

Schoenberg and the Audience: Modernism, Music, and Politics in the Twentieth Century

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I. Polemical Preliminaries

These festival weeks have had nothing to do with music. Schoenberg's followers have overdone it. What the consequence of the absolute domination by dodecaphony will be . . . is that in ten years, I am convinced, no one will talk about the twelve-tone system.

It seems that the last twenty years of eclecticism in contemporary music may have finally undone what "Schoenberg's followers" have "overdone" for nearly half a century. It is now respectable and even fashionable to concede that perhaps audiences have been right all along. Abstract, inaccessible, unfriendly, harsh, hard to follow, dense, even boring are still the adjectives applied by most concert-goers to Arnold Schoenberg's music. The twentieth-century composer, once most highly respected by generations of academics, whose music and theoretical writings reveal a daunting intellect and capacity for analysis, and whose own legendary contempt for others became routinized posthumously among those who specialized in his defense, now appears entirely vulnerable. With a slight edge of delight, critics are increasingly able to declare along with Malipiero, and only superficially in imitation of Boulez, decades later that Schoenberg is "dead."

Although thinking and writing about Schoenberg remain valued academic pursuits, to the public beyond academic circles Schoenberg, except for a few early works, commands little spontaneous affection, and at best a grudging respect. If his music is as great as he and his disciples claimed, why does it remain so difficult, so merely intellectual for so many; why after three quarters of a century are essays in the genre of Alban Berg's 1924 classic "Why is Schoenberg's Music so Difficult to Understand?" still appropriate?

Five basic factors currently stand in way of a sympathetic reconsideration of Schoenberg. First and foremost is the success of the so-called "post-modern." With the collapse of the perceived tyranny of those who viewed Schoenberg as the true prophet of new music, voices have emerged (some of them repentant former adherents to the cause) who actually relish the slaughter of the main sacred cow. From 1945 until the early 1980s, the accepted wisdom among composers and scholars echoed Ernst Krenek's closing comments at the Second International Schoenberg Conference in Vienna in 1984: Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School had altered musical thinking forever. No composer in the future would be able to circumvent Schoenberg and his influence, even if he was to write minimalist and tonal music. Just fifteen years later most successful younger contemporary composers appear to have paid little or no attention to Schoenberg. This has altered the paradigm of the history of twentieth century music that held sway into the mid-1970s, in which Schoenberg played the central role.

Second is the accumulated weight of sustained historical reevaluation. Those who question how modern Schoenberg really was challenge a facile equivalence between the terms "modernist" or "avant-garde" and the twentieth century. Perhaps, they seem to say, modernism in the sense of Schoenberg and his school refers merely to one limited historical period and group within the twentieth century. Or there is the line of argument first put forth decades ago independently by Pierre Boulez and Elliott Carter questioning how far Schoenberg had really traveled from a dependency on late nineteenth-century musical models. Were not Webern, Varèse, Ives, Messiaen, and even Stravinsky equally innovative and significant? This differentiation within modernism sought to help emancipate post-World War II composition from too exclusive a bias in favor of Schoenberg. A divergent view of the century and modernity emerges from these types of revisionism, one in which Schoenberg holds merely one place of prominence among many. Schoenberg may have been less a radical conservative and more a radical reactionary, one who carried Wagner's belief in a progressive imperative for music to an absurd extreme into an age in which history would no longer matter.

By refusing to see Schoenberg as the pivotal figure in the history of twentieth-century music, these revisionists create a third factor: they detach Schoenberg's music and its aesthetic and historical valuation from the social and political projects to which it was once inextricably linked. During the 1920s, Hanns Eisler, who retained an unqualified admiration for Schoenberg, his teacher, was among the first in Schoenberg's circle to speculate independently about the function of new music in modernity. Schoenberg's modernism consistently offended its audience. If that audience had been merely made up of smug owners of capital and their bourgeois apologists, there might have seemed something redeemingly "progressive" about Schoenberg's brand of modernism. But the failure of Schoenberg's modernism to gain any audience beyond its own elite of admirers—however constituted—revealed just how hollow were his supporters' appeals to historical necessity or a Platonic belief system that legislated a normative ideal of musical thought and form and therefore a typology of proper listening.

Since Schoenberg's brand of innovation as well as his Jewish identity became the focus of anti-Semitic right-wing politics early in the 1920s and later the object of Nazi persecution in the 1930s, the dissonances between the progressive in politics

and the modernist in music were left unresolved. The alliance between the two went largely unquestioned for decades, even well after 1945. In the context of Cold War politics, Eisler's challenge to Schoenberg and his school from the left could be discredited as "Stalinist" and reactionary, while Schoenberg's brand of modernism continued, until the late 1960s, to appear as a non-subversive but forward-looking contemporary line of defense of individuality and freedom against uniformity and tyranny within the "free world."

Adorno's analysis of Schoenberg and his influence created a powerful critical and philosophical framework that buttressed Schoenberg's post-war influence, particularly in academic circles. According to this line of interpretation, modernism in music of the sort audible in Webern and in the work of the younger composers supported at Darmstadt and Donaueschingen in the 1950s and 1960s eloquently confronted the corrupting influences represented in the West by commercialism and mass society, the very ills that had helped fascism succeed.

With the receding prestige of socialist and progressive politics in the early 1980s, the growing critique of the liberal welfare state in England and America and ultimately the collapse of Communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the critique of capitalist culture and society put forward by Adorno and other Frankfurt School contemporaries, particularly Herbert Marcuse, became less attractive in the West to new generations of young people. Schoenberg and his notions of musical modernism were gradually detached from a plausible justifying political and historical logic locating them on the side of freedom and anti-fascism, and therefore of the angels.

While the later twentieth century heirs of the left have largely rejected modernism in favor of popular musical culture as an important dimension of political resistance, neo-conservatives have taken their own peculiar revenge on Schoenberg. Some have risen to Schoenberg's defense, citing his work and legacy as a bulwark against the collapse of cultural standards after the mid-1960s. Other neo-conservatives, however, have delighted in the idea that the largely liberal and leftwing post-war academic community's "emperor had no clothes" after all.

The fourth factor working against Schoenberg is the reemergence of an empirical and principled set of arguments prevalent at the turn of the century that defend tonality (or something very much like it) as natural and objective. According to this argument, which makes an appeal to normative philosophy, psychology, and physics, certain ways of organizing sound and time in music correspond to facts and laws of nature. In the early twentieth century, Schoenberg found himself on the side of those who argued against the idea that the Western system of harmony was privileged and rooted in nature, rendering tonality normative and objective. The sophisticated revival of the idea of a "natural" music has been fueled partly by linguistic theory (e.g. Chomsky and generative grammar), language philosophy (from the late Wittgenstein on) and the analysis of syntax.

Theorists as disparate in their approaches as Boretz and Epstein have suggested that when we look carefully at music as a reflexive system of communication we need to explain rather than dismiss the failure of any music to gain response, engage listeners or be easily preserved in memory. Perhaps it is not tonality that is natural. But the need for particularly evident patterns in music: repetition, focal points, continuities, tensions, resolutions and regularity—the accumulation of classes of events that can be processed and associated readily by the brain—may be universal. Schoenberg's modernism may lack these requirements because of an inherent conflict between the way we are as humans and the way twelve-tone music is organized. The wide dissemination (or to put it more plainly, the popularity) of a form of music need not be considered a sign of vulgarity, ignorance or concession to corrupt fashion or style. Populist politics and high theory have now merged: Schoenberg's brand of modernism, particularly in its twelve-tone phase, becomes a failed experiment that cannot intersect effectively with wider human experience cognitively and therefore either aesthetically or politically.

The fifth and final barrier to a sympathetic rehearing of Schoenberg today is ironically the difficulty we have in transcending the accumulated traditional rhetoric of criticism and defense surrounding the question of Schoenberg. Schoenberg and his disciples in the 1920s can be compared properly to the circle around the poet Stefan George, to whose work Schoenberg turned at a pivotal moment when the composer took a decisive step away from tonality. But the most apt comparison is with Richard Wagner. Not only did they both have disciples and demand uncommon degrees of loyalty from their followers, but Wagner and Schoenberg invented and institutionalized a rhetoric of self-defense and description. They both brilliantly placed themselves within music history and connected their work to past and future. Institutions designed to preserve and defend the Schoenberg legacy were created, first in Los Angeles, then in Vienna. Schools of composition and criticism that developed after 1945 relied heavily on Schoenberg's analysis of compositional methods, his views on form and structure, and his readings of Mozart and Brahms. To generations of Schoenberg admirers, followers and scholars, any departure from this self-constituted (or auto-poetic) code of discourse of defense and description was tantamount to ignorance or betrayal.

Schoenberg's philosophy of music and his logic of self-estimation have cast a decisive shadow over music theory and musicology in this century. Whether it is the concept of "idea" (as opposed to "style"), the "Grundgestalt," "developing variation," the "emancipation of the dissonance" or the relation of music and text, the way Schoenberg thought and wrote about music and its meaning has had perhaps more influence in the arenas of performance practice and critical approaches to music in this century

than his own music has had on the writing of new music. At the end of this century, almost fifty years after Schoenberg's death, it is in part the institutionalized charisma of Schoenberg the teacher and theorist that retards a new appreciation of his music. Perhaps if we successfully challenge the rhetoric of Schoenberg and his most ardent posthumous defenders, we will be able to open up new avenues of access to his music.