

“Siegfried Idyll” (1870) Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

<https://youtu.be/reO4v3dTpZY>

Like it or not—and those who don’t marshal arguments both aesthetic and ethical —Richard Wagner invaded the awareness of creators in all artistic media and genres in the latter nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. His oeuvre exemplifies one touchstone of Romanticism: the yearning to go beyond limitations—beyond rationality, beyond societal conventions, and beyond artistic tradition. Monumental are the reach of his ambition and the grasp of its attainment. He composed text and music to ten long operas increasingly progressive in musical vocabulary to the point where the language left behind accepted harmonic coherence and metric symmetry. Moreover, he preached and practiced a previously unattempted synthesis of the intellectual, the aural and the visual, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or Comprehensive Work of Art. In pursuit of that end, he had new instruments built expressly for his works, and a theater erected exclusively for their performance.

And here we are, thirteen players plus me, without singers or sets or costumes, performing one of his works in under twenty minutes—the epic distilled for the domestic. Siegfried, slayer of dragons, has been admitted to the drawing room—or, to be precise, into the modest foyer of a villa with a semi-distant view of Lake Lucerne to which the Wagners, Richard and Cosima, had fled the world so the Master could create undisturbed. (He thanks her for the idea in the rhymed dedication that precedes the idyll.) A son was born on June 6, 1869, when the composer was engrossed in the last act of the third opera of the four-opera cycle The Ring of the Nibelungen, the eponymous hero of which is the naive Siegfried. The baby with the heroic name was a year-and-a-half when Richard surprised Cosima with this aubade on Christmas morning. (I have repeatedly made the pilgrimage to Villa Tribschen, a fifty-minute drive from central Zurich, without figuring

out how the instrumentalists all fit; somebody has to have sat on the staircase.)

The “Idyll”—pean, evocation, celebration and lullaby—draws on the musical materials of the third act of Siegfried. In the opera they are variously associated with the love Siegfried and Brünnhilde discover upon their long-fated first encounter—their tenderness, their desire, and their giddy defiance of impending doom. (Stay tuned for Götterdämmerung.) One citation easily identified by non-initiates: the chirping forest bird (flute, clarinet), whose warnings Siegfried only understands after he has been splattered with the blood of the dragon he has slain.

“Kammersinfonie” (Chamber Symphony) Op. 9 (1906/rev.1924).
Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951)

<https://youtu.be/4po3zSPTexY>

“I do not attach so much importance to being a musical bogey-man as to being a natural continuer of properly understood good old tradition!” (A.S. letter to the philanthropist Werner Reinhart, 1923.)

First-generation-Viennese son of a Jewish shoe store owner and a piano teacher, Arnold Schoenberg taught himself composition from a mail-order encyclopedia, not attempting his first sonata until volume “S” had arrived.

His early compositions for orchestra were hyper-Romantic, hyper-Wagnerian in subject matter and musical language: *Verklärte Nacht* (1899) <https://youtu.be/U-pVz2LTakM>, a tone poem about a woman being forgiven by her lover for bearing another man’s child; *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1903) <https://youtu.be/S0J7PYoL7IU>, another tone poem, depicting the illicit love between a man and his stepmother, in a medieval setting; and *Gurre-Lieder* (1903/1912)

(<https://youtu.be/NEQ3V2bgzo0>), a cantata for enormous orchestra, soloists and chorus, a medieval tale of adultery at court, like Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. (Adultery, of course, celebrated as the triumph of heart over mind, though leading to perdition—Eros and Thanatos tightly bound.) The Chamber Symphony (1906) builds on the idiom of these creations in purely instrumental, non-referential terms—in other words, as a symphony. It maintains the sensual, passionate flow, but tightens the formal structures, heightens the complexity of the counterpoint, and sharpens the harmonic dissonances. It hovers on the outer edge of tonality, which Schoenberg was to abandon soon thereafter.

What's Old: A symphony. Four movements, as in Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, *et al.* A declamatory fast movement, a jocular second movement, a poignant slow movement, a fast last movement. The scherzo as second movement rather than as the traditional third has a notable antecedent in Beethoven's Ninth symphony.

What's New:

- a) A symphony for only fifteen players, with delegates from the string, woodwind, and brass constituencies.
- b) Four movements that run into each other, without pause. More radical is that the last movement, rather than introducing new material, recapitulates the previous three movements—not successively, but combined, intermixed in ever new contrapuntal combinations. Earlier symphonies, notably those of Franz Liszt and César Franck, had incorporated ideas from prior movements in the last; most famously, Beethoven's Ninth cites them successively before rejecting them in favor of "something new". But none of them had approached the radical incorporation and remixing of ideas from the three prior movements that Schoenberg pulls off here.

What's Old: The symphony is tonal, *i.e.* in a key, *i.e.* based on the relationship between chords formed from a major scale (*e.g.* C major,

the white keys from C up to C), or a minor scale (A minor, the white keys from A down to A).

What's New: a) The rapidity and fluidity of modulation, *i.e.* how fast and how ambiguously the chords and the keys succeed each other.

b) The underlying scale is not always major or minor, but sometimes whole-tone, consisting of equally spaced intervals, e.g. C-D-E-F#-G#-A#-B# (=C).

c) The underlying chord is not always a triad—a chord based on intervals a third apart—E-G#-B—but a chord based on fourths. Thus, the horn fanfare that begins the first movement after a brief slow introduction is the notes D-G-C-F-B-flat-E-flat. And the introduction itself builds a tower of such fourths before resolving to a major triad. The fanfare and its upside-down version recur throughout the symphony, most prominently as the extended introduction to the slow movement.

What's Old: The derivation of 'accompanying' voices from main ones. There are hardly any arbitrary notes. A model is Johannes Brahms (d.1897).

What's New: The extent to which this is true, and the myriad contrapuntal combinations of motivic matter, in complexities rivaling Bach. (One challenge in playing this piece is that every figure is thematic, but most must remain subordinate. It can be argued that at times the texture becomes too dense.)

The premiere of the *Kammersinfonie* followed ten open rehearsals, *i.e.* some 25 hours at least. We are boldly (arrogantly?) performing it after seven hours. More optimistic than the fact several of us have played it before (it's my third go at it in over half a century) is the way new idioms gradually seep into the collective musical language. What may have sounded like gibberish originally has, without losing its provocative freshness, become something we speak.

Serenade for Winds, Cello and Bass, (1878), Antonin Dvorák (1841-1904)

<https://youtu.be/DWZnIestDps>

Antonin Dvorák was inoculated against Wagnerism early but insufficiently.

More than twenty years after the fact, Dvořák recalled very vividly the composer's visit to Prague (in 1863), saying "I was perfectly crazy about him, and recollect following him as he walked along the streets to get a chance now and again of seeing the great little man's face." In the same context he mentions Wagner's significant influence on the harmony and orchestration of his opera *Král a uhlíř* (first setting, from 1871). The operas he wrote late in life, notably the now-popular Rusalka (1901), exhibit Wagnerian traits in both form and harmony.

Dvorák's symphonic and chamber works, however, are aesthetically more akin to the music of Wagner's antipode, Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), traditionally tagged as the other great composer of the latter nineteenth century. Yet I was once marginally involved in a faculty lunch table debate at the Music Academy of the West at which one of my eminent colleagues, a professor at a major conservatory, was arguing that compared to Brahms, Dvorak was the greater. (I know that one will keep you up at night. Still...)

The two are historically linked as Master and Acolyte. Dvorak, in his late thirties, was essentially known for one piece only, the (other) Serenade, for strings, when he submitted works for a grant from the Austro-Hungarian government, successfully. The grant was renewed several times, in effect freeing the composer to—compose. Only after several of these rounds was it revealed to the applicant that one of his champions on the judging panel was Brahms. This was to lead to a lifelong friendship, in the course of which Brahms facilitated the ascension of his somewhat younger colleague into lasting international prominence by arranging for his prestigious publisher, Simrock, to include Dvorak in his catalogue. The two composers exchanged drafts of their work regularly thereafter.

The history of this Serenade links them directly. It was to meet and thank Brahms that Dvorak undertook a trip from his home in Prague

to Vienna, home of Brahms, in the winter of 1877. While there he attended a concert at which Mozart's "Gran Partita" (K.361) for two each of oboes, clarinets, basset horns and bassoons along with four French horns and string bass was performed. He immediately set about to emulate it, minus basset horns and one French horn, plus cello (and an optional contrabassoon we can't afford), and composed the work in two weeks of January 1878.

To get back to my erstwhile colleague's argument: it was basically that whereas Brahms was the master of compositional craft, he lacked Dvorak's spontaneous gift for melody. The argument would carry little water were Dvorak not also a master composer, in the sense of com-(together) -posing (placing). The difference lies in the naturalness, art concealing art, of Dvorak's music. This appearance of naiveté is abetted by his recurring recourse to folk music, or rather, to the language of Slavic folk music (there are few direct quotations). The retreat from the dreary present to the legendary and the traditional, to folk poetry and folk music, was also a marker of Romanticism.

The middle section of the second movement tonight is clearly a "Furiant," a rapid Bohemian dance in 3/4 time with shifting rhythmic emphases. The last movement is also a foot stomper. These fit naturally into the genre "Serenade," by convention a piece to be played outdoors in the evening, i.e., an entertainment. The first and third movements, however, it seems to me, dig deeper. The work opens with a march in a minor key, to me clearly nocturnal, perhaps even funereal. It may or may not be relevant that in the months immediately preceding, Dvorak had suffered the death of two of his children. The third movement, with its pulsating syncopated accompaniment in the horns (imported from Mozart's partita), also seems to me to approach anguish beneath its surface lyricism. The moon clouds over.

