

Gustav Mahler: *Piano Quartet in A minor*

The Piano Quartet in A minor was composed in 1876 when Mahler was just 16. It is his first known work. While there certainly is a dark, brooding quality to it, anyone hearing it for the first time would be hard pressed to identify it as a work by Gustav Mahler. Even after repeated hearings, it is difficult to imagine a path that leads from here to his first major work, the cantata *Das klagende Lied* (1878–1880), let alone his final masterpieces, *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony.

It is difficult to say what the overall form of this quartet movement is. The harmonic motion is neither subtle nor adventurous, and the texture is thin for what we expect from the Mahler we're familiar with. But there is a melodic motif that seems to be responsible for that dark, brooding undercurrent we sense – one that knits the entire movement together. Pitch-wise this brief three-note motif is simply a leap up (usually by a minor sixth) followed by a step back (usually a half step); and its rhythm is | h. q | w |.

This quartet is actually the first movement of a larger work that Mahler never finished. Nevertheless this single movement was performed twice in 1876, both times with Mahler at the piano – first at the Vienna Conservatory and then at a concert in Mahler's boyhood home, Iglau in Bohemia. He tried unsuccessfully to have it published, and eventually the work became buried and forgotten under Mahler's accumulating sketches and scores. It was rediscovered by Mahler's widow Alma Mahler in the 1960s. It was then premiered in New York by Peter Serkin and members of the Galimir Quartet. Since then it has received many performances and several recordings.

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Arnold Schoenberg: *Ode to Napoleon, Op. 41*

It is surprisingly easy these days to forget how ruinous Europe can become. It is almost impossibly difficult to imagine its piazzas filled with fear, its buildings in ruins, or its peoples actually up in arms against one another, even when photographs and memorials are in the public squares themselves. But it does seem actually to happen periodically. In anticipation of a coming paroxysm of this type, Arnold Schoenberg moved to America in 1934, where he would find work, academic respect and influence, material comfort, and tennis matches with George Gershwin.

Lord Byron's *Ode to Napoleon* appeared on the 16th of April 1814, ten days after Napoleon's abdication. Although Byron expresses an easy sort of contempt for the ex-emperor, it is clear that his attitude derives from a kind of fascination and admiration as well. Lucifer and Prometheus — to whom Byron compares him — were after all not metaphorical figures of small importance, and Byron, like many artists, had given Napoleon much of his interest, and much of it positive (see also: Beethoven). The end of Napoleon left even his detractors confused. He left much of Europe in smoldering ruins, just as he left it with a profound revolution of social and legal reforms.

What is almost shocking for an American reader, though, is to see the hope for America which Byron expresses at his poem's end:

The Cincinnatus of the West,

Whom Envy dared not hate,

Bequeathed the name of Washington,

To make man blush there was but one!

George Washington had left the American presidency, declining a third term, a mere seventeen years before Byron wrote *Ode to Napoleon*. Washington's letting go of the reins of power must have made a large effect in the world for Byron to have concluded his poem with this reference. One can see in both Byron and Schoenberg —

whatever misgivings, mysteries, or cultural discomforts the United States brought them— a great hope in the geopolitical meaning of American democracy. In Schoenberg's case, this hope was not misplaced. For reasons that seem to have been a mix of professional and ethnic, Schoenberg did not find a place in Australia or in Britain. So he wrote in 1942, when outcomes and even origins of conflict were far from clear:

How I came to Compose the *Ode to Napoleon* [Opus 41], 1942

The League of Composers had asked me (1942) to write a piece of chamber music for their concert season. It should employ only a limited number of instruments. I had at once the idea that this piece must not ignore the agitation aroused in mankind against the crimes that provoked this war. I remembered Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, supporting repeal of the *ius primae noctis*, Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, Goethe's *Egmont*, Beethoven's *Eroica* and Wellington's *Victory*, and I knew it was the moral duty of intelligentsia to take a stand against tyranny.

Make what you will of the word 'intelligentsia' — it was once current — Arnold Schoenberg, in all of his expressive eccentricity, was taking a political stand using the resources at his disposal.

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Richard Strauss: *Three Songs*

Richard Strauss once said, "The human voice is the most beautiful instrument of all, but it is the most difficult to play." Throughout his life, Strauss challenged the range and technical abilities of singers in his lieder and operas, but his love for the voice never flagged. These three lieder, some of his best known love songs, were written relatively early in his career.

Zueignung ("Dedication" or "Devotion") was the first of the eight songs comprising Strauss' first published lieder in 1885 when Strauss was 21. The text is by the Austrian poet Hermann von Gilm (1812-1864). The title of the poem when it was originally published was the poem's refrain, "Habe dank" ("Have thanks" or "Give thanks"). The accompaniment throughout is reminiscent of Schubertian rolling triplets found in many of his lieder. There is a "failed cadence" on "Habe dank" at the end of the first two verses as the voice moves up a minor third, but in the final "Habe dank" there is a fulfilling arrival as the voice jumps up a major sixth.

Traum durch die Dämmerung ("Dream through the Twilight") and *Morgen!* ("Tomorrow!") were composed in 1895 and 1894, respectively, in the years that Strauss was composing *Till Eulenspiegel*. *Traum* is the first of three songs based on love poems by Julius Bierbaum (1865–1910) dedicated to the Wagnerian baritone Eugen Gura. Its lovely melody is set against a gently rocking accompaniment.

Finally, *Morgen!* – one of Strauss' best known and most widely recorded songs – sets the text of John Henry Mackay, a poet of Scottish descent who was brought up in Germany. Here a clear, gentle voice floats hesitantly over an accompaniment of slowly ascending arpeggios, as if bidding time to stop.

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Richard Strauss: *Metamorphosen*

Strauss gives the 13th of March, 1945 as the day on which he started the score for 'Metamorphosen'. It isn't true. The piece was commissioned the year before, and Strauss had been working on a piece for 11 stringed instruments even before that. However, on the 12th of March — one day before — the Vienna Opera was bombed. Upon hearing this, Strauss renewed his efforts on the work, and gave this date to mark its new beginning.

The pairing of 'Ode to Napoleon' (1942, Los Angeles) with 'Metamorphosen' (1944-45, Munich) raises many questions, some awful and historic, some aesthetic and scholarly, and all rather important in their way. One of the first questions, curiously, is about Beethoven. Both Schoenberg's Ode and Strauss' *Metamorphosen* refer to both the 3rd ('Eroica') and 5th Symphonies of Beethoven. (The third was famously dedicated to Napoleon as 'hero' and had its dedication violently scratched out when Beethoven heard that Napoleon had taken the title of 'Emperor'.) Schoenberg maintains that the E-flat major triad at the end of the 'Ode to Napoleon' can refer to the key of 'Eroica', and that he subconsciously mixed the 'Marseillaise' and Beethoven's 5th Symphony to set the words 'the earthquake voice of victory'. And of course Beethoven was — and remains — a source of great pride for Germany and Austria.

Beethoven's 3rd Symphony is at the heart of 'Metamorphosen'. It comes, however, as a *marcia funebre*, and with no sense of heroism. A funeral march... for whom, for what? For the opera? For soldiers? For civilians? For Germany? For the century itself? A few days after finishing 'Metamorphosen', Strauss wrote in his diary:

The most terrible period of human history is at an end, the twelve year reign of bestiality, ignorance and anti-culture under the greatest criminals, during which Germany's 2000 years of cultural evolution met its doom.

In a way, there's no need to select a concrete subject for the march motive. There were so many funerals, and there was so much loss. And '2000 years of cultural evolution'? Such an idea might once have seemed current and generative. Such was the context for this flowing and beautiful piece.

Strauss was living in Garmisch, south of Munich at the base of the Alps, at the end of the war. He was visited in April 1945 by the principal oboist of the Pittsburgh Symphony (then a corporal, working to secure the area), who asked him if he would consider writing an oboe concerto. Strauss said, simply, 'no'. He evidently reconsidered, though, and completed an oboe concerto a few months after. In this way things seem to move forward, despite everything.

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