

“He knew who he was.”

Nuria Schoenberg Nono



Arnold Schönberg (1874–1951) in front of his house in Los Angeles, after 1940

1913 was a fateful year for Arnold Schönberg. Within only a few weeks he experienced his greatest success (the world premiere of *Gurrelieder* on 23 February) and his greatest failure (the so-called “scandal concert” on 31 March at the Musikverein in Vienna) – reason enough to attempt to put that time into perspective with Nuria Schoenberg Nono, the composer’s daughter.

At the outset of the interview, Nuria Schoenberg Nono reads from one of her

father's letters: "At the risk of delighting my enemies, I must confess that I become very angry at every bad review, every criticism, every attack. Even if I laugh, it is out of rage. That is why I think it would be insincere not to defend myself when I have the opportunity to do so. Inwardly, in fact, I do defend myself, and I am proud of hiding as little as possible of what is going on inside me."

That affirmation, it seems to me, is a distinct indication of your father's character. Would you agree?

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: Yes. His music always expressed his emotions; it is not mathematical or even cold, as some people keep saying – and the critics simply haven't understood that. He saw his contribution as evolution, not revolution.

1913 was a benchmark year. How do you place that in perspective?

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: He was already living in Berlin then, where he had more recognition than in Vienna. Of course the premiere of *Gurrelieder* and its success were very important, but basically he had already left that behind him; he had already moved beyond tonality. And unfortunately the "scandal concert" became far better known than the success of *Gurrelieder*; there is so much talk about it that it almost seems everything he did was a scandal – and scandals are always more interesting than successes.

Audiences back then came to see it that way, too; I find that intriguing. They used hollow keys as whistle-like noisemakers and even used their fists to express their differences of opinion. It's a bit of a shame that there is no confrontation anymore. Everything is in order today; [audiences] only have enthusiasm for the great interpreters, and that is right – but the music itself often has little or nothing to do with its success; the music is much less important in terms of audience response. No-one would take up a passionate position for music anymore today; things have become very vapid.

Schönberg could have made things easy for himself and stayed within the Late Romantic idiom. Yet he devoted his very existence to the new aesthetic.

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: During the war, he even composed "for his desk drawer," waiting for the time when it would be possible to play his works. It was an "internal necessity," as my father once said.

Gustav Mahler said that he had been without a homeland three times: as a

Bohemian in Austria, as an Austrian under the German Reich and as a Jew in the world. Your father also lost his homeland three times: tonality (which was his own decision), audiences and then his actual home country, when he was forced to emigrate.

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: His greatest loss was his cultural milieu when he moved to America: his friends and pupils. But he enjoyed teaching very much and I think that was what saved him. He was also interested in less gifted pupils, always endeavouring to respond to them individually. Sometimes he would come home and say that a pupil “had seen daylight,” when he had not expected it at all. In a certain sense, he did adapt to the new situation in America – but he also wanted to improve it. “Make it better” is a key term for what I experienced with my father; whatever one did, one should do it as best one could – and that could apply as much to washing dishes as it did to composing. Everyone was to be respected – every labourer or craftsman – who did his work well. That was a very important side of my father’s character.

“Scandals are always more interesting than successes.”

Did you get a sense from your father that the fate of an expatriate was a burden on him?

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: I remember him as a very loving father who had a lot of time for us. We children never experienced any big variations in his mood. But I do believe he suffered a great deal, when I think of everything he had lost. First of all, he could not speak English when he arrived in America; he learned it and, reading his writings and lectures, his vocabulary was astonishing. He was able to bring his daughter Gertrud and her husband to New York, but his son Georg remained in Vienna. Initially, he did not want to leave – and then it was too late. The single fact that [my father] did not know whether his son was alive during the war is depressing. And then there were the contacts he had lost. Alban Berg had already died, and he was told that Webern was politically not above suspicion. That certainly took a great toll on him as well.

What was there on the positive side?

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: He was always grateful to be in America at all and that he had a position at a university. There were others who had had important positions in Germany but who never got a second chance. My mother was also very important. She was so optimistic and strong and she believed in him so much. She passed that on to us three children, too, and so we knew who our father was – and we were proud of him. She truly helped him in every way imaginable.

All of us got something important from him: ethics. There was a big party at our house on his 75th birthday; the guests included the Kolisch Quartet. That same day I had to register at university. 2000 other students were already waiting. I was worried that I would miss the party, so I went to a professor we knew in administration, and he let me through before the rest of them. When I got home and told that to my father, he was not at all impressed. He said that one must never use another's name to gain advantage – one had to earn it oneself. His reaction was of course exaggerated – I had done what I did for him, naturally, and no one was harmed – but one way or another I have never forgotten that notion.

That anecdote can be applied to his art, too: how he went his own way and stood by it. When Hollywood asked him to write film music, he set his price so high that he would never get the assignment.

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: He said, "If I commit suicide, then I at least want to live well afterwards." But there are sketches for this film music; the notion did interest him, in some way.

What did you learn about Vienna when you were living in Los Angeles?

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: Mostly, things from my grandmother, who used to play waltzes for us. What we learned about Vienna was not very positive. There was a parody of a famous song which replaced the words "city of my dreams" with "unforgivable disgrace." Yet there was still a love of Vienna which somehow came through – or a love-hate feeling for Vienna, since there was something like a "genuine" atmosphere there; when my mother came back from the concert premiere of *Moses und Aron* in Europe in 1954, she said, "Ach – there are real faces there – in America, everything is plastic."

No-one made a concerted effort to bring your father back to Europe after the

war.

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: The mayor of Vienna wrote to him, and he was invited to the summer courses in Darmstadt in 1950 and 1951. But by then he was already ill and secondly, he was unsure whether Anti-Semitism still existed – which it did, of course.

Schönberg had terrible experiences with Anti-Semitism. Did he prepare you children for that eventuality?

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: No, not at all. He never spoke about such things. I was born in 1932 and my brothers after that. We were brought up as Catholics because my mother was Catholic; we knew practically nothing about the Jewish religion. I was the oldest, so of course I knew what was going on in Germany, but my father never talked about it; he never said much about Europe, either. I'm sorry for that now, of course – I could've asked him so much. But our family was more or less normal; we talked about schoolwork, not about his experiences in Vienna. He was thinking about our future; we never learned much about politics or the past.

What would you ask him today?

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: When I was making the book of documents about his life, I saw and heard practically everything in the archive. I learned a great deal about him, yet there are many things I would like to know. But I would also like to be able to say to him after a good performance that his music was a great success. A short while ago, Daniel Barenboim conducted the Orchestra Variations Op. 31 at La Scala in Milan; he gave a short introduction, explaining where and when certain motifs would appear, develop, etc. The audience concentrated hard and the performance was a huge success. Sometimes I think, "If only he could witness that!" Moments like that are the kind that make up for everything. Even though I am not very religious, I still hope that he does witness them. But he knew it. Once he said to me, "I am sure that one day my music will be understood, because there are already five [people] who understand it." I cannot remember their names – but he said we should not worry. He was certain that he would be accepted later on – and he knew who he was.

There is a story I find very moving; your father happened to hear "Verklärte Nacht" one day on the radio at a petrol station. Your brother Larry said he had never seen your father so happy.

Nuria Schoenberg Nono: Yes, but it wasn't a petrol station. We always went to Santa Barbara in the summer. At midway, there was a kiosk in the countryside selling freshly-squeezed orange juice. We always used to stop there. There were loudspeakers, and Verklärte Nacht was coming out of them. He was also played on the radio on his birthday: Gurrelieder, the Leopold Stokowski recording, I think. There were indeed moments when we were truly happy.

Interview: Wolfgang Schaefler