

1 Introduction

JENNIFER SHAW AND JOSEPH AUNER

This Cambridge Companion provides an introduction to the central works, writings, and ideas of Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951). Few would challenge the contention that Schoenberg is one of the most important figures in twentieth-century music, though whether his ultimate achievement or influence is for good or ill is still hotly debated. There are those champions who regard as essential his works, theories, and signature ideas such as “the emancipation of the dissonance,” and “composition with twelve tones related only to one another,” just as there are numerous critics who would cite precisely the same evidence to argue that Schoenberg is responsible for having led music astray.

No doubt many readers will take up this volume with some measure of trepidation; for concertgoers, students, and musicians, the name Schoenberg can still carry a certain negative charge. And while the music of other early modernist twentieth-century composers who have preceded Schoenberg into the ranks of the Cambridge Companions – including Debussy, Bartók, Stravinsky, and even Schoenberg’s pupil Alban Berg – could be regarded as having achieved something of a state of artistic normalcy, Schoenberg’s music for many remains beyond the pale. It is not our purpose here to bring Schoenberg in from the cold or to make him more accessible by showing that the alleged difficulty, obscurity, fractiousness, and even unlovability of his music are mistaken. On the contrary, much of his music – indeed almost all of his creative output, be it theoretical, literary, or in the visual arts – could be characterized to some degree as oppositional, critical, and unafraid of provoking discomfort. He began his *Theory of Harmony* specifically by challenging what he characterized as “comfort as a philosophy of life,” with its pursuit of the “least possible commotion,” arguing instead that “only activity, movement is productive.”¹

But this passage also points in turn to what has been much less understood, namely the degree to which Schoenberg’s contrarian impulse was driven by what was ultimately a productive intent, aimed at reforming, rebuilding, extending, and ameliorating all aspects of musical life. Reductive and monolithic views of Schoenberg have obscured the range of issues, problems, and developments with which he sought to intervene over the course of a long life that spanned late nineteenth-century Vienna, Berlin of

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the Weimar Republic, and Los Angeles émigré culture from the 1930s to the early 1950s. Yet it is our contention, as demonstrated by many of the essays in this collection, that what has kept Schoenberg and his music interesting, provocative, and problematic for well over a century is precisely his profound engagement with the musical traditions he inherited and transformed, with the broad range of musical and artistic developments during his lifetime he critiqued and incorporated, and with the fundamental cultural, social, and political disruptions through which he lived. The evidence of this engagement can be found in the pages of his scores, his published writings, and through the vast archive of his correspondence, library, sketches, writings, and paintings that he collected and cataloged throughout his life, much of which is now available through the Arnold Schönberg Center in Vienna to anyone with an internet connection.

That such a case still needs to be made a hundred years after Schoenberg first confronted audiences with his musical “air from another planet,” as evoked by the text for the last movement of his String Quartet No. 2 from 1908, can be attributed to many factors, but perhaps most directly to the composer’s own self-presentation. In 1911 Schoenberg published a rather rude aphorism that would seem to sum up his problematic position in the musical life not only of that period, but for much of the century that would follow:

The artist never has a relationship with the world, but rather always against it; he turns his back on it, just as it deserves. But his most fervent wish is to be so independent, that he can proudly call out to it: Elemia, Elem-ia!²

Here we have a distillation of many of the characteristics that have shaped the reception of Schoenberg’s music and thought: a self-imposed isolation, a disdain for an uncomprehending public, and a seemingly intentional difficulty and obscurity that even if unraveled turns out to be something unpleasant. Indeed, the mysterious final word “Elemia” appears in no dictionary, but is a reference to the German acronym “L. m. i. A.,” which could be translated, somewhat delicately, as “Kiss my ass.”

And of course, many audiences, critics, and other composers have been more than ready to return the insult. Richard Strauss’s remark in a letter to Alma Mahler from the time of the aphorism, “I believe that it would be better for him to be shoveling snow than scrawling on music paper,” sets the tone for a hundred years of critics who have repeatedly proclaimed Schoenberg’s incompetence, irrelevance, and misguidedness.³ Indeed, if on no other account, Schoenberg’s continuing relevance is demonstrated by the rivers of ink spilt by those who have sought, once and for all, to prove his irrelevance. But Schoenberg’s advocates, too, have often accepted his claims of isolation. For Theodor Adorno, the degree to

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which he heard Schoenberg's works as severing "the last communication with the listener" and becoming a music into which "no social function falls," is a measure of its ultimate authenticity.⁴ Adorno's very influential interpretation of Schoenberg's music as "the surviving message of despair from the shipwrecked" resonates more broadly with accounts of modernism in general that emphasize its quest for autonomy, its break from everyday life, and its "adversary stance" to bourgeois culture.⁵

But it is ironic that Schoenberg's antisocial aphorism appeared in a very visible place in the *Gutmann Concert Calendar*, published by the noted impresario Emil Gutmann, who was responsible for the 1910 premiere of Mahler's Eighth Symphony and who played an important role in the commission of *Pierrot lunaire* by the actress-singer Albertine Zehme and the subsequent extensive tour of the work. Schoenberg mentions Gutmann in a 1912 diary entry describing a concert of Ferruccio Busoni's music that gives a vivid sense of his active engagement in the rich musical life of Berlin:

made the acquaintance of [Serge] Koussevitzky. Gutmann dragged me to him. He wants to perform *Pelleas* in Petersburg and Moscow next year. Would be very nice. Hopefully. At least this year foreign countries are starting to take some rather keen interest in me. In two weeks, says K. they will do my IInd Quartet in Petersburg . . . Went to Heidelberger Restaurant with Gutmann, [Emil] Hertzka, [Anton] Webern, and [Edward] Clark after the concert. Gutmann in very high spirits. But is supposed to have sworn (!!)

to perform the *Gurrelieder* in the fall. We shall see. Hertzka beamed!⁶

Reading this rather dizzying display of name-dropping (including a famous conductor, Schoenberg's publisher, and two of his students), it will come as less of a surprise that Schoenberg planned an autobiography to be entitled "Life-Story in Encounters" that would "present all persons with whom I have been in contact, in so far as their relationship to me is of some interest."⁷ The list of names he assembled counts more than 250, in such categories as "Performers," "Musicians, Painters, Poets, Writers," "Publishers," and "My Friendships"; surprisingly, in light of Schoenberg's reputation for irascibility, there are only two censorious categories: "Thieves" and "Rascals," with only eight names between them. For a composer who is often interpreted from the perspective of the character of the isolated, misunderstood prophet Moses seeking purity in the wasteland, as depicted in his opera *Moses und Aron*, Schoenberg's encounters could populate a small town. Among the musicians, painters, poets, and writers he includes on this list are Gustav Mahler, Alexander Zemlinsky, Richard Strauss, Max Reger, Hans Pfitzner, Ferruccio Busoni, Max Schillings, Paul Hindemith, Franz Schreker, Ernst Krenek, Ernst Toch,

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Igor Stravinsky, Darius Milhaud, Maurice Ravel, Arthur Honegger, Charles Koechlin, Heinrich Schenker, Leopold Godowski, Franz Lehár, Alfredo Casella, Gian Francesco Malipiero, Ernest Bloch, Eusebius Mandyczewski, Artur Schnabel, Anton Bruckner, Pablo Casals, Erich Korngold, Fritz Kreisler, Oskar Kokoschka, Jascha Heifetz, Carl Moll, Gustav Klimt, Adolf Loos, Wassily Kandinsky, Max Liebermann, Thomas Mann, Heinrich Mann, Franz Werfel, Peter Altenberg, Karl Kraus, Richard Dehmel, Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo Hofmannsthal, and many others.

Many of the chapters in this book deal with Schoenberg's intensive encounters with these and other figures, including the chapters by Jennifer Shaw, who provides an overview of finished and unfinished collaborative works from throughout his life, Craig De Wilde on Schoenberg's interactions with Strauss, Elizabeth Keathley on Schoenberg's productive partnership with Marie Pappenheim for the opera *Erwartung*, Op. 17, Richard Kurth, who considers Albertine Zehme's influence on the vocal writing in *Pierrot lunaire*, and Joy Calico who discusses Schoenberg's complex relationship with his student Hanns Eisler.

Schoenberg's most profound and long-lasting encounters, as Calico argues, were through his many students in Europe and the United States. In addition to his direct involvement with a large number of students, Schoenberg also published many articles and books concerning the theory and practice of teaching, and still more of his teaching materials have been published posthumously. Through his direct impact, and even more through the teaching activities of his students, including influential performers, conductors, administrators, and teachers, the impact of his ideas and music has been vast, including on many universities in North America and the United Kingdom, such as the University of Southern California, University of California, Los Angeles, Black Mountain College, North Carolina, the Tanglewood Music Center in Massachusetts, New York's New School, and Morley College, London, and stretching from the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music, Berlin's University of Arts, North German Broadcasting in Hamburg, the BBC, Covent Garden, Australia's Elizabethan Trust Orchestra, Hammer Films in London, and the film industry in Hollywood.

As the list cited above makes clear, Schoenberg's encounters were by no means limited to musicians, but included many leading artists and intellectuals in Germany and Austria. His closest contacts among painters were Oskar Kokoschka, Wassily Kandinsky, and Richard Gerstl, whose portrait of Schoenberg appears on the cover of this book, but he had dealings with many others including Carl Moll (1861–1945), the stepfather of Alma Mahler and a Secessionist painter in the circle around Gustav Klimt. A keen inventor

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and designer of card games, board games, and small machines (such as his own bookbinding machine), Schoenberg also painted and drew throughout his life. His most intensive activity as a painter coincided with the years of his pursuit of an ideal of direct and intuitive emotional expression, 1908–12, when his comparative lack of technical training as a painter seems to have permitted a kind of spontaneity that he struggled to achieve in his composition. The first one-man exhibition of his works took place in 1910 at the Heller Bookshop in Vienna, and the following year his paintings were included in the first of Kandinsky's *Blue Rider* exhibitions. Contemporary accounts of Schoenberg frequently mentioned his paintings along with his musical works. Hundreds of his paintings and drawings survive, including many self-portraits, "visions," and "gazes" (ranging from the more explicitly expressionistic self-portraits to nearly abstract works), portraits (mostly of family and acquaintances), caricatures, landscapes, stage settings, and still-life compositions.⁸

The intensity of Schoenberg's encounter with Kandinsky is evident in its impact on both artists. Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and others in Kandinsky's Berlin circle attended an all-Schoenberg concert in Munich on January 2, 1911 at which Schoenberg's Op. 11 piano pieces were performed, as well as a number of his tonal songs and his two string quartets. Schoenberg did not attend, but Gutmann, who had organized the concert, told him that it had been "A great and loud success . . . there was some opposition following the piano pieces, but these really need to be heard more than once to be understood."⁹ In fact, it seems there was loud applause after the songs and a mixture of applause and hissing after the Op. 11 pieces. This was a concert of contrasts. One of the songs performed was Schoenberg's "Erwartung" (Expectation), Op. 2, No. 1 (1899), a setting for vocal soloist and pianist of a text by one of Schoenberg's favorite poets, Richard Dehmel. Schoenberg's Op. 2 is highly effective and, to his Viennese audiences, reasonably familiar territory. Schoenberg's profound engagement with the German lied tradition is explored in the chapter on the songs by Walter Frisch, as well as in Richard Kurth's discussion of *Pierrot lunaire* and its allusions to Schumann's *Dichterliebe* and other songs. In contrast, the Op. 11 piano pieces, which Schoenberg composed in February 1909, were heard as radically new works. As Ethan Haimo charts in his chapter, this was only one of a series of works from these years in which Schoenberg tested the limits of comprehensibility. For Kandinsky and Marc, it was the Op. 11 piano pieces that made the strongest impression. After the concert, Marc wrote to a colleague, "Can you imagine a music in which tonality is completely suspended? I was constantly reminded of Kandinsky's large *Composition*, which also permits no trace of tonality . . . and also of

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Kandinsky's 'jumping spots' on hearing this music, which allows each tone to stand on its own (a kind of white canvas between the spots of color!).¹⁰

Kandinsky's response was even more direct. He first made two sketches of the concert, both of which depict the grand piano dominating the space with the audience members crowded around it. He then turned this into his painting entitled *Impression III: Concert* where the details have become more abstract; the dramatic effect of the music translated by Kandinsky into blocks, columns, and streaks of color. Kandinsky, who had not yet met Schoenberg, wrote to him after the concert that their radical ideas about music and color shared much in common: "The independent progress through their own destinies, the independent life of the individual voices in your compositions, is exactly what I am trying to find in my paintings."¹¹

This began an important artistic friendship and collaboration that lasted into the early 1920s. The relationship with Kandinsky is also taken up in Julian Johnson's chapter on *Herzgewächse*, Op. 20 (Heart's Foliage), a brief work for voice and chamber ensemble from 1912, first published in Kandinsky's *Blue Rider Almanac*. Johnson discusses the song in terms of a "seismic change in the geology of modernism" evident in the emergence of a metaphysical dimension that is so fundamental to Schoenberg's development in the years 1908–23, between the break with tonality and the twelve-tone works. Richard Kurth's chapter on Schoenberg's unfinished opera *Moses und Aron* similarly emphasizes Schoenberg's willingness to test the limits of comprehensibility as a way to point toward an otherwise unrepresentable metaphysical dimension.

These contrasting styles of Romantic and radical composition, sometimes within the same work, combined with sharply divided responses from audiences and critics to those works, form the background not only to the composer's activities and development but also to strong reactions to performances of his music that continue today. A particularly important work in Schoenberg's development was his First Chamber Symphony, Op. 9, composed in 1906 and premiered in Vienna the following year. Its rich and complex harmonic language, although tonal, is at the very edge of tonality; Robert Morgan's chapter delves into theoretical issues around what Schoenberg described as "fluctuating tonality" in the context of analyses of two songs from the Eight Songs, Op. 6 completed just before he began work on the Chamber Symphony. Schoenberg never stopped composing tonal music, and, as Severine Neff shows in her study of his Second Chamber Symphony, Op. 38, started right after the first, but not completed until 1939, he was stimulated by the challenge of reconciling tonality with his later compositional approaches.

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Characteristic of Schoenberg's compulsion to engage with and transform whatever genre he encountered, the Chamber Symphony is not really a symphony as his audiences would have understood the Beethovenian model of a large-scale, multi-movement work (in fact Schoenberg never completed a full symphony, although he began plans for two during his life). Yet neither was it conceived on the typically more modest scale of a chamber work, but as a work for a small symphony – as in the sense of instruments (in this case fifteen of them) sounding together – with a focus on the kinds of solo textures usually found in chamber music. In other words, there are inherent tensions both in the hybrid genre Schoenberg chose to write and in his harmonic language – and these tensions are played out in all aspects of the piece, through its complex rhythmic writing, its network of solo instrumental lines, doublings and dense *tutti* parts, and its very broad range of dynamics, registers, and expression. Although written as a one-movement work, Schoenberg himself marked five sections in the score as Sonata-Allegro, Scherzo, Elaboration, Adagio, and Recapitulation and Finale, and while there are some extreme demands made of the players, this is a reasonably accessible piece for audiences to listen to: themes and motives do return (although rarely is anything repeated in exactly the same way) and, especially in the Adagio, there are some exquisitely beautiful solos.

Throughout his life the chamber music tradition offered a particularly fertile resource, as Michael Cherlin discusses in his chapter on the very popular *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night) for string sextet of 1899 and other chamber music for strings. He was also active in writing choral music, including his 1907 a cappella chorus *Friede auf Erden* (Peace on Earth) which premiered (in a version with a small string ensemble) in Vienna in 1911, conducted by Franz Schreker. One of his most popular works is *Gurrelieder* (Songs of Gurre), a dramatic cantata that he began in 1900, completed in 1911 and which premiered (also under Schreker's direction) to great popular and critical acclaim in 1913 – and which, like the First Chamber Symphony, continues to receive mainstream performances today.

In writing for the huge choruses that fill the stage with *Gurrelieder*, Schoenberg could draw on his own experience conducting and composing for several suburban workers' choirs, which began shortly after leaving his job as a bank clerk in 1895 and continued through his first move to Berlin in 1901.¹² In Berlin Schoenberg became involved in another activity difficult to reconcile with the image of the isolated, elitist Schoenberg. From December 1901 until July 1902 he worked as music director of the famous *Überbrettel* Cabaret in Berlin, one of the many artistic cabarets aimed at the fashionable urban intelligentsia. In addition to writing his own cabaret lieder, a large part

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of his job there had been to make arrangements of existing songs (mainly about alcohol and sex!). In fact, Schoenberg made arrangements of his own and others' compositions throughout his career and, in particular, he spent a good part of his military service during the 1914–18 war arranging patriotic songs and marches for Austrian military bands. Schoenberg's experience of the war was directly linked to his compositional output. In a short note that appeared in a Berlin newspaper in 1916 about a proposed performance of an expanded orchestral version of the First Chamber Symphony it was announced that:

Arnold Schoenberg, the most modern of the modern composers has been conscripted into the army reserves in Austria. At this time Schoenberg's most recent, still unfinished symphony, was supposed to have had its premiere in Prague under Alexander Zemlinsky. The premiere did not take place at the behest of the composer. In a letter to Zemlinsky, Schoenberg indicated that he would like to postpone the premiere until after the War. He would not want during the War to be the reason for new attacks and hostilities, as could well result from this symphony. When peace again comes, he will no longer steer clear of such attacks – peacetime for him shall again be wartime.¹³

This newspaper report points to Schoenberg's increasing interest in the public dimension of his music during the war years. That he would have postponed the work with an eye toward what the audience's response might have been – or even proposed that as an excuse – marks a significant change from his pre-war aesthetic when he accepted and embraced the fact that his music would only be appreciated by limited circles of like-minded listeners.

The war itself undoubtedly had a significant impact on how Schoenberg saw his social role. His experience of military service (for even men in their forties like Schoenberg were called up for compulsory military service for the Austro-Hungarian forces during World War I) is most directly evident in the jovial chamber work *Die eiserne Brigade* (The Iron Brigade), a march and trio for piano quintet which he wrote in August 1916 for an evening party for recruits at the Bruck an der Leitha military school. By using trumpet signals and other music based on the military drills familiar to all Austro-Hungarian army recruits, Schoenberg took pains to make music that would be readily comprehensible to its intended audience. Attention to Schoenberg's new concern for the audience can clarify the function of such projects as the Verein für Musikalische Privataufführungen (Society for Private Musical Performances), which presented over one hundred concerts over the three years it operated in Vienna (1919–21), with Schoenberg as president and many of his current and former students as members. While the "private" aspect is often emphasized, its purposes were to build the audience for modern music and reform

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concert life by challenging the power of critics, eliminating what was identified in the prospectus as the “corrupting influence of publicity,” and to avoid the disruptions that had accompanied many performances.¹⁴

Schoenberg’s relationship to the public is also bound up with the origins of the twelve-tone method, as is made clear in the history of the massive Choral Symphony that he began in 1914 just before the outbreak of the war. It is in the fragmentary sketches for this work that Schoenberg first used a twelve-tone row and explored ways to generate material by using inversions, retrogrades, and other twelve-tone techniques. In a letter to Alma Mahler he described his vision of a work which was to include seven movements, an orchestra of 300, and a chorus of at least 2,000:

It is now my intention after a long time to once again write a large work. A kind of symphony. I have already felt it; I can see it already, now perhaps this summer it will come to something. For a long time I have been yearning for a style for large forms. My most recent development has denied this to me. Now I feel it again and I believe it will be something completely new, more than that, something that will say a great deal. There will be choirs and solo voices; that is certainly nothing new. Today that is already allowed to us. But what I can feel of the content (this is not yet completely clear to me) is perhaps new in our time: here I will manage to give personal things an objective, general form, behind which the author as person may withdraw.¹⁵

In light of the subsequent history of twelve-tone composition – in particular its adoption and transformation by composers like Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Milton Babbitt after World War II – it is common to characterize twelve-tone composition as the quintessential elitist, insider art. Thus it is striking that it was in a large-scale public work like the Choral Symphony that Schoenberg first systematically pursued the new ways of thinking that led to the development of the twelve-tone method. Moreover, in contrast to an image of twelve-tone music as cerebral and abstract, the sketches for the Symphony indicate that Schoenberg’s new compositional tools were closely linked to the eclectic selection of texts he had chosen, and to his ideas about spirituality, death, transcendence, and immortality.¹⁶ The linkage between such metaphysical concerns, the twelve-tone method, and Schoenberg’s central concept of the “Idea” (*Gedanke*) is the subject of Joseph Auner’s chapter on Schoenberg’s row tables. During 1917–18, while his Choral Symphony evolved into his oratorio *Die Jakobsleiter* (Jacob’s Ladder), Schoenberg wrestled with defining the idea of comprehensibility in an unfinished theoretical work entitled *Coherence, Counterpoint, Instrumentation, Instruction in Form*, a major focus of which is on techniques the composer must use “if the author addresses himself to many listeners or to those of limited capacity.”¹⁷ By April 1923 Schoenberg had completed three works that chart

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the transition from what he called “working with tones of the motive,” to the first twelve-tone pieces, the five Piano Pieces Op. 23, the Serenade Op. 24 for chamber ensemble and baritone, and the Suite for Piano Op. 25.

In the postwar years, Schoenberg’s often critical engagement with the many new trends was shaped by what he perceived as his obligation to reinforce and extend the influence of German music. Between 1918 and 1922 Schoenberg arranged popular tonal pieces, some in the style of his cabaret songs, for teaching purposes and for the benefit of the Society for Private Musical Performances as well as for his own family’s entertainment. He also agreed to a request from Josef Stransky, conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, to orchestrate two of Bach’s chorale preludes. The first of these Schoenberg completed in April 1922, the second in June 1922, and the New York Philharmonic performed them on November 7 that year. In both arrangements Schoenberg extensively modified Bach’s scores, not just by means of contrasts of register, articulation, timbre, and tone doublings, but also by the addition of harmonic tones and new contrapuntal lines. In both pieces the changes primarily emphasize motivic coherence, even to the extent, as scholars have discussed, of creating motivic connections that, in Bach’s original settings, were “not at all present.”¹⁸ Schoenberg’s decision to arrange organ chorale preludes by Bach rather than any of his own works – tonal or free-atonal – must have been guided both by his desire to reclaim Germany’s superior place in music, as he had claimed in his 1919 *Guidelines* for the new Ministry of the Arts, but also to emphasize his own connections to the German musical tradition.¹⁹

The image of Schoenberg as the isolated prophet with his back turned to the world was further established by the post-World-War-II avant-garde who sought a music free from tradition, as Richard Toop discusses in Chapter 18. There has been a related emphasis in discussions of Schoenberg’s works from the 1920s and 1930s of twelve-tone works such as the Third String Quartet, Op. 30 (1927), the Variations for Orchestra, Op. 31 (1928), and his opera *Moses und Aron*. But as Peter Tregear discusses in his chapter on Schoenberg’s “opera of the times” *Von heute auf morgen* (From Today to Tomorrow) and other works, there is plentiful evidence of Schoenberg’s engagement with the latest developments in the works of the younger generation, including Kurt Weill, Paul Hindemith, and Ernst Krenek, with their connections to popular music, contemporary life, and the impact of film and radio.

Once the National Socialists’ policies came into effect in 1933, Schoenberg, who had been a target of anti-Semitism from the early 1920s, fled Berlin with his family to Paris, where his reconversion from Lutheranism to Judaism was formally witnessed by the painter Marc