

April 1 marks the centenary of the founding of the Bauhaus, arguably the most important school of art and design of the 20th century. Though not on its curriculum, **Albert Ehrnrooth** can't help thinking that music influenced the Bauhaus style, and vice versa.

REVIVING THE GLORY DAYS

Was it a coincidence that the lifespan of the Bauhaus school coincided almost exactly with the birth and the demise of the Weimar Republic? In February 1919, the first democratically elected German assembly gathered in Weimar instead of Berlin, which after the war had become a hotbed of revolutionaries and anarchists. The quiet and picturesque city of Weimar briefly became the capital while the representatives for months deliberated the new republic's constitution.

Weimar's reputation as a cultural powerhouse had faded. In the beginning of the 19th century, intellectuals had come from far and wide to visit the literary giants Goethe and Schiller who lived in the Duchy's capital. The small city briefly became the centre of the musical world when the local Grand Duchess managed to persuade Franz Liszt, who had given up his career as a soloist, to take up the post as Kapellmeister. He stayed for nearly 20 years (1842 – 1861) and acted as a magnet for famous musicians and composers. At the start of the 20th century, Weimar's Duke and the city council were keen to revive those glory days.

Walter Gropius (1883 – 1969) was a very promising

TUNING IN TO

Mention Bauhaus and people think of white, flat-roofed buildings with frameless doors and windows. Or they associate the name with tubular steel furniture and streamlined utilitarian objects made of metal and glass. Bauhaus became a style, a byword for modernism. But when the Staatliches Bauhaus institution opened 100 years ago on April 1, 1919 in Weimar, in central Germany, it was just another art school in a fairly provincial town.

There was no real Bauhaus theory or philosophy. It only became a movement or a label after the National Socialists forced the school to close down in 1933. In the the following years many students and most teachers went into exile. It didn't take long before Bauhaus buildings started popping up around the world: Tel Aviv, Buenos Aires, Chicago, Canberra, Tokyo and many more places. Bauhaus was arguably the 20th century's most influential school of art and design. One of its major achievements was its cross-disciplinary approach, which set an example for all art academies that followed in its slipstream. Music didn't form part of the curriculum. However, that doesn't stop me from believing that music did play a role, admittedly not a major one, but its significance is mostly overlooked in the extensive Bauhaus literature.

architect with one significant modernist building, the Fagus Factory, to his credit when he presented his proposal. He wanted to amalgamate Weimar's Art Academy and the School of Arts and Crafts into one institution. In 1919 Gropius was appointed to head the new school. He proceeded to write the now legendary four-page Bauhaus manifesto, the cover of which features an expressionist woodcut of a gothic cathedral. This utopian church symbolised Gropius's all-inclusive ideal: "There are no barriers between handicrafts and sculpture or painting; they are all one." Everything was to come together in one creative form: the building. Bauhaus literally means 'Build House', but amazingly Staatliches Bauhaus didn't offer a specific architecture course during the Weimar era.

Gropius's proclamation may have stressed equality of status and gender, but female apprentices (students) continued to be directed towards traditional 'feminine' disciplines like weaving, pottery and bookbinding. Industrial design and architecture remained mostly a male preserve. But commercially, the women students at Bauhaus were definitely more successful than the men. This was largely thanks to Gunta Stölzl, an early Bauhaus Weimar graduate, who in Dessau led the weaving workshop that created some truly pioneering textiles and tapestries that also sold very well.

The Bauhaus art school in Dessau, at night



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Gropius managed to contract some premier league artists for his team. The Russian Wassily Kandinsky was already the international face of abstract painting and theory. The expressionist painter Paul Klee had, before the war, started to experiment with a colour palette and patterns that were inspired by music. Klee and Kandinsky didn't give straightforward painting classes at Bauhaus. Their focus was firstly on analysis and synthesis and both were keen (primary) colour theorists. The painter and sculptor Oskar Schlemmer was hired to run the mural-painting and sculpture workshops and he was particularly keen on putting on fairly bizarre theatrical shows.

A BRIEF CULT

Some of the teaching methods that evolved at Bauhaus were truly innovative and art courses all over the world integrated many of the school's improvements. Johannes Itten, a Swiss expressionist painter and theoretician, was the most influential, original and strangest of the pedagogues in those early days. He wasn't a great artist, but Gropius became deeply impressed after hearing one of his lectures. Itten came on board and it was he who devised the compulsory preliminary course (the 'Vorkurs'), which gave the apprentices ample time to show their talents before the real selection process took place.

Itten wanted his students to experiment with different materials but he often seemed more concerned with the inner being of students than their work. He was a disciple of the mysterious Mazdaznan religion, followed a vegetarian diet, and did all sorts of physical and spiritual exercises that today seem perfectly sensible, but in those days were deemed to be disturbing. Slowly but surely he 'converted' his students to his neo-Zoroastrian religion and just like him they shaved their heads and wore special robes. This cult-like behaviour amongst students continued for a number of years until Itten's departure in 1923, when most apprentices went back to normal.

MUSIC AT BAUHAUS

It was Alma Mahler who introduced her husband Walter Gropius to Itten. She met the rather dashing, young Gropius while she was still married to Gustav Mahler. The composer found out about the affair and consulted Freud about Alma's infidelity. The sessions resulted in Alma returning to her husband. During WWI, Gropius saw active service on the Western Front (and was awarded the Iron Cross twice) but also found time to renew his relationship with the by now widowed Alma. They were married in 1915, the same year Alma's *Four Songs for Voice and Piano* were published. By the time Gropius was appointed head

of Bauhaus, Alma was spending time with the author Franz Werfel in Vienna. In 1920 she divorced Gropius.

Though it was not part of the Bauhaus curriculum, music was very important to many of its long-standing teachers. Klee was not only a gifted painter and inspirational master, he was also a highly accomplished violinist. He would perform duets with his pianist wife in public and organise string quartet concerts at home. His passion was the music of Bach and Mozart, not the work of his contemporaries. When talking about compositional harmony in painting and weaving, Klee would often use musical analogies. Kandinsky did the same. Kandinsky, who had synesthesia, devised an exercise in which students analysed connections between colour shapes and musical compositions. He tried to invite Schoenberg to Weimar, but the composer was offended by some anti-semitic remarks Kandinsky made in his invite. The music teacher Gertrud Grunow, who had studied with the famous conductor Hans von Bülow, was employed by Gropius in 1919 to teach 'Harmonization'. The theory was based on "the belief that a universal equilibrium of colour, music, perception and form is anchored in each person". Her pupils could discover inner harmony by doing mental and physical exercises, sometimes accompanied by Grunow's piano.

The composer Stefan Wolpe attended the preliminary course and came under the spell of Klee, Kandinsky and Grunow. He collaborated with Schlemmer and wrote many politically edgy compositions, but when Hitler came to power he retired to Palestine and finally settled in the United States. Wolpe refused to compromise in his musical choices and throughout his career he remained committed to the Bauhaus philosophy of material and craftsmanship. Ferruccio Busoni attended some of the musical performances at the first Bauhaus exhibition (1923) and brought his pupils Kurt Weill and Stefan Wolpe with him. Igor Stravinsky was also in town to see the second outing of his stage work *L'Histoire du Soldat*.

It is difficult to judge if the composers who visited the Bauhaus exhibition were impressed or even influenced by what they saw, but I believe that Carl Orff may actually have been inspired by the Bauhaus curriculum. Orff doesn't deserve to only be remembered for *Carmina Burana*. The school for gymnastics, dance and music that he founded in 1924 encouraged group improvisation, which was pretty radical in those days. After the Second World War, Bavarian Radio commissioned Orff to produce a series of educational music programs, which were later adapted and published under the title *Orff-Schulwerk, Music for Children* and for decades the books were used in classrooms all over the world. Paul Hindemith attended the Bauhaus exhibition to witness the premiere of his song-cycle *Das Marienleben*. Hindemith also saw Schlemmer's rather whimsical *Das Triadische Ballett*.

SCHLEMMER'S TRIADIC BALLET

Schlemmer, who had provided the stage designs for Hindemith's short operas *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* and *Das Nusch-Nuschi*, asked Schoenberg to compose the original score for the *Triadic Ballet*, but was turned down. Instead, a musical potpourri of old bits and pieces was heard in Weimar. But three years later Hindemith provided



Carl Orff

“AFTER THE WAR, THE GOOD BURGHERS OF WEIMAR RESENTED STUDENTS REEKING OF GARLIC, SUNBATHING NAKED ON THE ROOF OF A BUILDING DESIGNED BY GOETHE”

a new score for the *Triadic Ballet*, which was performed on a mechanical organ. The original music rolls have been lost but Hindemith integrated parts of the score in the *Suite for Mechanical Organ* (1931). One could argue that Hindemith as a composer and pedagogue came closest to the Bauhaus ethos. He was a multi-instrumentalist and continuously tried to bridge the widening chasm between the passive public and the composer. The critics often labeled his compositions as 'Gebrauchsmusik' (functional music), which Hindemith hated, but he is one the 20th century's major German composers.

It is debatable how artistically satisfying Schlemmer's *Triadische Ballett* was (the original performances were not recorded), but it was certainly 'out-there'. Each scene had no more than three dancing figurines and in total there were 18 different costumes. The dancers were restricted in their highly rationalised movements by the costumes and android masks. Some outfits stopped the performers from bending a leg or raising an arm. Schlemmer's choreography appears to have been inspired by a boardgame (chess?), with all its geometric fields, rather than evolving around a series of story-based dance sequences. The costumes have become iconic and some of the more recent attempts to re-stage the choreography are colourful but rather whimsical (check it out on Youtube). If nothing else, the *Triadic Ballet* ticked most of the Bauhaus boxes. After all it was a piece of total art, a 'Gesamtkunstwerk', a perfect synthesis of the visual arts, dance, set and costume design and music.

THE 1923 BAUHAUS EXHIBITION

After the war, Thuringia remained a conservative bastion. The good burghers of Weimar resented students reeking of garlic, sunbathing naked on the roof of a building designed by the venerable Goethe. In 1922 the government put



Top: Paul Hindemith



Bottom: Walter Gropius

pressure on the school to show what they had achieved so far. The underlying threat was that the state would withdraw its financial support. Gropius quickly mobilised the masters and apprentices and put together a display that impressed most critics (and former cynics) at home and abroad who had never seen anything by Bauhaus before.

A lasting legacy from this first major show is the Haus am Horn (which has now been restored). This was a truly collaborative effort between a few design masters and their students, who actually built the house. It introduced the idea of the pre-fabricated house and the kitchen was a revelation. There was a continuous workbench in front of the window, and all the amenities were placed within a triangle so as to be within easy reach for a servantless housewife. There was hot running water, electricity, a washing machine and many other things we take for granted today, that were still unaffordable for workers and even many middle class people in 1923. Georg Muche and Adolf Meyer had come up with the first recognisably modern kitchen. Financially the exhibition of 1923 was not a success but the deepening economic crisis and the steep rise in inflation were probably the main reasons. Right-wing forces came to power early on in Thuringia and in 1924 the school's budget was halved. Gropius knew it was time to look for a new home.

THE MOVE TO DESSAU

The move to Dessau (1925–1932) initially proved a perfect match. The fast growing city specialised in mechanical engineering, building Junker aircrafts, and a booming chemical industry was governed by the Social Democrats. It all corresponded with the updated Bauhaus credo. Gropius was not only offered the opportunity to build the school, but also the large Törten estate, which was to house factory workers. Gropius's Bauhaus school design is famous for its façade consisting entirely of large windows facing the street, which allowed the outside world to observe the people inside. This was a triumph of purity and transparency and consequently copied all over the world. Gropius now wanted the school to focus more on exploiting Bauhaus products for profit. The Hungarian constructivist artist László Moholy-Nagy was asked to take over the preliminary course. His teachings steered the curriculum towards machine aesthetic and industrial design. To make his point he wore a sort of 'designer boiler suit'. He was groundbreaking in the fields of photography, typography and printmaking. Moholy-Nagy left in 1928 and later designed sets for the Kroll Opera House in Berlin.

AN ARCHITECTURE COURSE, FINALLY

In 1927 the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer took over from Gropius and under his stewardship the institution finally offered a course in architecture. Meyer believed in improving the common man's lot by designing functional buildings. He may have been a fervent Marxist but he had a sharp business acumen. He encouraged students to make designs that could be mass-produced cheaply and as a result Bauhaus doubled its revenue. But Meyer also politicised the school and created division among students. The right-wing opponents were at the same time growing



Bauhaus-Dessau

stronger in Dessau's city council and they claimed Bauhaus was "a nest of bolsheviks". In 1930 it was revealed that Meyer had donated money to striking miners and that was his downfall. Meyer joined a collective in the Soviet Union and took a number of students with him.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe already had an international reputation as an architect when he agreed to take over from Meyer. Architecture became the main focus of the school and theory dominated the curriculum. Mies forbade political activity, Klee left and Kandinsky was employed less and less. The Nazis gained control of Dessau's city council in 1931 and cut the funding drastically. Bauhaus increasingly had to survive on income from licensing fees from student designs. But in 1932 the Dessau parliament terminated all staff contracts and the Nazis threatened to destroy the iconic buildings. Mies managed to briefly continue Bauhaus as a private institution in a disused telephone factory in Berlin, but when Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, the die was cast. In April of that year the Gestapo bolted the Bauhaus buildings shut.

THE END OF THE BAUHAUS SCHOOL

The influential art and design school only lasted 14 years, but its influence spread very quickly. Moholy-Nagy founded the New Bauhaus in Chicago, Mies' architecture became sought after in the US, and Gropius taught at Harvard and designed a few buildings on the campus. Australia also got to experience the true Bauhaus spirit with Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack who had been an apprentice of Paul Klee in Weimar. Hirschfeld-Mack was living in London when he was declared an 'enemy alien' and sent to Australia. He spent a couple of years in an internment camp but was released in 1942. He became the art master at Geelong Grammar School while continuing to produce paintings that are delicately textured and harmonious. Many public Australian collections hold his work. ●

BAUHAUS 100: TOP SPOTS

Weimar: Go on an official walking tour. You'll see famous buildings and interiors from the first Bauhaus era, including the school buildings, Gropius' office, Schlemmer's mural, and the Haus am Horn. The new Bauhaus Museum Weimar opens in April.

Dessau: The most iconic Bauhaus buildings are here and many are open to the public. The new Bauhaus Museum Dessau will open in September.

Berlin: Many venues have events planned including the Akademie der Künste.