



**Sandra McColl.** *Music Criticism in Vienna, 1896-1897: Critically Moving Forms.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. x + 246 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-816564-4.

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## Synchronicity, Music Criticism, and <cite>Fin-de-Siècle</cite> Vienna

The close of the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented abundance in Vienna's musical life: public concerts offered a range of music to broad audiences; opera and operetta theaters presented new stage works weekly; and guest performers from Europe and overseas made Vienna an indispensable stop on their itineraries. This musical feast coincided with a proliferation of newspapers and journals, many of which boasted daily feuilletons by staff music critics. The felicitous combination of these conditions produced a mass of music criticism, documentation that provides a revealing window onto the period. This wealth of material has, however, remained all but inaccessible to scholars in this country. In her book, Sandra McColl closely examines the music journalism published during the fifteen months between October 1896 and the end of 1897 in hopes of revealing the "richness of everyday life" within this period. While she provides a useful overview of Viennese criticism, most of it translated into English here for the first time, the mass of material seems to have proven overwhelming, for the book falls short on synthesis and organization.

Music criticism in Vienna was long dominated by Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904), unrivaled as eminence grise during the period on which McColl concentrates. Indeed, the book's subtitle ("Critically Moving Forms") pays tribute to Hanslick's influence; in his widely read aesthetic treatise, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*,<sup>[1]</sup> Hanslick advanced the thesis that "Der Inhalt der Musik sind tönend bewegte Formen," refuting those who believed that music could represent anything outside itself (a basic tenet undergirding the Wagnerian system of leitmotifs). First published

in 1854, Hanslick's slim book received ten editions during his lifetime and was well known, at least by reputation, to all those active in Vienna's musical life. Critic Robert Hirschfeld coined the allusive phrase "critically moving forms," in reference to Hanslick's pathbreaking role creating the music feuilleton, and McColl quotes Hirschfeld in the Introduction (p. 1). But nowhere does she explain the phrase's deeper resonance with Hanslick's own work. Her apparent wish to move beyond Hanslick to the many other critics active in Vienna is understandable and laudable. Yet, most of the critics discussed in the book were reacting or responding to Hanslick in some way, and the reader would have been better oriented to the import of their comments had a focused discussion of Hanslick's ideas and significance been included.

McColl's Table of Contents promises a fresh approach to well-trod musical territory. The book is divided into three parts of two chapters each. The first part, "Papers, Critics, and Events," includes chapters on "The Papers and the Critics" and "The Richness of Everyday Life," intended to provide background information for the more specific discussion that follows. The first chapter is perhaps the most useful of the entire book, for it provides a survey of the newspapers and their critics, including circulation figures and short biographies, but even here McColl makes some startling statements about politics and newspaper readership. She notes that "despite the election of the Christian Social Lueger to the mayoralty of Vienna in 1897, newspapers of a liberal or left-of-liberal colouring are larger in number and (where known) circulation than those of more extreme political colouring"

(p. 14). However, she offers no further discussion of the paradox she implies. In a footnote two pages later, she again observes that “in general, it might fairly be claimed that the distribution figures for Viennese newspapers were inversely proportional to the success of the parties or ideologies they supported in elections, so it may be concluded that the Viennese read newspapers for something other than their political content” (p. 16). Is this the only conclusion to be drawn? This assumes that all those who vote also read newspapers, when, in fact, the literacy rate and available leisure time was greater among Liberals than among the workers who supported Lueger and the Christian Social party. This conclusion also ignores the historical importance of newspaper journalism in shaping and disseminating Liberal ideas and, in contrast, the importance of the spoken word for Christian Social politicians.

Another jarring conclusion follows on page eighteen, where McColl writes that the “[*Wiener*] *Salonblatt* is not so much a newspaper as a women’s magazine. Women did not have the vote in the 1890s, so *WS* is politically neutral.” Although the *WS* may not have included discussions of governmental politics, the necessary relationship McColl suggests between enfranchisement and importance as a political entity is nonsensical. During this period in Viennese city politics, the “Lueger Gretl” was extremely influential, and women’s newspapers provided an important avenue for reinforcing those *volkstümlich* domestic virtues valued by the Christian Social party.<sup>[2]</sup> Indeed, the *Oesterreichische Frauen-Zeitung* actively encouraged the economic boycott of Jewish businesses and became the most anti-Semitic of all Christian Social journals. The *Wiener Salonblatt* may not have evinced a political leaning, but McColl’s suggestion that women’s newspapers were *necessarily* apolitical makes the reader skeptical of her further conclusions.

In the first chapter McColl presents a list of critics, organized by their age in 1896, a revealing method of organization and one to which she returns periodically. She acknowledges that this method of sorting according to generation was inspired by Carl Schorske’s ideas of generational tension between the older “fathers,” who had enjoyed the heyday of Austrian Liberalism, and the younger “sons,” who had become disillusioned with Liberal ideals. Although McColl notes that the twenty-eight critics she lists fall fairly neatly into these two age groups, she does not discuss whether the qualities Schorske attributes to the two generations actually apply to the critics or can be demonstrated in their work. Her tendency to mention facts and make assertions without further de-

velopment or elaboration proved to be a persistent source of frustration throughout the book.

Chapter Two, “The Richness of Everyday Life,” provides a detailed introduction to Vienna’s musical world during 1896 and 1897. McColl divides the chapter into discussions of commemorations (Schubert centennial) and funerals (Bruckner and Brahms), concert life, and operatic and theatrical life. She provides a list of works performed at the Vienna Court Opera, as well as programs given in Vienna’s smaller concert halls. The wealth and diversity of events available in Vienna becomes abundantly clear through this broad, synchronic approach. In this chapter, however, McColl again mentions certain disturbing events without commenting on their implications. In discussing the activities of the New Richard Wagner Society, she mentions that the *Ostdeutsche Rundschau* advertised the Society’s recitals and “a lecture on Chamberlain’s *Richard Wagner: Der Einfluss des Judenthums*, noting that a warm welcome would be extended to any German guests” (p. 44). This blatant exclusion of Jewish listeners was only one example of the rising anti-Semitism beginning to be felt more keenly in musical, as well as political, circles. McColl misses the opportunity to draw the connection between the newspaper’s political slant and musical life at large. The same paper reported that at a concert by the young pianist, Artur Schnabel, “the Bsendorfer-Saal [was filled] to the rafters with the assembly of musical Israel” (p. 59). This remark, another anti-Semitic barb, appears 15 pages after the first instance in McColl’s narrative, and both pass without comment on what they reveal either about Viennese musical life or about the newspaper that published them.

Part II, subtitled “Politics, Civil and Artistic,” includes chapters on “Civil Politics and Musical Opinion” and on “The Politics of Art in the Aftermath of Wagner.” The former proves to be the most original work of the book; here McColl discusses the predominance of Czech composers at the Vienna Court Opera and on the Philharmonic’s programs, a popularity that coincided with rising Czech nationalism and the controversial Badeni language ordinances. Works by Dvorak, Smetana, and Tchaikovsky (regarded as a fellow Slav) received prominent premieres and frequent performances at the expense, some critics felt, of German contemporaries such as Hugo Wolf or Richard Strauss. The chapter concludes with a discussion of “Mahler and the Jewish Question” in which McColl surveys the press’s reaction to Mahler’s appointment in 1897 as director of the Vienna Court Opera. This brief discussion is valuable for the lengthy translated excerpts,

but once again the material was offered with too little synthesis.[3]

In this and the following chapters, McColl all too often makes apologies for the music critics' demonstration of political opinions; her embarrassment seems to stem from an ideal of music criticism similar to Hanslick's conception of music, i.e. as an "absolute art" having no reference (or influence) outside itself. Comments like "[Critic Theodor Helm] was not, it must be admitted, completely above making political points" (p. 103), and "of the critics not mixed up in politics" (p. 164), and several references to the music feuilleton as the "supposedly non-political section of the paper" (p. 96) suggest that McColl was surprised to find a political slant in these works of music criticism, even during such a volatile period in Vienna's political history. She frequently insists upon the point that "political opinion might influence and hence distort aesthetic judgments" (p. 107), a statement which assumes that an "objective" aesthetic judgment is possible apart from the critic's opinions, political or otherwise. A critic inscribes his own values in every review he writes, however detached he may seem; as musicologist Carl Dahlhaus (among others) has asserted: "It would be abstract and high-handed to make a radical distinction between aesthetic and historical criteria, between what a piece of music is in its own right and what it becomes as part of an historical context." [4] Although McColl makes the perceptive distinction that the younger generation of music critics tended to show their political colors more blatantly than members of the older generation, her idealized view that music criticism can exist apart from the broader cultural environment from which it arose limits the impact and subtlety of her analysis.

The following chapter, "The Politics of Art in the Aftermath of Wagner," addresses critics' treatment of works by Wagner, Liszt, Bruckner, Wolf, Strauss, and Brahms, an organization that will prove useful to scholars of the individual composers. The chapter includes a great deal of translated criticism, as well as the full text of Max Kalbeck's unfavorable review of Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* and the full text of another journalist's rebuttal.[5] This chapter cries out more than the rest for a focused discussion of Hanslick's ideas and importance. All the critics mentioned here were responding to Hanslick's critical heritage in some way, and their opinions would be more explicable to the reader had an introduction to Hanslick preceded this chapter. The chapter concludes with an insightful comparison of critics' reactions to Wagner and Wagnerism according to age and generation.

The final section, "Beneath the Rhetoric," includes chapters on "The 'Canon' in the Concert Hall" and on "Opera, Drama, and the Artwork of the Future." In these chapters McColl aims "to probe beneath issues of politics and party to determine just what motivated critics in forming their opinions" (p. 170). She examines a range of criticism in an attempt to establish the largely unwritten criteria used to judge new music. In a few places she distills her broad readings into a succinct point, such as when she characterizes the *Oesterreichische Musik- und Theaterzeitung* as "of all the music journals the most welcoming to new musical developments which often confronted the aesthetic sensibilities of the majority of critics" (p. 174). This kind of summary would have been most helpful had it been included in her descriptions of the journals in Chapter 1. A few pages later she observes that "for both Hanslick and Kalbeck, music is the supreme art form whose potential is best realized when it is allowed to obey its own laws and not forced into a position of dependence on any other art" (p. 187). Again, this valuable point could have helped to orient the reader had it appeared earlier. The book ends with a short conclusion in which McColl reviews the characteristics of music journalism according to the age and generation of the authors, and she calls for further work, especially on critics of the younger generation.

McColl's goals and methodology are admirable and innovative; the idea of a synchronic study is too frequently passed over by music historians in favor of a diachronic study of a composer's career or the history of an organization. The years on which McColl chooses to focus her work are particularly rewarding for this kind of investigation, for they saw momentous events in both the musical and political life of Vienna. Yet, precisely because they were so rich, they call for more stringent organization than McColl offers. Despite compelling chapter headings, the copious details within them are not accompanied by a sure grasp of their collective significance. The forest is obscured by the trees.

Finally, McColl's cumbersome writing style soon becomes tiresome for even the initiated reader. The vagaries of nineteenth-century German prose perhaps seeped too deeply into the author's own style. The first sentence of the Preface does not bode well: "One aspect of Viennese cultural life of the late nineteenth century which has been all too frequently glossed over is music journalism, which experienced an extraordinary flowering at that time" (p. vii). In another typical passage, she writes of Max Kalbeck: "While himself self-consciously German-and-proud-of-it, Kalbeck's view of Germanness

was essentially cultural and linguistic rather than political. His proficiency in ancient and modern languages broadened his cultural horizons and, within the Austrian context, his knowledge of the Czech language and positive response to, for example, *Dalibor*, made him, despite his German birth, in some ways a better 'Austrian' than many of the liberals whom Schorske sees as regarding themselves as more 'Austrian' than 'German' (p. 129). Frequent parenthetical interruptions, discursive leaps from one paragraph to the next, and several lengthy excurses, all detract from the book's potential appeal.

On a more positive note, McColl's translations are quite readable, and although only two reviews are provided in their entirety, English speakers will be grateful for the lengthy excerpts included here. Given such an array of details—composers, works, newspapers, critics—a good index is of utmost importance, and McColl's is thorough and user-friendly. She includes photos of the journalists in question, many published here for the first time; this addition helps bring to life the flavor of the closing days of the nineteenth century. The book makes an original and welcome contribution to fleshing out the conventional view of *fin-de-siecle* musical life. However, its limitations in synthesis, occasional leaps of logic, and prolix prose style suggest that it is perhaps better used as a reference book than read from cover to cover.

Notes:

[1]. Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen: ein Beitrag zur Revision der Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (Leipzig, 1854).

[2]. See Richard S. Geehr, *Karl Lueger: Mayor of Fin de Siecle Vienna* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), pp. 209-232.

[3]. A more nuanced and detailed treatment of similar material may be found in an article by K. M. Knittel, "Ein hypermoderner Dirigent': Mahler and Anti-Semitism in Fin-de-siecle Vienna," *19th-Century Music* 18 (Spring 1995), 257-276.

[4]. Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. by J. B. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 95. See also Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

[5]. Kalbeck (1850-1921) was a prominent journalist, librettist, and Brahms biographer. McColl has expanded her work on this critic in a recent article, "Max Kalbeck and Gustav Mahler," *19th-Century Music* 20 (Fall 1996), 167-184.

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