

# Schönberg's Now

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According to a well-known anecdote, an army sergeant once asked Schönberg if he was the Schönberg, to which the composer replied: “Somebody had to be, nobody wanted to be. So I volunteered.” Schönberg’s disarming claim for his own inevitability – not to mention that infamous prediction of a hundred years of dodecaphonic dominance – has been a provocation to his many detractors, who have delighted in pointing out that his atonal, twelve-tone, and serial futures have failed to materialise. But Schönberg’s significance has never rested on his inevitability or the way he defined the future, but how he re-defined the present. It is how Schönberg engaged with the moment that infuses his music with its coiled energy and forms the core of his creative legacy.

It is telling that Alban Berg’s seminal essay, “Why is Schönberg’s Music so Difficult to Understand?,” focuses not on an atonal or twelve-tone work, but on the composer’s String Quartet in D minor, op. 7, to demonstrate the “immeasurable richness” of Schönberg’s art with its intricate motivic relationships, continuously developing variations, and complex polyphonic textures. To be sure, Berg points out the rhythmic irregularities, asymmetrical phrase structures, and accelerated harmonic pace that were already symptomatic of a disintegrating tonal system, but the substance of Schönberg’s “difficulty” was in the sheer density of the moment-to-moment evolution of the musical material. Thus, even before Schönberg proclaimed the emancipation of dissonance he had initiated what Martin Eybl has called “Die Befreiung des Augenblicks”, the emancipation of the moment.

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The tension between this focus on the moment and the need for larger

structural coherence within a collapsing tonal system would lead, in the end, to the development of Schönberg's "method of composing with twelve tones which are related only with one another" that promised to re-integrate small and large scale relationships within an atonal context. The appeal of the method was aesthetic, even moral, but it was never the dogma its detractors (and some of its adherents) proclaimed. Schönberg's own application of his method was hardly doctrinaire and his compositional choices continued, as ever, to be guided by musical instinct and his ear. If Webern was more rigorous, it was through a radical constriction of means; Berg's approach, on the other hand, was expansive, and he went to extraordinary lengths to retain a network of tonal references in his music. Still, the various stratagems by which Schönberg and his circle sought to lend the new method historical legitimacy tended to reinforce the popular notion that the promulgation of this "system" was the defining breakthrough of musical modernism, the core of Schönberg's contribution, and the essence of his inevitability.

Berg certainly implies as much in his article on Schönberg's "difficulty", although his more modest prediction for the composer's 50-year predominance proved generally accurate. One might well argue that Schönberg's specific influence, particularly in the academy, lasted into the 1970s, including along the way the serialism of the 1950s and 60s with its debt to Webern. But the waning centrality of dodecaphony did nothing to diminish the overriding significance of Schönberg's atonal revolution (which had even found its way into the Hollywood vernacular) or the allure of exploiting the full chromatic spectrum, either melodically, as William Walton would do in his Symphony No. 2, or systematically, as in Dallapiccola's creative adaptation of Schönberg's ideas. Over time Schönberg's twelve-tone method lost much of its dogmatic aura and became an historical artefact, a readily available and variously adaptable compositional tool.

What has remained, however, is Schönberg's presence – an insistent presence – that has lost none of its appeal or any of its provocation – including its capacity to provoke reaction (which is something quite different from rejection). The first significant reaction came from within. With his famous proclamation of Schönberg's death, Pierre Boulez sought to move beyond Schönberg and emancipate his revolution from inherited forms and syntax. A still more radical reaction, likewise from within, emerged from John Cage, a former Schönberg student who challenged the hubris of intellectual control with an embrace of aleatory music. The in-the-moment aesthetic of Cage's 4'33" circles back to that most fundamental dimension of Schönberg's revolution: time. It is Schönberg's insistent "now" that led to another reaction in minimalism that has enjoyed its own fifty years of ascendance. The response to Schönberg that emerged in the 1960s in the works of Philip Glass,

Steve Reich, and others, had less to do with a reaction against dissonance, intellectual pretence, or coercive dogma (though all of these played a role), than with an urge to reclaim the moment, to infuse it with a kind of evolutionary autonomy through process. Their works are also an implicit response to Berg's celebration of Schönberg's difficulty, for they imply a very different kind of listening, a different relationship to the audience based on a very different kind of musical moment, radically restricted in its syntax and proceeding at a significantly slower pace. It is therefore with delicious irony that one erstwhile minimalist, John Adams, paid tribute to Schönberg's Chamber Symphony with one of his own, a work whose intensity and manic energy draws inspiration both from its model and also from the world of children's cartoons, a conscious clash of high and low that Schönberg would have loved.

Yes, loved, because it should come as no surprise to find Schönberg in the company of Mickey Mouse or Charlie Chaplin. These were enthusiasms long before the course of history took him to Los Angeles and reflect the composer's alert embrace of creative innovation. Schönberg was never a follower of fashion, but there are few composers whose works register successive historical moments with such seismic intensity. In this, like Stravinsky or Picasso, he is an exemplar of a new breed of twentieth-century artists. Consider Schönberg's stylistic trajectory from late Romanticism through Expressionism to Neoclassicism reflected in *Verklärte Nacht* and *Gurre-Lieder* through the Chamber Symphony and the Second String Quartet, from *Erwartung* and *Pierrot lunaire* to the Serenade and the Piano Suite, op. 25. There is an equally compelling thematic trajectory that dominates the second half of Schönberg's career from the *Weltanschauungsmusik* of *Jakobsleiter* to the *Bekenntnisoper* *Moses und Aron*, from his denunciation of fascism in *Ode to Napoleon* to his response to the Holocaust in *A Survivor from Warsaw*. Each of these works, so different one from the other, is a unique response to a specific moment; each literally breaks a mould or sets a precedent – though not for Schönberg himself, for whom there could be no repetition. He was a man propelled by a fierce forward momentum, which may explain why he left so many fragments and torsos – including *Jakobsleiter* and *Moses und Aron* – that bear testimony to a restless creativity, born of the moment.

Each of these successive moments in Schönberg's development left lasting traces, not least in spawning new forms and genres. *Verklärte Nacht* wedded chamber music with the symphonic poem; the Second String Quartet introduced the voice into its texture; the Chamber Symphony inspired a revival of the chamber orchestra as a symphonic medium. *Erwartung* and *Die glückliche Hand* are progenitors of the psychological monodrama and the

modern Gesamtkunstwerk, whereas *Pierrot lunaire* revitalised the melodrama. Numerous later works infused new life and sparkling wit into traditional forms (Pace Boulez!), such as the suite, serenade, string quartet, concerto, and variation form. Quite apart from questions of genre and form, there is the distinctive sound of Schönberg's music, which, though varied from work to work, invariably combines clarity with a sinewy energy and sensuous appeal that has had an enduring influence upon composers across a broad spectrum. The choral writing in *Glückliche Hand*, *Jakobsleiter*, and above all *Moses und Aron*, for instance, has found echoes in composers as diverse as Penderecki and Feldman; the sound colours of op. 16 presaged the music of Ligeti and Lutosławski, and any composer writing for large orchestra would do well to consult that model of lucid transparency, the *Variations for Orchestra*, op. 31. The most emblematic example of Schönberg's sound world is, of course, *Pierrot lunaire*, which quite apart from its formal influence on works by such composers as Stravinsky, Boulez, and Peter Maxwell Davies, established the paradigmatic combination of keyboard, winds, and strings that has defined new music ensembles to this day. *Pierrot* is also a reminder that with each foray into new terrain, with each advance in musical language Schönberg devised concomitant advances in notation and performance practice. *Pierrot's* Sprechstimme, though not entirely unprecedented, opened the door to the extended vocal techniques that are part of the training of every contemporary singer. Moreover, in wedding the avant-garde with cabaret (a world Schönberg had earlier explored with his *Brettlieder*), *Pierrot lunaire* was a pathbreaking bridge between "high" and "low".

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Schönberg's multifaceted oeuvre is most certainly a product of the fractured age in which he lived, but within the exigencies of historical events his determination to take control of his own evolution set a high bar for his contemporaries, most especially his students. As an autodidact his approach to music theory was at once rigorous and idiosyncratic – we see it in his brilliant *Harmonielehre* of 1911 – and he expected the same kind of individualistic

thinking of his students. The most gifted among them, Anton Webern, Alban Berg, Hanns Eisler, and Nikos Skalkottas, whether in adherence or revolt, turned such demands to their advantage and created identities of unmistakable originality. Their example in turn inspired composers as diverse as Milton Babbitt, Luigi Nono, George Perle, and Stefan Wolpe to today's neo-romantics and spectralists, who have crafted languages and styles that are at once indebted to and independent of their Viennese models.

Few today would proclaim an exclusive allegiance to the "Second Viennese School". Indeed, the epithet itself has lost much of its historical usefulness. It is certainly to Schönberg's credit to have given the precepts of motivic organicism, developing variation, and formal coherence new currency within a modern context, to have developed a musical prose responsive to the metric freedom of expanded chromaticism, and to have established performance and interpretive practices, not least through the activities of his Society for Private Musical Performances, to serve the interests of the musical idea. To the extent Schönberg imparted normative attitudes and procedures to his students and their successors, he created a "school". But the flowering of music in Vienna around 1900 was rich and diverse, as one can see from the catalogue of Universal Edition, which, thanks to the visionary acquisitions of Emil Hertzka, brought together a much wider array of composers, including Alexander Zemlinsky, Franz Schmidt, Josef Matthias Hauer, Julius Bittner, Franz Schreker, Joseph Marx, Egon Wellesz, and Erich Wolfgang Korngold, as well as their immediate predecessors Bruckner and Mahler and the generation of their students. Today, our understanding of Viennese modernism has expanded to include these and other composers working in Vienna around the turn of the last century. As a result we see that the Schönberg circle was anything but hermetically sealed and that the break with tonality was never the sole arbiter of musical progress. Mahler's stylistic pluralism, Schreker's obsession with timbre, Zemlinsky's experiments with form, Wellesz' appropriation of French and Russian influences all contributed to a heady creative environment that continues to astonish and inspire composers today. And despite their differing preoccupations, these composers shared a common Viennese inheritance, as well as a range of thematic interests. Compare, for instance, the recordings of Webern with those of Zemlinsky in questions of phrasing, tempo relationships, or agogic accents; Berg's operas draw on the same literary influences – including Wedekind, Weininger, and Wilde – that inspired Schreker; and there are numerous intersections between Schönberg's penchant for philosophical mysticism and number symbolism and the theories of Hauer. It is precisely the expanded terrain of Viennese modernism that has opened up the spaces between the once rigid categories of "tonal" and "atonal", "progressive" and "conservative," "contemporary" and "modern", that has such appeal for composers today who

reject systems but embrace open-ended exploration and approach inherited forms and traditions with renewed interest. The continuing vitality of Schönberg's music and ideas, however, is not the residue of his historical role in leading the atonal revolution; it is not circumscribed by any "method" or "system"; nor does it derive from his central position within the larger phenomenon of Viennese modernism. Rather, it is his remarkable capacity for creative engagement with successive circumstances and environments.

Each of Schönberg's works is a kind of intervention in the moment, unexpected and unprepared, an exploration of possibility in which one composer steps up – literally "volunteers" – to propose the next moment in the developing variation of compositional thought. Was Schönberg inevitable or even necessary? Certainly not. And this is the reason he continues to be both.

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