounter at the close - Grete, Alviano, Amandus at the end *Der ferne Klang*, *Die Gezeichneten*, and *Der singende Teufel*.

Schreker proved an easy target for the Nazis who disdained his empathy for outsiders and charged him with promoting sexual perversion. The latter charge survives today because Schreker's frank treatment of sexual longing, that most private sphere of human experience, continues to threaten vested power structures. It is impossible to imagine a fascist appropriation of these operas although ironically the facile sensationalism of numerous post-war Schreker productions has perpetuated the Nazis' accusation. Both detractors and would-be champions overlook the composer's principal concern: the human condition in all its contingency and fragility. Schreker's menagerie of dreamers and outcasts, cynical voluptuaries and disillusioned idealists certainly owes something to the diversity of his own experiences. His letters and reminiscences suggest that as a young man he inhabited a world of fluid social boundaries, boundaries regularly crossed in his librettos and music in ways that continue to appall his critics. In this regard he can count Shakespeare and Schnitzler among his models.

Schreker shares his solidarity with life's outcasts and misfits with Alexander Zemlinsky, for whom he originally wrote the libretto to *Die Gezeichneten* (in its stead Zemlinsky composed Oscar Wilde's "The Birthday of the Infanta" under the title *Der Zwerg*). Both composers had a profound influence upon Alban Berg, who prepared the piano vocal score of *Der ferne Klang*, and *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* are unthinkable without their example. Indeed, Zemlinsky, Schreker, and Berg represent an aesthetic and musical triumvirate at least as compelling as the more familiar constellation of Berg, Schoenberg, and Webern. To tell the story of Viennese modernism through its operas would necessitate redrawing the city's artistic faultlines.

Schreker's own success as an opera composer far outstripped that of his Viennese contemporaries and in the years following the First World War new productions of his works even exceeded in number those of Richard Strauss. But Schreker's successes coincided with the height of Germany's post-war inflation, a coincidence not lost on his critics who noted that his decline began with economic stabilization. His sixth opera, *Irrelohe* (1924), was only a moderate success and the response to *Der singende Teufel* (1928) was lukewarm at best. It was a different age in which younger composers - Hindemith, Weill, Eisler, as well as Schreker's own students, including Ernst Krenek, Alois Hába, Felix Petryek, Wilhelm Grosz, Max Brand, Karol Rathaus, Berthold Goldschmidt, and Ignace Strassfogel (what other teacher produced such a diverse class?) - took the lead. Composers of an older generation - Strauss, Pfitzner, Zemlinsky, and Schoenberg - found themselves on the sidelines. All responded to

the transformed environment, but none more imaginatively than Franz Schreker.

As director of the Berlin Musikhochschule from 1920 to 1932 Schreker was in a position to observe contemporary developments first hand, and the ear that once strained to capture distant sounds proved no less adept in processing impulses from an age focused on the here and now. Schreker's creative engagement with his times began with its technology. Few composers spent more time in the recording studio and fewer still recorded so many of their own works.[1] Schreker was likewise at home in the broadcast studio, and his *Little Suite* of 1928 was one of the first works specifically conceived for the radio. His *Four Little Pieces* (1929/30) were written for film, part of the same project for which Schoenberg's wrote his op. 34. Late in his life Schreker served as the artistic director for a pioneering series of concert films.[2] There were even plans for a film version of *Der ferne Klang*, a work whose music and dramaturgy anticipated so many film techniques, including montage, split screen, flashback, jump-cut, and the establishing shot.

In the 1920s Schreker's music becomes lean and sinewy, a disappointment to those expecting the luxuriant *Klangrausch* of old. What critics fail to recognize is that the twisting lines, pungent dissonances, rhythmic quirks, the barbs and jagged shards of the composer's later work were ever present in his music, just below its rich, sumptuous surface. When performances of Schreker's early works bring out these elements the later works emerge for what they are - a response to the bracing, sober world of Berlin through distillation, a classic "late style" such as one finds in Beethoven, Mahler, or Shostakovich. The wiry linearity of the *Little Suite* (1928) suggests the influence of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, its closed forms and counterpoint the garb of Neo-Classicism, but this music's expressive urgency and pliant phrasing, so evident in the composer's own recording of the work, reveals the relationship to the Schreker of old. It is, incidentally, in his late works that one begins to hear echoes of Mahler, as, for instance, in the *Incalzando* from his *Four Little Pieces* for film.

A similar process of transformation is evident in the themes of Schreker's later operas in which art and politics are increasingly enmeshed. In *Der singende Teufel*, grim and austere, a musical utopia is co-opted by totalitarian orthodoxy, and in the comic folk opera *Der Schmied von Gent*, a tale of political repression and resistance, damnation and salvation, there is a sinister undertone that would be amplified by the Nazi demonstrations that marred the work's Berlin premiere in 1932. Surely the most enigmatic and beguiling of Schreker's last operas - and one of the most radical stage works of the 1920s - is *Christophorus, or the Vision of an Opera*, written between 1925 and 1929, but not premiered until 1978.[3] *Christophorus*, part satiric *Zeitoper*, part morality tale, is the artistic testament of Schreker's Berlin years. This modern retelling of the legend of St. Christopher is a parable of the limits of representation and as such offers an intriguing pendant to Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. It is no coincidence that *Christophorus* is dedicated to Arnold Schoenberg, a fact that has, until recently, gone unnoticed in the Schoenberg literature.[4]

Music history is ultimately the creation of our ears and Schreker's emergence from the shadows is gradually transforming and expanding our understanding of Viennese modernism. Kurt Blaukopf apostrophized Mahler as a contemporary of the future, but this is true of any composer whose music has the capacity to redefine itself within new contexts. Critics once attributed Schreker's colorful orchestration to self-indulgence and a lack of rigor; today we hear how he anticipated numerous post-war developments, including the timbral fields of Lutoslawski, Ligeti, and the spectral composers. Vassily Sinaisky's first Chandos recording of Schreker's orchestral music makes a compelling case for hearing Schreker in this way.[5] In a famous passage on *Klangfarbenmelodie* in his *Harmonielehre* of 1911 Schoenberg speculates on the expressive and structural potential for tone color.[6] He no doubt had the third of his *Orchestra Pieces*, op. 16, in mind, but his remarks are equally applicable to Schreker. We still lack the vocabulary to describe music's timbral dimension but recent analysis confirms that Schreker deployed his instrumental effects to carefully thought-out dramatic and structural ends.[7] Schreker's sound world captivated his contemporaries. Its influence on Berg has been noted but there are surprising affinities to Anton Webern, as well.[8] Schreker and Webern are not opposites, as one might suppose, but intimately linked through the precision of their timbral imagination - this, too, an unexplored chapter of Viennese modernism.

Michael Gielen, a modernist steeped in the works of Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg, recently led a new production of *Der ferne Klang* at the Berlin Staatsoper.[9] Affinities and differences between Schreker and his contemporaries emerged in sharp relief through Gielen's close attention to detail. Gielen's Schreker is altogether edgier, more rhythmically profiled, more dissonant than that of Sinaisky; he captures the caustic, acerbic side of the composer's personality, accentuates the dislocations in his music - and points the way to Schreker's late works. Gielen and Sinaisky offer complementary approaches to this music and both confirm Schreker's continuing modernity.

One means of discovering an idiomatic interpretive approach to Schreker's scores is to listen to the composer's own recordings and to the post-war performances of that handful of conductors - Hermann Scherchen, Robert Heger, Winfried Zillig, and Hans Rosbaud - who were still part of the Schreker performance tradition.[10] A 1965 radio performance of Schreker's Whitman cycle, *Vom ewigen Leben*, with Helen Donath under Hermann Scherchen, who led the work's 1929 premiere, remains, despite orchestral flaws, a benchmark of pliant, flexible phrasing and subtle interplay of lines. Donath is the ideal Schreker soprano, never heavy, always lithe, supple, expressive, and intonationally secure. No currently available recording of any Schreker work comes remotely close to matching the enchantment of her performance.

The start of a new century has set us to re-thinking the contours of the old. Early twentieth-century modernism is no longer the monolith it was, or rather, so many of its

contradictory facets have emerged to demonstrate "modernism" to be a monolith that never was. This process of historical revision has gone hand-in-hand with an urge to redress injustice by cultivating music suppressed by political or aesthetic orthodoxies. Our current preoccupation with victims should not obscure the fact that there are reasons more pressing than guilt, resentment, moral crusading, and idle curiosity to unearth forgotten scores. Franz Schreker offers an example of a discovery that challenges us to re-think familiar terrain, to stretch our ears in ways that re-write history, and open fresh perspectives on to the creative energies of our time. In twenty years a more familiar Franz Schreker will be a different composer. His present significance lies in his unfamiliarity, in his recalcitrance. He forces us to re-open our discourse about music history, to pose new questions, and the quality of those questions will determine how future generations judge the integrity of our historical revision. Re-thinking notions of twentieth-century Viennese modernism does not mean re-positioning Franz Schreker, or Alexander Zemlinsky, or even Gustav Mahler in the center of the narrative, but expanding the circumference of our inquiry to allow other voices to inform our understanding of a cultural environment that was, like our own, a world of pluralities.

NOTES

1. Schreker's recordings of his own works include his *Tanzspiel* (*Rokoko*), *Der Geburtstag der Infantin* (twice), the interlude from *Der Schatzgräber*, the Little Suite, as well as excerpts from *Der ferne Klang*, *Die Gezeichneten*, and *Der Schatzgräber* with Maria Schreker as soloist. There is, moreover, a test pressing of the introduction to the third act of *Die Gezeichneten*, as well as tantalizing evidence of an unreleased and now lost studio production of the Chamber Symphony. A forthcoming multiple-CD set of Schreker's extant recordings (including additional broadcast material) is planned for release by Symposium in 2002.
2. The series was produced by Eberhard Frowein during 1932 and 1933 under the title "Das Weltkonzert" and the six films with which Schreker was involved included Rossini's *Wilhelm Tell* Overture under Max von Schillings, Weber's *Oberon* Overture under Bruno Walter, Wagner's *Meistersinger* Overture under Leo Blech, Johann Strauss's *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* under Erich Kleiber, Nicolai's *Merry Wives of Windsor* Overture under Fritz Stiedry, and Wagner's *Tannhäuser* Overture under Fritz Busch. Financial difficulties intervened before Schreker could film his own performance of his orchestration of Liszt's Second Hungarian Rhapsody.
3. The premiere of *Christophorus*, originally scheduled for Freiburg i. Br. during 1932/33 season, fell victim to the political events of that year. For background on the genesis of the work see Christopher Hailey, "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte Franz Schrekers *Christophorus*," *Franz-Schreker-Symposium*, ed. Elmar Budde and Rudolf Stephan (Berlin: Colloquium Verlag, 1980), 115-140.
4. Aspects of the relationship between *Christophorus* and *Moses*

and Aron are treated in Christopher Hailey, "Between Modernism and Modernity: Schönberg and Schreker in Berlin", *Arnold Schönberg in Berlin* (Vienna: Arnold Schönberg Center, 2001), 58-69.

5. Sinaisky's recording with the BBC Philharmonic (Chandos 9797) appeared in 2000 and includes the *Prelude to a Drama*, *Valse lente*, *Ekkehard*, op. 12, the symphonic interlude from *Der Schatzgräber*, the *Nachtstück* from *Der ferne Klang*, and the *Fantastic Overture*, op. 15.

6. See Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, translated by Roy E. Carter (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), 421f.

7. See Ulrike Kienzle, *Das Trauma hinter dem Traum, Franz Schrekers Oper "Der ferne Klang" und die Wiener Moderne* (Schliengen: Argus Verlag, 1998). See further, Gösta Neuwirth, *Die Harmonik in der Oper "Der ferne Klang" von Franz Schreker* (Regensburg: Gustav Bosse Verlag, 1972). More recently Neuwirth has sought to extend his reading of Schreker's application of psychoanalytical processes to music structure, which he has called a grammar of the unconscious; see "Greta-Grete", in *Franz Schreker: Der ferne Klang*, ed. Ralf Waldschmidt (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 2001), 86-96.

8. See Nicholas Chadwick, "Franz Schreker's Orchestral Style and its Influence on Alban Berg," *Music Review* XXXV/1 (1974), 29-46. A proximity to Schreker's use of the orchestra is evident in Webern's early orchestra pieces, opp. 6 and 10.

9. The Berlin Staatsoper production of *Der ferne Klang* had its premiere on 21 October 2001 in a staging by Peter Mussbach.

10. Of particular note are Winfried Zillig's performances of *Der ferne Klang* (Hamburg, 1955) and *Die Gezeichneten* (Hamburg, 1960); Robert Heger's recording of *Der Schatzgräber* (Vienna, 1967); Hans Rosbaud's of premiere of the *Vorspiel zu einer grossen Oper* (Baden-Baden, 1958); and Hermann Scherchen's performance of *Vom ewigen Leben* (1965).