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.
      b. 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.
      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.
         1) Freud’s work reflected an interest in the psychological that was indicative of intellectual thought in Vienna at the time.
         2) Many artists and thinkers concentrated on dreams, sexuality, repressed desires, and the constitution of the human psyche.
   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.
      b. Other composers from the early twentieth century conducted recordings of their works, such as Stravinsky and Strauss.
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.”
      a. 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.
   a. His first important musical successes came as a conductor.
   b. He later accepted posts in New York, with the Metropolitan 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 did not 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.
         1) These pieces mark a return to simplicity, but with very sophisticated music.
         2) Nostalgia dominates in these pieces.
      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 (1908–09).

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.
      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. The juxtaposition of things like seriousness and parody (as demonstrated in the third movement, which Hanslick noted as the funeral march on “Frère Jacques,” interrupted by a section entitled “parody”) baffled the audience, and critics were not sure how to think about such novelty.

D. Maximalizing the Symphony
   1. Mahler wrote “Like a sound from nature” at the beginning of Symphony No. 1.
      a. It begins with a pedal point on A, spread over seven octaves.
      b. The opening motive derives from a song “This Morning I Went out Over the Fields” in Mahler’s song cycle Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen.
   2. Songs provide material in the next two movements as well.
a. The second is both Ländler (an Austrian dance) and song.
b. The third (mentioned above) begins with the bass playing “Frère Jacques” in a high register and minor mode. Sounding like a funeral march, the somber atmosphere is interrupted by Bohemian dance music. Later, this movement includes another song from Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen.

3. The final movement moves from terror to reconciliation, 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.
   a. Like Beethoven’s Ninth, the chorus is reserved for the final movement.
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.”
   a. The next three symphonies included no text (voice or chorus).
   b. There were no programs, although the Sixth was called “Tragic.”
   c. He married Alma Schindler during this period.
7. The Fifth Symphony has subtle allusions to his songs.
   a. The famous Adagietto relates to his song Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen (a Rückert text).
   b. The movement is a love offering to Alma.

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.”
   a. It was not a numbered symphony in his oeuvre, but contains elements of a symphony and song cycle at the same time.
   b. The final movement, Der Abschied, is almost as long as the rest of the work.
      1) It illustrates Mahler the philosopher-composer.
      2) Emphasis on the word “forever” rings at the end of the work.
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.
a. The late works, with their proximity to death, foretold the composer’s death.
b. His music predicted the music to come.

III. Strauss
A. Richard Strauss
   1. Even more than Mahler’s, 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).
      a. Strauss’s comments on *Macbeth* reveal his interest in philosophy music, notably seen in the later work *Also sprach Zarathustra*.
   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.
      b. The second, *Feuersnot* (1900–01), was more successful.
   2. His real fame as an opera composer came with *Salome* in 1905.
      a. This opera has only a single act.
      b. The opera derives from a play by Oscar Wilde.
         1) The play, famous for its decadence, was banned in London. Strauss saw it in Berlin.
      c. 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. (Her stepfather is so disgusted with her that he has her put to death.)
      d. 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.
      b. The passion familiar in works like *Tristan und Isolde* is not the passion in *Salome*, which is unidentifiable. The music depicts the perversity of Salome’s passion in equally perverse ways.
   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* (1908), 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* (1911), 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).
   a. A tone poem for string sextet, it seems to satisfy aims of both program and absolute music.
   b. The subject matter was provocative (illicit love and pregnancy).
   c. The juxtaposition of program music in a chamber genre was objectionable, as were (according to some) the harmonic progressions.
   d. The criticism he received from this work did not diminish Schoenberg’s compositional zeal, but rather steeled him for what was to come.

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.
   a. His famous lecture “Brahms the Progressive” traces the cohesion wrought by small groups of notes, hence “developing variation.”
   b. His student Berg wrote an article that explained these connections (motivic saturation), noting that this music was difficult to understand because it required the listener to listen and understand the use of these motives.

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!”
   a. These ideas are tied to Freud’s exploration of 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.”
      a. This section really refers to his own music.
      b. He sets the distance between the two (consonance and dissonance) as one of degree, not kind.
   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).
      a. Like Mahler, he juxtaposed seemingly disparate elements in the same piece.

F. *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.
      a. The madness element aligns with Freud’s Vienna and the ambiguity of psychological phenomena.
      b. The audience does not know if the woman has killed her lover or not.
      c. She kisses her dead lover, reminding us of Strauss and *Salome*.
      d. Her crying out the word “help” reminds us of Wagner and Kundry in *Parsifal*.

G. At the Opposite Extreme: Atonal 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. These are settings of Albert Giraud’s poems, which are replete with numerology.
   b. Schoenberg added to the irony of the poetry by using melodrama (based on recitation) for the singer. He called this *Sprechstimme*.
   c. *Mondestrucken* demonstrates how he approached cohesion in this work.
      1) All intervallic material is presented at the beginning in an ostinato in the piano part.
      2) It derives from the whole-tone scale.
      3) Although the use of specific pitches might seem to undermine this strategy, Schoenberg himself noted that these were more suggestions than precise pitches. In this sense he undermines the importance of what is written on the page.
   d. *Der Mondfleck* also demonstrates this irony.
      1) The instrumental parts proceed in strict, difficult canons.
      2) The approach to dissonance, however, renders the contrapuntal complexity moot.