**Elective Affinities: Debussy-Strauss-Ligeti**

This programme might be a testing ground for what Goethe, in the title to his third novel, called elective affinities (*Wahlverwandtschaften*). Likewise for the mysterious freedom that Walter Benjamin, in a celebrated essay on that novel, argued would arise through transcendence of Goethe’s ‘mythic’ standpoint. The danger might nonetheless remain of confusing critique, ‘truth content’ for Benjamin, with commentary or ‘material content’. Is that, however, a danger at all? Does it even matter if sometimes we confuse the merely (co)incidental – Benjamin’s essay was published in 1924, when *Schlagobers* had its premiere – with more substantive connection or ‘influence’? Not necessarily, though it might. We are all, in this sense, post-modernists now: we construct our own narratives, differently grounded, be they literary, historical, musical, otherwise. And yet, the obstinate, noble thread of modernism never quite snaps – certainly not in the works heard here.

Debussy composed *Jeux* at unusual speed over a single month in 1912, to a commission from Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes. Its opening barsspeak of an almost Joycean, fragmentary, modernity in their febrile, uncertain straining towards melody: not unlike Berg’s *Three Orchestral Pieces*, begun the following year. Debussy’s opening marriage of timbre and harmony is almost melodic in itself: not unlike Viennese *Klangfarbenmelodie*, be it of Schoenberg’s or Webern’s variety. No wonder that *Jeux*, alongside the piano *Etudes*, proved to be Pierre Boulez’s most prized Debussy. He would go on to help prepare a critical edition: no mean task in a work to which Debussy would make numerous revisions following the first performance, none of them incorporated into the Durand score.

Debussy initially rejected as ‘idiotic’ Diaghilev’s trivial scenario: ‘The scene is a garden at dusk; a tennis ball has been lost; a boy and two girls are searching for it. The artificial light of the large electric lamps shedding fantastic rays about them suggests the idea of childish games: they play hide and seek, they try to catch one another, they quarrel, they sulk without cause. The night is warm, the sky is bathed in pale light; they embrace.’ Diaghilev had though homoerotically: himself and two men. This was the practical, stageable realisation of his fantasy. Comparison with an earlier ballet, seemingly similar in its lazy yet provocative lack of purpose, also now heard almost exclusively as a concert work, is telling, Boulez describing *Jeux* as ‘*Après-midi d’un faune* in sports clothes’. On the ‘triple kiss’ climax, Debussy wrote of its ‘*risqué* situation’: ‘when it is a question of ballet, immorality escapes through the legs of a female dancer and winds up in a pirouette’, a claim as artfully ambiguous as the score.

A basic tempo must endure, whilst ‘actual’ tempo is modified on average almost every other bar. Form is seemingly generated before our ears, inviting and yet resisting analysis, aural or visual. The octatonic scale – intervals of a semitone and tone alternating – offers important symmetries: suggestive, perhaps, of those in the game. It also offers ambiguities – where would Debussy be without them? – crucial to transgression of rules, sporting and musical alike. Debussy’s dissonances permit an exploration of harmonic colour, of intervallic construction to combine with, incite, even contest organisation of timbre and duration, thereby anticipating style and idea in Messiaen and the post-war avant garde. The ‘general organisation … changeable instant by instant’ Boulez discerned might have been made to order for him; likewise for Stockhausen and, as we shall see, Ligeti. For Boulez, frontiers had been ‘deliberately “anaesthetised”, listening time … no longer directional, but time-bubbles.’ Bar Debussy’s final, nonchalant musical shrug, much of that had been prefigured, in the art of transition – ‘my most subtle’ – of later Wagner. *Parsifal* offered Debussy, Boulez, and many other heirs to Wagner rather more than musical lighting.

Strauss had long been vaunted as Wagner’s foremost heir; some had called him ‘Richard the Second’. However, his early 1920s reputation was uncertain. Modernist radicals such as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Debussy (now deceased) seemed to have left him behind – even if Strauss’s earlier harmonic iconoclasm and latter time-travelling neo-Classicism foretold a good deal in their work. If the triple-time waltz – metrical instantiation of Diaghilev’s three-way relationship? – haunts *Jeux*, here it is fundamental. Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker* comes to mind, not least in Strauss’s own scenario, as slight as Diaghilev’s. A young candidate for confirmation (*Firmling*) follows Viennese custom by taking a horse-drawn carriage ride to a *Konditorei*, at which he may help himself to as many sweets and chocolates,bedecked with *Schlagobers* (whipped cream), as he can stomach. Dances for marzipan puppets; a *Träumerei* for Prince Coffee; medicinal treatment for the *Firmling*’s indigestion; a ceremonial entrance for Princess Pralinée, showcased literally and metaphorically; male liqueurs vying for the hand of Marianne Chartreuse: those and other absurdities – surreal, by intention or otherwise – take us on a gluttonous journey, its dramatic ‘purpose’ as elusive as that in Debussy’s ballet.

So sweet-toothed a ballet suite might seem a world away from the ‘form … only perceptible in the continuity of its unfolding’ foretold for Boulez in *Jeux*. Yet listen unconcerned with posthumous reputation and you will encounter a portrayal of Vienna and its waltzes more sophisticated, more satirical than ‘critical opinion’ has generally allowed. The surface glitters and, as often with Strauss, invites us to consider whether the ‘depth’ of his great German inheritance, is straightforwardly absent, is mocked in its absence, or is subtly, even satirically reinstated. A possible attempt, conscious or otherwise, at its all-too-cosy (*gemütlich*)reinstatement has posed many listeners problems – as perhaps it should. We are accustomed to Strauss donning masks in his operas and tone poems, to asking ‘what, if anything, might this *mean*?’ Ask that of *Schlagobers* and affinities with the materialism of *Jeux* and *Melodien* may suggest themselves after all.

A clue concerning critical failure may be found in Romain Rolland’s diary: ‘Richard Strauss invites me to come to see him; and I go to his flat in the Mozartstrasse. ... His ballet *Schlagobers* has just been slated by the Viennese critics. Strauss appears affected by its failure. “People always expect ideas from me, big things. Haven’t I the right, after all, to write what music I please? I cannot bear the tragedy of the present time.”’ Should Strauss’s words be taken at face value? Most likely: yes and no. He often liked to play the philistine, all the more to rejoice in art for art’s sake: a creed, if not a sensibility, he shared with Debussy. Thoroughgoing aestheticism may challenge and entertain more than a *Zeitoper* concerning hyperinflation. That evening, Rolland resolved to hear *Schlagobers* for himself, heading to the Opera. ‘It is now clear to me,’ he wrote, ‘that the righteous indignation of the Viennese critics … stems from personal motives; for the music is highly agreeable.’ There were ‘happy touches in it of colour, light and shade,’ notably in the *Meistersinger*-ishriot scene, ‘which conjures up visions of Brueghel and of Rembrandt. But the public, under the influence of the press, does not applaud. … Strauss has caused too many wounds to self-esteem, even amongst his adherents. They are taking their revenge.’

Gustav Klimt had known what it was to face Viennese scorn. His not dissimilarly glittering mosaics and Breughel’s *Series of the Months* – men and beasts at work and play throughout Nature’s cycle – helped inspire Ligeti’s orchestral writing in *Melodien*,commissioned by the City of Nuremberg for Albrecht Dürer’s quincentenary in 1971. Ligeti described the opening in an interview given three years later: ‘There are chromatic scales in many instruments, you have a whole space – you know, intervals – which is filled up with scales. The first imagination was not exactly which pitches, but only ascending streams which are combed though so that certain pitches will fall out. Then I have a comb which is more…,’ to which Ligeti delineated varying spaces between his fingers. Such visualisation corresponds to what we hear as well as see, spaces filtered ‘until only one top note remains’. Such is the goal-orientation *Jeux* shuns and towards which *Schlagobers* strives.

Importance of pitch and thus of Webernian intervallic construction had taken a battering in Ligeti’s *Apparitions* (1958-8: closest of his works to *Jeux*, via Stockhausen’s analysis of it as heralding moment form). Not only have they returned here; textures have been clarified – lines placed further apart, semitonal clusters more the exception than the rule – so as to justify Ligeti’s title. A melody such as that on tuba will occasionally emerge in almost traditional fashion. ‘Restoration of interval’ (Jonathan Barnard), the major third prevalent here, or ‘non-atonality’ in Ligeti’s teasing self-description, would be of great significance for later works from the ‘anti-anti-opera’ *Le grand macabre* onwards. Anti-anti-tonality perhaps: not entirely unlike Strauss. His allusiveness may be echoed – quasi-Romantic nods from Ligeti to the openings of Bruckner’s Fourth and Mahler’s First Symphonies – in the ‘deeper currents of sadness and melancholy’ heard here by Richard Steinitz. However, in its delicacy, in its subtlety of orchestration and its fruitful ambiguity between individual line and self-transforming whole, *Melodien* returns us to *Jeux*.