

The Locked Door

Viennese Modernism and Its Place in a
Disinterested Modern World

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If a casual listener of Western classical music were asked to define Austrian music, what might their answer be? From my observations, the most common attributions to the category include the music of Haydn, Beethoven, and Mozart, perhaps the soulful folksongs featured in *The Sound of Music*, and certainly the waltzes of Johann Strauss Sr. and his sons. Indeed, it would seem that, from Austria's establishment of "The Blue Danube" waltz as its unofficial national anthem, to the globally televised annual Vienna New Year's Concert (whose programs are largely dedicated to Austro-German waltz and polka music of the 19th century), this generalization is true.

Yet, a significant peculiarity in Viennese music history becomes apparent when considering a Toronto performance by Viennese string quartet "ensemble LUX," a group of virtuoso performers "primarily dedicated to the performance and promotion of contemporary chamber music" (*EnsembleLUX.at*). The 2016 Toronto concert at the University of Toronto's Walter Hall, the third stop of their North American debut that already covered New York and Montreal, was put on "in celebration of 100 years of Austrian modern music," and "made possible through a generous gift from the Austrian Embassy" (*Performance.rcmusic.ca*). The concert program was dedicated to the "Austrian modern music" in question—music that stems from the tradition commonly referred to as the Second Viennese School, a distinctly Austrian school of thought first set into motion by composer Arnold Schoenberg at the turn of the 20th century. Hearing just a few notes penned by Schoenberg or his cohorts is enough to realize how drastically this music departs from the perceived standard of Austrian music—with its chaotic formations, unapologetic use of dissonance, and complete lack of tonality, born out of an unyielding modernist philosophy. Its influence has been far reaching, yet, as I will shortly evidence, the style remains perhaps one of the least performed and most obscure of the art music

spectrum. In this paper, I will discuss one of the reasons this may be—namely, how the music of the so-called Second Viennese School inevitably alienates the masses through its emphasis on subjectivism and individual identity—using ensemble LUX’s performance as a case in point. I will begin with a consideration of the “exterior”—how my claim is supported by the observable aspects of this performance and the reception of modern Viennese art music on a larger scale—followed by an examination of the social implications hidden in the philosophy and language of that music.

Inside the Niche

Even with minimal research, one can observe a unique dichotomy that surrounds modern Viennese art music, and, indeed, much of modern art music in general. On the one hand, composers of the tradition have received widespread acclaim in the realm of musical academia; on the other, their works are rarely performed or recorded, and virtually never featured through traditional forms of mass media broadcast, such as radio or television. In ensemble LUX’s performance, we may see a clue as to why this is so—specifically in the concert audience, which, even in the heart of a large multicultural city like Toronto, was possibly the smallest and least culturally diverse I had ever seen at any professionally organized musical event. I estimated there to be about fifty people, nearly all of whom appeared to be older, well-dressed Caucasian men and women. This begs the question: Was the performance inaccessible or exclusory to other prospective attendees? High ticket prices may have been a factor; yet significant discounts were offered to students and seniors, and I have personally observed other musical events in the same venue (with the same ticket prices) drawing much larger, more diverse crowds. It would appear, at first glance, that the musical style is simply unappealing to most concertgoers. This

assumption is strengthened when taking into account that all ensemble LUX's performances for the past year (as catalogued on their website) have been held at relatively small venues, as though a low number of attendees was consistently anticipated. This could also be interpreted to imply that these concerts are best performed in intimate, communal settings; however, given art music concert expectations of audience behaviour—to sit at a distance from the performers and make no sound aside from occasional applause—this idea seems unjustified. It may be of interest to add that a noticeable number of audience members did not return after the intermission.

Still, in contrast to the apparent ambivalence of the public toward this music, an uncanny reverence could be witnessed in the reception of its performance. From the moment the first note was sounded, the audience sat in utter stillness. Everyone around me—even those who later abandoned their seats during the intermission—watched the performers with such intensity that I was quickly persuaded I was witness to one of the great marvels of art. This scraggly yet venerating audience seemed to be an apt representation of the dichotomy of academic respect and low public appeal that surrounds modern Viennese music.

Moreover, this apparent sense of reverence was not limited to the audience—it was at least as evident in the performers. They played their instruments meticulously, as though every stroke, touch, and gesture were premeditated; they grimaced and swayed with deep feeling; their eyes rarely left the score in front of them. They did not seem to be “making music” so much as trying to articulate a message with worshipful precision. If that is true, one look at the scrupulously marked scores of these works makes it clear that any message here is not the performers’, but the composers’—and so it is the composers to whom we might turn for our translation.

A New Language

The origins of the “Second Viennese School” can be traced back to 1904, when Arnold Schoenberg began his career as a pedagogue in Vienna, taking on as his students—among others—the young composers Anton Webern and Alban Berg, who, along with their mentor, would soon form the great “trinity” for which the School is now known (Simms). Their artistic impetus could be defined as part of the “modernist” movement that began to creep across Europe shortly before the first world war—the notion that the development of art was obliged to mirror the radical, changing nature of society, philosophy, the sciences, and so forth. The result was a music that “explicitly eschewed repetition, large-scale forces, tonal stability, and extensive duration” (Botstein, in reference to Schoenberg’s influential early work *Kammersymphonie no. I*).

Hand in hand with the impetus of modernism came the artistic ideals set out by equally pervasive *expressionist* philosophies of the same time period. Under this belief system, the idea that music is obliged to provide a certain degree of aesthetic enjoyment or to cater to the tastes of the masses was viewed as a baseless relic of Classicism and Romanticism that prevented the art from realizing its full potential—that is, as a vehicle for an unprecedented level of self-expression. As Watkins put it, expressionism “emphasized an inner spiritual and psychological vision as opposed to a record of external events” (215), a definition affirmed by a 1917 quote from composer Edgar Varèse: “I dream of instruments obedient to my thought and which … will lend themselves to the exigencies of my inner rhythm” (qtd. in Botstein).

This obsession with self-expression was not directly responsible for the historically strained relationships between modernist composers and audiences, but the symbolic connection—of artistic individualization and audience alienation—is notable. It would seem that

the most common reason for the rejection of modernist music—including modern Viennese music—has always been in some way a result of its inherently provocative nature, the manner in which it overturns the most widely accepted Western notions of musicality in the name of artistic progress and even artistic ethicality (Locke 69, 70). Milton Babbitt went as far as to suggest that a mass public had no role in the modernist arts—and that this was, in fact, a virtue of modernism (Botstein). In addition, praise of modernism was not without implicative insult toward more conservative listeners, such as was seen during the Prague premier of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, when Alois Hába insinuated that the atonal opera would only satisfy listeners who had a higher dramatic sense (Locke 77). Perhaps the only true vindication of modernism by the general public came after the combined devastation brought on by the two world wars, when the grotesque, hysterical nature of works like *Wozzeck* finally seemed justified as a representation of the modern world. Modernist music was also strengthened as an “ethical” art by being vilified as “degenerate” by fascist regimes such as the Nazi Party; the implication being that any music hated by fascists had to be good for progressive society (Botstein). Here we may see the origins of the esteem now reserved for modernist schools like Schoenberg's.

Still, as one delves deeper into the nature of the modernist language, one realizes how problematic may be its “translation.” Because modernist-expressionist traditions like the Second Viennese School were developed specifically in opposition to earlier, widespread models of musical representation (to name a grossly simple example: major as denoting happy and minor as denoting sad), but did not instate any new audience-accessible models in their place, we are left with a music that is brimming with meaning unintelligible to everyone except its creators. Even if we consider later harmonic systems like Schoenberg's 12-tone system, it seems unrealistic to expect classically trained listeners to interpret musical meaning out of such a tonally aberrant

framework; rather, this music's highly theoretical nature suggests that it could truly be "understood" only by one who has deeply immersed themselves in it—whether by learning its performance or studying its score—to the point that it inspires within them some sense of empathy with the composer unrelated to any model of musical representation.

The Locked Door

In many ways, one could say that the music of the Second Viennese School resembles a locked door without a key. In contrast to earlier models of European art music, which each draw on the artistic styles of their predecessors to provide Western listeners with a framework—a key—for understanding musical meaning and extra-musical representation, the Second Viennese School's rejection of the tonal language of its predecessors threw away that key without substitute, isolating itself from the broader community of art music. No doubt an interwar Schoenberg would have asserted that his music was representative of a certain Austro-German identity (Watkins), but 12-tone music's gradual slump into obscurity is a testimony to its inability to unite a culture under that identity—partly due to the way it brings personal psychological identity to the fore.

Let us consider one particular piece in ensemble LUX's concert program: Arnold Schoenberg's String Trio op. 45 (1946), which one of the ensemble violinists, Thomas Wally, prefaced by explaining that the 12-tone piece was intended to reflect a period of severe illness of the composer. While certainly an emotional intensity could be read out of the piece's harsh acoustics and savage contrasts, it would have required a stretch of the imagination for me, as a student of Western art music, to interpret anything more specific; even though the performers—judging by their highly expressive playing—appeared to be feeling something much deeper than

I. Here is the locked door—a heartfelt personal impression conveyed in an unintelligible language. While the performers seemed to have gained a certain degree of access to that impression through their immersive study of the work, the audience was left in ignorance. It seems justified, then, that such public disinterest should surround modern Viennese music. My own appreciation for the niche was fostered only by the research I conducted prior to ensemble LUX's concert; perhaps a similar academic journey can be inferred for the few staunch patrons who remained after the intermission and, when the last note had faded, showered the performers with applause.

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