

ANTON WEBERN (1883–1945) , 548

James Siddons

Anton Friedrich Wilhelm von Webern was born December 3, 1883, in Vienna, and died on September 15, 1945, in Mittersill (near Salzburg). He received a traditional education as he grew up in Vienna, Graz from 1890 to 1894, and then in Klagenfurt. His death by a sentry's gunshot was tragic: he stepped outside into the garden after dinner to enjoy a cigar when an American soldier saw Webern and apparently considered him in violation of the curfew imposed by the occupation forces. In the years between his conventional childhood and his inexplicable death, Webern became the foremost protégé of Arnold Schoenberg and a primary influence in avant-garde thought in music, particularly in the areas of tonal organization, tone color, and minimalism.

In his youth, Webern spent his summers at Preglhof, the family estate, in the Carpathian Mountains. He would bring home souvenirs of hikes in these mountains such as flowers, rocks, and minerals. This experience instilled a lifelong love of nature in Webern. In addition to his studies in the Klagenfurt Gymnasium, young Webern took lessons in piano, cello, and singing. He was taken to the Bayreuth Festival as a graduation gift in 1902, then entered the University of Vienna to study musicology under Guido Adler, as well as music theory, cello, and piano. In 1906, Webern received an Austrian doctorate in philosophy for a study of the music of Heinrich Isaac; his performing edition of Isaac's *Coralis constantinus*, Part 2, was published in 1909. Webern then gained a livelihood by giving private composition lessons to students and serving as a conductor in small opera houses and of amateur choirs and orchestras, such as the Vienna Worker's Chorus. In 1927, Webern became a conductor for the Austrian State radio, a position he held until 1938, by which time the Nazis had deprived him of all his appointments and he was obliged to do clerical work at Universal Edition, who had been his publisher since 1921.

At the same time he was enrolled in the University of Vienna, Webern was also receiving private instruction in composition from Schoenberg. As one of

Page 549

Schoenberg's three seminal pupils (along with Alban Berg and Egon Wellesz), Webern participated in the flowering of postromantic chromaticism into the atonal and serial techniques that characterize the Second Viennese School, as Schoenberg's circle came to be known. From the beginning of his instruction in 1904, Webern's composing almost completely abandoned his postromantic imitating of Johannes Brahms and Gustav Mahler (he had even written a Wagnerian aria for *Siegfried*) for the new idiom developing in the works of Schoenberg and his pupils. Webern became an exponent of his teacher's theories and music, and participated in the performances of the Verein für Musikalische Privataufführungen (Society for Private Musical Performances) as an organizer and cellist. He was involved with Schoenberg routinely (except for the war years, 1914–1918) until 1925, and he and Berg remained close to Schoenberg thereafter (Wellesz favored musicology and eventually went to Oxford in the 1930s, devoting himself to research in Byzantine music).

Webern's compositions may be grouped into five style periods. The first period includes his juvenile works, composed through mid-1904. The influence of Schoenberg's tutelage (1904–1908) marks the second period, appearing in such works as the string quartet of 1905 and the piano quintet of 1907; the former is closely modeled on Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*. Schoenberg's technique of "continuous variation" appears in Webern's the *Passacaglia for Orchestra*, op. 1 (1908), and his exploration of atonality is reflected in Webern's *Five Songs* (1906–1908) (no opus number, texts by Richard Dehmel). Dehmel's poetic style, which moved from depictions of nature inspired by the fields of Brandenburg to the restraint of modern classicism, in some ways parallels Webern's movement from Mahlerian excesses to the brief works of 1905 and after, which increasingly relied on contrapuntal techniques (the final Dehmel song is in triple counterpoint) as common-practice tonality was abandoned. The culmination of Webern's prewar style came in 1909 when, with Schoenberg and Berg, he realized that the tonal implications embedded in even short melodic ideas required that melodic themes as well as triadic tonality would have to be abandoned if a new idiom for composition were to be achieved. For Webern, this challenge resulted in very short instrumental works that were atonal, athematic, and almost nonrepetitive; examples of this group are *Five Movements for String Quartet*, op. 5 (1909), *Six Pieces for Orchestra*, op. 6 (1909), and *Four Pieces for Violin and Piano*, op. 7 (1910). In these works, Webern first shows an interest in the tone colors of the various instruments as an organizing force in the music. Dynamics created by massing many instruments or employing only a few (for loud or soft sounds, respectively) are used to punctuate the music, as is passing the successive notes of a melody from one instrument to another; thus, the volume and color of a melodic idea constantly change. The passing of a melodic idea between instruments is a technique derived from Schoenberg, who would have a repeated note played by a different instrument on each repetition; in other words, instead of one instrument (tone color) playing a succession of notes (melody), one note would be played by a succession of instruments. Schoen-

Page 550

berg's technique is known as Klangfarbenmelodie (tone color melody), and Webern's expansion of this technique to apply to a succession (or series) of pitches performed by a succession of tone colors also makes possible melodic range, with many of these melodies leaping by dissonant sevenths, ninths, and tenths over several octaves, thereby avoiding the linear aspect of tonal melody. The brief and fragmentary nature of the melodic substance ("melody" is too full a term) of these short works made meter and extended rhythmic patterns unnecessary. What appears to be harmony is often only a dissonant dyad; one or both notes may well be a string overtone. The task of composing these instrumental works was most difficult for Webern, and he eventually gave up composing instrumental work for about ten years (1914–1924), preferring instead vocal and dramatic music for which the text provided the organizing elements of the athematic, atonal, ametrical, and nonrepetitive music.

Although Webern was in military service throughout the Great War, he found time to compose. In retrospect, we now understand that vocal texts provided a rationale for the organization of Webern's music until Schoenberg's twelve-tone method was formulated; hence, we find in Webern's third style works with such titles as *Four Songs*, op. 12 (1915–1917), *Five Sacred Songs*, op. 15 (1917–1922), and *Five Canons on Latin Texts*, op. 16 (1923–1924). Among the

poets whose works Webern set at this time were Stefan George, who became a dominating interpreter of the early twentieth century; Georg Trakl, the morbid but lyrical forerunner of German expressionism; and August Strindberg. Several songs use Chinese poems, and the *Five Canons* use texts from the liturgy of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday combined with the poem “Dormi Jesu” from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, which had so fascinated Mahler. Throughout these selections of poetry is a frequent concern with death or timelessness that finds expression in Webern’s short-breathed music punctuated by many rests and volatile dynamics.

Webern’s fourth style period, from the mid-1920s to the early 1940s, may be divided into two lines of compositional activity. One line of creativity was Webern’s resumption of composing instrumental works, made possible by Schoenberg’s formulation of the twelve-tone method in 1922–1923. In such works as *Symphony*, op. 21 (1928), *Quartet for Clarinet, Tenor Saxophone, Piano, and Violin*, op. 22 (1930), and *Concerto for Nine Instruments*, op. 24 (1931–1934), Webern combined his employment of such contrapuntal techniques as canon and his penchant for very short melodic ideas, often of only a few notes, with the twelve-tone series of Schoenberg to give local and comprehensive organization to his music. (For the listener, this organization, and even the forward motion of Webern’s music, is not always obvious to the ear.) By arranging all the parameters (tone or pitch, register, volume, and tone color, as well as rhythm and meter) in sets and patterns that organize an entire work or movement (most of which were but a few dozen measures in length), Webern expanded Schoenberg’s concept of a tone-row (a series of the twelve pitches) to a comprehensive concept of imposing a pattern or series on every parameter of the music, a

Page 551

technique known as serialism. Webern used serialism to fashion pervasive symmetry in his music, and he insisted to his conductors and performers that the lyric continuity of his contrapuntally based melodic ideas be brought out in performance; but there were few successful performances in this regard in his own day.

The other line of activity begun in the late 1920s (indeed, a fifth style of Webern’s music) is the group of vocal works he composed on poems of Hildegard Jone, an otherwise little-known poet and wife of sculptor Josef Humplik. Webern used Jone’s texts exclusively after their initial acquaintance in 1926 (except for a few Johann Goethe settings), and his interest in symmetrical shapes in music provided a basis for his friendship with Humplik. Jone’s poems typically invoke some natural scene or object to convey a mystical or spiritual idea, a characteristic that appealed to Webern in two ways: to his boyhood interest in the geography of the Carpathian Mountains and to his desire to provide a philosophical import to his music. Webern’s music for Jone’s texts became more lyrical than his instrumental works, and the harmonies thickened to four, five, and even six notes. The music expresses the texts in various means of text-painting. Webern uses the Baroque and Renaissance contrapuntal techniques here, and now more openly melodic forms such as recitative and aria are found in *Cantata no. 1*, op. 29 (1938–1939), and *Cantata no. 2*, op. 31 (1941–1943). The interest in religious song and liturgical music expressed in *Five Sacred Songs*, op. 15, and *Five Canons on Latin Texts*, op. 16, is found again in *Cantata no. 2*, which Webern compared to the Ordinary of the Mass and to the chorale cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach.

An assessment of Webern's role in avant-garde music must be prefaced by an acknowledgment of his deep-rooted interest in musical, poetical, and liturgical forerunners, and to his love of forms in nature. The boy who collected flowers and minerals during mountain hikes became the composer who took "hikes" through music history, collecting specimens to bring home to his drawing table and display on the five-lined shelves of his scorepaper, who pressed flowers between pages of books of poetry and then transformed the botanical shapes and poetic expressions into thoroughly patterned music. If borrowed keywords from Mahler and Béla Bartók may be allowed, it may be said that each Webern work is a *mikrokosmos* unto itself. In his 1933 treatise *Der Weg zur neuen Musik*, Webern wrote, "Between the works of nature and those of art there is no essential difference" (1963). Thus, when he composed he used serialism to order as perfectly as possible a self-contained work of art that embodied historic, poetic, artistic-creative, and ultimately spiritual elements. In the course of the twentieth century, the avant-garde musical world has reacted to Webern in various ways. In midcentury, the abiding interest was in the mechanical aspects of serialism (tone-rows and patterns in other parameters), in the use of tone colors as a basis for composing electronic music, and in the brevity and economy of means as a prototype for minimalist music. Webern's increasing use of words for their sound quality in his later vocal works presages vocal

Page 552

works by Pierre Boulez and others. With the demise of interest in electronic music and atonality and the advent of the new romanticism in the 1970s, a more complete understanding of Webern, one that includes the poetic and spiritual aspects of his music, became possible. Webern's view of history as an enabling mentor rather than a primitive forebear accords with late-century views of history and multiculturalism, as does his view of nature, which, when compared to his economy of means, accords with recent concerns about ecology and the use of natural resources. Webern's use of silence in some of his later works can now be understood in comparison to silence in Japanese music (the *ma* theory). And the long-overlooked spiritual expressions in Webern's music, using old liturgical forms for expressions that supersede boundaries of time and sect, have an important relevance to avant-garde thought and much of popular thought as well.

SELECTED WORKS

"Entflucht auf lichten Kähnen," op. 2, for chorus (words by Stefan George) (1908)

Passacaglia for Orchestra, op. 1 (1908)

Five Songs, op. 3 (words by Stefan George) (1908–1909)

Five Songs, op. 4 (words by Stefan George) (1908–1909)

Five Movements for String Quartet, op. 5 (1909)

Six Pieces for Orchestra, op. 6 (1909)

Four Pieces for Violin and Piano, op. 7 (1910)

Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook, ed. Larry Sitsky (Bloomsbury, 2002)

Two Songs for Mezzo-Soprano and Eight Instruments, op. 8 (words by Rainer Maria Rilke) (1910)

Five Pieces for Chamber Orchestra, op. 10 (1911–1913)

Six Bagatelles for String Quartet, op. 9 (1911–1913)

Three Short Pieces for Cello and Piano, op. 11 (1914)

Four Songs for Soprano and Chamber Orchestra, op. 13 (various authors) (1914–1918)

Four Songs, op. 12 (various texts) (1915–1917)

Six Songs for Soprano and Five Instruments, op. 14 (words by Georg Trakl) (1917–1921)

Five Sacred Songs, op. 15, for soprano and six instruments (traditional texts) (1917–1922)

Five Canons on Latin Texts, op. 16, for soprano, clarinet, and bass clarinet (texts from the liturgy of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and “Dormi Jesu” from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*) (1923–1924)

Three Traditional Rhymes for Soprano and Four Instruments, op. 17 (traditional texts) (1924–1925)

Three Songs for Soprano, Eb Clarinet, and Guitar, op. 18 (traditional folk and liturgical texts) (1925)

String Trio, op. 20 (1926–1927)

Symphony, op. 21 (1928)

Quartet for Clarinet, Tenor Saxophone, Piano, and Violin, op. 22 (1930)

Two Songs for Chorus and Six Instruments, op. 19 (texts by Johann Goethe) (1930)

Concerto for Nine Instruments, op. 24 (1931–1934)

Page 553

Three Songs, op. 23 (words by Hildegard Jone) (1933–1934)

Three Songs, op. 25 (words by Hildegard Jone) (1934)

“*Das Augenlicht*,” op. 26, for chorus and orchestra (words by Hildegard Jone) (1935)

Variations for Piano, op. 27 (1935–1936)

Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook, ed. Larry Sitsky (Bloomsbury, 2002)

String Quartet, op. 28 (1936–1938)

Cantata no. 1, for soprano, chorus, and orchestra (words by Hildegard Jone) (1938–1939)

Variations for Orchestra (1940)

Cantata no. 2, for soprano, bass, chorus, and orchestra (words by Hildegard Jone) (1941–1943)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Die Reihe, no. 2 (1955).

Isaac, Heinrich. 1909. “Choralis constantinus.” *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in österreich* 32.

Kolneder, Walter. 1961. *Anton Webern: Einführung in Werk und Stil*. Rodenkirchen: Tonger. Reprint, London: Faber, 1968.

Moldenhauer, Hans. 1963. *The Death of Anton Webern: A Drama in Documents*. New York: Philosophical Library.

———. 1978. *Anton von Webern: Chronicle of His Life and Works*. New York: Knopf.

Webern, Anton. 1963. *The Path to the New Music*. Ed. Willi Reich. Trans. Leo Black. Bryn Mawr, PA: Presser.

For journal articles and other short monographs, see the bibliographies for the Webern articles in *MGG* and the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.