

Chapter 25: Early Modernism in Vienna: Mahler, Strauss, and Schoenberg (1890–1918)

- I. Introduction
 - A. Modernism evolved in Vienna, intensifying emotional expression and sensuality, enlarging performing ensembles and traditional forms, and expanding tonality.
- II. The birth of Modernism
 - A. The years from the 1890s to World War I are often called the early Modernist period.
 1. Modernism is not only a condition but also an attitude and commitment, asserting the superiority of the present over the past.
 - B. Vienna at the turn of the century
 1. Vienna, long known as the City of Music, was an attractive destination for immigrants who saw the arts as an area in which they could succeed.
 2. Several leading figures lived in Vienna at this time.
 3. Scientific and engineering developments also altered at a rapid pace.
 - C. Maximalism
 1. Between 1890 and 1914, Modernism can be seen in “maximalism”: radical intensification of means toward traditional expensive ends.
 2. Wagner had expanded in two dimensions: length and sheer sound.
 3. Brahms had expanded motivic saturation and musical logic.
 4. Mahler and Strauss made their music even more autobiographical and incorporated more musical cues to represent nonmusical ideas than previous composers. This was partly reflective of the type of psychology perpetuated by Freud.
- III. Gustav Mahler: conductor and composer
 - A. The music of Mahler best represents “philosophy music.”
 1. He sought to reflect the entire world, showing the individual as part of the whole.
 2. Born into a Jewish family, Mahler converted to Catholicism to be eligible for the post of director at the Vienna Court Opera.
 3. As a conductor, Mahler was a perfectionist.
 - B. Mahler’s Lieder
 1. Mahler’s earliest significant works were songs; in this respect he followed the Viennese tradition of Lieder.
 2. The Lieder fall into two phases.
 - C. From symphonic poem to First Symphony
 1. Brahms wrote “plain old” Symphony No. 1, etc.; Berlioz, Liszt, and others named their symphonic works. Mahler went back and forth with the concepts involved with each as he approached the symphony.
 2. His first symphony began life as a symphonic poem.
 3. Mahler wrote “Like a sound from nature” at the beginning of Symphony No. 1.
 4. Songs provide material in the next two movements as well.
 5. The final movement moves from terror to reconciliation, Hell to Paradise, much like the Beethovenian trajectory of the Fifth Symphony.
 - D. Moving beyond program music

1. Mahler's Second Symphony also began as a symphonic poem, this one on death.
2. It is known as the "Resurrection" and requires the largest orchestra ever demanded at this point, as well as a chorus.
3. Some of the movements refer to earlier songs, and the middle includes an entire *Wunderhorn* piece entitled *Urlicht*.
4. Documents relating to the composition of Symphony No. 3 reveal that Mahler was inspired by extramusical elements when writing his symphonies.
5. Nonetheless, in 1900 he said, "Down with programs, which are always misinterpreted." He ceased providing them at this point.

E. Mahler's middle period

1. At the age of forty, Mahler's personal life and compositional career entered a new stage.
2. The Fifth Symphony has subtle allusions to his songs.

F. Mahler's late works

1. Mahler left for New York in 1907, returning to Austria to compose in the summers.
2. The Eighth Symphony, premiering in 1910, was his most popular success.
3. At the same time, Mahler composed *Das Lied von der Erde*, which he described as a "Symphony for Tenor and Alto Voice and Orchestra."
4. Death was a frequent theme or at least provided atmosphere for much of Mahler's music, and the final three major works (*Das Lied*, Symphony No. 9, and the incomplete tenth) can be seen as a trilogy that reflects on death in a real and tangible fashion.
5. After his death in 1911, Schoenberg and others gave him titles such as "martyr" and "saint," and to many he was seen as a prophet.

IV. Richard Strauss: radical Modernist

A. Even more so than Mahler, Strauss's music scandalized many critics.

1. His early works are conservative, in the style of Brahms.
2. His acquaintance with Alexander Ritter pointed him in another direction: toward Liszt and Wagner.
3. His first work in the programmatic vein was *Aus Italien* (1886); the first tone poem was *Macbeth* (1888).
4. He wrote both instrumental and dramatic music—usually he composed in the larger genres. (Strauss wrote a good deal of Lieder as well.)

B. Maximalizing opera: Strauss's *Salome*

1. The real fame as an opera composer came with *Salome* in 1905.
2. Taking Freud's prodding that sex could be perverse (acts other than for procreation), we can see in Strauss's *Salome* that music follows suit.
3. *Salome's* climactic scene, her *Liebtestod*, functions as does *Isolde's*, but Strauss mixes disturbing motives and tonal centers in ways that vividly paint the deviant decadence of the title character. He maximalizes the horror and passion.

4. *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) is entirely different from the previous two in that it is more traditional.

V. Arnold Schoenberg: the next generation

A. More than any other composer, Schoenberg forced his music and ideas into music history.

1. Largely self-taught, he became a major teacher and theorist, as well as composer.
2. His music exploded many traditionally held ideas, yet he was acutely aware of how his contributions fit into the continuum of European music.
3. With his most illustrious pupils, Webern and Berg, he represents the “Second Viennese School.” (The term is misleading in both its emphasis on school—and therefore students—and its implication that this was all that happened in Vienna.)
4. Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* marks the end of the nineteenth century stylistically, as well as temporally (1899).

B. A new synthesis of Wagner and Brahms

1. Schoenberg merged previously disparate musical ideals, namely “roving harmony” (Wagner) and “developing variation” (Brahms).
2. From Brahms he particularly inherited the notion that motive governed everything.
3. Schoenberg wrote a few large early works, notably the *Gurrelieder* (1910–11). Enormous in the sense of Mahler’s eighth, the work was very successful when premiered in 1913.

C. Schoenberg’s Expressionism

1. By the premiere of *Gurrelieder*, Schoenberg had stopped writing in the large, lush Romantic style. He indicated a new direction in a letter to the artist Kandinsky in 1911: “One must express oneself!” He emphasized inborn, instinctive emotions over acquired ones.
2. Expressionism is the term that over the course of a decade or so became common to describe the new, contemporary German art.

D. The “Emancipation of Dissonance”

1. Schoenberg’s mental state influenced his music, as the episode involving marital strife (and suicide of his wife’s lover) in 1906–7 reveals.
2. Schoenberg was a painter as well as composer, and both idioms reveal his turbulent emotional state at this time.
3. Schoenberg’s theory text, *Harmonielehre* (1911), proceeds rather predictably until the final section, beginning with the chapter on “Consonance and Dissonance.”
4. He saw the logical step from here as the “emancipation of dissonance.”
5. Although his music was described as “atonal,” Schoenberg preferred “pantonal.”
6. In defining words like “tonality” and “dissonance,” we must question various procedures and see why Schoenberg was compelled to deal with them.

E. The monodrama *Erwartung*

1. Schoenberg used art to express what was ugly and disturbing, uncomfortable though it may be.
 2. *Erwartung* (1909) brought Expressionism to its ultimate expression and guaranteed controversy for the composer.
 3. The one-act “monodrama” is the expression of a madwoman’s descent into psychological horror. Schoenberg uses dissonance without any hope of resolution to depict her psychological state.
- F. At the opposite extreme: Schoenberg’s atonal miniatures
1. Beside *Erwartung*, *Gurrelieder*, and others, Schoenberg simultaneously composed aphoristic miniatures.
 2. Looking at the piano pieces in Op. 19, we see Schoenberg’s attempt at organicism in the extreme—which seems at odds with the search for primitive instincts of Expressionism.
 3. Even more than his teacher, Webern worked toward economy of means.
 4. Schoenberg’s most famous work from this period was *Pierrot lunaire* (1912), consisting of twenty-one miniatures.