

HK Gruber



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An introduction to Gruber's music by Paul Driver

HK Gruber throws off labels as fast as pundits can affix them. Neo-romantic, neo-tonal, neo-expressionistic, neo-Viennese: he isn't any of these things, so much as a sentient (and downright accomplished) composer who keeps responding to whatever musical stimulus, be it highbrow or lowbrow, 12-tone or 7-tone, bitter or sweet, that comes his way, and is never misled by it into speaking with an artificial musical accent.

His Viennese origin, though, is a centrally important fact about his work. The great Viennese classics from Haydn to Berg are in his blood, and so is Viennese popular music, as witness the "Austrian Journal" for orchestra, Charivari, based on Johann Strauss's Perpetuum Mobile. Cabaret and pop strains of one kind or another permeate nearly all Gruber's scores, from the modest-scaled (but oddly Brandenburg Concerto-ish) 3 MOB Pieces to the masterly, single-movement Cello Concerto. If his use of light music is at its most literal in the two movements of Manhattan Broadcasts - Viennese reflections of American dance-band and jazz styles - it is at its most elaborate, indeed spectacularly polyphonic, in the second of the two movements making up his chamber concerto, Zeitflüren.

The memorable pop song that emerges at the end of the rigorously constructed first violin concerto ... aus schatten duft gewebt is of his own composition (well, he is descended from the Franz Xaver Gruber who penned Silent Night), and takes on the weight and poignancy of the Bach chorale at the end of Berg's concerto for the instrument. Among many fascinating features of Gruber's concerto (revised so as to prolong the concluding tonal paradise of the pop song) is the effortless way in which it brings together the Bergian and Stravinskian stylistic worlds, the chromatic and diatonic, expressionist and neo-classical.

Still Gruber's most famous, naughtily notorious, piece is the gothic melodrama or "pan-demonium" *Frankenstein!!*, a quasi-theatrical treatment of children's rhymes by H.C. Artmann, in which another Viennese characteristic is dominant - black humour, given a decisive focus when the composer himself is chansonnier soloist. Barrie Gavin's television film, *Bring me the head of Amadeus*, which Gruber devised, scored and acted in by way of a bicentenary tribute to his compatriot Mozart, partakes of this mood; and it also informs the long-gestated "musical spectacle" *Gomorra*, written for the Vienna Volksoper to words by Richard Bletschacher, like Artmann one of Gruber's frequent collaborators.

Less macabre but thoroughly offbeat, the one-act music-theatre piece *Gloria von Jaxtberg*, to a libretto adapted from his own picture-book by Rudolf Herfurtner, and

premiered at the Huddersfield Festival, must be the only opera to have as its protagonist a "lovely lady pig". Although in Gruber's most recent opera, the two-part *Der Herr Nordwind*, to a text by Artmann, the north wind itself is an important character.

Humour and seriousness are not easily divisible in Gruber's music - nor in his personality - and he is the last composer to pose as an Austro-German symphonist, yet he has produced a series, if not of symphonies, then of concertos that increasingly seems the backbone of his oeuvre. His first published work was a Concerto for Orchestra. Later came two concertos for violin (the second being *Nebelsteinmusik*), the one for cello, one (*Rough Music*) for percussion (with a second in the works), one (*Aerial*) for trumpet (here too a second is in the works), not to mention the "chansonnier concertos" of *Frankenstein!!* and its successor *Zeitstimmung* (to Artmann words again), and the chamber concerto that is *Zeitflüren*. It is interesting that *Zeitflüren*, *Aerial* (written for the BBC Proms) and the orchestral work that Gruber composed for Simon Rattle and the Vienna Philharmonic, *Dancing in the Dark*, are all diptyches, with slow, prelude-like first movements and fast, complex finales built from dance music. Though akin to the double-movement form explored by Lutoslawski in his orchestral music, it is an approach to symphonic argument that Gruber has made his own.

True, his newest orchestral essay, *Hidden Agenda*, for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, is a large (often densely scored) single movement. Its title, referring to the covert use of a note-row, will come as no surprise to those who have been privy to his manuscripts, where pitch and rhythm ciphers are marked at the bottom of the page. Always at the back of an Austrian composer born in the mid-20th century will be the presence of Schoenberg, but it is clear that, whatever stylistic ingredients Gruber may choose for his works, and whatever professional role (composer, conductor, chansonnier, actor, double-bassist) he adopts, he remains inimitably himself: one of the most startlingly original and masterful talents of contemporary music.

Paul Driver, 2006

(Music Critic of the Sunday Times)