

# ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG AND BARCELONA

SCHÖNBERG KNEW BARCELONA AND HAD GOOD FRIENDS HERE, AMONGST THEM PAU CASALS. HIS STAY IN THE CITY LASTED NINE MONTHS, FROM THE BEGINNING OF OCTOBER 1931 TO 30TH JUNE 1932, DURING WHICH TIME HE CONTINUED HIS INTENSE CREATIVE ACTIVITY.



CARLES GUINOVART PROFESSOR OF COMPOSITION, CONSERVATORI SUPERIOR MUNICIPAL DE MÚSICA DE BARCELONA



**A**rnold Schönberg, unquestionably, is one of the great names of the History of Music and a fundamental name —like Picasso, Einstein or Freud— in the cultural development of our century; an artist who was capable of re-enacting the myth of Faust in the figure of Adria Leverkühn under the pen of Thomas Mann. For him, every work was a new adventure of the spirit, a solution to a specific problem, discovered as a result of intense, profound reflection which penetrated —with a rich expressionism— new worlds of sensations. Just as Le Corbusier revolutionized the world of architecture with his “Modulor”, Schönberg also created his own system of organizing sounds, “Dodecatorism”, which, while being a synthesis of the past, opened up completely new and original possibilities, moved away from the classical grammar of music and revealed the structure of a new language.

It is now fifty years since, applying the aesthetics of this new language, a large part of the opera “Moses und Aron” was written in this city. “Moses und Aron” is possibly the most important work by this century’s most controversial composer.

The fact that Schönberg should have chosen to move to Barcelona, apparently because of his health, in search of a more suitable climate for the asthma he had suffered from since the Great War, is mainly due to his friendship with his Catalan pupil of Swiss origin, Robert Gerhard. It was thanks to Gerhard that the master’s controversial “Pierrot lunaire” had first been presented in Barcelona. The debut took place on 29th April 1925, under the direction of Schönberg himself, and ended in uproar. So the composer knew Barcelona and had good friends here, amongst them Pau Casals. His stay in the city lasted nine months, from the beginning of October 1931 to 30th June 1932, during which time he continued his intense creative activity.

As a point of interest, while in Barcelona, a time he always remembered with fondness, Schönberg lived in a Modernist house at *Baixada de Briz*, number 14 (now numbers 20-22), in Vallcarca. The house still has a plaque to commemorate the great musician’s stay in the city, with the inscription: “Arnold Schönberg compuso en esta casa durante los años 1931-32 parte de su obra Moisés y Aarón” (In this house, Arnold Schönberg composed part of his opera Moses and Aaron, in the years 1931-32). The plaque was installed in 1955 by a group of ad-



mirers made up of Josep Soler, Antoni Tàpies, J.E. Cirlot, José Luis Delás and Albert Manén. The buildings which now surround the house have reduced the visibility and the plaque is at present rather difficult to see.

The house is the work of the famous Modernist architect Salvador Valeri i Puperull, the present owner’s father, and was built between 1928 and 1930 and let to the composer almost as soon as it was completed. Apparently, there is an identical copy of this house in Los An-

geles (California), which the composer had built. It should be pointed out that in those days Vallcarca was a very distinguished residential area, close to the Güell park, looking out over the great city that lay at its feet. This part of Barcelona, at the end of Verdi street, was a peaceful place, ideal for intellectual work and for the composer, who wanted to live on the outskirts of the city.

Another important point regarding Barcelona is that it was the birthplace of Schönberg’s youngest daughter (7th May 1932), who was given the typically Catalan name of “Núria”. In time, she was to marry the avant-garde Italian composer, Luigi Nono. Recently, the first Spanish performance of “Moses und Aron” took place at the *Gran Teatre del Liceu*, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Viennese composer’s visit to Barcelona and his work here. The opera was performed on 2nd November 1985 and received riotous applause. Núria Schönberg attended the event and also took advantage of the occasion to visit the house she was born in.

During the composer’s stay in our city, the *Associació Obrera de Concerts* put on a concert in his honour on Sunday 3rd April 1932. Schönberg himself conducted the Pau Casals Orchestra. Anton Webern came to conduct a few times during this period. It should be remembered that the republican Barcelona of the time was in touch with European cultural movements, and in 1936, Alban Berg’s posthumous violin concerto dedicated “To the memory of an angel” had its debut at the *Palau de la Música Catalana* as part of the S.I.M.C. festival. The work has become a classic in its genre in twentieth century music. A few months after the concert, the Civil War broke out, thus putting an end to a period of activity and optimism and forcing many intellectuals, amongst them Robert Gerhard, to go into exile.

Through the members of the *Associació Catalana de Compositors*, we can see today that the Vienna school has had a great influence on certain Catalan composers. The *expressionism* which derives from the new language of Vienna has influenced the aesthetics of Catalan musicians like the *doyen* of our association, Joaquim Homs, a pupil of Gerhard’s, J.J. Olives, B. Casablanca (amongst the younger ones), not to mention Josep Soler, with the emotive and philosophical charge he inherited from the great Austrian master. ■