

When the audience turned its back on new music

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The prelude to Richard Wagner's "Tristan" would later be removed from the programme

31 March 1913 is a magical date in musical history; that evening, the Academic Literature and Music Association produced a concert in the large hall of Vienna's Musikverein in which Arnold Schönberg conducted a programme of music by his artistic associates. The concert made history; the audience's response was so unruly that the evening was cut short before the last piece on the programme (Mahler's Kindertotenlieder) could be

performed.

Everyone understood that date. It was a sign, duly reported the next day in the Neuen Wiener Tagblatt daily newspaper, thus: “One is not wrong in alleging that scenes like the one yesterday have never before happened, neither in Vienna nor certainly any other concert hall in any other cultural city.” The “scandal concert” was not merely an ephemeral annoyance in musical life; every commentator saw it at once as a special occurrence – the day when the audience turned its back on new music.

It could be called a showdown in Hollywood parlance – the final battle after a long series of trouble-making. A similar occurrence arose two and a half months later in Paris on 29 May 1913, at the world premiere of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*. It is difficult to say who started the showdown: the audience, which decided henceforth not to disrupt new music, but to ignore it – or Schönberg and his pupils, whose back catalogue has been ennobled to the status of “classics of the modern era?”

31 March 1913 also seems so significant because the programme consisted of works which today bear the label “masterpiece.” Had the composers whose works were played then been forgotten, the “scandal concert” would have lost its relevance. Instead, Schönberg is regarded as the father of 20th century music; the dissolution of tonality he achieved in his Op. 11 *Pieces for Piano* (1909) was the most important impetus for building a new musical language. His pupils Alban Berg and Anton Webern were role models after World War Two; Berg for those who did not want to forgo vocabulary which was traditional and – roughly speaking – sensuous, despite the twelve-tone musical language, and Webern for those who wished to objectify the material of a composition (not the composition itself) until an “objective” musical language inevitably emerged from the subject’s eccentricities.

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Gustav Mahler was rediscovered in the 1960s, his late works assessed as the “gateway to new music” (Dieter Schnebel) and his patchwork musical language, interwoven with vocabulary from “lower” musical spheres like a collage, ultimately became virtually a model for post-modern composers such as Luciano Berio and Hans Werner Henze. Alexander Zemlinsky did not return until the 1970s, when interest arose in composers who wanted to say something new within the tonal idiom without following Schönberg’s overturn. (The latter reaped skepticism to the same extent that the notion of progress became discredited in light of social, ecological and economic problems). In short: the compositions played at the “scandal concert” (including Mahler, who was not performed there) symbolised musical developments exerting immediate influence on our musical present.

The “scandal concert” certainly did not materialise out of the blue; it was already in the air in some previous concerts. *Gurrelieder*, given its first performance on 23 February 1913 by Franz Schreker, was a great, undisputed success, but Schönberg distanced himself from it in light of 31 March: “It was an entirely sentimental affair; I want to have nothing to do with it – and the effect of the music lay far behind that of the emotionally fuzzy prejudice of the people who, for once, felt the need to be modern.”

Still, the audience’s resistance took shape afterward. Two weeks prior to the “scandal concert,” Frank Schreker’s *Das Spielwerk und die Prinzessin* premiered at the Vienna Court Opera; the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* reported: “There was lively applause after Act I, although it was interspersed with loud hissing. A curious disquiet became apparent during Act II, along with occasional hissing. The audience divided into two camps after the Act II curtain fell; one applauded with all their might while the other hissed no less energetically.” Things became clearer on 31 March; the world premiere of Webern’s *Op. 6 Pieces for Orchestra* (called *Op. 4* at the time) were received with laughter in crass contradiction to the emotions Webern wished to express in that composition, already dividing the audience into friends and foes of that music. Zemlinsky’s *Maeterlinck Songs Op. 13* (only four of which were composed at the time) calmed the audience; they were even well received. Schönberg’s *Chamber Symphony Op. 9* was played in its version for multiple strings (the original version for 15 solo instruments had premiered on 8 February 1907); it was followed by verbal strife between friends and foes lasting minutes, and things apparently even came to blows in the gallery.

The actual scandal erupted due to Nos. 2 and 3 of Berg’s *Five Altenberg Lieder*. After *Sahst du nach dem Gewitterregen*, Schönberg felt obliged to demand that the audience be quiet, threatening to eject those who caused a disturbance from the auditorium; after *Über die Grenzen des Alls* a free-for-

all row broke out, which could not be pacified by words from the attendant police, the chairman of the Academic Association, Trakl's friend Erhard Buschbeck, and especially Webern's agitated shouts. The concert promoter's request – "Please, either listen to Gustav Mahler's Kindertotenlieder quietly or go home" – inflamed the Mahler devotees, who did not want to hear "their" Mahler in the context of such a concert. The concert ended when the orchestra left the stage.

The newspapers reported lengthily and gleefully about those scenes. The tone – including that of supporter Richard Specht – was that the Berg and Webern works especially were evidence of unacceptable compositional aberrances. While, in view of the success of Gurrelieder, Schönberg could not simply be written off as an oddball scatterbrain, the insinuation was that he had only put pieces by Berg and Webern on the programme out of gratitude to his deeply devoted and financially supportive pupils. Die Zeit alleged that Schönberg "felt obliged to repay his disciples by using his influence to have a performance of their pieces, although he privately thought very little of what they had achieved."

Schönberg, already living in Berlin at the time, took the occurrences seriously and chose to disassociate himself from audiences. Five years later, he founded the Society for Private Musical Performances; the public and critics – indeed, any expression of applause or dislike whatsoever – were forbidden at its concerts.

The harshness of the cultural confrontation became more significant in the shadow of World War I, which broke out soon thereafter; musical audiences were also rebelling against the dissolution of the traditional tonal and formal systems because they could sense that it was a harbinger of the ruination of their social security which had existed for decades – in Austria especially, as Stefan Zweig described it – thanks to the social and political hierarchies which had long been taken for granted. Democratisation of society, isolation of the individual in the explosively growing cities coupled with the dwindling importance of large families and finally the whirlwind developments in science and technology affecting each individual's daily life – all these were shaking the foundations which music, at least, was supposedly upholding.

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Assuming that the music of Schönberg and his pupils was, in fact, a reflection of the social upheavals of its time – i.e. that the music was “contemporary” in the most emphatic sense of the word – it is somewhat difficult to condemn the disturbers of 1913, and it is easy to take Schönberg’s side today, when it costs nothing to adopt such a standpoint. But back then, if the tonal language of Schönberg and his pupils was correctly translated as the unfettered expression of the individual unleashed from all rules of order – an individual obliged to laboriously spell out, letter by letter from out of the pile of rubble and who therefore heard the music that way, he might have rebelled – and is it not a very human thing, to be loath to accept the fatality of one’s situation?

One might suspect that the undisturbed concert performances of new music today might not be ascribable to universal understanding of that music, but rather to a hard and fast ritual, although music is something worth fighting for – even if we can be glad that the rules of confrontation have only rarely been broken since then.

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