

JOHANNA MÜLLER- HERMANN - a voice worth hearing

This essay is based on a presentation that I made to a panel at Radio Three in February. I'm delighted that the BBC have agreed to perform, broadcast and record some of Johanna Müller-Hermann's works, beginning in 2018.

Johanna Müller-Hermann was a composer who lived and worked in Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century.

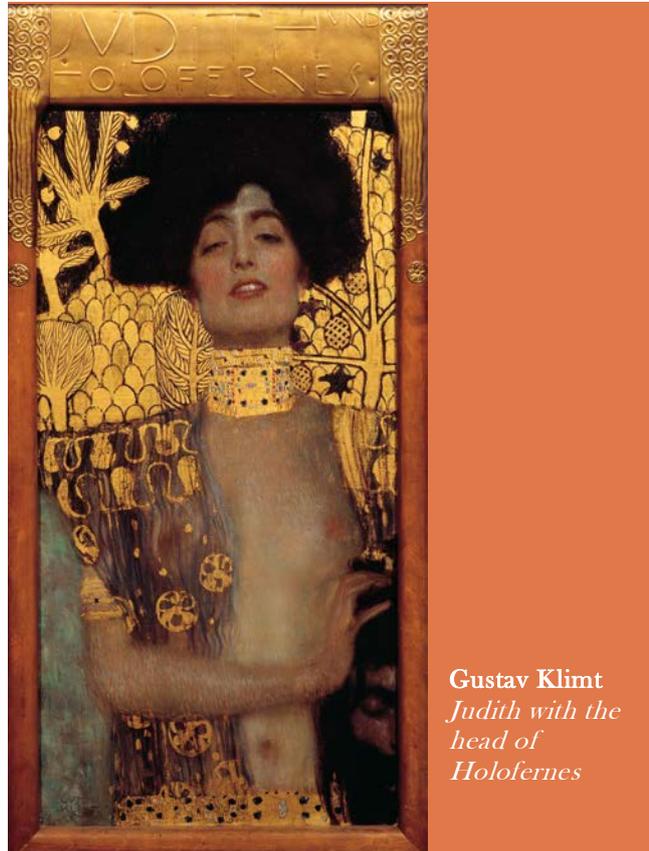


Johanna Müller-Hermann

GREAT MEN

Vienna at this period – sometimes called Vienna 1900 – is famous for its creativity and innovation. It's often described in terms of the 'great men' who led the way, experimenting and innovating in their chosen art-form.

For example, the artists' group, the Vienna Secession, led by Gustav Klimt, developed a new way of painting, which moved away from naturalistic landscapes towards a more abstract and allegorical style. This is Klimt's painting *Judith with the head of Holofernes*.



Gustav Klimt
*Judith with the
head of
Holofernes*



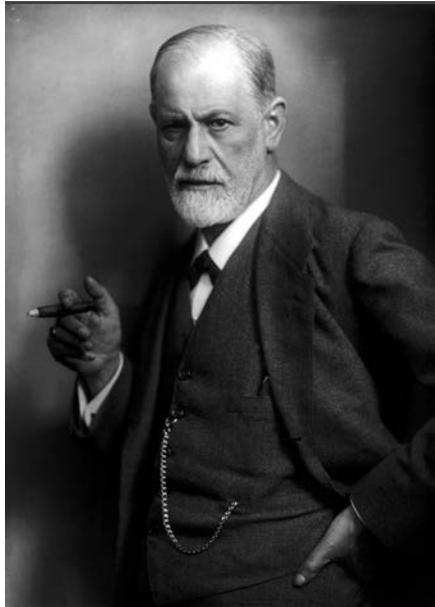
Egon Schiele
Portrait of Arnold Schoenberg

In music, Arnold Schoenberg found ways to stretch the limits of harmony to breaking point, creating music that expressed the extremes of human emotional experience. This is his portrait by another innovative painter, Egon Schiele.

His friend and teacher the composer and conductor Alexander Zemlinsky also taught Alma Mahler, Erich Korngold, and Johanna Müller-Hermann herself.

Meanwhile Arthur Schnitzler was experimenting with new literary forms such as the stream-of-consciousness, while the poet and playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal had joined up with the composer Richard Strauss to create powerful and controversial operas such as *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*

And of course this was also when Sigmund Freud was developing his ‘talking cure’ and his concept of the unconscious, which seemed to explain so much that was baffling about human behaviour.



Sigmund Freud in about 1920

But this wasn't all that was happening in Vienna at this time.

GREAT WOMEN

Vienna was also the scene of an increasingly vocal Women's Movement. Activists like Auguste Fickert challenged the assumption that men should take all the jobs and have all the money and make all the rules. At the same time, Eugenie Schwarzwald started a school, to give girls the chance of a proper education (and incidentally gave Arnold Schoenberg his chance as a teacher, at evening classes in the school building). And women's voices started increasingly to be heard in the arts, too.

Writers like Else Kotanyi-Jerusalem broke new ground by setting a novel in a brothel, while Rosa Mayreder's writings questioned the conventions and beliefs about gender that were used to restrict women's lives.

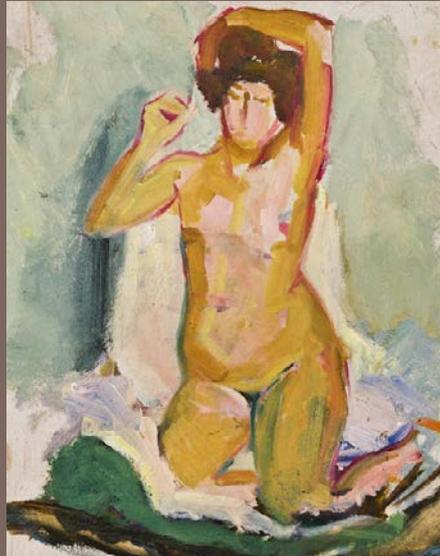


Portrait of Rosa Mayreder on an Austrian bank note

Visual artists, like the hugely successful sculptor Teresa Ries, were written up in all the newspapers, while Broncia Koller exhibited her beautiful semi-abstract pictures at major exhibitions, alongside the works of Klimt and Egon Schiele.



Teresa Ries
Hans Wilczek memorial



Broncia Koller
Kneeling woman

Music was no exception. As well as Johanna Müller-Hermann, a number of other talented women, such as Mathilde Kralik von Meyerswalden and Lilli Scheidl-Hutterstrasser, composed and performed music at the highest level.

Much of this female creativity has been forgotten, and descriptions of Vienna tend to focus on the fear and bigotry that was inspired by the increasing visibility of women, while the energy and creativity of those women is hidden in libraries and obscure academic texts.

JOHANNA MÜLLER-HERMANN

The extraordinary creativity of turn-of-the-century Vienna is the background against which Johanna Müller-Hermann lived and worked. She came from a respectable, educated Viennese family: her father was a senior civil servant.

Music was encouraged at home, but not as a profession. Following her father's wishes, young Johanna Hermann trained as a school teacher, and it wasn't until her marriage to Otto Martini-Muller (also a civil servant) that she was free to pursue her calling as a musician.

She studied the piano, the theory of music, and composition with a number of teachers, including Josef Labor and Alexander Zemlinsky, both of whom also taught Alma Mahler, as well as the successful Czech composer, Foerster.

When Foerster returned to Prague after Czechoslovakia became independent in 1918, Johanna Müller-Hermann took over his job at the Neues Wiener Konservatorium, and taught there till 1932. She was the first woman to have a post of this kind in the German-speaking world.

STRING QUARTET OP. 6

Johanna Müller-Hermann's String Quartet op. 6, is an early work – it was premiered in 1911. We know that she worked on it with Zemlinsky, because he wrote to Alma Mahler (who had introduced them) asking her advice on how much he should charge. The quartet starts in a fairly conventional way, but as it goes on, it becomes more adventurous, and the fourth movement is wonderfully lively and expressive, with a subtle, shifting harmony that was to become characteristic of Müller-Hermann's work.



The string quartet was recorded by the Artis Quartet in 1990. It's one of only a handful of Müller-Hermann's works that has been recorded professionally.

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MUSICAL WORKS

JMH went on to write music in all genres, from solo piano and songs from voice and piano to large choral and orchestral works. The only genre she never tried was opera.

Her works were performed in major concert halls such as the Musikverein in Vienna (pictured) and were published by Universal Edition, alongside the works of great figures like Mahler, Schoenberg and Berg.



Concert Hall at the Musikverein in Vienna

Reviews were generally favourable, though remarks like ‘you would never have suspected this was by a woman’ in the reviews of the string quartet give a sense of the barriers there were to wider acceptance of her music.

ERASURE

So why is Johanna Müller-Hermann’s name not better known?

In 1938 the Nazi took over Austria in the *Anschluss*. While she was not Jewish, as a creative woman, Müller-Hermann was at odds with the Nazi doctrine of ‘Kinder, Kirche, Küche’ (that women should confine their activities to the home and the church). The Neues Konservatorium, where she taught for nearly 25 years, was closed by the Nazis, and never reopened.



Golgotha

Woodcut by Viennese artist Trude Waehner (1900-1979)

And once the horror and destruction of the war was over, Müller-Hermann’s music suffered from two disadvantages. As a woman, her contribution to ‘Vienna’s Golden Autumn’ did not fit into the prevailing picture created of Viennese young men rebelling against their conventional fathers, which dominates the literature.

Secondly, as a tonal composer, she was ignored as being irrelevant to the great project of Modernism launched by Schoenberg’s atonal and serial techniques. This ideology, which also affected reception of composers like Richard Strauss and Alexander Zemlinsky, has largely now been left behind.

A VOICE WORTH HEARING

I believe it's time that Johanna Müller-Hermann took rightful her place as part of Vienna's great creative flowering at this period for two reasons

The first reason is that the world of Mahler, Strauss and Schoenberg looks so different once the contribution of women is understood. It starts to become clear that Vienna was not as uniformly misogynist as it's sometimes been depicted; that the questioning of convention included a questioning of the place of women in society; that Freud, Klimt or Schnitzler were working in a work where the old certainties about gender and sex were beginning to shift and crack. And as such, it's part of a bigger programme of recognising women's contribution to the arts and society through the centuries, to reverse the all-to-common erasure and ignorance of their voices.

The other reason is simply the quality of the music. It's beautifully crafted, the harmony is subtle and fascinating, and the composer's response to text and to instrumental colour is absolutely assured. This is a voice that deserves to be heard.

PERFORMING THE MUSIC.

Johanna Müller-Hermann's music includes chamber music, choral music, and large-scale works for soloists, chorus and orchestra. Only a handful of works have been recorded, and many scores exist only in manuscript.

My research into Johanna Müller-Hermann was partly inspired by a call from the BBC for information about orchestral and choral music by women. I'm excited that the BBC are planning to broadcast and record works by Johanna Müller-Hermann over the coming years.

I hope that this will be the start of something important: that in the next decade more and more works by women composers from all centuries are discovered and performed. There are so many voices that have been silenced by history, and Johanna Müller-Hermann is only one of many that are unquestionably worth hearing.

© Carola Darwin 8th March 2017

In 2018, Radio 3 broadcast a number of Johanna Müller-Hermann's works, including *Drei Gesänge* Op.32/33 BBC Concert Orchestra c. Jane Glover with Ilona Domnich Soprano.

All die wachsende Schatten BBC Singers

Lieder op. 2 Soraya Mafi (Soprano) Simon Lepper (Piano)