

Round Dances in Vienna

An Interpretation of Ernst von Dohnányi's *Winterreigen*

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ABSTRACT

Ernst von Dohnányi (1877–1960), the Hungarian composer and pianist, was usually described as a remarkably harmonious, easy-going, and resilient person by his contemporaries. At the same time, however, he was emotionally withdrawn, so we know very little about how he adapted to different life situations. An excellent example of this is the short period he spent in Vienna in his twenties (1901–1905) which his first biographer Bálint Vázsonyi depicted as an idyllic period, in which Dohnányi “enjoyed the artistic society of Vienna, the family home in which he was surrounded by two beautiful children and he composed a lot.” Following a more critical interpretation of the sources and the unearthing of their hidden references, this popular interpretation proves to be slightly flawed. It seems that Dohnányi reacted very sensitively to the seething public mood in Vienna at the turn of the century, and he himself went through a deep personal-creative crisis. This study presents the author’s experience of Vienna in connection with his piano cycle *Winterreigen* (op. 13, 1905–1906), composed for his Viennese friends, and shows how this experience haunted him even when he lived there again as a political refugee for a short time in 1945–1946 – when Vienna appeared for him not as a possible home in Central Europe but rather as the last bastion of the “West” against the advancing “East,” the Soviet army.

KEYWORDS

Ernst von Dohnányi, *Winterreigen*, Vienna, piano music

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1. INTRODUCTION

The winter of 1904/05 and that of 1944/45 found Ernő (Ernst von) Dohnányi in Vienna, both in a situation typical for or at least remarkable in the history of Central European music and cultural history. Needless to say, it was not only during these years that Dohnányi's fate was linked to the imperial capital. In his childhood and teenage years, as a citizen of late nineteenth-century Pressburg/Pozsony, he could have felt as if he were in suburban Vienna. Definitely so in cultural respects, as he put it in 1944 in a nostalgic radio lecture entitled "From my memory book:" "Because of the proximity of the two cities, there were hardly any artists performing in Vienna who did not come over to neighboring Pressburg"¹ – and he verified his claims by recalling several musical experiences. It was also in Vienna, where he introduced himself as a composer for the first time: in the spring of 1894, just before his secondary school-leaving exams, that he performed his Piano Quartet in F# Minor in the grand hall of the Association for Austrian Architects.² A concert held eighteen months later was even more memorable: his Piano Quintet in C Minor (his later op. 1) was performed by the Viennese association of musicians, the *Wiener Tonkünstler-Verein*.³ The president himself, Johannes Brahms, took the composition under his wings and put it on the program. Moreover, according to a well-known anecdote, he even praised it by saying "I wouldn't have written it better myself."⁴ Just like the Brahms legend, another well-known moment from Dohnányi's early years connected to Vienna is an event that is perhaps less favorable for Vienna but all the more advantageous for Hungarian music history: it was Dohnányi who advised fellow student Béla Bartók, who was a few years younger than him, to choose the academy in Budapest over its counterpart in Vienna, even though the latter one would have been the obvious choice due to its closeness.

2. VIENNA AND THE YOUNG DOHNÁNYI

Although he did not recommend Vienna to Bartók – at least as a place for academic studies – Dohnányi had a very strong tie with the Austrian capital since his young adult years; settling down there after marrying Elza Kunwald at the age of 23 was just as natural for him as if he had done so in Pressburg or Budapest. During the first few years of the twentieth century, he alternated between the three cities, and from 1903 onwards he mostly stayed in Vienna.

The brief period following the first years of his international career (1897–1901) and lasting until his first prestigious teaching appointment (1905, Berlin) has received little attention in research so far. Bálint Vázsonyi, the pioneer Dohnányi researcher, says in his biography: "[Dohnányi] was enjoying Viennese artistic society and his family with two beautiful children,

¹Ernst von Dohnányi, "Emlékkönyvből. Rádióelőadás [From my memories. Radio lecture] / Hungarian Radio, January 30, 1944," in KUSZ (ed.), *Dohnányi Ernő*, 63–79.

²March 11, 1894. Performers: The Duesberg Quartet and the composer. On the reviews of the concert, see also: GOMBOS, "Dohnányi Ernő," Part I, 163–164.

³November 25, 1895. Performers: The Kneisel Quartet and the composer. It was a private concert with no public access, so no reviews were published about it.

⁴See also: DOHNÁNYI, *A Song of Life*, 20.



and – naturally – composing.⁵ Vázsonyi also admonishes us not to take the worrisome letters written by Dohnányi's father, Frigyes Dohnányi, during these years too seriously: there was no crisis at all – the father's increasing bitterness in his letters represented merely a parent's sinister premonition.⁶ Yet it seems worthwhile to quote one of Frigyes Dohnányi's letters at length:

You must steer the course of your destiny with greater energy and get a stronger grip on your life; you must not allow yourself to be swept away by the waves of fate; though convenient, it is not worthy of a man, especially a person predestined for great things. You will not get anywhere with that passive resistance – waiting for results without putting in any efforts! You need to move around and do it a lot so that you will have enough income during the seasons and receive contracts for concert tours. And you must be more active in other respects, too; you need to be more engaged in improving your art. Do not believe – whoever says so and even if you happen to agree with it – that you do not need to practice ...

You have been blessed with wonderful talents, talents through which you are destined to endow mankind with treasures of eternal value ... Mankind will not lose anything at all if, for instance, a person with mediocre talent wastes their time; however, for someone who is destined to create great things, it is an unspeakable sin – instead of writing immortal work – to waste precious time with companions beneath them in every respect, chatter idly, harm their own health or even risk getting disgusted by work and eventually incapacitated ...

I have the feeling that my days are numbered;⁷ I only wish to live to see that my dear children's future and happiness are secured. You have everything you need for that: you have a muse that can lift you up and not leave you unless you give her up yourself; you have a kind and loving wife, beautiful babies; what more do you want? Your happiness is in your home: look around yourself, that is where you will find it.⁸

Frigyes Dohnányi, who was also a talented musician and an accomplished teacher, is one of the strong father figures in music history – in both positive and negative senses. His parental care was not infrequently accompanied by a stifling rigor and the moral terms he sought to dictate to his talented son were sustaining and oppressing at the same time. But the fact is he was closely monitoring the development of his son's professional career and private life. In this case he probably did not even need to make much of an effort, as the circumstances were presumably well-known throughout Vienna and the news must have easily travelled to the adjacent Pressburg. Although posterity is certainly not well-endowed with information about this period of Dohnányi's life – there are hardly any letters and even fewer memoirs or interviews –, the few available sources all suggest that Vázsonyi's widespread interpretation of these years spent in peace with hard work in an idyllic family circle is somewhat mistaken. Vázsonyi is often

⁵VÁZSONYI, *Dohnányi Ernő*, 101. All references are to the page numbers of the second edition.

⁶*Ibid.*, 108.

⁷Frigyes Dohnányi was ill for a long time, and he eventually died in November, 1909.

⁸Frigyes Dohnányi's letter to Ernő Dohnányi, July 20, 1903; National Széchényi Library, Budapest, Dohnányi estate [hence: H-Bn], without shelfmark; partly quoted in VÁZSONYI, *Dohnányi Ernő*, 106–108.



unreliable, but in this case he should be forgiven: he may not have known, for example, the interpretation of the composer's second wife, Elsa Galafrés, of this period,⁹ which – when read together with a few scattered comments appearing here and there in other sources – strongly confirms the father's concerns.¹⁰

In Galafrés' narrative, we can see a young man in his twenties, who has finally moved away from the puritanical parental home and is hungry for freedom and entertainment, fully embracing the *Drahn*, i.e. the typical Viennese attitude to life at the turn of the century, which is described by Galafrés as follows:

It is a heady mixture of both active and passive joy of life, a happy floating along with no consciousness of the passing of time. It is a state of intoxication, but intoxication caused by conversation, wine, love, by being young in Vienna. It could be harmless enough, but the time to "Drahn" is between ten in the evening and five in the morning.¹¹

Indeed, Vázsonyi also mentions that Dohnányi should not have married his first wife, a former college sweetheart, because by the time they married, their life paths had become very different (Frigyes did not even approve of the wedding).¹² It seems likely, though, that it was the constant mental and physical pressure of the *Drahn* combined with the unwanted family burdens that led to Dohnányi's nervous breakdown accompanied by frightening symptoms in 1904, which forced him to stay in bed for two months.¹³ This means that Galafrés' claims are quite possibly true: notably that Dohnányi accepted the offer by the Berlin college due to family pressure, in the sense that he realized he needed to leave behind the Viennese vicious circle for the sake of his family and his own health.¹⁴

3. THE WINTERREIGEN AND DOHNÁNYI'S VIENNA CIRCLE

By being unable, or perhaps – given his interpretation idealizing Dohnányi – unwilling, to mention the crisis arising in the young composer's life, Vázsonyi, whose popular biography has obviously more readers than Elsa Galafrés' hardly available memoir or even Frigyes Dohnányi's letters, is misleading everyone in his thinking about Dohnányi, including performers playing the compositions from the era in question. Even more so as some of these compositions are popular even today, for example the Serenade for String Trio op. 10 (1902), Four Rhapsodies op. 11 (1903–04), *Konzertsükk* for Cello and Orchestra op. 12 (1903–04) and *Winterreigen*

⁹GALAFRÉS, *Lives... Loves... Losses...*, 130. Galafrés' book was published two years later than Vázsonyi's, but she had been working on it for more than two decades, and Vázsonyi – as the book and the accompanying documentary collection suggest – must have consulted her, and her opinion on other issues is clearly shown.

¹⁰See most importantly: Ernő Dohnányi's letter to Ferenc Kováts, May 1, 1903; Frigyes Dohnányi's letter to Ernő Dohnányi, November 21, 1903; Frigyes Dohnányi's letter to Mária Dohnányi, January 7, 1904 (all from H-Bn, without shelfmark); and the third wife, Ilona Zachár's Dohnányi-biography, which describes the period before her meeting the composer (1937) relatively objectively: DOHNÁNYI, *A Song of Life*, 45–55.

¹¹GALAFRÉS, *Lives... Loves... Losses...*, 144. See also: CSÁKY, *Ideologie der Operette*.

¹²VÁZSONYI, *Dohnányi Ernő*, 124–126.

¹³GALAFRÉS, *Lives... Loves... Losses...*, 145–146; DOHNÁNYI, *A Song of Life*, 50–51.

¹⁴Ibid., 148.



op. 13 (1904–05). I am going to use the example of the latter to show how the biographical and psychological context can reveal a more nuanced picture of the composition.

Winterreigen is a cycle of piano pieces subtitled *Ten Bagatelles*, a work which, relatively exceptionally in the oeuvre, is admittedly and emphatically personally inspired. In the composer's words: "Each piece was dedicated to a different one, while the dedication of the whole to the spirit of Robert Schumann is revealed in the first piece *Widmung* (Dedication) by its use of the first melody from Schumann's *Papillons*."¹⁵ In this self-analysis, which was written much later, in the 1950s, Dohnányi briefly lists the specific inspirations for the pieces:

The titles of the other pieces do not need much explanation: *Marsch der lustigen Brüder* (March of the Jolly Fellows), *An Ada* (To Ada[,]) based on the notes A–D–A[,], *Freund Victor's Mazurka* (Friend Victor's Mazurka) a transformation of a Mazurka composed by Friend Victor, *Spherenmusik* [sic] (Music of the Spheres) in remembrance of a balloontrip (non-dirigible) in 1904 before the existence of aeroplanes [sic], *Valse aimable* (Amiable Waltz), also based on motives of the friend to whom it is dedicated, *Um Mitternacht* (At Midnight), *Tolle Gesellschaft* (Boisterous Party), and *Morgengrauen* (Dawn). The last piece, *Postludium* ends with the notes A–D–Ē, *adé*, which is an Austrian slang for *adieu* (Farewell).¹⁶

Analysts like to extend the personal enumeration with names of "friends" familiar from music history, looking for allusions to Liszt, Chopin, Beethoven or Brahms, in addition to Schumann.¹⁷ A lovely and romantic gesture, which is also an instructive expression of self-identification within the tradition of music history – this is how we listen to, how we used to listen to *Winterreigen*.

The party evoked in the composition, i.e. Dohnányi's circle of friends, or companions beneath him, as Frigyes Dohnányi called them, indeed included a great many eccentric characters. This certainly does not refer to the composer's two closest friends, namely Adalbert Lindner, the musical doctor who anxiously watched over his talented friend's health, and Victor Heindl, the lawyer and amateur literarian, who was the poet-librettist of Dohnányi's comic opera and several songs as well as song cycles¹⁸ and also wrote the poem-preface to the *Winterreigen* cycle. Nevertheless, Heindl was a true Bohemian. He liked to say, for example, that he was rather reluctant to go out without a good pint of cold beer, and his life philosophy and motto were something like this: too much work is degrading.¹⁹ The great impact this idea had on Dohnányi is also reflected in the little memoir-like publication titled *Búcsú és üzenet* (Farewell and Message), which was probably compiled by Dohnányi's widow: "Mockingly, I often quoted

¹⁵Ernő Dohnányi's letter to Peter Andry, November 18, 1956; HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute for Musicology, Archives for 20th–21st-Century Hungarian Music, Dohnányi Collection [hence: H-Bami], MZA-DE-Ta-Script 82.303.

¹⁶Ernő Dohnányi's letter to Peter Andry, November 18, 1956. In the original typescript, the titles are typed in capital letters.

¹⁷See, for example: GARWIN, "Self-Identification," SCHUBERT, "Dohnányi: Piano Works No. 2;" GRIFFITH, *Ernst von Dohnányi's Winterreigen*.

¹⁸*Tante Simona* op. 20 (1911–12), *Sechs Gedichte von Victor Heindl* op. 14 (1905–06) [Six poems by Victor Heindl op. 14] (1905–06), *Waldelflein* [Forest elf] (without opus number, 1905).

¹⁹GALAFRÉS, *Lives... Loves... Losses...*, 146.



the saying of a friend of mine: ‘Arbeit macht dumm und gemein, und ist außerdem zeitraubend!’ Work makes you silly and vulgar, and in addition takes all your time!²⁰

As Galafrés’ entertaining description shows, beside Lindner and Heindl there were some less stable acquaintances in Dohnányi’s company, who occasionally had a large influence on him. Among them, for instance, a well-known eccentric and wealthy Alpinist from Vienna, who adopted dozens of his own illegitimate children, and an athlete who convinced Dohnányi to join the Viennese aviation club, which had been famous for its dangerous attractions²¹ – this incident particularly infuriated Frigyes Dohnányi.²² For his son, however, air travel was a fantastic experience that he even captured in his music: a piece in the *Winterreigen* cycle entitled *Sphärenmusik*, i.e. *Music of the Spheres*, is dedicated to this phenomenal adventure. The composition, which is written in three systems at several places, has an extraordinary texture and suggestively depicts the surreal experience of floating, the silent motion of the huge hot air balloon, and the growing distance from the earth’s surface and together with it from reality (Example 1). Dohnányi mentioned the incident even in his last interview, in a conversation recorded in the university radio of Florida – there was an almost audible smile in his voice as he recounted his surreal air travel:

DOHNÁNYI: It was in 1904, and that time flying with an aero plane was just a dream, you know, we were very far from that. And some engineers, of course, had headaches to try to solve that problem, and we all hoped that one day it would come, but the problem was very far from being solved. And there was the balloon which, I suppose, in some ways was much nicer than the aero plane.

Adagio ma non troppo

pp

Example 1. Dohnányi, *Winterreigen* op. 13 no. 5 *Sphärenmusik*
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²⁰DOHNÁNYI, *Message to Posterity*, 12.

²¹According to the sheet: “Korwin.” For more detail, see [Without ed.], *80 Jahre Österreichischer Aero Club*.

²²GALAFRÉS, *Lives... Loves... Losses...*, 147–148.



ROY FLYNN (radio interviewer): How it was nicer?

DOHNÁNYI: It was nicer because it was more romantic – you flew where the wind [flew] the balloon. You could only regulate whether you wanted to fly higher or lower.

FLYNN: You couldn't direct it.

DOHNÁNYI: But you couldn't direct it, the direction was the wind. And what's wonderful is that in the biggest storm there was just ... because you flew with the wind, and you didn't feel the wind at all, because you were in the wind.²³

4. REIGEN AND WINTERREIGEN

There is only one other illustrative composition in Dohnányi's oeuvre that has a more explicit biographical inspiration than *Sphärenmusik*: notably, the water music with the title *Cascades* op. 41 no. 4 (1945–46) inspired by the Alpine landscape. In the same way as the seeming idyll in *Cascades* is overshadowed by an anxiety that is difficult to describe in musical terms, the ethereal sounding of *Sphärenmusik* is also permeated with an inner tension, which is probably not unrelated to the grim circumstances prevailing at the time of its composition. More attentive listener–analysts may have the impression in connection with the complete *Winterreigen* cycle that it was not written with such an open concept as it first appears, or as the uncharacteristically detailed description by the author suggests. It probably has many more secrets – perhaps references that only insiders could understand.

In fact, there is a detail even in Dohnányi's description that deserves further thought. “The title *Winterreigen* cannot be literally translated. ‘Reigen’ means ‘Round Dance,’ but the word has also a figurative meaning for which there is no word in English,”²⁴ explains the composer slightly mysteriously. It is important to understand that Dohnányi's personal crisis, which manifested itself in his unrestrained immersion in the Viennese *Drahn*, was resolved a few years later when he left his first wife for the previously mentioned actress and dancer Elsa Galafrés. Dohnányi became acquainted with Galafrés through the pantomime performances of his *The Veil of Pierette* op. 18 (1908–1909), which was based on Arthur Schnitzler's drama.²⁵ Schnitzler, who started out as a successful Viennese doctor and – influenced partly by Sigmund Freud's work – became a successful and quite provocative writer, is never mentioned among Dohnányi's Viennese friends. Given their extensive social contacts, however, they must have heard of each other even before the performances of *Pierette*.²⁶ In any case, Dohnányi could

²³Roy Flynn, Radio interview on Dohnányi's 82nd birthday, WFSU, July 24, 1959 [transcribed from the audio-recording]; H-Bami, MZA DE-Ta-Script 5.014/7.

²⁴Ernő Dohnányi's letter to Peter Andry (EMI), November 18, 1956.

²⁵FARESE, *Arthur Schnitzler*. On new research and publications, see also the website of the Arthur Schnitzler Society, Vienna: <<https://www.arthur-schnitzler.at/>> (accessed: February 1, 2024), and the website of the Schnitzler Archives, Freiburg: <https://www.ndl.uni-freiburg.de/personen/achimaurnhammer/schnitzlerarchiv.html/startseite> (accessed: February 1, 2024).

²⁶The composer's estate also includes some superficial correspondence between them dated in this period (but already after the completion of *Winterreigen*): Schnitzler's letter to Dohnányi, May 25, 1905, and Dohnányi's letter to Schnitzler, November 15, 1905; H-Bami, MZA-DE-Ta-Script 2.014/13, and 2.014/25.



have known about the 1903 appearance of a quite sensational and libertine drama by Schnitzler, which had actually been privately printed for circulation among the author's friends.²⁷ Its title, *Reigen*, refers to its unique structure and plot. Each of the ten scenes presents a rendezvous of two lovers in a way that one of the characters moves on to the consecutive scene as a member of a new couple. Eventually in scene 10, one of the first presented characters returns, and this is how the socially wide circle is closed. First we can see the scene of The Girl of the Streets and The Soldier (scene 1), then come The Soldier and The Parlor Maid (scene 2), The Parlor Maid and The Young Man (scene 3), The Young Man and The Young Wife (scene 4), The Young Wife and The Husband (scene 5), The Husband and The Sweet Young Miss (scene 6), The Sweet Young Miss and The Poet (scene 7), The Poet and The Actress (scene 8), The Actress and The Count (scene 9) and finally the play ends with the encounter of The Count and The Girl of the Streets returning from the first scene (scene 10).²⁸ Schnitzler's play quickly gained enormous popularity. Many translations were published; the first in Hungarian appeared already in 1904 with the title *Körbe-körbe* (Round and round).²⁹ There have been numerous adaptations, even parodies, and several film versions have been made thanks to its suitable material.³⁰ It is also worth highlighting the Hungarian aspects of the reception: the stage premiere of the play took place in Budapest,³¹ and many decades later the Budapest theater Vígszínház (Gaiety Theater) commissioned Mihály Kornis to write *Reigen's* adaptation set in the Hungarian society of the late 1980s, at the time of the political transition, which was on the program with the title *Körmagyar* (Round Hungarian) together with *Körtánc* (*Reigen*) in 1989.³²

It is perhaps no accident that Dohnányi borrowed the title of such a scandalous and frivolous yet disillusioned recent drama to evoke his own social life in a cryptic way. Even the ten-part structure of the composition (ten scenes / ten pieces) is consistent with its model. The prefix "Winter" could be explained by the introductory poem written by Heindl: according to the poem, the carnival period in winter was the most intensive one in social life (the "carnival" itself is also a reference to Schumann),³³ but winter might also appear as a synonym of farewell and parting, especially because Dohnányi completed the composition of the piece in the winter of 1905 – when he was already in Berlin, in the next stage of his life. In addition, it is perhaps not insignificant that the title *Winterreigen* rhymes with the title of Schubert's emblematic song-cycle, *Winterreise*. And regarding the particular theme of the *Reigen* drama, neither of the two wives' memoirs elaborates on what love affairs Dohnányi had, but both of them admit he had

²⁷ Arthur Schnitzler, *Reigen* (Vienna: Wiener Verlag, 1903). For a critical edition based on the first privately printed version (1900), see RAUCHENBACHER and FLIEDL (eds.), *Schnitzler: Reigen*.

²⁸ Based on the English translation: *Hands Around*, transl. by F. L. G. and L. D. E. [authorized translation] (New York: Koren, 1920 ["privately printed for subscribers"]), <<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/53513/pg53513-images.html>> (accessed: February 1, 2024).

²⁹ Arthur SCHNITZLER, *Körbe-körbe. Tíz párbeszéd* [Round and round. Ten dialogues], intr. by Sándor BRÓDY, trans. by Frigyes FREUND [?] (Budapest–Vienna: Frigyes Freund's edition, 1904).

³⁰ Adaptations for example: *La Ronde* (Max Ophüls, 1950); *Der Reigen* (Otto Schenk, 1973); looser adaptations: *Der Reigen – Ein Werdegang* (Richard Oswald, 1920); *360* (Fernando Meirelles, 2011); see also WOLF, *Arthur Schnitzler*.

³¹ October 13, 1912, Új Színház [New stage]. The author was not present.

³² In print: Mihály KORNIS, *Körmagyar* (Budapest: Napra-forgó, 1990).

³³ See the beginning of the poem: "Nun laßt, o laßt des Tages Sorgen schweigen, / Die Sternennacht lauscht draußen klar und kalt, / Und in der Töne Zauberbanngewalt / Laßt uns das Ohr nach fernen Träumen neigen!"



some. It is the inspirer of the bagatelle from *Winterreigen* entitled *An Ada* that is usually mentioned in this context, although it is uncertain who is meant by the nickname Ada. We should not believe that in order to better understand the composition it is necessary to know about barely identifiable or unidentifiable relationships among barely identifiable friends. This is probably only one of the secrets permeating the atmosphere and the function of *Winterreigen* which place it in a context quite different from anything previously known.

Is it possible to capture all this – a mixture of *Drahn*, liberty, melancholy, tension or intimacy and loneliness – in music? Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to listen to and interpret for example *Tolle Gesellschaft* (Boisterous Party) (Example 2) in this context; it is a piece setting unrealistic technical demands, which – as a recent performer put it – is a straight road for pianists to the emergency room.³⁴ It is also worth noticing the miniature passacaglia in *An Ada*,

Tempo I.

Example 2. Dohnányi, *Winterreigen* op. 13 no. 8 *Tolle Gesellschaft*
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³⁴SCHUBERT, “Dohnányi: Piano Works No. 2.”



in which an increasingly passionate accompaniment unfolds during the stubbornly repetitive A-D-A melody, attempting to explode from the frames before eventually failing and fading away with disappointment; but also the weird duo of the racing and heated *Um Mitternacht*, and the dazed and groggy *Morgengrauen*. It is the extraordinary contrast between the markedly extroverted pieces and the two introverted ones framing them (*Widmung* and *Postludium*), together with the presumed connection of the cycle to the *Reigen* drama reflected in its title and structure that links Dohnányi's composition to Schnitzler's world – one that is described in an obituary as follows:

impressionism, subtle and playful decadence, bitter and elegant Weltschmerz characteristic of the turn of the century ... Genteel pessimism, superficial but bitter love, acerbic scepticism concealed behind tickling and witty boudoire mood ... [Schnitzler's] characters are still the chic, end-of-century Viennese figures from earlier salon dramas, smiling and genteel lovers, "sweet young misses" and others, but behind their well-polished shallowness their hearts are already beating slightly nervously, so to say.³⁵

5. DURING AND AFTER WORLD WAR II

In general, a certain "subtle decadence" was not absent from Dohnányi's philosophy and worldview, even if it might sound surprising given his serene, well-balanced and pleasant personality. Apart from a few occasional examples, from the early 1920s onwards, interviews were regularly made with him, and even in these he would talk about the ideas obviously inspired by Oswald Spengler, philosopher of history,³⁶ which would later frequently appear in his life – for example in the following interview:

"How do you see the new generation?"

A diplomatic smile:

"I'm no prophet."

"So, you have such a bad opinion of them? Do they lack talent?"

"Few of them have a compositional talent. Nowadays, those with talent go into the world of technology, not the arts. It is difficult to make something new; the arts have been exhausted."

"Maybe it's because of the war..."

"No, there has always been war. Technology serves war, but war also spurs technology. In this field, more new things can be produced than in the arts. Whenever culture reaches a certain level of

³⁵BÁLINT György, "[In Memoriam] Arthur Schnitzler," *Nyugat* 24/21 (December, 1931), 482.

³⁶Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, which was very popular in Hungary right immediately after the appearance of the first volume (1918), and it was one of Dohnányi's favorite books; see DOHNÁNYI, *A Song of Life*, 146. Dohnányi's American library included another book by the author: Oswald SPENGLER, *Der Mensch und die Technik* [Man and Technics] (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1931); his own copy: H-Bami, MZA-DE-Ta-Script 3.222.



maturity, civilization takes over. Civilization is always the result of a culture's decline. Today we have passed the point at which culture and civilization can coexist. We live comfortably, but we have less to impart to ourselves. I don't know how we get out of this. Violence does not help."³⁷

The interviews reveal that Dohnányi regarded even his own art as a product of a declining age in the sense that he accepted the “death of culture” and that under such conditions he could not compose original music that was comparable to former artists but at the same time “beautiful” and appealing to audiences. The fact that he was in daily contact with the audience, accurately perceiving the tastes and reactions of its different segments, not only performing as a pianist but also conducting and compiling the program of Philharmonic Concerts, may have played a role in this. The above quote dates from 1943; by then he had already seen his conviction of Spengler's declining West and its imminent destruction confirmed.

He left Hungary in the following year, on November 24, 1944; he fled to Vienna first. At that time the refugee saw Vienna as the bastion of the West standing against the advancing East, the Red Army. When reconstructing the mosaics of the months spent in Vienna between November, 1944 and March, 1945, we must rely on the recollections of the third wife (future wife at that time): Ilona Zachár's diary and autobiographic writings replace correspondence, which became impossible by then.³⁸ They tell us about a life that could not have been more different from the magical period forty years earlier: unheated rooms in Collegium Hungaricum, starvation, constant air raids, days spent in bomb shelters, infectious diseases and complete hopelessness.³⁹ The turn-of-the-century Vienna rarely came to mind, only in moments like the one during a depressing Christmas walk in 1944, when Dohnányi sighed and said how he loved Viennese people, who were able to feel happy with something, for example good music, even in the worst of circumstances.⁴⁰ However, the following months were very hard to bear even for the Viennese. Pianist Tibor Wehner, who spent many hours in his former master's company at a bomb shelter in Vienna, told Bálint Vázsonyi in an interview about the early spring of 1945:

Concerts were impossible; there was a Beethoven evening scheduled for March in the Musikverein, and [Dohnányi] started rehearsing one or two days before ... He walked to the concert – there had been a particularly heavy bomb attack that day –, in spite of this he walked to the Musikverein but he saw that only a couple of people turned up, so the concert was cancelled.⁴¹

³⁷Zoltán EGYED, “Ernő Dohnányi on the Eternal Impact of Music, Good and Bad Music, the Relationship of Master and Student, and the True Calling of Women,” *Film, Színház, Irodalom* (February 19–25, 1943), in KUSZ (ed.), *Dohnányi Ernő*, 430–435.

³⁸See primarily the writing titled “Refuge in Neukirchen I–V,” and an almost hundred-page-long biography in Hungarian without a title; H-Bami, MZA-DE-TaZI-Script 2.064, and 2.053/2.

³⁹She also describes the Viennese circumstances – with fewer details – in her Dohnányi biography meant for the public: DOHNÁNYI, *A Song of Life*, 127–129.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Tibor Wehner's recollection, Bálint Vázsonyi's handwritten notes from the audio-recording; H-Bami, without shelfmark.



Fortunately, this is not how the story of Dohnányi and Vienna ended: there was a more fitting culmination in 1946 when he played all the Beethoven piano sonatas in a concert cycle consisting of seven nights organized within the framework of the resumption of concert life.⁴² It is true, however, that the circumstances were nothing like what they used to be in the old Vienna at the turn of the century. As the chronicler wrote:

The harsh, cold wintertime had begun, and the hall was unheated. Every member of the audience was shivering, and their teeth chattered from the cold. Dohnányi wore a sweater under his light evening suit, and his only source of warmth was a tiny electric heater that had been placed near his feet ... Dohnányi frequently rubbed his hands together. He later said that he had felt as though all the blood had run out from his fingers. The performance, however, was one of the loveliest he had ever given, and people said that they had never heard Beethoven played so beautifully. For the following recitals of Beethoven sonatas ... the hall was equally cold but only half filled with sneezing, shivering people. The empty seats bitterly reflected Vienna's poverty. Those who were present were most enthusiastic, as though they wanted to compensate Dohnányi for the absentees.⁴³

By "absentees" Ilona Zachár must have meant the audience in general: those – as she writes elsewhere – who could not afford concert tickets and were trying to get hold of food and firewood instead of entertainment. But the old Viennese friends were also absent from the concerts; at least their appearance is not mentioned in the accounts: the circle of *Winterreigen*, the world of *Winterreigen* was gone for good. Yet Dohnányi kept the memory alive even fifty years later across the Atlantic; not only in the interview quoted above, and not only when he took a plane – as he did quite frequently during the years spent in emigration – and reminisced about his hot air balloon ride, but also when he performed his pieces, *Sphärenmusik* in particular. Perhaps it is also significant that the last time he played it was in 1956 at a recording session in London which was made during the composer's single short trip from his American emigration;⁴⁴ this was the closest he could ever get back to Central Europe.

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⁴²November 30, 1946, and December 3, 8, 11, 14, 15 and 17, 1946.

⁴³DOHNÁNYI, *A Song of Life*, 155.

⁴⁴Dates of the recording: August 29–31, September 7–12, 1956, EMI/HMV ALP 1553 (1958). On its data and context, see SZABÓ, "Ernő Dohnányi."



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