Founded in 1918 by Arnold Schoenberg (with the assistance of Alban Berg), the Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen (Society for Private Musical Performances) was an idealistic exercise, born of a reactionary opposition to the increasingly commodified society of post-war Vienna. Its remit was simple: to provide performances of new music at the highest possible level in an artistic ‘safe haven’. As such, the Verein operated as a subscription concert series, which outlawed critics, proscribed applause, and published no programmes, so as to ensure that only works ready to be performed were presented and that audiences attended evenly.

Presented in the concerts was a mixture of solo, chamber, and orchestral works, the last of which were either realised in keyboard arrangements or through a sizeable chamber ensemble, typically comprising a handful of wind instruments, a string quintet, harmonium, and piano. The works performed were not restricted to the Second Viennese School, however; rather, Schoenberg was keen to programme any living composers who he felt exhibited a distinctive voice. This included music by Ravel, Debussy, Reger, Strauss, Mahler, and Bartók, amongst many others. Indeed, Schoenberg forbade the programming of any of his own works until the society’s second season.

The idea of a chamber reduction of a large-scale orchestral work was one that fascinated Schoenberg, who argued that stripping away layers offered fresh perspectives on the composer’s craft. Reductions, necessarily requiring fewer players, were also more affordable options for the financially squeezed Verein. Nevertheless, the Verein ceased meeting at the very end of 1921, owing to the austerity resulting from Viennese hyperinflation.

Published in 1876, Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem, L’après-midi d’un faune (The Afternoon of a Faun), is a sensuous evocation of this mythical half-man, half-goat’s libidinous and sultry daydreaming about a passing group of nymphs. As a young man, Debussy had set one of the poet’s earlier works and would go on to become more intimately acquainted with Mallarmé’s symbolist style through the latter’s weekly artistic soirées – a familiarity that eventually led to Debussy’s musical complement to this erotic text. Thus, in 1892, Debussy started composing a work intended to be the Prélude, interludes et paraphrase finale pour l’après-midi d’un faune; yet his project was cut short by the competing completion of his celebrated opera, Pelléas
et Mélisande, leaving only the Prélude.

This single movement is an examination of orchestral colour, from the singular delicacy of the opening flute’s lingering line, through suggestive swells, to more pungent and reedy pastoralism. Indeed, Saint-Saëns was less than kind about the work, stating that ‘it is as much a piece of music as the palette a painter has worked from is a painting.’

Both Debussy and Ravel made their own keyboard arrangements of the Prélude (1895 and 1910 respectively), Ravel stating that he would like the work performed at his funeral. The chamber arrangement made for the Verein, whilst often attributed to Schoenberg, actually appears to have been made by another member of the society, Benno Sachs, who had been a student of Schoenberg and acted briefly as the Corresponding Secretary for the Verein. Schoenberg offered clear advice about how to approach such arrangements, which Sachs seems to have followed closely. As a re-orchestration it retains many of the sounds of Debussy’s original, using the span of the piano to fill out gaps in the texture, and the harmonium to sustain missing parts in the winds, additions which add much interest and afford a new coherence and sensuality to the melodic line. Indeed, because the original eschews trumpets, trombones, and percussion (apart from the distinctive antique cymbals), this ‘miniaturisation’ does not lose much by way of colour – thanks to inventive substitutions – even if the spectrum of intensity is somewhat diminished. For example, in the opening passage, the clarinet re-enters earlier than in the original, so as to fill in a missing horn line.

A poetic stimulus also underlies Mahler’s Symphony No. 4, this time from his formative discovery of the collection of folksongs, Des Knaben Wunderhorn (‘The Boy’s Magic Horn’) in the late 1880s. The first four symphonies all include references to Wunderhorn, which led Mahler to suggest that they were a quasi-tetralogy with the fourth as its ‘tapering, topmost tower.’

Certainly, the symphony’s more modest proportions lend themselves to both this description and a chamber arrangement. Omitting both trombones and tuba – even if he had considered their inclusion in the climax of the slow movement – and content with just triple woodwinds (except the flutes), the relatively benign forces confused the audiences who were just becoming accustomed to Mahler’s big-boned works and original structures. It was also the first of his symphonies to adopt the traditional four movements (the first symphony having originally comprised five).
Although by the end of his life Mahler had dispensed with explicit musical programmes, this symphony is coloured by references. For example, the violin solo in the second movement, with its deliberately sharpened strings, evokes the sound of a folk fiddler, who is perhaps himself some sort of macabre figure, Mahler having labelled the solo in his sketches with the phrase ‘Brother Hain strikes up.’ Similarly, the third movement is a set of variations spelled out through rondo form, the theme of which reminded Mahler of his mother’s ‘sad and yet laughing’ face.

At the symphony’s heart – although not revealed until the final, fourth movement – is a vocal setting of the Wunderhorn poem Das himmlisches Leben (‘The Heavenly Life’, although later renamed by Mahler as ‘What the child tells me’), which he had originally intended to be the finale of his third symphony. Its naivety informs each movement, as Mahler tried to capture the ‘undifferentiated blue of the sky’, directing the singer to adopt a ‘childlike, cheerful expression, entirely without parody.’ It is this heavenly aspiration that also led Mahler to consider calling this symphony a ‘humoresque’, as he understood humour to be a key to a ‘higher world.’

Three of Mahler’s symphonies were performed at the Verein: the sixth and seventh in keyboard arrangements, and his fourth in the present reduction for fourteen instruments and solo soprano. This arrangement – premièred on 10 January 1921 with the soprano Martha Fuchs – was made by one of Schoenberg’s earliest composition pupils, Erwin Stein, who also took over the directorship of performances in the Verein from 1920. The exercise is a revealing one, as both Stein’s choices and the nature of such reduction expose more of Mahler’s counterpoint through the leaner textures: a logical extension of the original’s chamber-like ideals. In the years following the closure of the society the original instrumental parts were lost, only recently to be reconstructed by Alexander Platt from Stein’s annotations on a complete score of the symphony.

© Thomas Hancox, 2012