



THE PROMS LISTENING SERVICE

Radio 3's Tom Service proposes onward sonic explorations inspired by the music of tonight's Prom

SCHOENBERG Gurrelieder

Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* symbolises something very strange about its composer's career. At the time he was orchestrating this vast, hyper-Romantic, ultra-expressive, intoxicatingly dramatic and ghoulishly colourful music in 1910 and 1911, Schoenberg was conceiving and composing music that was going in a completely different direction: towards the aphorism, the hyper-condensed as opposed to the hyper-monumental, seeking to create the maximum possible expressive and poetic impact from the fewest notes rather than the most instruments and on the largest scale.

Take his set of Six Pieces for solo piano, Op. 19, composed in 1911. These are works that last sometimes just a handful of seconds, yet in their distilled poetry and their kaleidoscope of densely dissonant harmonies – like going on the journey of a Mahler symphony but in a minute rather than an hour – they conjure imaginative worlds that are as emotionally vast and vertiginous as *Gurrelieder*'s, it's just that we as listeners have to turn ourselves into ultra-aware, ultra-sensitive sounding boards to really experience them. The last piece is one of the most remarkable single pages in early 20th-century music: writing it after his close friend and mentor and champion Gustav Mahler's funeral in 1911, Schoenberg created a series of bells that are suspended in a harmonic and expressive limbo. This whole piece – a few bars, lasting a couple of minutes in its slowest performances – is a musical writing-out of the experience of having your breath taken away, when you're numbed, slain, close to suffocated, by grief. It ends with a shocked exhalation in the lowest register of the piano,

marked in the score 'wie ein Hauch' ('like a breath'), a respiration that confirms rather than resolves the suspense-stricken atmosphere of the rest of the piece.

Schoenberg is far from the only 20th-century composer to have made what seems like a radical stylistic or existential shift in their music. It would have shocked the audiences who saw the first performances of *Gurrelieder* to know that this master of the musically massive was also working out haikus of music such as the Op. 19 piano pieces; just as the Parisian audiences who loved to be appalled by Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* could hardly have predicted that the ultra-modern creator of this musical-mechanical atavism would regress (it seemed!) to the cool waters of neo-Classicism in subsequent music such as *Pulcinella* or *Apollo*.

Yet Stravinsky's greatest stylistic shock for unwitting listeners came later in his life, when the zenith of his neo-Classical rewriting and reforming of the entire musical past in his own image – his opera *The Rake's Progress* from 1951 – was followed by his final years, in which he became a serial composer, using the 12-note techniques of Schoenberg in works such as the distilled cabalistic constructions of his micro-cantata *Abraham and Isaac* or the density of the even shorter *Variations: Aldous Huxley in memoriam*. The great musical antipodes of early 20th-century music were at last aligned – even if Stravinsky had to wait until Schoenberg had died in 1951 until he fully embraced his own version of Schoenberg's composing with 12 tones; as if Schoenberg had to become the Classicism of a previous era before Stravinsky could deal with his legacy and ideas.

Mind you, towards the end of his life, Schoenberg did something that no-one

would expect from the person everyone likes to think of as the dark prince of dissonance, writing pieces that employ richly harmonised tonal chords for the first time in decades: his Second Chamber Symphony, for example. Composers: confounders of our expectations, more like. And just as well, too!



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