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Too Soon or Too Late?

Schoenberg, Berg, Webern: the current state of writing

THE MASS OF WRITING about atonal and twelve-note composers and their music shows how important it is to writers that the composers and the music be understood through the medium of words, however much the composers themselves may have affected to dislike such exposure. Naturally, the 'founding fathers' of this 'school' are the most written-about of all; but now that Schoenberg, at least, has been sanctified as both Modern Master and Master Musician,¹ it might be thought that understanding is broad and deep enough to make the constant cataract of words redundant. After all, no sensible person can really expect such complex music ever to become very widely accepted: audiences will always be small, despite Schoenberg's longing to be hummed in the street.

Is it time, then, for apologists and analysts to dry up? Apparently not. The better we get to know this music, it seems, the less we agree on what it 'means', or on how to write about it: contrast the reviews by Paul Griffiths² and Hugh Wood³ of Malcolm MacDonald's 'Master Musicians' Schoenberg study. The disagreement of the experts is complemented by the refusal of more than a minority of the serious-music audience, performers and promoters, to take these composers to their hearts. So it looks as if words will be with us for a long time yet: for as long as a case remains to be argued.

But as time goes by it begins to play curious tricks. Old, or old-fashioned, books surface alongside hermetic theoretical articles and monographs; the former engaging the music as if it were new and radical, if not actually still to be written down, the latter giving it the microscopic treatment proper to an intriguing archaeological discovery. The reading audience for these two types of material cannot be the same, even though the composers and the music with which the material is concerned are the same. So writing which comes too soon for some may be far too late for others: some find the assumptions made about the orthodoxy or even conservatism of this music unacceptable, while others eagerly scan the horizon to see what the future has in store. Writers, of course, will always believe in what they are doing, and all writers have to imagine that they have a private line to the composer and a special, uniquely perceptive code of intercommunication, which makes all their toil worth while and subsequent criticism irrelevant: but the private line from writer to composer is in itself no guarantee that the reader will receive the right connection and, as the cost of these three-way contacts increases, the more economy, accuracy and value for money seem to matter. A reader may still learn something from a bad book, but a badly edited book is an insult to the reader's mind as well as to his wallet.

The most substantial publication devoted to Schoenberg currently in progress, the complete edition of

his works,⁴ is well under way but still has far to go: to date the keyboard music, songs, concertos, chamber symphonies, some choral music and some arrangements have appeared, as well as the one-act opera *Von heute auf morgen*. This complete edition is, appropriately, a product of the age of conservation, designed to be definitive and irreplaceable and therefore especially vulnerable to the frailties and failings of editors and printers. Authoritative reviews are, therefore, all the more important and all too rare.⁵ But while the scholarship of this edition will inevitably be argued over, its cost is unarguably enormous, and the decision to produce study scores in reduced format, with no editorial annotations, is as dangerous as it is understandable: one has only to inspect the recent score of the Violin Concerto alongside Anne C. Hall's discussion of variant readings and the problems of arriving at an authentic text⁶ to find oneself in the middle of a musicological minefield, which no amount of ritualistic obeisance before the traditional, expressive qualities of the work itself will cause to disappear. Is it still too soon to start producing 'definitive' editions and biographies, when so much material remains to be collated, catalogued and analysed, and when 'publication' often seems to mean 'oversimplification'? And should there not be a more realistic application of that most sacred of trades union principles, the need for demarcation? The world's best cataloguer may be the world's worst analyst.

Jan Maegaard's *Studien zur Entwicklung des dodekaphonen Satzes bei Arnold Schönberg*⁷ is a publication of major bibliographical importance, and in many respects displaces the catalogue by Josef Rufer⁸ as a meticulously researched source-book sorting out some of the complex 'which-came-first' problems that beset the enquiring Schoenbergian. Maegaard may not have rendered all sabbatical pilgrimages to Los Angeles unnecessary, but he has certainly rendered some of them less urgent. The trouble is that he did not stop with lists and dates, but launched himself, head over heels, into the wild whirlpool of analysis. As George Perle notes, 'Where his chronological and descriptive catalogue can serve as a model of method, organization and comprehensiveness, from the analytical portion of his work one could derive a compendium of the misleading procedures, illogical classifications, and invalid inferences that must be avoided in any attempt to explain the technical character of this or any other music.'⁹

⁴Ed. Josef Rufer, *Sämtliche Werke* (Mainz: Schott/Vienna: Universal Edition, 1966-).

⁵For one relatively recent example, see O. W. Neighbour's discussion of the choral music volume, *Music and Letters*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (October 1976), pp. 443-446.

⁶'A Comparison of Manuscript and Printed Scores of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto', *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Fall-Winter 1975 [c1977]), pp. 182-196.

⁷Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen, 1972.

⁸*Das Werk Arnold Schönbergs* (Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1959), trans. Dika Newlin, *The Works of Arnold Schoenberg* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962).

⁹*The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (April 1977), p. 276.

¹Charles Rosen, *Schoenberg* (London: Fontana/Collins ['Modern Masters' series], 1976); Malcolm MacDonald, *Schoenberg* (London: Dent ['Master Musicians' series], 1976).

²*The Musical Times*, Vol. 118, No. 1609 (March 1977), p. 212.

³*The Times Literary Supplement*, June 10, 1977, p. 702.

It is, of course, in the field of methodology for the analysis (or even the mere description) of pre-twelve-note atonal music that there are the greatest number of pots ready to proclaim the blackness of any single kettle. Perle's own efforts have been described by Allen Forte (in a footnote, naturally) as 'insufficiently detailed and often contain[ing] mistakes'.¹⁰ As for Forte himself, readers of the American reviews of *The Structure of Atonal Music*¹¹ will be aware that the arrogant tone and at times cavalier manner of his theoretical discussion have not gone unrebuked.¹²

On this side of the Atlantic, meanwhile, there has been little or no serious consideration of such issues as the criteria for segmentation or the accuracy of Forte's computer calculations. For many Europeans these theories are apparently even more in the future than the music to which they have been applied. Instead, Forte has been much chided for appearing to impose a pre-twelve-note compositional system on Schoenberg, as if he actually composed with a table of pitch-class sets (complete with interval vectors) at his elbow.¹³ It may indeed seem remarkable that Forte should have been willing to provide such a conveniently simple target for attack, but there is still no sign that attempts to base a consistent terminology for compositional procedures in this music on what might be regarded as the composer's own approved terminology or method can ever result in more than an incoherent mixture of grammars and dialects reading like a peculiarly debased Esperanto. And when Forte writes that 'it is tempting to compare Schoenberg's detailed way of segmenting the musical continuum with the traditional diminutions of tonal music. Both are hierarchic, but they are essentially different with respect to the concept of musical space',¹⁴ we are reminded that the Monostatos of the set complex is also the Sarastro of Schenkerian tradition. It is emphatically not too soon to yield to the temptation which he offers here.

It is nevertheless a relief to turn to the calmer waters of analytical writings on Schoenberg's twelve-note music. The pressing need for thorough-going studies of individual works, which contain an explication of the relationship between the 'actual' music and the twelve-note material, is at long last beginning to be met: a recent example is *Reihentechnik und musikalische Gestalt bei Arnold Schönberg: eine Untersuchung zum III. Streichquartett op. 30* by Christian Möllers.¹⁵ Möllers may not be as theoretically liberated as some would like (his sources are principally European) but, after the ritual quotation of Schoenberg's remark about stressing what the music *is* rather than how it is *done*, he proceeds to justify the view that the doing and the being are inseparable. All the facts are here, and even if Möllers' interpretation of them is not the only possible one, they are clearly and carefully set out.

The book by Möllers is at the opposite extreme from two large volumes recently published by John Calder, each at £12.50. To read Luigi Rognoni's *The Second Vienna School: Expressionism and Dodecaphony* is to find oneself plunged back into an era when the air from

another planet was a heady mixture of Leibowitz and Adorno, the former the apparent apostle of a new technical tradition, the other the modish philosopher of modernism's inherent and apparently incorrigible inadequacies.

Far from blazing a trail, this book is now itself a historical document, for it originated in Rognoni's *Espressionismo e dodecafonìa*,¹⁶ as expanded into *La scuola musicale di Vienna*.¹⁷ If the reader is out of sympathy with a writer who can quote admiringly such statements of Adorno's as 'His [Webern's] particularization which was expressed both in his unreflective uncertainty as a craftsman and in the strain put on his own imagination for a single purpose, reached the point where he, as a creator generally speaking, was unable to keep abreast of himself as a particular artist', he or she is not going to be coaxed into a more sympathetic stance by a translation which often reads ineptly or by a presentation which, for all the lavish inclusion of music examples, is riddled with misprints and out-of-date information. Robert Mann, the translator, even gives us 'transportation' for 'transposition' at one point. We also read that, in *Von heute auf morgen*, 'the rhythmic configuration is clear and almost rudimental', and that, in Webern's String Trio, the development of the twelve-note series 'is carried out in abysmal reaches'. Rognoni's style is such that it must be very difficult to translate either the letter or the spirit: indeed, it often appears to be aiming for an expressionism as intense as that of *Erwartung* or *Wozzeck*. It can also be alarmingly imprecise, claiming that 'The first tangible move towards dodecaphonic structure does not . . . appear until 1923', and that 'a series never constitutes a melodic or thematic idea in itself'. Bartók's String Quartet No. 3 should be dated 1927, not 1926, and the 'rocking' third at the end of the *Lyric Suite* is major, not minor. A particularly unfortunate misprint in a musical example adds a D to the octave Bs of the great climax in the interlude between scenes 2 and 3 of *Wozzeck* (Act III) — this stands uncorrected from the Italian original.

Rognoni can be much more stimulating and perceptive in his more general, cultural-historical comments, as when he links Schoenberg and Webern to Husserl, or describes *Moses und Aron* and Schoenberg's drama *Der biblische Weg* as reflecting a period of history when 'action could render every concept of liberty, of civilisation and human progress dangerously ambiguous'. He also argues, interestingly, that it was Webern's search for 'immediacy of expression' and his 'craving for purity' which led him to shun Sprechgesang. But the drawbacks already detailed, together with the complete absence of any post-Moldenhauer information about Webern, or post-Maegaard facts about Schoenberg, mean that the book is of little practical use to students today. Made available when new, it would have been stimulatingly comprehensive and idiosyncratic: today, both tone and content are anachronistic. It has come too late.

Calder's other publication is also a translation in which one is continually made aware of how difficult that task was: it, too, is well garnished with misprints and lacks any sign of firm editing. H. H. Stuckenschmidt's *Arnold Schönberg: His Life, World and Work* first appeared as *Schönberg: Leben, Umwelt, Werk* in 1974,¹⁸ when it was criticised for its diffuseness and laboured style. Even the experienced hands of Humphrey Searle have failed to transform these defects into virtues and there are moments when one can only suspect that Mr Searle has deliberately inserted an awkwardness simply to liven up the leaden prose. Why else would he describe Zemlinsky as 'one of the most peculiar musicians of his generation', or refer to the performance of *Erwartung* by 'a singer and

¹⁰'Sets and Nonsets in Schoenberg's Atonal Music', *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Fall-Winter 1972), p. 43.

¹¹New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.

¹²See particularly William E. Benjamin's essay in *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Fall-Winter 1974), pp. 170-190, and the comments of Hubert S. Howe, Jr. in *Proceedings of the American Society of University Composers*, Vols. 9 & 10 (1974-5), pp. 118-124.

¹³See especially Forte's article 'Sets and Nonsets in Schoenberg's Atonal Music', *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Fall-Winter 1972), pp. 43-64.

¹⁴Op. cit., p. 63.

¹⁵*Beihefte zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, Vol. 17 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977).

¹⁶Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1954.

¹⁷Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1966.

¹⁸Zurich: Atlantis-Verlag.

a producer', or to the fact that Marya Freund 'spoke and sang *Pierrot Lunaire*'? Mr Searle is even forced to divert himself, and us, by imitating Germanic English and describing the 'tendency to the compression of the forms'. Simply in terms of factual accuracy, the book is a considerable achievement, though those with specialised information have pointed to minor errors,¹⁹ and the author evidently did not have access to Maegaard's work on, for example, the dating of the Five Piano Pieces, op. 23. Yet, in spite of the multitude of facts which the book contains, there is a pervasive vagueness or evasiveness when it comes to considering why certain events took place and, in particular, what drove Schoenberg to act in the way he did. In one respect, this blankness serves a purpose: there is so little discussion of Schoenberg's motivation that one senses the simple inevitability of even his most extreme leaps into the future: he merely did what was necessary and right. Yet such apparent certainty of purpose emerged from a sequence of conflicts, crises, illnesses and upheavals which gives Schoenberg's life an almost heroic quality. Perhaps fin-de-siècle Vienna, or Berlin in the 1920s, was an improbable location for heroism, but the individuality and integrity, as well as the arrogance and impossibility of the man, all but disappear in the grey pages of the Stuckenschmidt-Searle narrative.

Fortunately, there are some good things to reward the patient reader. The author quotes liberally from unpublished letters such as those to Richard Strauss and Walter Goehr, as well as from Schoenberg's Berlin Diary. Stuckenschmidt can draw on his own long memory when discussing the fluctuations of Schoenberg's finances, recalling that in 1924 the composer was again 'able to assume an elegance in his clothes which he had not been able to afford for many years'. And if the author, in his role of official biographer, is irritatingly pious in failing to clarify the nature of the composer's many personal disagreements and quarrels, he leaves us in no doubt about the greatest tragedy of all: Schoenberg simply had too little time for composition: 6,000 pages of orchestration of other composers' scores in Vienna, heavy teaching commitments in Berlin and America. No wonder he was often ill and invariably bad tempered. But the official biographer is always in a difficult position, with living relatives and associates to placate. In this sense, and with the archives presumably far from exhausted, it is still too soon . . .

The dangers of premature conclusions (particularly of those which either damn or canonise) are even more evident in the case of Alban Berg. George Perle has already put Bergians deeply in his debt through his analytical work, the most recent example of which, 'Berg's Master Array of Interval Cycles',²⁰ is of particular fascination, but there can have been no more readable articles on any of the twelve-note composers than his 'The Secret Programme of the Lyric Suite'.²¹ At times these articles seem to combine the best of *Perspectives of New Music* with the 'best' of the *News of the World*. Such revelations naturally postpone the completion of any would-be definitive life and works, while making the worthy efforts of Redlich, Reich and Carner seem that much more prehistoric. I've already heard the first rumbles from those disposed to dispute some, if not all, of Perle's interpretations of this new evidence, however, so the subject is far from closed, and should absorb the attention while we wait for Cerha's completion of *Lulu* to be unveiled by Boulez and Chéreau in Paris — an event now scheduled for February 1979.

¹⁹See Hans Keller's review in *The Spectator*, Vol. 239, No. 7793 (November 12, 1977), pp. 22–23.

²⁰*The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (January 1977), pp. 1–30.

²¹*The Musical Times*, Vol. 118, Nos. 1614–1616 (August–October 1977).

Boulez' own reiteration, in his *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*,²² of the failings of Schoenberg and Berg (and Webern most of the time) in fighting the good modern fight, ending with his statement of belief in the need to dismiss one's heritage lock, stock and sonata form, is good, knockabout stuff, even if it leaves his own positively derivative *Rituel* in a question-mark shaped spotlight. Nor did it prevent the indefatigable bearded of tradition from attending the official opening of the Schoenberg Institute in America. This establishment has already produced three issues of a new journal,²³ offering a few tempting scraps of analysis and biography, though as yet nothing to match the grandly protracted centenary tributes which have been appearing in *Perspectives*. With such an enterprise as Jane Coppock's 83-page article 'Ideas for a Schoenberg Piece'²⁴ (on the third of the Five Orchestral Pieces, op. 16) it is difficult to know which to admire more, the industry of the author or the ingenuity of the printer. Fortunately such efforts preclude glib summary and premature assessment. A final, very different, European Schoenbergian exercise may be included here, however. Giselher Schubert's *Schoenbergs frühe Instrumentation: Untersuchungen zu den Gurreliedern, zu op. 5 und op. 8*²⁵ may appear to be yet another earnest thesis, yet it is rather more comprehensive than its title suggests, with brief discussions of the structural role of instrumentation in opp. 22 and 36: it also has one of the most interesting general bibliographies to be found in any specialised Schoenberg publication, with rare dissertations and articles which range some way beyond the central subject-matter of the book.

In his later years as a performer, Boulez has seemed to give greater emphasis to Schoenberg and Berg than to Webern, and so have writers, deterred, perhaps, by the pre-emptive strike of Hans Moldenhauer in the mid-1960s: it's remarkable that the Moldenhauer-Irvine *Perspectives*,²⁶ the short study by Wildgans,²⁷ the Searle translation of Kolneder's first effort²⁸ and the volume of sketches²⁹ all appeared between 1966 and 1968. The journals have not been silent, of course, and there has been much activity in the Nibelheim of the dissertation writers. Some theses have been of great interest, even if the largest to achieve publication, Friedhelm Döhl's *Weberns Beitrag zur Stilwende der neuen Musik*,³⁰ is actually an unrevised reproduction of a 1966 thesis and therefore not as up to date with periodical and thesis literature as its date of publication suggests. Walter Kolneder's second study of Webern — *Anton Webern: Genesis und Metamorphose eines Stils*³¹ — is a sad disappointment, with its tilting at analytical windmills, which may not have been totally imaginary in the days of *Die Reihe*, but which have long since disappeared save from dusty minds. Much more rewarding have been the

²²London: Eulenburg, c1976.

²³The *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* appears three times a year. Information on subscription rates is available from the Arnold Schoenberg Institute, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California 90007.

²⁴*Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Fall–Winter 1975 [c1977]), pp. 3–85.

²⁵Baden Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1975.

²⁶Comp. Hans Moldenhauer, ed. Demar Irvine, *Anton von Webern: Perspectives* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966).

²⁷Friedrich Wildgans, trans. E. T. Roberts and H. Searle, *Anton Webern* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1966).

²⁸Walter Kolneder, trans. H. Searle, *Anton Webern: An Introduction to His Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968).

²⁹Anton von Webern, *Sketches (1926–45): Facsimile reproductions from the composer's autograph sketches in the Moldenhauer Archive* (New York: Carl Fischer, 1968).

³⁰Munich: Katzbichler, 1976.

³¹Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag für Unterricht, Wissenschaft und Kunst, 1974.

exemplary criticisms of the published editions of pre-op. 1 material in C. A. Dimond's 'Fourteen Early Songs of Anton Webern'³² and Reinhard Gerlach's 'Die Handschriften der Dehmel-Lieder von Anton Webern: textkritische Studien'.³³ Another relevant and thought-provoking study is William Wilson's 'Equitonicity as a Measure of the Evolution towards Atonality in the pre-Opus 1 Songs of Anton Webern'.³⁴ Nor should the student of Webern overlook the three articles by Roger Smalley on the published sketches.³⁵

The fact that this essay has only been able to mention a small proportion of the more substantial, more valuable or simply more recent material might be taken as sufficient indication of a healthy state of affairs. The music itself may still not be played all that much, though records appear now and again (most recently, the Juilliard's gripping set of the Schoenberg quartets).³⁶ The

³²DMA diss., University of Oregon, 1971; University Microfilms, 72-14,722.

³³*Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, Vol. 29 (1972), pp. 93-114.

³⁴PhD diss., Florida State University, 1975; University Microfilms 75-15,510.

³⁵'Webern's Sketches', *Tempo*, Nos. 112-114 (March, June, September 1975).

³⁶CBS Masterworks 79304 (three records).

vastly enlarged version of Schoenberg's *Style and Idea* has been out since 1975³⁷ and a translation of the complete *Harmonielehre* is promised in the very near future.³⁸ Even those final arbiters of intellectual respectability, GCE and degree syllabuses, include atonal and twelve-note music. So, even if, because of the vagaries of publishers, some material appears too late to be accurate or illuminating while other material appears too early even for prevailing academic tastes, the sheer distance between the two extremes is a measure of vitality as well as of confusion. Perhaps this will only be reduced by, not fewer words, but fewer words about words? I have certainly written more than enough on this occasion: and even if you read every word of the writers I've written about, the music will still be waiting patiently when you've finished, using its own language to make its own sense. To misquote and mangle Wordsworth and Schoenberg's Moses: the word is too much with us — let us learn to enjoy the lack of it.

³⁷Ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

³⁸Trans. R. E. Carter, *Theory of Harmony* (London: Faber and Faber, forthcoming, estimated price £22.50).

SCORES RECEIVED

Malcolm Arnold

Two John Donne Songs (Roberton Publications)

Christopher Brown

Hexham Mass (Roberton Publications)

John Buller

Proenca (G. Schirmer)
The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies (G. Schirmer)

George Butterworth (collector)

The Ploughboy's Glory (The English Folk Dance and Song Society)

John Cage

Etudes Australes (Edition Peters)

Lyell Cresswell

Drones IV (Arts Lab Music Publications)

George Crumb

Dream Sequence (Images II) (Edition Peters)
Four Nocturnes (Night Music II) (Edition Peters)
Music for a Summer Evening (Makrokosmos III) (Edition Peters)

Peter Maxwell Davies

Ave Maris Stella (Boosey & Hawkes)
Dark Angels (Boosey & Hawkes)
Five Klee Pictures (Boosey & Hawkes)
Miss Donnithorne's Maggot (Boosey & Hawkes)
Stedman Doubles (Boosey & Hawkes)
Stevie's Ferry to Hoy (Boosey & Hawkes)
Symphony (Boosey & Hawkes)
The Two Fiddlers (libretto) (Boosey & Hawkes)
Vesalii Icones (Boosey & Hawkes)
Westerlings (Boosey & Hawkes)

Simon Emmerson

Variations (Arts Lab Music Publications)

Brian Ferneyhough

Four Miniatures (Edition Peters)
Sieben Sterne (Edition Peters)
Sonatas for String Quartet (Edition Peters)
Time and Motion Study I (Edition Peters)
Transit (Edition Peters)

Vinko Globokar

Airs de voyages vers interieur (Edition Peters)
Vendre le vent (Edition Peters)

Geoffrey Hanson

Three Pieces for Organ (Roberton Publications)

Jonathan Harvey

Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis (Faber Music)

Joan Last

Two Hand Duos (Leonard, Gould and Boltzler)

Colin Matthews

Night Music (Faber Music)

Nicholas Maw

Life Studies I-III, IV-VIII (Boosey & Hawkes)

Wilfrid Mellers

A Blue Epiphany for J. B. Smith (Faber Music)

John Middleton

Fantasie (J. B. Cramer)

Richard Orton

Ambience (Arts Lab Music Publications)

Melvyn Poore

Vox Superius (Arts Lab Music Publications)

Roger Reynolds

The Promises of Darkness (Edition Peters)

Peter Sculthorpe

String Quartet No. 8 (Faber Music)

Michael Tippett

Symphony No. 4 (Schott)

Antonin Tucapsky

In Honorem Vitae (Roberton Publications)

Arthur Wills

Scherzetto (J. B. Cramer)

Christian Wolff

Bread and Roses (Piano Solo) (Edition Peters)
Dark as a Dungeon (Clarinet Solo) (Edition Peters)
Dark as a Dungeon (Trombone and Contrabass) (Edition Peters)
Exercises 15-18 (Edition Peters)
String Bass Exercise out of 'Bandiera Rossa' (Edition Peters)
Three Studies (Edition Peters)