

■ Research Report

Music Criticism in Vienna c. 1898–1920

This work is being undertaken on a University of Queensland Postdoctoral Fellowship. It follows on directly from my doctoral work in which I cut a fifteen-month slice of Viennese musical life, from October 1896 to December 1897. Within this period of time, I searched out as near to comprehensive a range of newspapers as possible, in order to make a survey of the breadth of activity in music journalism. The results of this, an improved version of my thesis, will appear in 1996 as *Music Criticism in Vienna, 1896–1897: Critically Moving Forms*.¹

Motivated by curiosity as to what happened next, I returned to Vienna. Taking another slice, this time from 1907, I discovered some things constant, some changes, new issues and a few deaths and disappearances of critics. The burning issues of the 1890s had been attitudes to Wagner, to Bruckner and to Brahms. In 1907, the most divisive issue appears to have been Gustav Mahler's directorship of the Court Opera. Critics also hotly debated his symphonies, along with the compositions of Richard Strauss, Max Reger, Claude Debussy and Arnold Schoenberg. The idea of decadence appears with noticeable frequency in critiques not only of music, but also of the age. Despite fears for the musical future, 1897 had been an altogether more confident and optimistic time.

Having determined the most interesting and promising critics and journals, I then turned to an examination of ten to twelve of them in the years between 1897 and 1907, and then the years after 1907. 1904, the year of the death of Eduard Hanslick, emerged as a watershed year in the annals of criticism. The obituaries reveal more about their authors, who were younger critics, than about Hanslick; they say much about their desire to dissociate from the musical aesthetics and musical politics of the preceding generation.² Within two years of Hanslick's death, most of the older generation of critics had also died. A new generation of critics had arisen to deal with a new generation of artistic problems.

In the concert hall, the first decade of this century was unquestionably the decade of Mahler; less clear is how to characterise the next decade. In the opera house, Richard Strauss dominated the first twenty years. With *La Bohème* established in the Court Opera's repertory and with *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*

premiered in Vienna in 1907, Puccini is unsurprisingly the most prominent Italian. Such repertory was in the forefront of discussion, and the première list was dominated by other works in the 'romantic' vein, such as Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* (1905) and Schmidt's *Notre Dame* (1914); also, one must not forget the Viennese première of *Parsifal*, which was released from embargo, at the beginning of 1914. Thus the first two decades of the century appear more as a smooth continuation of the last than as something self-consciously new, albeit with a stronger tendency towards decadence.

Even 1914, a year traditionally and conveniently used to conclude histories of 'nineteenth-century music', does not appear to be much of a watershed. Musical culture in Vienna continued throughout the war years; any change in the nature of repertory was at best gradual. In 1913, the belated première of Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* was warmly received, the critics expressing delight and surprise at 'real music'. The E major Chamber Symphony and D minor Quartet, however, had occasioned hissing in 1907, while in 1909 the Second String Quartet excited a riot in the hallowed space of the Bösendorfer-Saal. Despite the occasional plea for calm, the critical reception generally mirrored the audience response. Among critics seeking to take Schoenberg seriously, the best response possible appears to have been acquiescence. Thus Richard Specht wrote in the journal *Der Merker* in 1911:

Before Schoenberg's George-Lieder, the Piano Pieces, and a bit before the Quartet with voice, I stand as before disturbing, mysterious, inaccessible pictures; here a foreign language is spoken which in many sounds arouses confused, dreamy ideas, which just as often joylessly repels and provokes me, and yet it repeatedly grips me, precisely because the key to these sounding symbols is missing. Here I must say over again what I have already had to admit many times in these pages and expressly repeat: that I and my ear are to blame if here a music and a listener collide and there is no good sound—and not this music.³

Is this a 'watershed remark', demonstrating the beginning of Schoenberg's acceptance by the critics? I think not. Instead, it shows the emergence into print of

that minority of enthusiasts who supported Schoenberg's works and other 'avant-garde' music to the present day. It is a fascinating historical phenomenon. In the nineteenth century, Wagner was divisive. In the twentieth, the culture of 'art music' is not so much divided as fragmented.

Most of my research work has involved investigating the newspaper holdings of the Austrian National Library and the Vienna City Library. Some of these are on microfilm, while those not on microfilm can still be copied—for a fee. However, in the course of my last field trip I discovered something especially interesting: Max Kalbeck (1850–1921), critic of the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, had kept a diary in 1897. I enquired about this in all the appropriate archives without success, so in despair I wrote to Florian Kalbeck, Max's grandson. Grandfather's diary was news to him! He referred me to the descendants of Kalbeck's daughter, and eventually an overnight train journey to Hanover resulted in a meeting with Kalbeck's great-grandson-in-law, the conductor Hans Urbanek. To my delight, he allowed me to photocopy the whole diary. I have incorporated into my book some of the results of my preliminary struggles with Kalbeck's handwriting.⁴

Othmar Wessely writes, rather dismissively I think, of Kalbeck's views about music as being influenced by 'bourgeois liberalism'.⁵ To write off liberals as 'bourgeois' [*bürgerlich*] is common in German-speaking musicology where it always appears to carry a pejorative overtone. But what, in Kalbeck's day, was the major opposition to liberalism? The answer must be German nationalism. We know too well the results of that. Certainly in his diary and his published writings, Kalbeck expresses himself politically in terms of opposition to German nationalism. He also appears to regard Wagnerian art and ideology as an affront to his sense of German identity. This has rekindled my interest in the opponents of Wagnerism among critics and others. I do not believe that the full complex of values underpinning this opposition has been taken seriously. Should art have nothing to do with politics? Perhaps, but try telling that to Wagner! To follow this line of enquiry will push me back into the nineteenth century.

The study of music criticism begins with music. You must know the music to appreciate the opinions about it, otherwise they are just words uttered in a vacuum. You must also know the critics to appreciate their opinions in context. The opinion of a faceless, ageless signature means far less than the opinion of a particular historical personage of a particular generation with particular religious, political and especially

musical beliefs and opinions which were brought to a critic's writings about music. Some might call this irrelevant. I call it interesting. Only to the most narrow-minded view of musical scholarship does knowing the critic and the culture appear to detract from the study of the music. It puts music in its cultural context. The literary canon of the day for example is an illuminating complement to the musical canon. People discussing Mahler alluded to Sophocles in those days. They viewed Elgar through Lessing-coloured glasses, that is when not comparing him with Mendelssohn.

Mahler's Sixth Symphony and Strauss's *Salome* were still new in 1907. Critics heard them as new music. They also regarded them as symbolic of the time. Carl Lafite wrote of Mahler's Sixth: 'One thing is certain: as an expression of will, as a cultural product of our time, Mahler's Sixth is of the highest significance'.⁶ To Maximilian Muntz, *Salome* was 'the epochal musical artwork of today'.⁷ In both cases, as in others, no particular sense of approval of 'our time' or 'today' is intended.

Critics viewed Mahler's huge orchestra with its battery of untuned percussion as revolutionary. Most disapproved, some more than others. Nevertheless, to uncover even their disapproval serves to remind us of characteristics of the work all too easily taken for granted.

Most critics considered *Salome* to be in bad taste. They tended, therefore, not to enjoy it. Were they wrong? I think not. Nearly nine decades later, *Salome's* 'one-sided love duet with the severed head'⁸ is no more tasteful, and just as disgusting. Now however, we enjoy it. We have learned the aesthetic appreciation of bad taste, to delight in being shocked or disgusted. We have also of course, learned a considerable tolerance for dramatic representations of violence and brutality. Are we any better off for that?

Finally, a word for those who might be interested in following similar lines of enquiry. Viennese music criticism is a very rich field. Despite Vienna's status among historians as a major cultural centre however, few works received their world première there. Consequently, other Austro-Hungarian and German cities grow in importance and similar riches ought to be expected from their music criticism. Anyone with a knowledge of Czech and German could find significant rewards from an examination of the press in Prague. Likewise, similar joys wait in Budapest for anyone with Hungarian and German. Even these cities are only a start. Be prepared, however, to do battle with bureaucracy.

The study of journalistic criticism is only a small part of the study of the reception of music. Around the

turn of the century however, it is a very important part. The newspaper was the principal means of daily and weekly dissemination of information. Within the newspapers, words far outweighed pictures in importance. Music criticism appeared often on the front page, with articles frequently longer than this report. I recommend it as a rewarding and illuminating area of study.

Notes

¹ Sandra McColl, *Music Criticism in Vienna, 1896–1897: Critically Moving Forms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, in print).

² Sandra McColl. 'To bury Hanslick or to praise him? The obituaries of August 1904', *Musicology Australia* 18 (1995), pp.37-49.

³ 'Vor Schönbergs George-Liedern aber, den Klavierstücken und zum Teil auch vor dem Quartett mit Gesang stehe ich wie vor beunruhigenden, geheimnisvollen, unzugänglichen

Gebilden; hier wird eine fremde Sprache gesprochen, die in manchen Lauten oft wirre, traumvolle Ahnungen auslöst, die mich aber ebenso oft freudlos abstötzt und aufreizt und doch wieder fesselt, gerade weil mir der Schlüssel zu diesen klingenden Symbolen fehlt. Wobei aber immer wieder zu sagen ist, was ich in diesen Blättern schon mehrmals zu bekennen hatte und ausdrücklich wiederhole: daß ich mir und meinen Ohr die Schuld gebe, wenn hier eine Musik und ein Empfangender zusammenstoßen und es keinen guten Klang gibt—und nicht dieser Musik.' *Der Merker*, 2 (1911), 699.

⁴ I have seen misprints in the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* which indicate that the typesetters there had similar trouble with Kalbeck's handwriting.

⁵ Othmar Wessely, 'Kalbeck, Max', in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, ed. Historical Commission of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1964).

⁶ *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 January 1907, p.3.

⁷ *Deutsche Zeitung*, 29 May 1907, p.1.

⁸ Max Kalbeck, *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 27 May 1907, p.12.