

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG (1874–1951) , 463

Walter B. Bailey

Arnold Schoenberg was born in Vienna in 1874 and died in Los Angeles in 1951. His highly influential contributions to the avant-garde were many and are dominated by his pursuit of free atonality circa 1908, his discovery of the twelve-tone method in the early 1920s, and his refinement of that method in his later work. In addition, he pushed the boundaries of nearly every style and genre with which he was associated. In his youth, he combined the dominant genre of programmatic orchestral music and the more conservative idiom of chamber music to create the programmatic string sextet *Verklärte Nacht*, op. 4 (1899); in a variety of works written throughout his career, including *Gurrelieder* (1900–1901), *Pierrot lunaire*, op. 21 (1912), *Moses und Aron* (1930–1932), and “*De profundis*,” op. 50b (1950), he exploited the vocal technique of *sprechstimme* in solo and choral configurations; in his orchestral and chamber works, especially the *Five Orchestra Pieces*, op. 16 (1909) and *Pierrot lunaire*, he explored novel instrumental combinations and techniques; in works such as *Gurrelieder* and the planned programmatic symphony (1914), Schoenberg wrote and conceived works on an even grander scale than his contemporaries, and in the *Six Little Piano Pieces*, op. 19 (1911), he created aphoristic pieces of remarkable brevity. Despite its modernity, of which these are only a few examples, Schoenberg’s approach to music was always rooted in the past, and he saw his own musical style as a continuation of German musical traditions and procedures extending back in time from Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner to Ludwig van Beethoven, Wolfgang Mozart, and Johann Sebastian Bach. Audiences, however, were frequently unable to hear these connections.

Largely self-taught, Schoenberg mastered the Viennese classical tradition (Josef Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven) by analyzing the scores of its masters; by the turn of the century, he had assimilated the romantic language of his own day (Brahms, Wagner, and Richard Strauss) and was well on his way to matching the sprawling intensity of the music of Gustav Mahler, who was one of his

Page 464

mentors. By 1908, he judged the tonal system to be so overextended that it had become meaningless, and he therefore abandoned it to write what many consider to be the first atonal music. Following World War I, he derived the twelve-tone method of composition from the sounds and techniques he had employed in his freely atonal compositions. Most of his later works were composed using this method, although Schoenberg also continued to write tonal music and to make arrangements of earlier tonal compositions.

Schoenberg’s love-hate relationship with his native city and its notoriously conservative audiences inspired him to seek employment elsewhere on a number of occasions. He spent all of 1902 and more than half of 1903 living in Berlin, where he interacted with composers such as Strauss and Ferruccio Busoni, and he resided there again between 1911 and 1915, returning to Vienna only because of World War I. In 1926, he directed a master class in composition at the Berlin Academy of the Arts, then one of Europe’s most prestigious teaching positions, and he remained in that post until the Nazi purges of 1933 forced his resignation. Schoenberg then

found haven in the United States, where he resided (mainly in Los Angeles) for the rest of his life. Although he found employment relatively easily and was paid on a level comparable to that of his position in Berlin, Schoenberg never regained the prestige of his master class at the Berlin Academy and felt slighted by the lack of recognition that he and his works received in the United States.

Schoenberg found disfavor with the Nazis not only because of his avant-garde musical style, but also because of his Jewish heritage. Born into a nonobservant Jewish family, Schoenberg apparently had little instruction in the religion of his forebears. As a young man in Vienna, he converted to Protestantism and only gradually rediscovered his Jewish roots, prompted by the growing public animosity toward Jews in Germany and Austria in the 1920s. After fleeing Berlin in 1933, Schoenberg formally reconverted to Judaism in Paris. Among Schoenberg's mature, twelve-tone works are several that document his Jewish identity, including the unfinished opera *Moses und Aron; A Survivor from Warsaw*, op. 46 (1947), for narrator and orchestra, and the small choral works of his last years, "*Dreimal tausend Jahre*," op. 50a, "*De profundis*," op. 50b, and "*Modern Psalm no. 1*," op. 50c (1949–1950).

Schoenberg's discovery of a personal spirituality went hand in hand with the development of his avant-garde musical style, especially with regards to the general aesthetic trend of expressionism and how it informed his move to atonality. Expressionism, one of the most influential general artistic trends of the early twentieth century, has been described as the ultimate realization of romanticism, where the deepest, most personal feelings of an artist are expressed quickly and succinctly in a white heat of inspiration that disregards traditional ideas of beauty, form, and even social acceptability. As was the case with works created according to the tenets of late nineteenth-century symbolism, expressionist works contained an expressive essence that verged on the religious or spiritual. Their creation was often a kind of personal confession, and expres-

Page 465

sionist artists frequently saw themselves as nearly unconscious participants in the creative process. Schoenberg, for example, spoke of "artistic compulsion," and frequently depicted himself as someone driven somewhat unwillingly by a highly developed musical conscience.

Schoenberg's works written in 1909, including the *Three Piano Pieces*, op. 11, the *Five Orchestra Pieces*, and the monodrama *Erwartung*, op. 17, and the *Six Little Piano Pieces*, composed in 1911, epitomize his early expressionist musical idiom. Some are very brief, others are longer and based on a sung text. Some are thematic with fairly obvious repetitions, and others are seemingly constructed without recurring themes or motives in a kind of "stream of consciousness." All exploit tone color, chromaticism, intense motivic saturation, and (at best) a tenuous connection to tonality. In some of these works, Schoenberg made a conscious effort to avoid any musical shape or simultaneity reminiscent of the language of tonality, so as not to mislead the listener. Even if a shape or gesture recalls tonal music, it is expressed without the usual tonal underpinning; tonal harmonic progressions are definitely missing.

In analyzing his own atonal works, which he had created so intuitively, Schoenberg noted their motivic unity, their chromatic saturation, and the cohesive connections between linear (melodic)

and vertical (harmonic) shapes. Schoenberg preferred the term “pantonal” for these works and abhorred the term “atonal,” which he saw as describing only what the pieces were not. Nevertheless, he was at a loss to describe just how this music was constructed and, although his expressionist aesthetic outlook convinced him that they were highly unified and cohesive, he predicted that it would only be later generations that would be able to describe that unity. Over the years, analysts have described the music most frequently as a web of motives from the language of tonality circulating in an atonal context, but there are also those who have described it purely in terms of tonality. True to Schoenberg’s prediction, “set theory” finally emerged as a way to describe the unity and cohesion of this music without resorting to the loaded terms used to describe tonal music.

In the course of the next ten years, Schoenberg gradually modified the intuitive component of his compositional process by incorporating various consciously constructive features along with his intuitively inspired ideas. This trend is most obvious in *Pierrot lunaire*, one of Schoenberg’s most influential works. A cycle of twenty-one short pieces for voice and small ensemble, *Pierrot lunaire* features a bevy of contrapuntal techniques such as canons and fugues to supplement the atonal language that Schoenberg had developed circa 1908. For the analyst, this adds an obvious level of cohesion, although it might not be apparent to the listener. Listeners are usually caught up in the innovative surface of the work, which is dominated by the peculiar vocal technique of *sprechstimme*, usually described as half-way between speech and song, which Schoenberg specified for the narrator. The texts that are set, Otto Erich Hartleben’s German translations of Albert Giraud’s bizarre French symbolist poems about the clown Pierrot and the moon, match the peculiarity of the vocal technique, as does the

Page 466

instrumentation of the accompaniments, each one set for a different combination selected from among eight instruments played by five performers. The shift indicated by this work is subtle but important, as Schoenberg explored ways to connect the freshness of his intuitive atonal language with some of the “strengthening” constructive features of the past. Aurally, and by virtue of its subject matter, it belongs to the expressionist idiom; technically, it is somewhat distant from the completely intuitive works of 1909.

Schoenberg continued this trend toward strengthening musical structure in his compositional efforts undertaken during the next several years, although he brought few works to completion. He was driven by the expressionist aesthetic, on the one hand, to create a work of special spiritual significance through intuitive means, and on the other hand, by his desire to guarantee the structural cohesiveness of his composition. He was also inspired to create grand, lengthy, dramatic settings of texts expressing the apocalyptic spirituality that was on the leading edge of thought in the years just before World War I. Literary works by August Strindberg (*Jacob Wrestling*) and Honoré de Balzac (*Seraphita*) piqued his interest as early as 1912, and he tried to employ Richard Dehmel and Marie Pappenheim to create dramatic texts from them, to no avail. By 1914, the idea for the work had evolved into a multimovement programmatic symphony with voices and gigantic orchestra incorporating texts by Dehmel, Rabindranath Tagore, from the Bible, and by Schoenberg himself. Its program, religious in nature, stems from his earlier interest in Strindberg and Balzac and represents a stepwise process by which man is raised from an

earthbound to a spiritual level. The work was never completed, but the sketches for the various movements and the one performable fragment that emerged from the symphony, the oratorio *Die Jakobsleiter*, demonstrate that Schoenberg was exploring ways to guarantee that the sounds he preferred would yield the constructive techniques he valued, and vice versa.

Schoenberg experimented with themes containing all twelve tones, especially in the sketches for the *Scherzo* of this unfinished symphony, and he derived related materials from them through a variety of processes that prefigured the twelve-tone method, including transposition, inversion, and more subtle procedures that demonstrate he saw the row not only as a theme, but also as an abstract, referential idea (a concept that is at the heart of the serial ideal). Similar procedures are also in evidence in portions of *Die Jakobsleiter*, but it was in the two sets of small pieces on which Schoenberg was working in the early 1920s that the twelve-tone serial idea emerged in full form. In the *Five Piano Pieces*, op. 23, and the *Serenade*, op. 24 (both 1920–1923), Schoenberg mixed free atonality with serial processes based on sets of less than twelve pitches, exploring the motivic and melodic/harmonic unity possible with the serial process. Finally, in the *Five Piano Pieces*, op. 23, no. 5, and in the “Sonnet” from op. 24, he combined the unifying properties of the serial process with the chromatic saturation of a twelve-tone set.

In developing the twelve-tone technique, Schoenberg completed an aesthetic

Page 467

shift toward rational system and method that he had begun in works such as *Pierrot lunaire*. In the twelve-tone works, these rational processes are clearly more important than they had been in the earlier, intuitive, expressionist compositions. The twelve-tone method is one that values rational order and system, but in Schoenberg’s hands it was mostly a means to an end. Intuition or inspiration still generated the idea of the work and its thematic/motivic beginnings. Schoenberg then used the twelve-tone method to perfect the thematic material, to develop and extend it as secondary thematic, transitional, or developmental material, and even to generate harmonic material.

The twelve-tone method posits that all pitch material in a composition relates directly to the original fixed order of the twelve-tone row. Rather than each pitch in a composition being related to a single tonic, as in tonal music, each pitch in a twelve-tone composition is related to the row, in which the pitches are related only one to another. This row, as much a succession of intervals as of pitches, can be transposed to begin on any pitch, it can be inverted (i.e., reversing the direction of the intervals), it can be retrograded, and the inverted form can be retrograded. The four forms of the row (original, inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion) can each be transposed to begin on any of the 12 chromatic pitches, yielding 144 possible row forms. From this array of materials, the composer may choose various forms to suit his ends. In Schoenberg’s hands, these choices and their application are flexible and inspired.

In his works written following the discovery of the twelve-tone method, Schoenberg was continually refining its use. He shared his discovery with his students Alban Berg and Anton Webern and, despite opposition from other compositional camps, the twelve-tone idea spread. It yielded widely varying results at the hands of different composers and even within Schoenberg’s

output. In the later 1920s and 1930s, Schoenberg's twelve-tone serial works such as the *Variations for Orchestra*, op. 31 (1926–1928), the unfinished opera *Moses und Aron*, the third and fourth string quartets (1927 and 1936), and the *Violin Concerto*, op. 36 (1934–1936), defined his mature style with their avoidance of tonal implications, classicizing forms, and relatively strict application of the method. In twelve-tone works from the 1940s, such as the *Piano Concerto*, op. 42 (1942), the *String Trio*, op. 45 (1946), *A Survivor from Warsaw*, and the *Phantasy for Violin with Piano Accompaniment*, op. 47 (1949), Schoenberg explored the joining of triadic and tonal references with the twelve-tone method, various kinds of pitch symmetry, and a freeing of the twelve-tone aspect of serial organization. In other words, his application of the twelve-tone method continued to evolve throughout his life.

Following World War II, younger European composers who had been denied access to avant-garde music during the war were eager to learn the twelve-tone method from teachers such as Olivier Messiaen and René Leibowitz. Young composers such as Pierre Boulez, after mastering the basics of the method, found fault with it and its creator. To Boulez's taste, Schoenberg had mixed a radical, rational, objective method of organizing pitch with outmoded means of orga-

Page 468

nizing the other parameters of music, and he perceived the resulting sound to be far too old-fashioned and romantic. Nevertheless, Boulez's radical new integral serialism was indebted to Schoenberg's twelve-tone method for its origin.

In the last years of his life, Schoenberg found himself in an unenviable position: for much of his life, audiences had branded him as a radical avant-gardist who had no appreciation or love for the glorious musical traditions of the past; now the younger generation dismissed him as belonging only to that past. In his own artistic conscience, he had remained true to the traditions of his musical ancestors while evolving with the major artistic trends of his day. If he was bitter at the reception of his music, he had remained true to his musical self.

SELECTED WORKS

Tonal Works

Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured Night), op. 4, for string sextet (1899)

Gurrelieder, for vocal soloists, choirs, and orchestra (1900–1911)

Chamber Symphony no. 1 in E Major, op. 9 (1906)

String Quartet no. 2 in F-sharp Minor, op. 10 (1907–1908)

Freely Atonal Works

Fifteen Poems from the Book of the Hanging Gardens (15 Gedichte aus Das Buch der Hängenden Gärten), op. 15, for voice and piano (1908–1909)

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

Erwartung, op. 17 (monodrama) (1909)

Five Orchestra Pieces, op. 16 (1909)

Three Piano Pieces, op. 11 (1909)

Die glückliche Hand, op. 18 (“drama with music”) (1910–1913)

“*Herzgewächse*,” op. 20, for voice and small ensemble (1911)

Six Little Piano Pieces, op. 19 (1911)

Pierrot lunaire, op. 21, for speaker and small ensemble (1912)

Four Songs for Voice and Orchestra, op. 22 (1913–1916)

Die Jakobsleiter (oratorio for vocal soloists, choir, and orchestra; unfinished but performable) (1917–1922)

Twelve-Tone Works

Five Piano Pieces, op. 23 (1920–1923)

Serenade, op. 24, for baritone, clarinet, bass clarinet, mandolin, guitar, and string trio (1920–1923)

Suite for Piano, op. 25 (1921–1923)

Woodwind Quintet, op. 26 (1923–1924)

Suite, op. 29, for E-flat clarinet, clarinet, bass clarinet, and piano quartet (1924–1926)

Four Pieces for Mixed Choir, op. 27 (1925)

Three Satires for Mixed Choir, op. 28 (1925–1926)

Variations for Orchestra, op. 31 (1926–1928)

Page 469

String Quartet no. 3, op. 30 (1927)

Von heute auf morgen, op. 32 (opera in one act) (1928–1929)

Two Piano Pieces, op. 33a and op. 33b (1928–1931)

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

Accompaniment to a Film Scene (Begleitungsmusik zu einer Lichtspielszenel), op. 34, for orchestra (1929–1930)

Moses und Aron (opera; unfinished but performable) (1930–1932)

Three Songs for Voice and Piano, op. 48 (1933)

Violin Concerto, op. 36 (1934–1936)

String Quartet no. 4, op. 37 (1936)

Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte, op. 41, for speaker, piano, and string quartet (1942)

Piano Concerto, op. 42 (1942)

Prelude to the Genesis Suite, op. 44, for mixed choir and orchestra (1945)

String Trio, op. 45 (1946)

A Survivor from Warsaw, op. 46, for speaker, men's choir, and orchestra (1947)

"*Dreimal tausend Jahre*," op. 50a, for mixed choir (1949)

Phantasy for Violin with Piano Accompaniment, op. 47 (1949)

"*De profundis*" (Psalm 130), op. 50b, for mixed choir (1950)

"*Modern Psalm no. 1*," op. 50c, for mixed choir, speaker and orchestra; unfinished but performable (1950)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bailey, Walter B., ed. Forthcoming. *The Schoenberg Companion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Haimo, Ethan. 1990. *Schoenberg's Serial Odyssey: The Evolution of His Twelve-Tone Method, 1914–1928*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Lessem, Alan Philip. 1979. *Music and Text in the Works of Schoenberg: The Critical Years, 1908–1912*. Ann Arbor, MI: UNIT Research Press.

Reich, Willi. 1971. *Schoenberg: A Critical Biography*. New York: Praeger.

Schoenberg, Arnold. 1984. *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*. Ed. Leonard Stein. Trans. Leo Black. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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

Schoenberg-Nono, Nuria, ed. 1992. *Arnold Schönberg 1874–1951: Lebensgeschichte in Begegnungen*. Klagenfurt: Ritter Klagerifurt.

Stuckenschmidt, Hans Heinz. 1977. *Arnold Schoenberg: His Life, World, and Work*. Trans. Humphrey Searle. New York: Schirmer.