

In the air

Vienna: where worlds meet

Ariel Wagner-Parker

I have been to Vienna now five times and don't feel I have even begun to scratch the surface of this great palimpsest of a city, heavy with a history five times millennial.

True, that surface is dazzling – the waltzes and the charm, the cafés and the horse-drawn cabs: your eyes need time to adjust to the deep rich darkness behind and beneath, the shades behind the smiles and sweetness.

Wien, from the Celtic *Vedunia*, „wood-river“. The Vienna Woods, with their *Tales*, and the blue-blooded Danube flowing past, bearing the ghosts of empire from Black Forest to Black Sea – though the city turns its back on its proud river ...

Two visits were devoted to Mozart, one to Schubert and the latest two to Erich Wolfgang Korngold: for the 50th anniversary of his death, Vienna's Jewish Museum was staging a commemorative exhibition, with a *Liederabend*, and the State Opera, a production of *Die tote Stadt*. (cf. p. 9)

But Vienna in itself always provides a mosaic of moments, both trivial and powerful, pieces in a puzzle of interacting worlds ...

The first evening, Viennese sweetness – literally. After supper in the hotel restaurant, we were given little glass jars of a thick red syrup called *Waldbeer Rumtopf*: „für besinnliche Momente“. These charming souvenirs would clearly have to come home with us – but how? In our suitcase? We gazed at the frail hinged springs that held the stoppers in place In our hand-luggage?

Airport Security would confiscate them as prohibited liquids ... „Besinnliche Momente“ indeed!

On the Friday, to the *Albertina* for Paul Klee, visiting the Mozart Memorial in the *Burggarten* on the way. There stands Wolfgang Amadé, grace made man, right arm extended („*ecce musicus*“), left hand resting on a lectern. Grave, serene, generous, a creative ideal – unapproachable on his high white plinth.

Outside the park, solidly filling his seat, *Herr Geheimrat* Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, authority cast in bronze, accepting homage as his due.

At the Klee exhibition we meet a few old friends and many new ones. Klee, both magician and spellbound child.

A mother passes by, worriedly assuring her daughter that yes, they would soon find one of Klee's cat-pictures.

In the *Stadtpark*, among the natural exuberance of May, is the Schubert Memorial. Schubert sits in classical pomp, flowing robes, book open on lap, stern gaze – as unlike modest, humorous beloved Franz as it is possible to be. More like Goethe, in fact, to whom he sent his *Lieder* and who couldn't even be bothered to reply.

Then there is the emblematic golden statue of Vienna's Waltz King, Johann Strauss *Sohn*, bushy-haired, thick-moustached, left leg thrust forward, stiff with energy, playing the fiddle for ever under his triumphal arch.

Korngold, in order to earn money, adapted Strauss' operettas for Hubert Marischka and Max Reinhardt. Thanks to the latter *Warner Bros.* engaged him to write the music for *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, inadvertently saving his and his family's life: Korngold was in Hollywood in 1938, when Hitler marched into Austria, into the open arms of the jubilant citizens of Vienna. Korngold came „home“ to Vienna after the war – he was filmed beside the Goethe statue – but he was a ghost in the city that had once adored him. His dreams of the impossible return broken, disillusioned, he sailed back „home“ to the dream factory of

Hollywood, the city of illusions leaving Vienna behind him for ever ...

Postwar Vienna, setting of *The Third Man*. We visit some of the locations which in the flesh (the stone, rather) startle you with their strange familiarity.

Sudden serendipity, as two worlds merge, smiling archly, into one another:

The *Mölkerbastei*, the doorway where Harry Lime stands hiding. Holly Martins sees his old friend's cat weaving round his legs and shouts drunkenly at him to come out and show himself, shattering the night silence. A lamp comes angrily on in a house close by and sudden light falls on the bemused face of Orson Welles. Then comes the Viennese smile: you walk a few paces up the street – and discover that the light shines on Lime from Schubert's *Dreimäderlhaus*, meeting-place of cultural Vienna, site of *Schubertiades*. And round the corner is the *Pasqualati-Haus*, where Beethoven lived during most of his time in the city.

We revisited the house where Schubert was born in the suburb of *Himmelpfortgrund*. His father ran a school on the ground floor and the family lived in a small apartment above: tiny hall and „smoke-chamber“ (kitchen) – where Schubert's mother bore many of her 15 children (not 14, as is always written); nearly all of them died in infancy or early childhood; Franz Peter was her thirteenth but only four were alive to see him born – and one „living“ room.

Waiting for the *Geburtschaus* to open, we wander down the hill, thinking about the opera we had seen the night before ... In *Die Tote Stadt* Paul, obsessively mourning his dead wife Marie, meets Marietta, a dancer, Marie's physical double, though of quite different character. Paul is enchanted, almost believing in resurrection, the impossible return of the loved being ... There lying in a sunny window is a beautiful tabby, the double of our dead cat, whom we mourn. Vienna, a symphony, in which the same themes recur in different registers ...

Marie, Marietta, the Virgin Mary. Saturday: an extraordinary performance of Monteverdi's *Vespers* that soared and echoed round St Stephen's Cathedral, the *Steffi*, where Mozart's funeral service took place in an outside chapel.

A strong wind always seems to blow around St Stephen's – as the saying goes: „*Wien ist entweder windig oder ... giftig*“.

... And sure enough, on our last day, the hotel was the venue for the 76th congress of the *International Fertilizer Association* ...

But we left, with our memories – and souvenirs of Viennese sweetness: the little jars of (biological) *Waldbeer Rumtopf* made the journey home, wrapped in four bags, courtesy of the museums of Vienna.



Photo: Ariel Wagner-Parker

The „Mölkerbastei“, where Franz Schubert meets „The Third Man“