

Franz Schreker: Discovering a Distant Sound

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Franz Schreker in his study (Berlin, 1930/34)

Der Ferne Klang (The Distant Sound), the title of Schreker's best known opera, is the central metaphor of his entire oeuvre, a world of beguiling sonorities of such unprecedented originality that one can well believe the composer when he said that the themes, plots, and characters of his operas sprang from a musical vision. There can be no more compelling argument for his assertion than the opening bars of the overture to *Die Gezeichneten* (The Stigmatised, 1918), that mesmerising bi-tonal shimmer of violins, harps, celesta and piano hovering over a sinuous, serpentine melody in the bass clarinet and lower strings. This is the music of fin-de-siècle Vienna, a city on the precipice, teetering between breathtaking vistas and terrifying chasms.

Schreker was every bit the contemporary of Sigmund Freud, Gustav Klimt, and Arthur Schnitzler. Like them he explored the dark recesses of the psyche and the labyrinthine complexities of the human soul, but he did so with an infinitely nuanced musical language that took as its starting point the rich

resources of the orchestra. If Arnold Schönberg emancipated dissonance, Schreker, like Debussy, emancipated timbre, elevating instrumental colour to an importance equal to that of melody, harmony, and rhythm. And whereas Schönberg was drawn to the austere purity of the abstract idea, Schreker, a man of the theatre, was fascinated by the sensuous play of appearances, by dreams and illusions that both entice and entrap.

For this reason Schreker's distant sounds are no mere Romantic utopia. They are metaphors of the fragility of human happiness, a theme that echoes in all his mature operas (whose librettos he wrote himself). The other thread running through these works is his deep compassion for human vulnerability, a trait he shares with Alban Berg, who knew Schreker's operas well, having prepared the piano vocal score of *Der ferne Klang*; his *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* are unthinkable without the example of his older contemporary. Berg learned, too, from Schreker's vocal writing, with its supple responsiveness to a mood, idea, or word.

There is no shortage of soaring lyricism in Schreker's work – think of Carlotta's paeon to the sun at the end of Act I of *Die Gezeichneten* – but all is in flux, continuously unfolding, and repetition is rare. And at every turn there is an exquisitely delicate interplay between vocal inflection and instrumental colour, beautifully exemplified in Schreker's exquisite Walt Whitman settings, scored for orchestra as *Vom ewigen Leben* in 1927.

But for all its aching beauty Schreker's music is not heavy with the nostalgia one finds in Berg, Mahler or Korngold. Its fragile immediacy and fleeting evanescence are at once intensely visceral and strangely elusive.

“Schreker's modernity lies in a shift of perspective.”

Schreker's modernity lies not so much in any revolution of musical language along the lines of atonality or dodecaphonic serialism, as in a shift of perspective. On the one hand he extends Wagner's concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk with a visual and aural dramaturgy that anticipates the language of cinema, including split-screen effects, close-ups, and montage. On

the other hand, Schreker embraces a stylistic pluralism that recalls Mahler in which the seemingly conventional and banal are found alongside the revolutionary and the sublime. As with Mahler these worlds cannot be separated, nor adequately reconciled by critical precepts. Schreker's aesthetic world hovers between Naturalism and Symbolism, between Jugendstil and Expressionism, between Romanticism and Modernism, and this exhilarating mixture of elements is one of the reasons his music defies easy categorisation.

In his day Schreker's most popular operas were *Der ferne Klang*, *Die Gezeichneten*, and *Der Schatzgräber* (The Treasure Digger, 1920), but recent productions have rediscovered the early pantomime, *Der Geburtstag der Infantin* (The Birthday of the Infanta, 1908), the apocalyptic *Das Spielwerk und die Prinzessin* (The Carillon and the Princess, 1913), the expressionistic *Irrelohe* (1924), and the late comic masterpiece, *Der Schmied von Gent* (1932).

Only *Der singende Teufel* (The Singing Devil, 1928) still awaits a full scale modern production. This is part of the long overdue reassessment of Schreker's later works, written after his move to Berlin in 1920, when he became the director of that city's renowned Hochschule für Musik. The remarkable transformation of Schreker's style in the last decade of his life reflects his fascination with the new technologies of recording, radio, for which he wrote the *kleine Suite* (The Little Suite, 1928), and sound film, for which he wrote his stunning orchestration of Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* (1933).

Today, after decades of neglect, Schreker has reclaimed his place in the history of European musical modernism as a teacher, conductor, and administrator, but his principal legacy rests with a wide-ranging oeuvre that includes beyond his operas and orchestral works, choral works, chamber music, Lieder, and early keyboard works.

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