

Letter From Vienna

// Wien Modern—Wien Oldtime // 1999

(a musical diary with themes, during a music festival)

by Daniel Goode

I

October 1999

Shortly before leaving New York for Vienna on October 18, I talked by phone with a young Viennese sound-installation composer. He said "You are very lucky to be coming when you are coming...." He explained that the whole month of November was devoted to the *Wien Modern* music festival and I should get a festival pass (a huge saving) and, oh, don't expect the music to be like Downtown New York music. I said I wouldn't expect it. But somehow I couldn't forget it. All the way through the festival I was haunted by what "downtown New York music" had been and still was to me. You may see what I mean in the course of this chronicle, though my purpose is not to talk about my own milieu.

In 1971 I had taken my first trip to Europe and come by train to Vienna for a few days, where I attended an earth-shaking—to me—performance of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*. I had only just a little while earlier in London attended a performance in the Albert Hall of Mahler's *Ninth Symphony* conducted by Pierre Boulez; fascinating but not moving. I wrote about these two experiences over the next year in a medium I weirdly called a *graphic essay* (indeed one component of it looked like a cross between a huge board game and "Pin the Tail on the Donkey," a kind of kid's collage). The title was *Two Events* and it was really a compositional diary.

So now it's twenty-eight years later and I'm still writing a music journal on compositional themes, this time stimulated by the Wien Modern music festival of November 1999. I am concerned that today's music be as profound as yesterday's. I don't really understand why it's either not, or very rarely that way. At Wien Modern I did immediately understand that I was looking at the European version of post-WW II Modernism. But because Vienna is a symphony town, the symphonic past is always here looking out at you as you behave "modernly." In 19th-century Vienna the symphony became a totally absorbing art form without the need for story or stage action. It the source of Edward Hanslick's conservative aesthetic of pure, abstract musical beauty but also of Mahler's radical symphonic aesthetic that "The symphony is like the world: it should have everything in it." I find that, for me, anyway and I would think for anyone who is at all susceptible to the past, the *symphonic Geist* acts as an implicit critic of the present. You may be able *not* to notice a string quartet or a piano sonata, but along with

that other imposing musical monolith, the Indonesian gamelan orchestra, if you wander into the presence of the Symphony Orchestra you will find it hard to shake its influence. So that is why, though I have started out merely chronicling my experiences of Wien Modern, I am soon thrust into a dialectic between today's and yesterday's New Music. At times the back and forth in my mind has had the ferocious energy of the ball in a tennis match. I was not amused. Provoked by anxiety, is more like it.

Inevitably, I had to confront the root issue for anyone, I think, who takes seriously the implications of the large-ensemble form in culture. I believe that the symphony orchestra is different in kind from just a large collection of players playing together. It acquired that difference in meaning over time, so that by now we can say it has been "invested" with a special significance, something like a cross between being a distinct medium and—transposing a term from Asian culture—being a "national treasure." We can have several attitudes towards this transformation of *large ensemble* into Symphony Orchestra and I'll save my exploration of the issue till the end.

November 15

There can be no doubt about it: Tan Dun can compose. (Born 1957 in Hunan, China, he has lived in the U.S. since 1986.) With verve, variety, soulfulness, dramatic heft, with or without forays into the vernacular; with textures melting into each other with or without improvisation...moments I can wish I had composed, vastness or intimacy, each at his command. And yet, and still, he loses his way, squanders his creations, and it all falls down.

Red Forcast: Orchestral Theatre III (1996, 45') for Soprano, Orchestra, Video and Tape was performed at the twelfth Wien Modern festival on November 15, 1999, with the composer conducting in what looked like red pajamas. Well, red *was* the theme, it seems. The large video screen (videotechnik, Mike Newman) showed lots of Mao, lots of protesters of the Vietnam war, lots of bombs falling, lots of smiling, marching, waving Chinese, lots of other familiar politicians: Kennedy, Nixon, Martin Luther King Jr., Brezhnev, Krushchev. The very young Beatles appeared and "Let It Be" pounded out from the stage piano. The soprano (Nancy Allen Lundy) moved about, crooning, carrying a portable tape speaking in German. A saxophone player (uncredited) played a beautifully nuanced series of opening riffs, then walked about to coax the opening sounds from the chamber orchestra arranged in a circle beneath the huge screen, monitors poking out on stage here and there.

At the beginning and end the composer, Tan Dun, appeared, conducting us all from the video screens (the orchestra followed his screen conducting) and even Mao's waving seemed to conduct the orchestra in a near-final moment. Vibrant *ritornellos* came and went. For a moment I thought he had done it: made a video opera that worked. A

bobbing, yellow-and-red crowd of Chinese women and girls seemed to dance to the music from the orchestra playing below on stage. I was transfixed. But it was over in a few seconds and nothing like that ever happened before or after. A slow, wistful section of music dissipated the energy, bombs fell again, the music picked up, the ritornello returned, and on the screen a big bass drum thumped the final note. But a big bass bang does not the thrill of a finale make. It was all much too late.

This piece was preceded by *Orchestral Theatre II: Re* (1992, 20') *Orchestral Theatre I: Xun* (1990, 20'). It had the orchestra, the audience, and a solo baritone (Stephen Richardson) intoning the note D (Re) with two conductors conducting. The first conductor was again the composer; the second was for the audience. Tan Dun, before turning to the orchestra to begin the piece, talked to us, the audience, about how "Re" was part of so many English words like "return" and recalled to us Buddhist thought and other ancient things. Many since the 1960s have composed One Note pieces (Tan Dun, by the way, had many notes and noises nicely placed in and around the presumptive central D with wind players all around the balcony of the grand Baroque *Grosser Saal* of Vienna's central Konzerthaus), but none of his predecessors in one-note composition composed anything like this pop-Buddhist cantata. Its best accomplishment was perhaps getting a moderate-sized audience of rather formalistic, inexpressive Viennese to open their mouths and sing along with one of their own orchestras (the excellent Radio Symphonieorchester Wien). But this one-time softening-up of the superego can only do so much. We could only wish for a re-incarnation of S. Freud to carry on the much-needed task of relieving these citizens of Vienna once again of their rigidifying repressions. This theme will reappear.

The all-Tan Dun evening began with *Orchestral Theatre I: Xun* (1990, 20') and featured a soloist (Bruce Gremo) with the whole orchestral wind section playing a 7,000-year-old ocarina-type instrument called the *Xun*. Beginning with only one hole thousands of years ago and now with ten, it warbled and hissed in solo and ensemble moments with the orchestra: international style world-Pop—I'm afraid to name it so grossly, but so it tootled on in my mind afterwards.

November 14

I went to Tan Dun's spectacle the night after (defecting from Wien Modern) I had gone to the Musikverein—a smaller but equally spectacular Rococo concert hall—to hear the Wiener Symphoniker (a city orchestra) play Bruckner's unfinished *Ninth Symphony* conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Let me skip the fascinating and enigmatic lecture-demonstration that Harnoncourt gave (my rudimentary German prevented me from understanding much) and concentrate on what he did: he played, between explanations, only the fragments of the unfinished Finale and not the inevitable recomposition for which it would have been necessary to play a continuous movement).

What made the Bruckner evening so much more meaningful than Tan Dun's was the intensity, the emotional charge. This seemed to mean that music from almost exactly one hundred years ago could resonate deeply within me while music of our moment, equally

sophisticated compositionally, could be at best a mild pleasure. And who would want to exchange intensity of experience from whenever, for a mildness whose only other virtue is contemporaneity?

November 2

Before we go down this spiral of self-criticism of *our* age, let me bring forward another composition, performed on the opening night of Wien Modern: Morton Feldman's *For Samuel Beckett*. This forty-five-minute unbroken skein of soft, undulating sound for large ensemble (performed by Klangforum Wien, Sylvain Cambreling, conductor) was every bit as intense as the Bruckner *Ninth Symphony* and, permit me this wild idea, every bit as repressed as the Viennese audience.

Try to unravel this if you can. The conjunction of these two pieces twists my mind into knots. I'm thinking of a conservation-of-energy model for the contrasting music of Bruckner and Feldman. Bring the disparate atoms and molecules, widely separated in space, back together and you regain the energy lost in the dissipation of the Big Bang. The intensity of Bruckner's Big Bang, a product of a unified European art-culture, can only be reproduced by painfully squeezing the careening fragments back together into a confined space, aching to expand again but prohibited by the composer's heroic self-policing: only soft continuous sounds, closely spaced together, straining against each other, formally mirroring each other, and never leaving for a moment the rigors of their inter-relationships in time and musical space. Listening to the piece felt like holding one's breath for forty-five minutes: exhausting and exhilarating. It reminds me of the sexual technique of cutting off the blood supply to one's sex organs to increase the pleasure of orgasm. (It's useful to quickly scotch the idea that the real sexual life of the composer has anything to do with an interpretation of their work which finds a musical energy resembling sexual energy. From what we know, Bruckner was a celibate while Feldman was anything but.)

Transparency is for many, me included, a treasured value of musical texture: what you hear is what you get. My favorite aesthetic observation of Mozart's, in a letter to his father, is that in his own music "there is always something for the cognoscenti." I've always taken this to mean that there is always, in every piece of his, a kernel to chew on with the mind (to apply to or to find in the music), but we need not chew on it, apply it, find it because the thrust of the composition, its main effect, is totally, completely perceptible. Yes, there may be secret engines at work in a Mozart composition, but you need not know them to grasp and enjoy the work. For the reflective, the thinker, the analytic or synthetic mind, there will always be a kernel, a concept, a driving idea. But this is not necessary for appreciation or even for fulfillment of the artistic aim.

Let us say, that the cognoscenti get an extra and significant thrill, and that maybe this is needed to teach composition and to experience a deeper understanding, but not simply to listen. I love this relation of the sensible to the intellectual, its grace and acceptance of both worlds, its avoidance of dogma, its receptiveness to a unity of experience beyond the dualistic thrashing about we often—helplessly—find necessary to thinking about

artworks. The "Mozart standard" does not belittle the thrill of synoptic patterning by the mind, but it does not require it as a tool for listening. The best 19th-century music to my mind continues Mozart's aesthetic rule. The worst 20th-century music repeals that rule.

Feldman's *For Samuel Beckett* and Bruckner's *Ninth Symphony* are transparent works with something in each for the cognoscenti.

But let the cognoscenti wait while we approach each from a listener's point of hearing without reference to a written document. Most listeners, no matter how sophisticated, are not likely to have seen the score for either, let alone studied it.

Feldman's work, written in 1987, the year he died, was commissioned by the Holland Festival 1987 for the Schoenberg Ensemble—a chamber orchestra with all instrumental choirs represented. Each choir—the woodwinds, strings, and brasses—sets up slow pulsing chords at repetitive time lags from one another. The piano and mallet player—in this performance sitting at opposite ends of the ensemble—are rhythmic wild cards, interweaving their own duet in a seemingly unrelated way to the other three choirs. Their notes are sparse, sometimes only single pitches, everything soft, of course, sometimes only audible if you see the player's gesture at the moment of re-entering the music. The three large choirs of woodwinds, brasses, and strings at first seem to answer each other at shortish time intervals (call it *andante*). Later, the time lags are longer (call it *lento*) and include, towards the end of the forty-five-minute duration, actual silences for the first time. These are very dramatic in context (see Bruckner, below). Throughout the piece the chords, which contain many closely spaced intervals like seconds, hold for multiple repetitions before a smallish change in the intervals. These changes are likewise giant in effect, though small in absolute terms, with bass note changes more momentous than internal intervallic ones.

All this falls within the classic minimalistic technique. What, then, gives it the classic expressivity of the late 19th-century? Well, if there were at least one giant crescendo, one huge pause, one Mahlerian collapse of all voices in a low groaning noise, we could say there is the tension of build-up and release. But none of this actually occurs. That, then, is the drama of release, it's *no release*! Feldman holds it all in. It's palpable and disturbing. It should act on you like an emotional "noodge". If it doesn't you have missed the experience. You should wonder how you have listened to a kind of quasi steady-state droning with tiny changes and either been moved, disturbed, or unaffected. In any event, the absolute withholding of the classical grand gesture of expression is itself a grand gesture. Feldman is a heroic composer in the mold of the late 19th century, even if all obvious evidence is to the contrary. We should add that forty-five minutes is nothing in the late-Feldman canon: three or even five hours is more like it. The "last" heroic composer. Or as his friend and colleague, John Cage, said to him: "You are an extremist."

Anton Bruckner (1824-96) is an extremest of a different sort, but in a more familiar late 19th-century mode. Is he more or less extreme than Wagner, Mahler, Schoenberg (of *Gurrelieder* or the 12-tone method)? *Es macht nichts*—no matter—because there is a special kind of extremism that sets him apart from everyone else. He is obsessed with the

symphony and, some would say, writes the same one over and over again ten or eleven times, changing very little but inexorably moving towards a stasis in the last three or four. These last ones all "sound the same," have the same formalities, and, of course, the same rhetoric. This is essentially true of all but the very early ones. Excluding the scherzo-trio movement in each, which is totally locked into the strict early 19th-century Beethoven model of sectioning with repeats, the "big" movements (first, fourth, slow) are strange indeed. With a score, we can discern the elements of the controlling form of past symphonies, the *sonata allegro* procedure, but without a score, just listening, reflecting, gathering continuities, there is a kind of dizzying confusion of gorgeous, over-flowing phrases repeated, and repeated once more, then suddenly interrupted by a complete contrast or a sudden dramatic pause of silence.

Here in the 20th-century, it seemed revolutionary when Karlheinz Stockhausen coined the term "moment-form" in and around his late '60's composition, *Momente*, to describe a certain kind of discontinuity in which a highly integrated, self-referential unit of music would give way to another one, completely different but equally related only to itself. A long composition could be a succession of these moments but without a formal armature on which to hang all the details as in the long movements from Bach through Brahms.

But Bruckner could have been there first with moment-form: to the ear, these movements can seem to be a succession of such moments, rather than parts of a gigantic *sonata allegro* form. True, there are returns of moments and there are development moments, as well as introductory and valedictory moments. But all in all, to the ear, not the eye, Bruckner is a giant miniaturist, constructing huge time lengths out of intimate (even if loud) moments, using every rhetorical connecting device, but especially those two of cross-cutting and dramatic silence or *luftpause*. Perhaps that is what leads me to say that Bruckner is a composer of transparencies: what you hear is what there is. There are no secrets—except, of course, there is always something for the *cognoscenti*!

We, the *cognoscenti*, may want to know, for example, how a huge late-19th Century orchestra is being used with such clarity of definition, with such seemingly simple lapidary textures without simple-mindedness. Or we might want to know how Bruckner manages so many harmonic/melodic sequences (the same passage transposed up or down). In the slow movement of *Symphony No. 6*, I counted a sequence that descended at a slow tempo for twelve repetitions. Maybe not a record, but in classical pedagogical terms, a big *no-no* nonetheless. Answers to these questions, are probably not going to come so much from an examination of the written score, but from our own nervous system: what it wants, how it evaluates what it hears, how it processes varied repetition, and most significant, what the emotive underpinning of our music-mind requires for satisfaction.

There are no easy answers to be had by studying so-called universal perceptual abilities. Rather, culture enters, and culture teaches, passes on, trains a connection between perception and emotional response. How would we describe being "open", "receptive", "welcoming", "satisfied" "moved by" the next moment in the composer's ongoing presentation of ideas? The *cognoscenti* have a lot to explain here, and Bruckner is a good

subject for an auditory microscope with which to view how we feel each moment-after-each, because the whole is made up so clearly of juxtaposed moments. They are transparently *there*, each following each, even giving our 20th-century's speeded-up metabolism time for a quick psychic litmus test between phrases. Once we adjust our breathing and thinking rhythm to Bruckner's parade of moments, there is positive pleasure in taking in each glorious mini-event as it happens, in relation to the previous one and in relation to your ongoing thought and feeling—something you can't do with quick-cut film and TV advertising rhythms.

Bruckner's event-rhythm is the opposite of the manipulation we have had to accept in contemporary sound and image-making. Let us fantasize a contemporary scene: Bruckner with one keyboard stroke sends you one phrase after another of his symphony, and you receive it, turning it over in your mind, stroke by stroke, meanwhile assembling a mosaic—picture of his symphonic design and reacting to each phrase with your own thought and feeling. In the end, that's what we have in music: a time-line of our memories, feelings, associations—and syntheses of these musical memories replacing the originals, as the event recedes into our past. There is no other final product to any musical experience. How else would we describe the result?

Bruckner is so unlike other composers in the Western tradition. Not only does he put breathing space around each moment as it unfolds, but each declares itself with a unique signature, leaving its trace inexorably in your consciousness. If in the Western tradition we could characterize the phraseology of composers, say, from Mozart through Cage as self-referential (musical ideas acquire meaning only in relationship to each other in the given piece), I would put Bruckner at the far end, away from self-referentiality, meaning that his musical substances tend to stand outside of an internal, consistent, self-referentiality. This is not to say that his works lack surface resemblances and even elaborate internal references, especially contrapuntal ones. But through these, an idea freely circulates in a space larger than the particular musical opus underway. A trumpet section blares a tattoo, a single flute softly wobbles (and warbles too!) over a hushed carpet of strings, a single motif clambers up or down the staircase of harmony. Which symphony am I in? #5?, #6, #8? Does it matter? It is glorious, no matter which. What will come next and what will I feel, think, how will I put it together with what just happened? I know I am overstating a condition in separating out Bruckner from others. After all we sometimes listen to Bach, or Mozart, or Cage in a generic way, uninterested in *which* work we are hearing and how its particular story comes out. But I am insisting that Bruckner is different. A Bruckner moment is both "written in italics" *and also* underlined. It calls forth a different way of listening.

Still, such a scatter-shot way of listening is a little unfair to Bruckner. He was not self-consciously radical in the manner of Wagner and Mahler. He worked over his compositions with classical zeal, inventing novel mirror counterpoint, finely tuning his harmonic shadings, indulging in developmental workmanship. But something, let us say, from his unconscious, is turning our attention elsewhere, away from a Beethoven-derived composition process, toward, well, in Bruckner's language towards God.

In *our* time, Bruckner's *techné* reads out as a kind of subjectivism in which each soft, loud, thick, thin texture, each one of these varied, yet pointed musical quanta has the coloring of the whole affective life of the Baroque through the hyperchromatic 19th-century. There's no escaping an interpretation of affect because the past has infused each phrase with an articulation, unfortunately one in which verbal descriptions immediately become clichés like *tragic, tender, heroic, longing*. Unfair, once more, to Bruckner because the music gives the lie to the cliché by going one step further into these very affects. One can only think of *intensification* as the secret of Bruckner's transcendence of banality, of cliché. Yet, that probably begs the question of how he does it. Does it have to do with the *quanta* themselves, or more with the juxtaposition? How does the *underlining*, the *written in italics* work musically? What is focus? For composition, these become the first questions to ask.

Returning to the performance of *Symphony #9* in Vienna's Musikverein on November 14, 1999, a full-house of gray-haired Viennese heard Nikolaus Harnoncourt begin with a lecture-demonstration, conducting the full orchestra playing the fragments of the unfinished Finale of the Bruckner Ninth. Any attempt to make a continuous whole out of these fragments cannot be called "Bruckner" in any sense. Thus, Harnoncourt did the right thing, and it should scuttle any future attempt to present a whole, complete Ninth. The fragments are interesting morsels, especially a chromatic, downward-moving chordal sequence. But they are only interesting, not musically prescient of some super-finale that lies within them. Then, after intermission, Harnoncourt conducted the complete first three movements. Just before the initial downbeat, a man's voice shouted out from the balcony, "Thank you for your lecture." Very unexpected, very un-Viennese, but the unusual format of lecture-demo and the fact that the orchestra was the City orchestra, not the Vienna Philharmonic, must have loosened up the audience.

I was moved, in spite of the audience around me, which was strange and unreadable, and one which contributed nothing to my desire for a communal experience of this *echt*-Viennese composer's swan song.

II

With *Wien Modern* coming to an end after a month of concerts—one nearly every night in mainly two grand locations and a couple of piquant places outside the center—I look back with a small quotient of satisfaction and a good deal of head-scratching. For by and large, the modernist masters like Stockhausen, Feldman, Cage, Xenakis, and Scelsi are handsomely served by the festival with some of their best pieces performed by some of the best young players in largely state-supported new music ensembles. But the choice of younger generations of composers is, I have to say, abysmal. Evening after evening of boring, international-style gray textures; humorless, rigid, over-notated scores (the "new complexity," notational anal penmanship now gone into Alzheimer overdrive) with only very occasional exceptions (see below). And given Vienna's lack of late-evening partying

to compensate, it was depressing and debilitating. I got tired of licking the evening's wounds with my own home cooking and my host's good Irish whiskey.

We can speculate on the reasons for my disappointment, but, like the music, it's not an exciting activity: briefly, perhaps too much centralization with conductor-motivated leadership rather than innovative composer or impresario leadership; clogged mental arteries, a generalized Viennese conservatism, local blue laws discouraging wild abandon and parodic critical behavior, an historical tendency to encourage *avant* creativity to go to Berlin, Paris, or New York; or all of the above. My special chagrin is that these Wien Modern concerts are better attended than new music concerts in New York, and that Vienna has a faithful, serious audience for all music that is performed in recognized places. And this audience will even travel to quaint, lovely spaces like the Jugendstil Theater at the Steinhof mental institution in the romantic hilly outskirts of the city, or to a rich industrialist's antiseptic but impressive Guggenheim-like art gallery/concert hall in a small town outside Vienna.

November 6

At this concert, I really sympathized with the young woman in the front row, foregrounded by her red clothes (Viennese dress drably), who marked every piece with her fingers ostentatiously stuck in her ears. We speculated that to get away with this in full view of the players and the gallery spectators, she had to be well-connected to the building's patron, the tall, distinguished industrialist who sat down, nearby, in the front row after delivering the opening welcoming remarks. But she was right about the music, with the exception of Xenakis' interesting 1976 piece, *Dmaathen* for oboe (fine performance, uncredited) and percussion. The mostly excellent young players, directed by James Avery (an American by birth and training) were the Ensemble SurPlus from Freiburg, Germany. The rest of the program was true to my earlier description, grey on grey, always and all-over-again.

November 30

Vinko Globokar (born 1934) has a nice Ivesian sense of multidirectional orchestral "chaos." The second of two large orchestral works of his on the program was *Mass, Power and Individuality* (1994/95, 45'), performed by the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Slovenia, Diego Masson, director) in this penultimate concert of the Wien Modern series. In addition to the normal-sized orchestra on stage, a large-ish "small orchestra" of about twenty was stationed between the front and back of the audience. Each player's chair was in a shallow cardboard box with small gravel slivers under foot. A very distinctive opening moment had them rubbing their feet in this—it sounded like crumpled newspaper. Four soloists played from four corners of the hall. On stage front left and right were percussionist, Vanessa Tomlinson, and accordionist, Teodor Anzellotti. On balconies left and right, and amplified, were contrabassist, Stefano Scodanibbio, and guitarist, Michael Schroeder. My first impression of the "individuality" in the title was the wailing tones from the solo contrabass played on each string, in front of the bridge, tremolo. Only the wonderful wild accordion solos matched this lonely bass moment.

There were choric yells from both orchestras (stage, audience), blows from a huge wooden hammer (from the small orchestra), and an unearthly, beautiful organ chord (on tape) that was just audible behind the soloists. It suddenly swelled up just before the final cutoff; but this was awkward, a compositional misjudgement in my opinion. It would have been better if the chord had stayed soft. The composer shared conducting from the middle of the balcony, cueing soloists and looking into the huge score, occasionally bemused as if he wondered if all was OK, or as I imagined for him thinking: "why did I do that, just there?"

It was an entertaining work, didn't lag in the middle, and was played with commitment (though I caught one trumpeter yawning and a cellist looking at his watch) and yet.... Except for the lovely and truly evocative organ chord behind a lot of scruffy, aggressive soloing, there were really no beautiful sounds in this piece for large orchestra, still state-supported on the eve of the 21st-century. I am wondering at my own "conservative" remark here but plan to explore it later.

Sandwiched between two Globokar pieces was Iannis Xenakis' *Keqrops* (1986, 15'). It is a kind of piano concerto (Rolf Hind was soloist in a shining red chinese blouse) with very harsh, rhymacized clusters for the orchestra. It was interesting to hear Xenakis' concerto ideas for piano. They were almost pianistic in a Prokofiev way, quite different from the orchestral writing. I had read enough about this piece to be really curious. Instead I dozed and felt guilty. But this aside, when I thought about the program order (the first piece was another big orchestra piece by Globokar called *Labour*), I felt the problem of the late 20th-century approach to orchestra in the European venue of "new music." Any one of these three pieces would have been stimulating, dialectically significant in the middle of a program of repertoire from the 18th-century through Impressionism. But as a diet of orchestra sound for a *whole* evening, sitting at the feet of the most glorious generic large ensemble produced by Western culture: it was deadly fare.

There are two problems here and one causes the other. The most significant structural problem with the contemporary orchestra is its unbending uniformity of instrumentation (I am ignoring the kind of superficial variety that comes from a few, occasionally added, exotic instruments). This rigidity forces composers, hamstrung by uniformity, to vary whatever else is in their power for their own creative reasons. They can vary the sounds produced by the orchestra and they can (within logistical reason) vary the placement of the players. They have done both in course of the century with extreme thoroughness. In this festival alone I witnessed a piece in which the players of the orchestra were scrambled so that a flutist sat with strings, a percussionist at the front by the conductor, and much more. This was an interesting, affecting orchestra piece by the Canadian, Claude Vivier, 1948—83, called *Siddhartha* (1976, 30') performed by Radio Symphonieorchestra Wien, Peter Rundel, director, on November 7.

Varying the sounds of the orchestra has resulted in three or four decades of orchestra pieces that have steadily, implacably replaced harmonic sounds with inharmonic sounds. Which is to say that the noise potential of the orchestra has become a style all its own, at least in Europe where government support has prevented the *de facto* censorship that lack

of support has caused in the United States. So, once all of the harmonic intervals have been filled with tones, and then with microtones and sliding tones, what do we have? A strange, contradictory situation in which the instruments of the orchestra, designed over centuries (even millennia) to resonate ideally as harmonic instruments, are used to fill in the whole frequency spectrum and produce glorious or not-so-glorious noise-bands (in acoustics, discrete spectra of noise).

My thesis is not that noise, noise-bands, and orchestras used as giant noise machines are bad, but that composers (again mainly in Europe where orchestras commission and play contemporary orchestra works) have been forced into a narrow strategy of producing noise compositions (they can't "go back" to Bruckner, et al !) because they don't have the most obvious freedom a composer can ever have: the ability to dictate the size and instrumentation of the largest institutionalized ensemble we have in the West.

Deprived of the possibility of essentially remaking the instrumentation of that large ensemble, modernist orchestra composers can then only deal with either the harmonic fundament of the ensemble or the physical placement of the players on the stage. Should they, instead of composing for a giant noise-ensemble, want to use the harmonic basis of each instrument and of the whole orchestra, they have only the stale technique of neoclassicism, or neoromanticism and, unfortunately, all too many in the United States, at least, have mined this deadly lode, usually with predictably boring results. But let us look a little more closely both at our magnificent sound source, the Western orchestra and at its issues.

III

The Problem of the Orchestra. I recently told a new Viennese acquaintance, a philosopher, that I was obsessed with the idea of the orchestra, though I hadn't really composed for that medium since my student days and a little after. She said that to her the orchestra represented the ideals of the Enlightenment and of Beethoven's part in that. Something about freedom she said, a glorious, even overwhelming sound of humankind.

The orchestra's ideal status as the expression of individuals merged into a collectivity-in-unity, singing some part of ourselves back to us in an awe-inspiring, expressive language, is not something talked about in my musical circles. The Symphony Orchestra is either shunned as an elite item purposefully kept out of the hands of the children of the avant-garde, or it is grimly and slavishly courted as a source of commissions, royalties, and publications. Few composers I know will exult in the sheer overwhelming power of its sound, of the monumentality of ninety-to-a-hundred human beings with one leader, doing together something of such precision and difficulty that really has no other exemplar in Western culture.

Most of us, on the other hand, know orchestral players who gripe and bitterly complain either about their conductor, their terms of employment, or the boredom of playing what

they have to play every day, and when pushed to articulate more, will say that the orchestral life is a crass negation of the very ideals that brought them into music in the first place. Of course I'm speaking of Americans now, but the strange and contradictory place of the orchestra in contemporary life is a worldwide urban phenomenon. It is a grand, grandiose, expensive, elitist, and European institution (even when found in Asia), an unlikely institution to survive in postmodern global capitalism where digital information is primary, and inefficient skilled manual labor is some kind of atavistic holdover of pre-digital civilizations. Yet no country espousing Western ideals can do without a nice handful of these relics.

And if you ask me, the orchestral sound is one of the most thrilling things on earth. Yet there is something profoundly wrong with the *deep* structure of the orchestra and this is connected to the way it fails to unite the past of its tradition and the present-day state of musical creativity. One cause is the Modernist attack on the past, which included an attack on magisterial largeness. In the early 20th-century, Schoenberg, in his *Chamber Symphony No. 1*, paired down the orchestra to a string quintet and single winds. This kind of ensemble of about fifteen musicians fulfilled a minimum harmonic and contrapuntal requirement for his, now, post-romantic music and would become one kind of model for the "radio orchestra"—sound engineers could always enrich the sound if necessary! But the large symphony orchestra survived this attempt at streamlining, and full-sized radio orchestras still exist and thrive in Europe (though they were summarily dismissed from American's totally commercialized radio decades ago). Still, composers often felt that the symphony orchestra was not the ideal medium for their ideas, especially neoclassic ones, or post-Webern, pointillist ones.

What makes an individual instrument primarily a harmonic instrument, and the large ensemble, the orchestra, also a harmonic instrument is the same phenomenon: the harmonic (or overtone) series. Each principle note in the instrument's scale is a resonant fundament that is reinforced by the largely indiscernible overtones which are piled, skyscraper-wise, above the heard tone (the fundamental) in multiples of the fundamental's vibrational frequency, while adding at the same time a shimmering, a highlighting to the instrument's tone. As a kind of bonus, the relative strength or weakness of each overtone contributes to the tone color, which helps us hear the difference between a flute, an oboe, a violin, a french horn, and so on. This has been known since the 19th-century scientific discoveries of Helmholtz.

What is interesting about the giant orchestra as it ended up in the late 19th-century and continues on into the present, is that the weighting of instruments by volume emphasizes the the same pattern as the the overtone series. In the low end of the the orchestral range we have a group of string basses, and a tuba and trombone section, augmented by the low kettledrums and often a piano, even an organ. Then in the middle range we have all the other instruments. In the highest range we have the top of the flute and oboe ranges, the piccolo and the harmonics of the violin section, the top of the piano range, and the glockenspiel. Blurring the distinction between a single low note resonated by all the higher instruments in the manner of the harmonic series on a single instrument *and* the orchestra's giant major chord (or "seventh chord") is a wonderful, if occasional "show-

stopping" sound found in Wagner, Strauss, and less ostentatiously, in most 19th-century composers here and there: the giant, full-range major chord.

Once a composer understands the principle behind this harmonic sound either *en masse* or in the individual instrument (and acoustics is now part of the composer's standard training), a lot of other possibilities start to creep out of the background. First, you don't need the particularly large numbers of the *large* orchestra *or* of its particular standard distribution. Only the scored orchestration of the symphonic classics determines that we shall have thus many flutes, thus many horns, trumpets, etc. Nothing else! Second, there are many, many ways of getting the giant chord-sound acoustically without using exactly that large-orchestra distribution. Further, there are other characteristics of "harmonic music" besides this giant resonant chord phenomenon: for example, the tendency to outline sound with a prominent bass line and a prominent treble, or "melody" line. Then there are endless variations on this in which, for example, the melody is surrounded closely by smaller intervals like thirds and fourths (Ravel's flick of the orchestrational hand in *Bolero*).

This is just the beginning of compositional thinking about a large ensemble that is not the prototypical arrangement of the standard orchestra. Once freed from the tyranny of that arrangement, the idea of the large sound played by a large number of people becomes again a progressive idea and not a deadly museum of ex-Enlightenment provenance. It is once more something that can have the freshness and exuberance of the earliest orchestral sound of Stamitz, Mozart, Haydn, von Weber, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and their peers, but without the necessity of cleaving to their styles. Let us fantasize just a few ad hoc "orchestras."

——Fifteen trombones, fifty violas, five saxophones, ten flutes, five piccolos.

——Two tubas, three contra-bassoons, ten clarinets, fifteen violins, two pianos, percussion.

——Thirty cellos, thirty oboes (and english horns), fifteen harps, and organ.

Of course every orchestra manager, orchestra contractor, conductor, orchestral trustee knows that this is an impossible way to parse the orchestra. It makes no financial sense and maybe very little programmatic sense. We would need to have a different conception of moving from the sonic idea to the concert program. But let me sketch a somewhat utopian fantasy of the Flexible Orchestra: given a big city, composers would work with each other to develop a particular combination of instruments for, let us say, two or three repeated programs (more if you include touring). They compose for this unique ad hoc large ensemble. The contractor hires from the union book the number and types of instruments required for this program. Of course some cities might not support thirty professional oboists or fifteen harpists, so regional differences will emerge. They might themselves be interesting orchestral discoveries which composers could exploit. Perhaps Memphis has a plethora of saxophonists but very few piccolo-ists. San Francisco may have a huge number of contrabassists.

One can find endless ways to object to the fantasy I am sketching here. But funding would be a prime objection. How could a community fund both a standard orchestra and the ever-changing Flexible Orchestra? Well, funding for the arts in general is a bitter battleground, especially in America where encrustations of gigantic wealth never yet seen in the history of the world are coupled with ever-declining public services and skeletonized funding for public education and culture. There is a revolution to be fought here for more than just the Flexible Orchestra. Yet even without the larger struggle for a fairer and healthier distribution of national wealth, we might suggest that maybe every city need not have the standard orchestra, that we don't have to duplicate the 19th-century orchestra automatically wherever there are clusters of people. The standard orchestra could be here and there among us, the Flexible Orchestra could be in even more places because, in fact, its very flexibility in numbers and types of instruments would encourage a flowering in more places than the standard orchestra.

There are some precedents for this flexibility. The marching band, the symphony band, the large jazz ensemble all have a more informal structure than the symphony orchestra. High schools, colleges, and small communities work with what they have to produce these types of ensembles. I am taking the idea of the informal ensemble to an extreme in my fantasy because I see great potential artistic gains from doing so. We need to hear the classics live in expert orchestras. But we don't need to be shackled by the format. My feeling is that we are very much shackled by the standard orchestra in our time.

I return to my Viennese philosopher friend who sees the classic orchestra as an instrument of Enlightenment ideas. I see the large sound of the large ensemble peopled by a large number of players as representative of group effort freely entered upon for the larger satisfaction of everyone: a collective ritual of individual-and-group in which the very flexibility I have proposed is that of freely chosen possibilities by self-selecting creative individuals. It has Enlightenment values behind it, but also more specific egalitarian and communitarian ideas that America invented with, let us say, the rural co-op movement. This is an ideal that reappears today in many avatars, with the "zap action" of an ad hoc political activist group, the food co-op, even the online discussion group, and the shifting make-up of a "free improvisation" musical group. Our corporate leaders may have stolen the very money out of our collective pockets but they haven't taken away the forms with which we manage to survive without them.

Postscript from Brno

November 11

Less than two hours by train from Vienna, across the border in the Czech Republic, is Brno, a former Empire city on a small scale—with a lot of Universities. By lucky chance there was a new music concert in town one evening during our short visit.

Suddenly I felt at home in this informal, small community of musicians, students, teachers, friends, all attending a concert by an ensemble formed by a group of graduates of the Janacek Academy. A quirky electronic piece emerged like some urban detritus from seemingly random-placed loudspeakers on stage. Two young cellists, female, and a pianist played a dolorous piece with hardly any roots in the European modernist world. But kick-ass modernism quickly returned with a wonderful percussion duo by a composer in this group, Katerina Ruzickova. The two young men had a ball wacking away and shouting lines like: "An eye for an eye until the ear is torn off" which sounds quite frightening in Czech. The evening ended with a long performance piece by the group's leader, a composer with a dancer who certainly seemed like his girlfriend by the end. He played many things, she changed clothes while he took his shirt off, and all of her clothes came off, finally, at least so it seemed in the theater light. It was good-natured piece, indeterminate of meaning at least to me. I wondered if, in the "previous regime" (Communist times were referred to in that way) the implied nudity might have been provoking. I don't know, but that now dimming past of the *previous regime* (pre-1991) also meant subsidy to some valued local institutions—I saw one, a small and impressive school for the arts outside of Brno that is struggling to survive without government subsidy.

November 12

I came to Brno in part to visit my friend, composer Peter Graham, who lives in the nearby mountain town of Adamov. He was a mentor to members of the group in the previous evening's performance and I was able to meet some of these young musicians at its end. What I liked about that evening was the mixture of playfulness and seriousness, simplicity and complexity, while underneath, there was a humaneness that needs not boast about its long tradition of professionalism.

The day after the concert Peter had planned to take me to Janacek's house in the front yard of the Academy. Janacek spent most of his life in Brno as an organ teacher and composer. He's probably one of the greatest opera composers of the last two centuries, but many of us knew of him first through the extraordinary late chamber music he wrote in his seventies. On top of all the wonderful things one can say about those late works, it is intensely heartening to think that some creative people flourish *particularly* in their late years. It is an antidote to the depressing image of decline of creative power that mirrors a decline in physical power. That combination makes a bigger dose of mortality than one

usually wants to swallow. The American composer, Roy Harris, struck me as an example, at least artistically, of this negative trajectory. We could get into some horrible arguments about some other composers like Stravinsky and Schoenberg, maybe even Henry Cowell. But any self-reflective composer can develop a nightmare scenario around the final acts of his creative life, and the mantra-like focus on late Janacek is my antidote.

Of course, Peter, would not let me get away with any simple act of hero worship. As he told me then and later with examples to back it up, Janacek was a pretty odd, even unpleasant man. And anyway, he would add, there is only a handful of late, great works. The early works are nice, but perhaps a little disappointing when compared with their models in Czech music: the great works of Smetana and Dvorak. Nevertheless, those late works of Janacek are like nothing else in either 19th or 20th-century classical music.

We hurried off after lunch to Janacek's house because, through the generosity of the director of the museum that is the Janacek house, we were going to be able to see it, though it was closed that day.

Here I was full of anticipation, taking a cab through the small town so we would not be late: the very opposite of my ironic attitude towards all those composers' many houses in Vienna that I never visited. How did I manage not to go to any of Beethoven's, Schubert's, Mozart's holy dwellings? Sheer snobbery of a composer against the materiality of the place wherein the spiritual act takes place? I don't know, but the special feeling I have for the Sinfonietta, the two string quartets, the Capriccio and Concertino and more, led my feelings on during the short cab ride.

We were ushered into the house graciously by the director, who put the video tape on while we browsed the documents and photos around the walls. The composing room itself with the piano amidst sunlight from the garden was beguiling. I thought of the dark, intense moments in the string quartets, for instance, and wondered how this bright, joyful space could engender such musical thoughts and sounds.

We couldn't stay for the whole video, but the part which dissected the relationship between Czech speech and Janacek's prosody was wonderful. I had read some of his essays in translation in which he talked about the inflection of common expressions and how he transliterated them into tone. Nowadays we have machines that can extract pitches from speech. But think of the active, focussed art of listening it takes to turn speech into tone so that it follows the morphology and rhythm of the spoken words.

This side-trip to Brno was a welcome escape from the Austrian ethos and from my mixture of admiration and distaste for Vienna and its musical life. Here was a very different, equally serious town of culture and commerce, but perhaps with the humility and informality that often comes with smaller scale. Again and again I entered a reverie from my earliest experiences of 19th-century music, a kind of mental merry-go-round about the "germanic" and the "slavic" in music, how each culture translated Romanticism into different musical gestures. How after a dose of one, I needed the other: after too much Brahms, Dvorak would seem like fresh air, yet one could never jettison one for the

other. It's amazing to me that after so much modern music has passed through me, and then so much postmodern music and whatever is coming to us now, that the archetypes that rise up inside me when I finally spend time in the countries that produced so much music, are figures like Brahms and Dvorak, representing different icons of how to do it—how to *make* music.

All in all, I am perplexed by the strength of influence on me of the past especially the 19th-century and turn-of-the-century culture. Even if you perform mental exercises not to think too much about those periods and their music (remember the Freud example: stand on the corner and try not to think of a white elephant—you can't do it), the atmosphere trickles through if only in popular song, in jazz, in klezmer music, and movie music. No escape. I can't even name the sides of the battle that seem go on in the very molecules of culture, but it often seems like the pull of feeling against anti-feeling. *Seems* like it. (But what is feeling and why do we say we need it in music?) Each "side" seems to overstay its welcome and you are thrown from one to the other in endless oscillation.