

Remark: This essay is an adaption of the essay »Gedanken zur regionalen Kulturarbeit in Wien« (engl: *Thoughts to local culture work in Vienna*), which was published by the author in the proceedings *Musikethnologie und Volksmusikforschung in Österreich: Das „Fremde“ und das „Eigene“* [Musikethnologische Sammelbände 20], edited by Gerd Gruppe in 2005.

Viennese song

By Susanne Schedtler, *Viennese Folk Music Society*. (Translation: Maggie Pemberton)

Viennese song is not only a musical but above all a socio-cultural phenomenon. It inhabits a world of its own with its rather curious kind of tranquillity and pensiveness, and has been attracting listeners far beyond the city of Vienna for over a hundred and fifty years. Viennese song is quite simply a personality profile of the Viennese people - and a musical and literary glorification of itself, as the literary critic Harry Zohn once said.

Although the songs symbolised pure "Lebensfreude" (zest for life), they simultaneously lamented the general decline apparent in every area of life. There was, however, something ageless in their complacency and "blissful Vienneseness", and somehow it seemed that these songs had existed since time immemorial.

Death also occupies its own special place in Viennese song, but it does not feature nearly as strongly as is always maintained.

A large number of mainly well-known writers and composers have tried their hand at Viennese song, and their words and melodies have invariably proved to be exemplary for the genre. The favourite themes of Viennese song are Vienna in general and popular places in Vienna, the "self-reflecting" Viennese song which simply sings about itself, the Viennese dialect, the "golden Viennese heart" and the Good Old Days. In the nineteenth century we also find songs from stage plays with a humorous, self-critical or socially critical tone, albeit often displaying a whimsical sympathy for the sung subject.

Particular hallmark

A particular hallmark of Viennese music is the great variety of chromatic and harmonic phrases and turns. When this music is sung, the frequent changes of tempo also become apparent; they follow the curve of the "story" and are intended to keep the audience in suspense. Noteworthy is the theatrical fermata before the singer fervently bursts into the chorus, which most of the audience generally joins in with. A typical Viennese song is written in 2/4 or 3/4 time and is performed, as already mentioned, with inimitable rubato. The time signature is also often changed during the course of a song. This usually occurs at the beginning of the refrain, together with a change of key.

In the face of all this, it is even more astonishing that Viennese song is so firmly established not only as performing art and passive entertainment but also as "popular song". For many listener-participants this goes well beyond merely joining in the refrain. It is estimated that there are a good 60,000 to 70,000 Viennese songs, of which contemporary Viennese performers probably have several hundred in their repertoires.

It must be remembered, however, that alpine song was also enormously popular in nineteenth century Vienna, and that there is a not inconsiderable number of Viennese songs which display a similar stylistic simplicity in their composition. They belong to the cultural legacy of the Tyrolean national singers and other alpine ensembles which travelled throughout the whole of Europe from 1820 onwards, and which enjoyed sweeping success in Vienna. Yodelling was thus able to assert itself in Vienna too, and it can be found in many Viennese songs as a so-called "Salonjodler" or "Salondudler" (yodelling indoors as opposed to outdoors or in the mountains). The singer and yodeller Trude Mally (b. 1928) mainly performs songs from this Viennese-alpine repertoire, and the tradition is kept up by younger singers such as Agnes Palmisano (b. 1974).

Developments and history

Amongst the many Viennese song composers there were several who were of particular significance in its historical development. The contemporary Viennese musician, composer and poet Roland Josef Leopold Neuwirth writes, for instance, of Rudolf Kronegger (1875-1929), one of the most important composers of Viennese song:

"Should one believe that the feeling for authentic Viennese folk music had been irredeemably lost, the composer Kronegger proves to be a welcome example of enduring naturalness.

His pieces consist of sinewy melodies and unaffected, genuine language. The waltz songs are enchanting - "So a echtes Weaner Tanzerl" ("Such a real little Viennese dance"), and his marches are naturally elegant - "Mir san vom Brillantengrund" ("We're from Brillantengrund" [the former name for one of the areas which now makes up Vienna's 7th district]) or "Jetzt wird's gemütlich!" ("Things are getting cosy!"). He did not have much time for the fashions of his contemporaries, drawing his inspiration from the reservoir of old dance compositions. His music is as graceful as, for instance, the inspired marches of Alexander Katzenberger." [Roland Josef Leopold Neuwirth: "Das Wienerlied" (The Viennese Song). Published by Paul Zsolnay, Vienna, 1999, p. 48]

Neuwirth goes on to say of Franz Paul Fiebrich (1879-1935), another revered composer of Viennese song, whose works are still sung today:

"Although his predecessors had left nothing to be desired with regard to sentimentality, he was in this respect apocalyptic, in his words just as in his music. But the justification of it follows hard on: if you play his songs without letting yourself be seduced by his overly romantic style, you experience Fiebrich's heartfelt commitment to ingenious counterpoint. He goes rather far in his searching for "heart tones", and reaches the limits of what may be regarded as naturalness of expression. Yet for him – and his many fans among the current older generation - these "heart tones" are only just good enough, while to our generation he just seems to be hopelessly trapped in his era. Fiebrich's songs are without doubt beautiful, for example "s Weanalied" ("The Viennese song") and "Dem Herrgott sei Masterstück" ("The Lord God's masterpiece"), but they represent a full stop."

From the turn of the twentieth century up until 1938 it was, above all, Jewish composers and writers connected to the cabaret scene who breathed fresh life into the genre of Viennese song. It was now characterised by puns rather than by dialect, and the instrumentation was altered. But with the rise of National Socialism this promising new turn vanished, and Viennese song sank back into the "Mir san mir" (proud to be us) topos.

After 1945 there was another wistful look back to the elusive Good Old Days when everything was still alright, just as there had been around the turn of the century. Carl Lorens, known for his many witty songs, stopped writing cheerful texts in about 1890, and instead began to lament the decline of the folk singer and with him of Viennese song as such. He took to emphasising the fundamental virtues of the easy-going Viennese people (but not in an ironic manner any more); and in a similar way one tried to suppress anything related to current events or especially to politics in those songs written after 1945.

There were a few exceptions, for example Herman Leopoldi (1888-1959) with songs such as "Ich brauch an Ziegelstein" ("I need a brick") (1946) and Peter Wehle (1914-1986) with "Steh auf, liebes Wien" ("Get up, dear Vienna") (1946). Excellent mediums for disseminating these songs and their inherent mood were the record and the film. The "Pawlatschen" (make-shift stages) used by folk singers in the inns and the almost daily circulation of brand-new song texts became a thing of the past. The sentimental reminiscing about bygone Vienna, the almost grotesque glorification of wine and drinking, and the Viennese song that merely sings about itself seem from today's point of view to be the standard pattern of post-war Viennese song. The composers of that era were, amongst others, Hans Lang (1908-1992), Fritz Wolferl (1899-1974) and Josef Fiedler (1898-1970); lyric-writers included Erich Meder (1897-1966), Josef Kaderka (1910-1993) and Albin Ronnert (1894-1970).

Kabarett

After the Second World War [1939 to 1945] a new kind of cabaret took root; the satirical songs of Gerhard Bronner, Georg Kreisler and Peter Wehle touched the raw nerve of the Viennese people. In 1961, Helmut Qualtinger shocked the Viennese with his portrayal of the "Grantler" (a permanently grumpy and rather pessimistic person) and cowardly opportunist "Herr Karl" ("Mr. Charles"), opening a window on the darkest abysses of the Austrian soul. In the preceding years, Qualtinger had already attracted attention as the interpreter of Bronner's satirical hit songs such as "Der g'schufte Ferdl" ("Ferdinand the fop") (1952) and "Krügerl vor'm G'sicht" ("A mug in front of your mug") (1960). These "Viennese" songs did indeed achieve fame, but far from comforting the golden Viennese heart they shattered it in its fundamental convictions:

[...]

Vienna's a world city, business goes far,
And every sixth person now owns a car.
You can drive to the tavern, it won't take you long,
And hear proper old down-to-earth Viennese songs.
There you can even find
Cosiness of the kind
They had in those "fried chicken" times.
But you need plenty of wine with it - Prost! -
Or else the chicken will stick in your throat.
After the sixth glass
Everything goes spinning past,
And our onlookers say "Ain't they got class!"

A beer glass, a wine glass, a schnapps glass, a tippel,
Our eyes are becoming quite moist.
The heart's getting warmer, my head's getting dizzier,
The feet are so airy and light.
I'll splash out and pay for the songs and the music,
For I'm in my heaven – and then I'll go puking.
[...]

from "Krügerl vor'm G'sicht" ("A mug in front of your mug").

Even though the words, written by the teetotaler Bronner, directly alluded to Helmut Qualtinger's drinking problem, the song is in its cynical utterance a merciless attack on the innumerable Viennese songs that regard the enjoyment of wine as the very cornerstone of "Gemütlichkeit" (the untranslatable state of feeling cosy, contented, relaxed etc. all at once), and which continually play upon themes such as the following:

"Wo man trinkt, da laß dich ruhig nieder!" ("Where they drink's the place to set up home!")
[German words: Carl Maria Haslbrunner, music: Karl Fassl (1948)]

My doctor is a splendid man,
He knows just what is what.
He helps me every way he can
And never says, "Do not ...!"

If I feel under the weather,
When it's time to call the ambulance,
He says, "Come, come! No need for wincing!
Just take the tram to Grinzing!"

See the wine-growers, see the big fat lice upon the grape,
They're hard at work the livelong day! Now, aren't they in good shape?"

Where they drink's the place to set up home,
For with alcohol you purify the mind.
It brings cheerfulness and strengthens every bone,
It will fill your blood with spring and love, you'll find.

But those who waste their time just sipping water
Become dim-witted quicker than they ought to.
We're not dim-witted, we've a guarantee for ever!
That's why we stand for drinking wine here in Vienna!
[...]

New Revival

Viennese song received new impetus in the 1970s thanks to the two composers, lyric-writers and musicians Karl Hodina and Roland Josef Leopold Neuwirth. Eberhard Kummer, the singer and harpist, also contributed greatly towards making older Viennese folk music popular again with the recordings he made for radio from 1973 onwards.

Karl Hodina, actually a jazz musician and painter, a representative of Fantastic Realism, began in about 1970 to rediscover the "Wiener Lieder und Tänze" (Viennese Songs and Dances) in the albums of the same name compiled by Eduard Kremser. With his performances and recordings, and with his own jazz and blues inspired compositions and lyrics Hodina soon won his own circle of fans, which to this day holds his special approach to Viennese song in the highest esteem. His Viennese song "Herrgott aus Sta" ("Lord God made of stone") (1962) is so enormously popular that it can already be categorised as a folk song. The Viennese chansons "I liassert Kirschen für di wachsen ohne Kern" ("I'd have cherries grown for you without stones") and "s'Vogel am Bam" ("Little bird on the tree") also fall into this category.

Roland Josef Leopold Neuwirth began to become interested in Viennese folk music around 1974. In the beginning, people were outraged by the heavy rock sound of his concerts, and rejected them. Not until the mid-1980s did he reduce his group "Extremeschrammeln" (roughly translated: "The Extreme Schrammels") from a rock band to a proper Schrammel quartet and extend his repertoire to include interpretations of old Viennese dances. But for the main part he writes his own works and songs. In his lyric-writing he falls back on the punning common in the improvised stage performances of the nineteenth century; he is particularly distinctive and masterly in his use of dialect, and is time and again politically and socially relevant. Musically speaking, he feels himself committed to the blues. In spite of the fact that Neuwirth has consistently shunned sentimentalising "blissful Vienneseness", his popularity is not restricted to the younger generation; the fact that the songs are in Viennese dialect is for many older people a factor of utmost importance.

Several of the more recent composers, writers and ensembles of the twenty-first century are also breathing fresh life into the genre. "Kollegium Kalksburg" (roughly translated: "The Kalksburg College", after a place in Vienna's 23rd district which has a private school as well as a clinic for people with drinking problems), "Neue Wiener Concert Schrammeln" (roughly translated: "The New Viennese Concert Schrammels"), "Die Strottern" (a Viennese word meaning roughly "people browsing around for usable things and opportunities"), and the writer Peter Ahorner are but a few of those worthy of recognition.

Viennese instrumental music

The Schrammel quartet first became popular in Vienna in the 1880s. It typically consists of the following instruments: two violins, a chromatic button harmonica which produces different notes depending on whether the reeds are blown or sucked (this replaced the high-pitched G clarinet of the original quartet), and the "Kontragitarre", which is a Viennese double-necked harp guitar with long sub-bass headstocks. While there were ensembles which had already been playing in this formation, for example the "Brüder Butschetty" (the Butschetty brothers), it was the "Gebrüder Schrammel, Dänzer und Strohmeier" (the two Schrammel brothers with Dänzer and Strohmeier) who helped this chamber ensemble to eternal fame from 1884 onwards.

The original Schrammel ensemble achieved fame far beyond Vienna. The freethinker Crown Prince Rudolf (1858-1889), only son of Emperor Franz Joseph I (1830-1916), counted himself among the admirers of the first-class violinists Johann and Josef Schrammel, with whom the era of the "Schrammel quartets" began. They did not perform in concert halls but in "Heurigen" (wine taverns) and inns. The dance pieces in the repertoire of the Schrammel ensembles, the "Alt Wiener Tanz" (old Viennese dances), call strongly to mind the "Ländler" (an Austrian country dance in 3/4 time in which the couples spin and clap), but the slower dance melodies are more suitable simply for listening to. Viennese song, they thrive on the "lachrymose" effect of the cunningly drawn-out 3/4 time, the theatrical fermatas and the changes of tempo. A peculiarity of so-called Viennese violin-playing is "Schnofeln" (playing sul ponticello); i.e. the bow is drawn across the strings close to the bridge and thus produces an almost whimpering tone quality.

On the origins of Schrammel music Johann Schrammel himself said:

"In the [18]20s there were small ensembles in Vienna, usually two people, zither and violin. Two violins and a "Bassgeige" (bass violin, or double bass), the so-called "Linzergeigen" (Linz violinists or Linz strings), were also to be found [...]. These Linz strings (who were often copied in Vienna) performed in the inns in the evenings, and girls also came along who danced with astonishing virtuosity [...]. Pamer refined this music and called it "Deutsche" (German). Strauß and Lanner introduced another rhythm, one wherein the bass strikes the first crotchet, and the second and third crotchets are supplied by the accompaniment."

This is the story of the birth of the stylised Viennese Waltz, which is to this day an outstanding and popular element of Viennese art music. The Viennese Kontragarre with its double neck developed out of the rather bulky "Bassgeige" and was given its final form, including its thirteen to fifteen strings, by the Viennese instrument-maker Johann Gottfried Scherzer in about 1860.

By Susanne Schedtler, Vienna 2008. Translation by Maggie Pemberton

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