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Julian Johnson

Excerpt

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Introduction

The sound of nature?

The hills are alive with the sound of music

With songs they have sung for a thousand years

One might think that the title song from Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1959 musical is virtually the antithesis of the music of Anton Webern. Yet it is not entirely unthinkable that its opening line might have appeared in one of Webern's many enthusiastic descriptions of his own mountain excursions – trips made in the same alpine landscape which is now, in popular cinema history, forever associated with Julie Andrews in the role of Maria von Trapp. This ridiculous, impossible point of contact epitomises why it is so hard to discuss the question of music and nature seriously. Music's relation to the social construction of nature remains one of the most profound and central problems facing the aesthetics and social history of music, yet it has remained largely out of bounds this century because apparently inextricable from an aesthetics of *kitsch* and the popular notion of art as unmediated representation. What Rodgers and Hammerstein articulated in 1959 is precisely this aesthetic. It reinforces the popular definition of the artist as inspired by nature and reproduces the ideology of nature as a source of consolation which in turn becomes the content of the artwork. The inadequacy of such a one-dimensional aesthetic is apparently so embarrassing to serious inquiry that the whole subject has been ignored rather than explored with greater rigour.

This book is not about the capacity of music to imitate birdsong or to produce sonic analogies to the growth of plants, the flowing of streams or the morphology of the landscape. It is fundamentally neither about nature itself nor about any potential relation that music may have to it. Rather, it is about the way in which a society constructs an *idea* of nature and the role

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that art, and specifically music, may have in the articulation of that idea. That music might be ‘the sound of nature’ was an idea Webern encountered in the music of Mahler, who used the direction ‘like a sound of nature’ (*wie ein Naturlaut*) on the opening page of his First Symphony. But this idea has a long history in German musical aesthetics and was common currency of the late nineteenth century. In spite of that, my concern is never with the imitation of nature, even where the composer might have presumed this to be the case, and always with the function of certain musical material and its contribution towards the wider cultural discourse of the music.

The idea of nature is the resistance against which human culture is made. All art – music included – is formed in relation to prevailing ideas of nature and the natural. Art may seek agreement with these ideas, or seek to oppose them or even transcend them, but in each case it is shaped by its relation to them. It is my contention that modernist and avant-garde music of the twentieth century is as much defined by this equation as was nineteenth-century music. But while the idea of nature was manifestly a central topic of Romantic art and music, in the twentieth century it goes underground as conventions of representation give way to various forms of abstraction. Webern is a particularly interesting case study not only because his career spans this crucial historical and stylistic watershed, but because his music refuses the one-dimensional oppositions of such labels. It is the contradictory nature of Webern’s music that makes it a particularly fruitful perspective through which to view this period more generally.

Anton Webern and the sound of nature?

There is little doubt that the idea of nature was central to Webern’s thinking. We know this from several sources: not only from his sketchbooks and diaries, but also from his correspondence, his lectures, the authors he read, the texts he chose to set and the accounts of those who knew him. We know, moreover, that nature was for Webern much more than an idea. He sought an active and intense experience of the natural world through two life-long passions – mountaineering and gardening. Webern’s diaries underline the importance of the idea of nature to his life, and reflect its interleaving with his musical pursuits. In later life, when he had abandoned keeping any kind of regular diary, he used to scribble annotations in his sketchbook. Some of

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these record everyday family events – birthdays, visits from his children and so on, but a large proportion document his frequent walking trips in the mountains. Everything is carefully dated, both the sketches and the quotidian events. To read through the sketchbooks is briefly to restore the musical works to the life in which they were made, to see them momentarily not as cultural artefacts, texts or institutional property, but as part of a real material life in which birthdays happen, people go on walking trips, air raids take place and the water supply is cut off. It would be naive to propose a direct connection between the kind of events recorded in the margins of the sketchbooks and the musical sketches themselves: we know the nature of artworks and their relation to material life to be more complex. Elsewhere, however, there are more overt suggestions, not least from Webern himself, that the two realms may indeed be connected – not in any immediate way, but connected nevertheless.

And therein lies one of the central problems which this book attempts to address. Webern's well-documented passion for nature would be unproblematic if it were discussed only as colourful biographical detail: the suggestion that Webern's idea of nature has bearing upon his music is far less so. In general, discussion of this question in relation to Webern has not escaped the inadequacies of such discussions about music in general. The worst of these is predicated on the assumption that musical representation is unproblematic. Too often, the connection of Webern's music and nature is discussed simply by quoting particularly ecstatic passages from Webern's letters, reproducing some well-known photographs of him in the outdoors and juxtaposing these with a discussion of a few pieces of his known to have had some extra-musical association. The implication seems to be that the mere act of juxtaposition is sufficient demonstration that one is logically connected to the other. Musical texts are therefore read as depictions or evocations of events or places and the music is thereby reduced merely to an illustration of the biographical. This is the opposite of what I want to suggest. I am talking neither about music as analogous to some experience of nature nor about music as evocative of an actual scene or landscape. Such assumptions underlie an approach to the music which is reductive on several levels. Firstly, such an approach often implies that music which deals with ideas of nature is necessarily programme music. Secondly, it tends to reduce the music to an element of biography rather than using the

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biographical detail to enlarge our understanding of the music as a specific, individual mediation of cultural ideas. Thirdly, such a model reproduces an ideology of some ahistorical, timeless nature to which music might have some relationship. At the same time it thus reproduces an ideology of musical expression as the communication of things which predate the act of communication. Reversing this tendency therefore has two immediate effects: one is to reveal nature as constructed, the other is to begin to see the extent to which music participates in such a construction.

Most commentators on the subject of Webern and nature have dealt with the same small group of pieces which, in their different ways, would seem to offer superficial evidence of a relation to ideas of nature. The works most often discussed are the early tone poem *Im Sommerwind* (1904) and the String Quartet of the following year. These works are hardly typical of the mature Webern but they figure because the first is clearly related to a poetic hymn to nature of the same title by Bruno Wille and the second, according to a sketch of Webern's, to a triptych of landscape pictures by the painter Giovanni Segantini. Some commentators jump straight from these works to discussing the extra-musical outlines that appear in Webern's sketchbooks for some of the late instrumental works – principally the Quartet Op. 22, the Concerto Op. 24 and the String Quartet Op. 28. These outlines mention specific localities, features of the landscape and members of his family.

My suggestion is that these works are not exceptional in this respect and that, with the exception of a few student exercises, virtually every piece Webern wrote had some extra-musical or associative origin. Moreover, the same extra-musical concerns recur throughout his career, from his earliest tonal compositions to his last serial works. This idea is based primarily not on Webern's own claims about some of his pieces, nor indeed some of the extra-musical evidence – compelling and useful though both sources are. Rather, it is based on the fact that his music absorbs and transforms conventional musical topics for the representation of nature, and that the relationships these construct throughout his work as a whole amount to something like a musical discourse on nature.

The idea that Webern's music might be related to ideas of nature has been a quiet but consistent theme in the work of many commentators. A

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degree of caution is necessary, however, in considering these. Webern was obviously happy to talk of such things to his closest friends and to his pupils, and the two lecture series he gave in 1932 and 1933¹ make central use of a Goethean theory of natural forms, the language of which is frequently echoed by commentators rather than discussed critically. Comments by colleagues like Heinrich Jalowetz and Ernst Krenek, for example, tend to employ language that they may well have heard from Webern himself. Krenek, who knew Webern well, underlined his fondness for mountain landscapes. 'If a listener is inclined towards associative ideas,' he suggested, 'he might easily find that Webern's music evokes the clear, thin air and the formidable, tense silence of the very high mountain summits.'² But it is Hans Moldenhauer, Webern's principal biographer, who must take the credit for emphasising this side to Webern's life, making frequent factual reference to Webern's mountain excursions as well as commenting on the significance such things had for him, often illustrating his point with extensive quotation from the composer's correspondence. A single example will serve to give the flavour:

Webern's notes radiate the zest with which he lived each hour in the alpine solitude, contemplating nature's singular manifestations at the last outposts of plant life. He had a faculty for making each excursion – even if it lasted only one or two days – an experience that revitalised his entire being. Fully aware of this secret source of energy, he went to the heights as often as possible. From spring to autumn, hardly a month was allowed to pass without an outing, and sometimes a climb was ventured even in the middle of winter . . . Any full understanding of Webern's personality must take into account his passion for mountain climbing – a drive bordering on obsession. Behind his quiet gentleness there lay a dogged perseverance, a tough fibre that made him willing and able to undergo efforts considered futile or sheer folly by others. The analogy to Webern's life as a creative musician is obvious.³

In general, Moldenhauer is careful to discuss the topic in relation to Webern the individual rather than as directly related to the music. Such considerations, he says, are vital to 'any full understanding of Webern's personality', and there he is wisely content to leave the matter. To make the leap from such observations to a discussion of the music is far more

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problematic. Nevertheless, the implication that such a connection exists is usually not far below the surface. Elsewhere, Moldenhauer recalls some remarks of Robert Craft:

He was never happy away from his beloved Tyrol, and out of Austria, on his concert tours, he was bitterly homesick. The presence of the mountains can be felt in all of his work. And overtly, bell sounds are imitated, not only in such nature and colour pieces as Opera 6 and 10 (which actually use cowbells) but in the last work he was to complete. Bell sounds in clear mountain air are evoked in almost every Webern opus.⁴

Few commentators have ventured beyond the suggestion of vague evocation, although Craft's mention of bell sounds points to a specific detail that has hardly been followed up. A number of articles have appeared which review the extra-musical evidence (the letters, diary entries and sketchbook outlines), but few make any attempt to discuss the music.⁵ Perhaps the strongest claim for a connection between the music and ideas of nature is that made by the composer himself, principally in his correspondence. Much of this has been preserved, and although a large part inevitably relates to practical matters, his letters to his closest artistic friends (particularly Schoenberg, Berg and Hildegard Jone) quite often discuss either his music or his passion for nature. It is more rare to find him discussing a direct relation between the two but on the occasions when he does so his claim is unequivocal. In a letter to Berg (8 October 1925) Webern discussed one of his recurrent fascinations – the flora of the high alpine pastures:

The sense of those flora, impenetrable: that's the greatest magic for me. I perceive an inscrutable meaning there. And I can certainly say: to give back musically what I perceive there I've already strived to do for the whole of my life. A principal part of my musical production feeds back to that. Namely: just as the scent and the form of these plants – as a pattern given from God – reaches to me, so I'd like it to be with my musical forms. I wouldn't want that to sound presumptuous; for I add at once: it is a fruitless effort, to grasp the ungraspable.⁶

That Webern had an intense 'expressive agenda' is hardly to be doubted. As he wrote to Schoenberg (4 December 1910), 'I want only to express,

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uninterruptedly though my whole life, that which inspires me. I don't want anything else. And if I can't do it, I become ill.⁷ On plenty of occasions he expressed his view that art was about the clearest possible expression of an idea. In his 1932 lecture series he stated: 'Music is language. A human being wants to express ideas in this language, but not ideas that can be translated into concepts – *musical* ideas.'⁸ His delight in the specificity of his musical ideas being understood is clearly expressed in a letter of thanks to T. W. Adorno for an article he had written on Webern's music. This 1932 review in the *Schweizerische Musikzeitung* of the European première of the Symphony Op. 21 ended with Adorno's discussion of the fifth variation of its second movement. 'The sound of the harp,' wrote Adorno, '... transforms itself here into ancient cowbells: the last soulful sound heard in the mountains.'⁹ Webern's letter to Adorno (3 December 1932) is full of gratitude for the latter's words. Above all, he expressed his happiness that Adorno had understood the quality of his music as speech. He went on: 'It is really that simple: one portrays what one has experienced. And when speaking of the harp passage in the fifth variation of my symphony you interpret it as "cowbells", this image makes me extremely happy, because I gather from that, that you have rightly heard – as you always express with your words.'¹⁰

Of course, it is rarely that simple in Webern, and elsewhere he shows himself fully aware of the extent to which the nature of musical mediation distances it from any literal representation of experience. The timing of Webern's letter to Adorno is significant. Written nearly a decade after his adoption of the serial method, his insistence on expression and his pleasure at the extra-musical reference being recognised are both striking. That music and nature could be intimately related was a commonplace romantic assumption that Webern inherited in his formative years in the late 1890s. Despite the enormous changes in his musical language between then and the late serial works, for him this idea remained indubitable. It is of course discussed at length within the context of Goethe's nature theory in the 1932 and 1933 lectures. Well before this, however, he had shown a sophistication of aesthetic thought in the distinction he made between crude mimesis and genuine aesthetic mediation. The simple and naive nature evocations of his youth gave way early on to an understanding of a more complex relationship. In a letter to Berg (Stettin, 12 July 1912)

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Webern developed his idea of the artwork being related to nature and yet autonomous at the same time:

Recently I wrote to you about the advantages of the mountain climate. It is so remarkable; everything becomes more tender in that air, more noble, the flowers and – which is the most important of all – the food . . . Everything that is necessary for the vital prosperity of men is up there. Where then should men be? Above. ‘Up there’, how that sounds to us. It is more than a mere symbol. ‘The wanderer on the highest heights’, who hears nothing but the cow bells as the only sound from this world. So said Mahler once to an orchestra, as he rehearsed the 7th. That too is no mere symbol; Mahler’s symphonies I mean. I don’t want symbols. I want the things themselves. The ‘reality’ of artworks is not a symbol, not an imitation either of outer or inner Nature. It does not imitate the pulsing of the heart. It is something in itself; it has its own pulse. Or else all imitation is of one and the same thing. Perhaps indeed it is so. And this one is God. Only the word imitation is not right.¹¹

Perhaps Webern’s most striking claim that his music is connected to the idea of nature is made through the extra-musical outlines which appear in the sketchbooks for a number of the late instrumental works.¹² These are discussed in detail in chapter 5. They range from relatively general indications of mood – as in the outline for the Symphony Op. 21 – to detailed associations for each section of the rondo that forms the second movement of the Quartet Op. 22. One of the most remarkable aspects of these outlines is the recurrence of the same details – in particular, the gravesites of Webern’s parents (in the villages of Schwabegg and Annabichl). Other recurrent themes are aspects of the mountain landscape (especially flowers) and members of his family with whom he obviously associated certain places (presumably tying his associations to specific excursions and experiences).

This book starts from the assumption that Webern’s claims deserve to be taken seriously. It suggests that his preoccupation with nature is far from peripheral, and that this apparently quirky and anachronistic detail of his creative life points to an area of intellectual importance out of all proportion to the contingent and private aspects of Webern’s own biography. It proceeds in the spirit of archaeology, which often begins with an apparently insignificant shard of evidence. But such evidence acts as a signpost to the real object of study, encouraging us to excavate in areas which have hitherto been deemed insignificant.

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Culture and society

While this is a book about Webern and his music, it is also about the society of which he was part and in which his musical ideas were shaped. It is about Webern's idea of nature and its central role in his music, but at the same time it is also about the social construction of that idea of nature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While it is as much concerned with social and cultural history as it is with music history it is no contextual study either. Its primary focus is the music and it is through a study of the music that it seeks to learn more about the cultural history in which that music is involved.

European high art has for centuries been an overwhelmingly urban activity, and movements in art history concerned with nature have usually been more articulate about the urban context from which they sprang than the realities of rural life. Romantic poets may have roamed the hills and painters worked *en plein air* but the audience and the market for their work was almost exclusively an educated, affluent and increasingly urban class. Indeed, it is not hard to relate the centrality of nature representation in Romanticism to the parallel and contemporaneous growth of the modern European city. The paradox of an increasingly urban society sponsoring an art increasingly preoccupied with nature and landscape becomes particularly acute by the end of the nineteenth century. Mahler's music exemplifies an art which is preoccupied with referencing ideas of nature while remaining an uncompromisingly modern, urban form – certainly not written for the rural communities whose music it so often evokes.

Webern's nature music, like Mahler's, does not tell us about nature itself. Or if it does, the focus of this study is far more modest. My suggestion is that it tells us a good deal about the predominantly urban society in which it was composed. Webern's career, like Mahler's, was always shaped by the cultural politics of large cities. In *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, as in Paris or Berlin or London, one of the principal functions of art and music was to mediate, in aesthetic form, a society's own understanding of itself. In critical, analytical art as much as in reproductive and immediate works, the construction of nature played a central role. Perhaps this role was never more critical than at the time when it became problematic, as the contradictions between the modern city and art's myth of man and nature in harmony became insupportable. Webern's life and work were contemporary with

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such diverse versions of this equation as the pastoral idyll of a folk revival, the artifice of a thoroughly urban aestheticism, the embracing of technology in futurism, and the retreat into metaphysics in theories of abstraction. All of these were responses to the same social reality, the same disjunction between modern urban experience and a definition of human individuality derived from an earlier age.

The musical and the extra-musical

Although this study works towards these larger social and historical concerns, it does so *through* a study of musical texts. While this involves a certain amount of technical analysis I have kept this to a level at which the relationship between analysis and music as heard remains clear. One of the central, if underground, themes of this study is the inseparability of what are conventionally referred to as the *musical* and the *extra-musical*. For the sake of clarity I have continued to use these terms with their conventional associations, whereby the *musical* refers to the realm of musical notation and sound prior to audition and the *extra-musical* refers to any intellectual activity occasioned by the musical over and above merely formal, abstract relations. But while I have continued to observe this convention it should soon become clear that I do not consider it meaningful. Indeed, I cannot imagine a situation – other than a wholly artificial and contrived one – in which the musical is ever present without the so-called extra-musical. The extra-musical is an inseparable part of the musical – they cohere in the same material, which has on the one hand an apparently autonomous life of its own but on the other is always formed, performed and heard as part of a socially significant activity. Any meaningful discussion of music *as music* has to address this twofold presence.

Related, but not identical, is the division made between programme music and abstract or autonomous music. While there are clear indications that some of Webern's music prior to World War I involves programmatic elements, on the whole his music is not programmatic in the conventional sense. However, this in no way means that it does not make associative references or present musical materials imbued with distinct extra-musical associations. I have made use throughout my discussion of the idea of a musical 'topic', a term I borrow gratefully (if loosely) from Kofi Agawu,