Chapter 27: Early Austro-German Modernism: Mahler, Strauss, and Schoenberg

I. Introduction
A. The term “Modern” includes an attitude and a commitment.
B. Modernists differed from Romantics in several ways.
   1. Audacity, self-consciousness, alertness to surrounding world, urbanity as opposed to spirituality, naturalness, spontaneity, naïveté, authenticity, and transcendence of the worldly
   2. Wagner, while seemingly progressive when discussed in previous chapters, was actually reactionary; Brahms was, in fact, the liberal looking forward.
C. The Modern Condition
   1. For a reactionary like Wagner, the person who damaged culture, society, etc. was the emancipated, assimilated, urbanized Jew.
      a. The two leaders of radical stylistic innovation, Mahler and Schoenberg, fit that description.
   2. Several leading figures lived in Vienna at this time.
      a. The Secessionists, such as Klimt, united a group of artists; Wittgenstein and, eventually, Hitler spent some time in Vienna.
      b. Born to Jewish parents in the Czech Republic, Freud also lived and worked in Vienna.
   3. Scientific and engineering developments also altered at a rapid pace.
      a. Edison recorded Brahms playing his Hungarian Dance in G Minor in 1905; Mahler recorded on piano rolls.
D. Maximalism
   1. Between 1890 and 1914 modernism can be seen in “maximalism”: radical intensification of means toward traditional expansive 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 non-musical ideas than previous composers. This was partly reflective of the type of psychology perpetuated by Freud.

II. Mahler
A. Gustav Mahler: Conductor and Composer
   1. The music of Mahler best represents “philosophy music.”
   2. Born into a Jewish family, Mahler converted to Catholicism to be eligible for the post of director at the Vienna Court Opera.
      a. His first important musical successes came as a conductor.
      b. He later accepted posts in New York, with the Met Opera and the Philharmonic.
   3. As a conductor Mahler was a perfectionist.
      a. He required that the orchestra be well rehearsed.
      b. He reinstated cuts that had been in Wagner’s operas.
      c. He darkened the opera house so that people could not socialize as easily.
      d. He didn’t let latecomers in.
4. Mahler did not compose an opera, but he had much dramatic music in his works.

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.
      a. The 1880–1990s: folk-based songs, written to lyrics from folk poets, especially Das Knaben Wunderhorn.
      b. Later: different directions, first in the use of poems of Rückert, the Kindertotenlieder; and finally with the Chinese poetry in Das Lied von der Erde.

C. From Symphonic Poem to First Symphony
   1. Brahms wrote 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.
      a. Entitled “The Titan,” it consisted of two parts and five movements, Mahler provided a program for it.
      b. After two performances, Mahler dropped the second movement and simply called the work “Symphony in D Major.”
      c. Thus, this work began life as a Lisztian conception but, when finished, resembled a Brahmsian symphony.

D. Maximalizing the Symphony
   1. Mahler wrote “Like a sound from nature” at the beginning of Symphony No. 1.
   2. Songs provide material in the first three movements.
   3. The final movement moves from Hell to Paradise, much like the Beethovenian trajectory of the Fifth Symphony.

E. “Down with Programs!”
   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.
   6. At this time, we note Mahler’s “middle period.”
   7. The Fifth Symphony has subtle allusions to his songs.

F. The 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.
a. Known as the “Symphony of a Thousand,” the first performance had 1,029 performers.
b. More oratorio than symphony, the entire work is sung.
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 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.

III. Strauss
A. Richard Strauss
1. Even more so than Mahler, Strauss’s music scandalized many critics.
2. His early works are conservative, in the style of Brahms.
4. His first work in the programmatic vein was Aus Italien (1886); the first tone poem was Macbeth (1888).
5. 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
1. Strauss’s two early operas met with mixed success.
   a. The first, Guntram (1892–93), was Wagnerian and a flop; the second, Feuersnot (1900–01), was more successful.
2. His real fame as an opera composer came with Salome in 1905.
   a. The opera derives from a play by Oscar Wilde.
   b. The plot is based on a biblical story, but Salome is transformed into a necrophiliac who desires the head of the John the Baptist and kisses it sensuously at the end.
   c. The themes in Salome clearly point to Freud’s teachings on desire and death.
3. 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.
   a. The composer challenged conventional morality musically.
4. Salome’s climactic scene, her Liebestod, 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.
5. The next opera, Elektra, continues to explore decadence, taking it to a gruesome extreme.
6. Both of these operas end with the title characters dead, which is not part of the “original” story but reflects fin-de-siècle interests. They also go hand in hand with the social emancipation of women, and with men’s fear of empowered women.
7. The next opera, Der Rosenkavalier, is entirely different from the previous two in that it is more traditional.
8. Strauss continued in the more traditional style of Rosenkavalier for the rest of his life, quickly becoming old-fashioned in a radically changing stylistic period.
IV. Schoenberg
A. Schoenberg
  1. More than any other composer, Schoenberg forced his music and ideas into music history.
  2. Largely self-taught, he became a major teacher and theorist, as well as composer.
  3. His music exploded many traditionally held ideas, yet he was acutely aware of how his contributions fit into the continuum of European music.
  4. 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.)
  5. Schoenberg’s Verklärte Nacht marks the end of the nineteenth century stylistically, as well as temporally (1899).

B. A New Synthesis
  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. Expression Becomes an “Ism”
  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. He also said that “art belongs to the unconscious!”
  3. These ideas bring to the forefront the question of intelligibility when expressing the unconscious.

D. “Emancipation of Dissonance”
  1. Schoenberg’s mental state influenced his music, as the episode involving marital strife (and the suicide of his wife’s lover) in 1906–07 reveals.
  2. Schoenberg was a painter as well as a 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 the “emancipation of dissonance.”
    a. Composers did not have to resolve chords a certain way.
    b. Harmony was not functional.
    c. Schoenberg demonstrates “fluctuating” tonality with examples from Wagner. Motive, not tonality, holds the music together.

E. Atonality: “The Air of Another Planet”
  1. Although his music was described as “atonal,” Schoenberg preferred “pantonal.”
2. In defining words like “tonality” and “dissonance,” we need to question various procedures and see why Schoenberg was compelled to deal with them.

3. The move to pantonality took Schoenberg several years. He dabbled in various traditional procedures (as established by composers such as Brahms and Mahler).

F. Erwartung

1. Schoenberg used art to express what was ugly and disturbing, uncomfortable though it may be.

2. Erwartung 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.
   a. The madness element aligns with Freud’s Vienna and the ambiguity of psychological phenomena.

G. At the Opposite Extreme: 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.
   a. Many of his works are extremely short.
   b. He once noted that, once he had used all twelve notes, what else was left to do?
   c. Webern developed a practice, named Klangfarbenmelodie, whereby tone color has value as well as pitch.

4. Schoenberg’s most famous work from this period was Pierrot lunaire (1912), consisting of twenty-one miniatures.
   a. Schoenberg added to the irony of the poetry by using melodrama (based on recitation) for the singer. He called this Sprechstimme.
   b. Mondestrucken demonstrates how he approached cohesion in this work.