Mahler and Strauss Transcript

Date: Thursday, 3 February 2011 - 6:00PM
Location: Barnard's Inn Hall
Gustav Mahler once said of his friend Richard Strauss: “Strauss and I come from different sides of a mountain. One day we shall meet.” The two first met in Leipzig in 1887 as young conductors and were to remain friends until Mahler's untimely death in 1911 - the year Strauss completed perhaps his most successful opera, <i>Rosenkavalier</i>. Mahler conducted many of Strauss’ works including the tone poems <i>Also Sprach Zarathustra; Ein Heldenleben; Don Juan and Tod und Verklärung</i>. Mahler also conducted Strauss’s opera, <i>Feuersnot</i> in 1901 at the Vienna Court Opera and as a pianist, Mahler also performed one of the songs performed in today's concert, the radiant <i>Heimliche Aufforderung</i>, Op.27, No.3 from 1894 – a set of four songs that were a wedding present to his wife.<sup>[3]</sup>

Strauss was also a supporter of Mahler’s music and conducted several of his symphonies. Both men were more renowned as conductors than as composers during the 1890’s and 1900’s - particularly Mahler. Both had extensive experience conducting opera and honed their skills in opera houses in Austria and Germany becoming the leading conductors of their day which culminated with music directorships in Munich/Berlin (Strauss) and Vienna/New York (Mahler). But it was to be Strauss that was to write new operas and leave a lasting legacy in the genre: Mahler instead focused on symphonies although many of these are informed and influenced by his songs and the texts he chose.

According to Alma Mahler, in her fascinating biography <i>Gustav Mahler - Memories and Letters</i>,<sup>[4]</sup> the two would have long heated discussions together whilst she would talk to Strauss’s wife, the soprano Pauline de Ahna, about hairdressers, blouses and the latest thrillers!<sup>[5]</sup> She said of Mahler and Strauss: “They enjoyed talking to one another as they were never of one mind.”

Strauss and Mahler were polar opposites as personalities. Strauss was cool, calculating and collected: a highly professional musician who wore his talent lightly and in a self-deprecating way. He was frequently misunderstood: he gave the false impression of being flippant and casual about his work and in a world where impressions were everything, his Bavarian accent was cause for amusement in the more rarefied and urbane environments of Vienna and Berlin. He loved playing cards – skat – and would socialize and gamble with orchestral musicians after performances.

Mahler was remote, autocratic, self-centered, neurotic, impatient and cantankerous. He agonized over his composition and his household revolved around him and his work to the extent that Alma Mahler had to give up composing to be subservient to him (although when she had an affair with Walter Gropius in 1910, this did change and Mahler was more appreciative of her musical talents.) Both Mahler and Strauss were recognized as being highly talented from an early age but it was Strauss that was the wunderkind – blazing a trail as a teenager both as a composer and as the protégé of Hans von Bulow<sup>[7]</sup> taking over from him in 1885 as Music Director of the Meiningen Orchestra<sup>[8]</sup> – one of the leading orchestras at that time.

Strauss had great facility even as a teenager and this can be heard in works such as Serenade Op.7 (1881-1882,) Suite, Op.4 (1883-84,) and the Cello Sonata Op.6 (1881-3) that is in today’s programme. It is worth comparing these early Strauss works with those Mahler wrote as a student at the Vienna Conservatorium – the youthful Piano Quartet for example, seems quite stilted in comparison to these early Strauss works which have a fluency and virtuosity that belie his tender years. Part of this youthful fluency could be due to the great influence Strauss’s father on the young composer. Franz Strauss was a leading horn player and principal horn in the Munich Court Opera. His influence certainly helped shape Richard’s sense of style - Franz Strauss had worked closely with Richard Wagner and he told to his son to steer clear of his music and focus on the classics. However, when Strauss “discovered” Wagner and came under the influence of Von Bulow, who advocated the “music of the future” as embodied in Liszt’s tone poems and Wagner’s operas, Strauss changed tack and became modernist in outlook, particularly in works such as <i>Heldenleben</i> and his operas <i>Salome</i> and <i>Elektra</i>.

The classicism of his youth was something to which he would increasingly return and for some, retreat into during his long life. Strauss’s youthful classicism can be heard in the Cello Sonata and stylistically is like Schumann or Mendelssohn.

Mahler’s early years were spent immersed in military band, folk music, song and Jewish music that surrounded him as a child growing up in Bohemia. His talents were obvious but his development was less precocious than Richard Strauss. The music that surrounded him become elements, which he uses in novel and sometimes shocking ways in his symphonies: juxtaposing different types of music to great dramatic effect. Take for example the slow movement of the First Symphony in D Major, <i>The Titan – Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen</i>. This movement has an ostinato modeled on the popular round <i>Frere Jacques</i> or its satirical Austrian version, <i>Bruder Martin</i>. There are sections with Klezmer orchestration, promoting the clarinet, cymbal and bass drum and these are contrasted with <i>Verklärter</i> or transfigured music, which is taken from his Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen. This is music about music: music that is referring to different genres and works and putting these together in interesting and arresting ways.<sup>[9]</sup>
Nothing is radical about this in itself: the classical style that evolved during the time of Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart essentially created a discourse from disparate musical elements and is often referential. Take for example in the Finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony which starts with recitative (opera) and includes Theme and Variations; Turkish band music, Four solo singers and choir (oratorio,) fugue and is in four movements like a mini symphony – *Presto:* Allegro molto Assai (Alle Marcia,) Andante Maestoso; Allegro Energico sempre ben marcato. The opening of the Finale even quotes the earlier movements and dispenses with them with the Baritone recitative “Oh friends no more of these sounds. Let us have music more tuneful and joyful!” after which the famous theme of the Finale – The Ode to Joy – is first heard in the Celli and Basses.

Mahler is undoubtedly indebted to Beethoven[10] for these novel and flexible solutions to the symphony but what is radical is how Mahler uses these elements in conjunction with the harmonic and structural developments of Wagner and Brahms: the two polar opposites in later 19th century Austro-German music.

It is interesting to note that whilst both Strauss and Mahler synthesize elements of both; like Wagner, Strauss was at his most radical in his renowned operas:[11] like Brahms, Mahler was primarily the writer of symphonies and songs.[12] For all four composers, the text was an important catalyst for musical inspiration as was their unshakeable belief in the primacy of the Austro-German musical tradition.

When Mahler composed the Rückert Lieder, it was a new century. He commented to a friend in 1900: “I could never repeat a state of mind – and as life drives on, so too I follow new tracks in every work.” This feeling of a fresh approach can really be heard in the Rückert Lieder, which not only break new musical ground for the composer, but also provide avenues for exploration in later works. Take the song, *Ich atmet‘ einen linden Duft* – the oscillating quavers first heard in the violin in bar 4, together with the dotted rhythm from Im Mitternacht, are combined in one of the last works Mahler completed *Das Lied von der Erde*. Look at the second movement, *Der Einsame im Herbst*, where these two elements are combined – almost to the point of quotation. This of course could be a composer writing in a late style, looking back over his works and bringing them back in one final magnum opus or it could be that the rather spare economical orchestration that is used in the Rückert Lieder and the procedures Mahler employs, suit the mood of this song which is entitled “The lonely one in Autumn.” Whatever the reason, Rückert Lieder marks a change in style.

It is this sparesness, the chamber music-like way that Mahler uses the symphony orchestra in Rückert Lieder that make this work so radical. This economy is way ahead of its time akin to the late chamber works of Debussy (particularly the Sonata for Violin and Piano (1917) and the Cello Sonata (1915) - both works a musical distillation of the composer’s settings of Verlaine. Together with Schoenberg – *Herzgewasche* and the lace-like textures of Webern, we have to look a decade or more after the Rückert Lieder to find works, which are the antithesis of the lush romanticism that characterizes much of the music before the First World War.[13] Rückert Lieder provides a fine example of why Mahler is a radical and progressive composer.

The arrangement we are performing today by Daniel Grossman is in the spirit of the arrangements made by Schoenberg and his students for the Private Music Society, Vienna which ran between 1919 and 1921. Very little has to be changed as the orchestration in the original is so spare. Even the piano and harmonium have very little padding to do which would be the case in a more lush and densely written score.

As ever, there are strong links between the songs and the symphonies that were in his mind at the time of writing the Rückert Lieder namely the Symphony No.4 – which interestingly is very classical - and Symphony No.5. The song *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* – “I am lost to the world” has more than a passing similarity with the famous Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony: a relationship that becomes all the more cryptic as this movement is a song without words to Alma Mahler. Willem Mengelburg[14] - Mahler’s assistant - wrote in his performance score that the Adagietto was a love song to Alma. Mahler met her whilst he was writing the symphony and the prevailing seriousness of the opening movements which starts with a funeral march are eroded by the achingly beautiful slow movement and joyful finale. Mengelberg wrote in his score: The Adagietto was Gustav Mahler’s declaration of love to Alma who had initially resisted his advances. “Instead of a letter he coded it in this manuscript without a word of explanation. She understood and replied “he should come” – I got this story from both of them.”

True to form, the text somehow typifies Mahler’s own attitude: “I live alone in my heaven, In my love and in my song.” Ironically, when Mahler composed in his various summerhouses,[15] he demanded total seclusion and these words seem to resonate in his marriage to Alma: his service to his own muse overriding every other consideration. All or nothing – the overriding emotion that drives his music.

Resonances of the Fourth Symphony can be heard in the spare orchestration and particularly in a striking oboe d’amore passage in *Um Mitternacht* where music comes to a sudden, anguished culmination then almost as quickly, despairingly descends into nothingness.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these songs is the way that Mahler touches on a higher spiritual plane in the Rückert Lieder than in any of his previous works. This is particularly striking at the end of *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* where the final violin phrase is marked Verklärung or “transfigured.” Technically, Mahler achieved this with expressive leaps and hushed dynamics but by adding the word, he is telling the performer to come up with something extra special; otherworldly; transfigured: transported to a different existence through music. This is why the Rückert Lieder are seminal – they mark the start of an increasing preoccupation with the
after life that predominates in his later symphonies. What a leap this song cycle is from the Wunderhorn Songs which are much more visceral and swashbuckling – although the Rückert song Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder reminds us of this earlier more earthy style.

The Strauss song, Heimliche Aufforderung is part of a marvelous set of four songs that Strauss wrote as a wedding present to his wife – a set that contains Morgen one of Strauss’s most serene and famous songs. Affecting and fleeting, Heimliche Aufforderung shows a young composer of total confidence and commitment. This song is obviously intended for the salon and reminds us of the masterly settings Debussy made in the 1880’s, for example Nuit D’Étoiles written for his muse Madame Vasnier – who like Stauss’s wife was a notable soprano. The obviously Wagnarian climaxes in the song, remind us of Debussy’s masterly Cinq Poèmes de Charles Baudelaire (1887-89) which are saturated with references to the Wagner of Tristan which had made such an impact on both Strauss and Debussy at Bayreuth.

In many ways this Strauss song is the antithesis of the opera that he was writing in subject matter and style. Compare the music, plot and lyrics of operas such as Feuersnot, Salome and Elektra. Like Mahler, Strauss felt the need to “up the ante” with the dawn of a new century and it was Salome that was to cause a scandal at its Dresden premiere in 1905.

The story of Salome had the potential to cause scandal and the libretto and the music fulfilled this expectation with a salacious Dance of the Seven Veils and a scene where Salome passionately kisses the severed head of John the Baptist. The music also pushes the boundaries of tonality and moments like the opening of the Dance of the Seven Veils foreshadow Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring of 1912.

Mahler would have conducted the Austrian premiere but the sensor banned the opera from being performed in Vienna. Instead the Austrian premiere was given in Graz in 1906 – half of Vienna went to see it. At the premiere the audience included Schoenberg, Berg, Zemlinsky, Mahler, a young Adolf Hitler and Puccini who described the music as being “terribly cacophonous.” Mahler loved the music and saw it as the music of the future – when you listen to the opera you can hear that both Mahler and Strauss from the first decade of the twentieth century are trying to achieve the same thing, breaking new ground by synthesizing and unifying the same 19th century traditions and aesthetics. Indeed some of Salome could have been written by Mahler and visa versa. Strauss was to continue to push the envelope with Elektra in 1909 securing his position as the enfant terrible of early Twentieth Century music.

However, as the century progresses, Strauss retreats into a refined, neo-romantic, neo-classical world of nostalgia, with works such as Metamorphosen (1945); the Four Last Songs (1948); The opera Capriccio (1942)– his bad boy status being eclipsed by composers such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky from 1910 onwards.

From a performance practice perspective, Strauss always claimed that the music of Salome and Elektra should be performed “like the fairy music of Mendelssohn” and it is very easy to forget the classical way orchestras in Berlin and Vienna played in the early 1900’s[16] – the wind and brass with no vibrato and less power (they had different instruments that were largely unchanged from the time of Beethoven:) the strings with gut strings rather than the metal ones used today and with a more discerning use of vibrato which was used more as an ornament than a ubiquitous part of tone production. It is easy to forget where this “new” and radical music comes from and both Strauss and Mahler felt they were a part of a glorious and superlative musical tradition stretching back to Bach as performers and composers – as did the orchestras they conducted.

To conclude, Mahler felt he was misunderstood as a composer despite having over 260 performances of his symphonies during his lifetime. “My time will come” he commented. Strauss towards the end of his long life observed: “I have outlived myself.” Both have become better understood with hindsight and their music is more popular than ever: played and listened to worldwide. If one takes the mountain of the opening quotation, this represents the Austro-German music tradition and what Mahler and Strauss do is meet at the summit by extending and unifying the disparate and conflicting classical and modernist elements.

It is interesting that Schoenberg saw his twelve-note method – serialism – as the innovation “that would ensure the predominance of Austro German music for the next 100 years.” Ironically, this was the case during Strauss’s lifetime when serialism dominated contemporary music. Even Stravinsky – the other great innovator – turned to serialism in the 1950’s.

The sound world of Mahler and Strauss lived on in Hollywood where composers drew on its fantastic craft, orchestration and dramatic imagination and increasingly in the concert hall and recording studio: Mahler’s symphonies since the 1960’s have rivaled Beethoven’s in the number of commercial recordings.

However, it is now the approach of Mahler and Strauss, which has won through in contemporary music; an approach that creates music which audiences relate to and that has an audible continuity with the past. This is where Strauss and Mahler meet on their mountain and this has approach has proven to be inspirational, radical and ultimately more enduring than many of the other developments in 20th century music.

Further Reading:
R Philip, Performing Music in the Age of Recording (Yale, 2004)
K Martner Mahler’s Concerts (New York, 2010)
D Mitchell Gustav Mahler Songs and symphonies of Life and Death (London, 1985)

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[2] Richard Strauss – *Feuersnot*, Op.50 (1901) was not a great success and Mahler conducted only four performances. The plot was a parody on the Wagnerian idea of redemption through love with Richard Strauss being represented by the protagonist, Kunrad. The irony of the plot with its erotic and sexual undertones, did not go down well with the audience and neither did the music, which like Elektra (1909) and Salome (1905), was pushing the envelope of conventional harmony.


[8] Meiningen Orchestra – one of the finest orchestra’s of its time – it premiered many of Brahms’s orchestral works including the First and Second Symphonies.

[9] There is an interesting account of Mahler meeting Freud in Holland. Mahler felt that a traumatic event in his childhood had prevented him from writing a great melody as he always felt the need to undermine his music with comical or satirical elements.

[10] It is interesting to look at Mahler’s performing score of Beethoven 9, which includes many amendments and changes to orchestration and dynamic, to “improve” its dramatic impact. The scores also shows Mahler’s concept of flexible tempi to heighten dramatic effect – this was in an age before recording when audiences would hear such large scale music only in the concert hall or could play piano reductions at home.

[11] Wagner did write a Symphony in C early in his career in 1832. It does not show any of the hallmarks that were to set him up as one of the great radicals of the 19th Century.

[12] Brahms never wrote an opera but like Mahler wrote many songs (over 200,) choral works and the German Requiem, which very much continues the tradition of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

[13] A notable exception to this is Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* because of the forces he uses which inspired so many other composers particularly after the First World War – violin/viola – flute/piccolo – clarinet/bass clarinet – piano – cello - rather than the texture of the music.

[14] Willem Mengelburg (1871-1951) worked as Mahler’s assistant and was the Music Director of the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam from 1895-1941 where he made it into one of the great orchestras of the world and was an early champion of Mahler’s music in recording and concert hall.


[16] Listen to early pre-electric recordings of the Vienna Philharmonic or Oscar Fried’s recording of Mahler Symphony No.2 with the Berlin Court Opera Orchestra of 1924 – the first of many recordings of Mahler’s symphonies.