

Introduction

I was driven into paradise!
Arnold Schoenberg, Hollywood, October 9, 1934

The arrival of Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) in Southern California in September 1934 marked a milestone in the region’s cultural history.¹ The renowned composer had been a controversial figure in Europe for over three decades, attracting both admiration and fury for his musical innovations while helping to define modern music in the twentieth century.² Deeply affected by the increasing antisemitism in Europe during the 1920s, and faced with the rising scourge of National Socialism in 1933, he left Germany with his wife Gertrud and young daughter Nuria, staying in Paris during the summer before sailing in October for the United States. He first spent almost a year on the East Coast, and the transition was not easy. While suffering through the cold and damp of Boston and New York, Schoenberg made the decision to move with his family a final time to the warmer climate of Los Angeles, where he hoped to obtain an academic post, to teach composers from the film industry, and to improve his health. It was a wise choice. As one of the first European exiles of the 1930s to venture so far west, Schoenberg eventually referred to himself as “a California composer.”³

This book is about Southern California Modernism and Schoenberg’s multiple contributions to that movement. Contrary to how some scholars have portrayed the composer, I do not believe Schoenberg worked in a vacuum or in isolation while in exile, but on the contrary was deeply engaged with the cultural and intellectual environment in which he found himself in California.⁴ This is not to suggest that he was contented with his life in America, or even that he was satisfied with his achievements, but that he made consistent efforts throughout his American exile to remain connected with other artists, even during the very difficult final years of declining health and waning physical energy. As a key participant in Southern California Modernism, Schoenberg had strong associations with exiles as well as with native-born American artists and students.

The exile community in Southern California was significant. Out of 104,098 German and Austrian refugees who arrived in the United States

between 1933 and 1941, an estimated 15,000 émigrés came to Southern California.⁵ Many were famous writers, directors, and composers, who came to the region either because of the entertainment industry, the Mediterranean-like climate, or because of the growing circle of émigrés themselves. Writers such as Thomas Mann, Salka Viertel, and Bertolt Brecht; directors Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, and Billy Wilder; and philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, to name only a few, left a deep and lasting impression on the arts and culture of the region.⁶ Widening this circle further, although far less numerous, were émigrés not from German-speaking lands, including composers Igor Stravinsky and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, writer Christopher Isherwood, and director Michael Curtiz. According to historian Gerald Nash, these and other exiles “made a profound cultural contribution to the West and the nation . . . Constituting the cream of the European intelligentsia, they brought an intellectual maturity and sophistication to cultural life in the West that it had previously lacked.”⁷

Perhaps not surprisingly, it seemed by the early 1940s that Los Angeles was overrun by exiles, especially German-speaking immigrants. Certainly native-born American artists thought so, and even some of the exiles themselves. There is a story about Otto Preminger, who arrived in 1935 after escaping the Nazis and subsequently achieved success in Hollywood. He was playing cards at a country club with two other émigrés, who suddenly started speaking together in Hungarian. Preminger allegedly exclaimed, “Wait a minute! This is Los Angeles. This is the United States. We’ve come here from Europe, we’ve found physical safety here, this country has welcomed us to itself, this great city has welcomed us, we’ve found work in the motion picture industries and the universities and you’re sitting there speaking Hungarian. This is Los Angeles. Speak German!”⁸

Like many of the exiles, Schoenberg’s initial view of Southern California was enthusiastic, even ecstatic, because he believed he had found paradise. He expressed this view vividly in one of the first speeches he gave after his arrival.⁹ As a Jew who had returned to his faith (he had converted to Christianity in 1898 but reconverted to Judaism in 1933), Schoenberg addressed a group in Hollywood on the problems that Jews faced in fascist Germany.¹⁰ He had come

from one country into another, where neither dust nor better food is rationed and where I am allowed to go on my feet, where my head can be erect, where kindness and cheerfulness is dominating, and where to live is a joy and to be an expatriate of another country is the grace of God. I was driven into paradise!

While grateful for the safety and opportunity that he found, however, it became clear that all was *not* paradise. One of the claims of this book is that Schoenberg, like many exiles, faced harsh struggles involving his art, his faith, and his identity that were difficult to overcome. As Adorno famously wrote, exiles experienced a “damaged life,” and one “does well to acknowledge it to himself, if he wishes to avoid being cruelly apprised of it behind the tightly-closed doors of his self-esteem.”¹¹ Although he had an often tense relationship with Adorno, Schoenberg may well have agreed, because he shared with other exiles a deeply conflicted view of his profession, and of his very identity, in Southern California. As a composer of “serious” music, how could he survive in a region that seemed to revel in commercialism? As a Jewish exile from Europe, how did he deal with the dilemma of essentially representing the musical culture of Germany and Austria – countries that had utterly rejected Jews? And since antimodernists abounded in Southern California as elsewhere, how could he overcome stubborn obstacles in the performance and reception of his music? This book argues that Schoenberg, like his fellow exiles, navigated between American support for European modernists and a suspicion of those same artists, both on artistic and political grounds. This dialectic resulted in a troubled perception of America for the exiles and the reconstruction of homeland in the host country.¹²

One problem for those exiles who identified with the modernist movement concerned their very future as artists.¹³ By the 1930s Europe was sliding into political and economic chaos, and many artists and intellectuals looked on in horror, in part because there seemed nothing they could do to stop it. Jewish artists, and some non-Jews with a modernist bent, found their work in German-speaking countries labeled “degenerate” (*entartet*).¹⁴ Adding to this ominous trend was the split between those modernists who opposed fascism and those who adamantly supported it. This was as true in literature as it was in music; German fascist writers sought to invoke “a new national community,” according to Russell Berman, which represented a clear threat to democratic and liberalist ideals.¹⁵ In short, modernists by the 1930s seem to have lost their way. “Was modernism no longer a viable option,” Ehrhard Bahr asks, “or could changes be implemented to prevent modernism from becoming reactionary?”¹⁶

In this book I consider some of Schoenberg’s solutions to the problems that modernist composers faced. Teaching first at the University of Southern California (USC, 1935–36), then as a tenured professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA, 1936–44), Schoenberg explored several

ways of overcoming aesthetic challenges to modernist ideas while proving surprisingly flexible to innovation and experimentation relatively late in his career (at the time of his appointment at UCLA on July 1, 1936, he was only a few months shy of his 62nd birthday).¹⁷ Exile seemed to offer new opportunities to revise not only his own approaches to composition and teaching but also how others perceived him as an artist. In producing twenty compositions in exile, he returned at times to composing tonal works and also integrated tonal chords in twelve-tone pieces, thereby expanding the perception in America of what composers considered “modernist”; he wrote music that made overt, political statements that directly confronted events from the era; and he composed several pieces that expressed Jewish belief and practice, juxtaposing the modern with the traditional (see Appendix 1).¹⁸ In dealing with challenges that confronted modernist composers during the 1930s and 1940s, Schoenberg was not about to stand on the sidelines.

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Let us begin with definitions. Southern California Modernism formed part of a wider, international aesthetic movement from roughly the 1880s through the 1950s in which artists sought a conscious break with the past through experimentation, debate, and confrontation.¹⁹ It involved all of the arts, making it a truly interdisciplinary movement: architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, photography, film, dance, and music. Several scholars have tried to explain what modernism precisely was. While admitting that modernism “is far easier to exemplify than to define,” Peter Gay asserts that what modernists shared “indisputably in common was the conviction that the untried is markedly superior to the familiar, the rare to the ordinary, the experimental to the routine.”²⁰ Similarly, in her pioneering work on modernism in New York during the 1920s, musicologist Carol Oja argues that “the beauty of modernism was that it encompassed no dominating center or clear line of authority . . . Yet it stood for one basic principle: iconoclastic, irreverent innovation, sometimes irreconcilable with the historic traditions that preceded it.”²¹

By contrast, Joel Dinerstein addresses the identity crisis that “American modernism” arguably had, since it arose in part out of the ferment of ideas that originated in Vienna before fanning out to Paris, London, and Berlin. Building on the work of William R. Everdell, whose book *The First Moderns* examined the intellectual and cultural upheavals that artists in these European capitals experienced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dinerstein sees American modernism as a response to technological and industrial progress, thus equating the movement “with the embrace of mobile identities.” Like Gay he recognizes the

problems in defining modernism, settling on the notion that “[t]o be ‘modern’ is to undergo perpetual change,” while emphasizing the transformative impact the movement had on literature, dance, and music in particular. Precisely why this movement fell into an identity crisis Dinerstein does not explain, but he does suggest that discord over the themes of race, class, and gender in America reflected an uncertainty with modernity in general and modernism in particular. Above all, modernism reflected an almost restless sense of experimentation that resulted in “self-liberation, autonomous creativity, and cultural rebellion.”²²

This belief in experimentalism and cultural rebellion characterized modernism in Southern California as well, which arose in the early twentieth century and encompassed widely different art forms. It first occurred in the visual arts, a movement that cultural historian Philip Ethington has referred to as Southern California Modernism, and to which I believe we can add the performing arts in which there were common goals. This movement comprised men and women, American and émigré, who sought nothing less than a transformation of the arts in Southern California. It was also ethnically diverse: modernists came from Japan and Mexico as well as from Europe and the United States. As Ethington puts it, “Southern California Modernism ranks as one of the major contributions of Los Angeles to global culture.” It remains, he asserts, “a key example of the cultural creativity of cities.”²³

One of the central cities in this movement was Hollywood. There is little doubt that the entertainment industry was one of the magnets that drew artists, modernist or not, to Southern California. As one of the few cities during the Great Depression to offer artists a living wage, and even highly remunerative positions, Hollywood necessarily plays an important role in this story. I use the term “Hollywood” in both a geographic and metaphorical sense. It was a physical space, a city of some 185,000 people when the Schoenbergs arrived and the site of eight major studios.²⁴ Yet Hollywood was also a metaphor for the entertainment industry more widely, and it was this meaning that appealed to Schoenberg most. The headquarters of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), United Artists, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) Pictures, each with which Schoenberg had some contact, were no longer within the boundaries of Hollywood, but they certainly still belonged to the idea of Hollywood. Although not all modernists in Southern California were drawn to Hollywood, I believe we can refer to “Hollywood Modernism” as having a significant place within the wider movement of Southern California Modernism, whether as a source for musicians, composers, patrons, or audiences.

By exile I am referring to those immigrants from Europe who were forced to flee their homeland during the 1930s and 1940s.²⁵ Immigrants had been coming to Southern California long before the arrival of the exiles, of course, and modernist artists of the early twentieth century, such as Viennese architects Rudolf Schindler and Richard Neutra and Mexican muralist Alfredo Ramos Martinez, made decided contributions to the development of early modernism in the region. The difference here is that while most émigré artists from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came freely, the exiles did not. The very notion of exile, with its violent wrenching away from the homeland, meant that the artists who fled fascism had direct experience with political or religious persecution or both, which often had a direct impact on their art. That experience strongly colored the exiles' understanding not only of their political and cultural environment in America but of their perception of the role of the artist within that environment.

The study of exile forms part of immigration studies as a type of forced migration.²⁶ People migrate for different reasons; in exile there is a sense of permanence, since it is often accompanied by a loss of citizenship. As one scholar notes, exile "is primarily caused by external forces: threat, danger, and social exclusion."²⁷ Such hardships were often coupled with severe financial straits for many, like writers Heinrich Mann, Alfred Döblin, and Bertolt Brecht, all of whom "struggled to eke out an existence in their small bungalows and apartments," as cultural historian Jarrell Jackman phrased it.²⁸ Little wonder, then, that the connection between exile and misery is evident in the German word *Elend*, which is linguistically related to the Old Germanic *eli-lenti*, meaning "in a foreign country."²⁹ The position of exile could become precarious, even agonizing: the sudden loss in identity, intensified by a loss of statehood. Edward Said thus referred to exile as a "condition of terminal loss" or as "a discontinuous state of being." The hardship, he asserts, is that "*nothing* is secure. Exile is a jealous state."³⁰

Writing about exile, both by those experiencing it and scholars recognizing it as a specific genre, has in itself a long history. Indeed, exiled writers created what classics scholar Jo-Marie Claassen calls a "myth of exile" – the result of writers communicating through books or letters their fate of exclusion from their homeland.³¹ Ancient Roman writers such as Ovid, Cicero, and Boethius, all of whom were forced to flee despotic rule, spoke of exile as a political tool that Roman emperors commonly wielded as a form of punishment; we have inherited the word "exile," after all, from the Latin *exilium*. Because of the loss of all political power, Claassen explains, exile was historically useful to rulers as a "tool in the exertion of criminal

justice as well as in politics.”³² This point relates to Paul Michael Lützeler’s notion of “cultural and political power motives” in the expulsion of a people from their homeland. From ancient times to the present, he argues, exiled artists and writers have fled as a result of political persecution, which has historically impacted their writing and art.³³ In a very real sense, as Claassen asserts, “[e]xile is a political act.”³⁴

That perception, I believe, directly influenced the work of exiles in expressive culture in Southern California during the 1930s and 1940s and the communication of their ideas through the literary, performing, and visual arts.³⁵ European artists fleeing fascism, similar to Mexican artists fleeing the regime of President Plutarco Elías Calles during the same period, could not stay silent because they were adamant about the importance that the arts should have in society – a role that had been engrained in them as cultural figures in Europe and Mexico. As working artists they had to continue to create, and like Schoenberg they explored new forms of expression in exile while dealing with the constant challenges that exile posed. This situation underlines Lawrence Levine’s assertion in his classic study *Highbrow/Lowbrow* that culture “is a process, not a fixed condition,” which emphasizes the dynamic rather than static nature of the arts.³⁶ To what extent the exiles participated in American culture, and were able to work with native-born American artists, frankly determined their degree of success (or perception of failure) in their new homeland. For many exiles in Southern California, fleeing from the Nazis meant the search for a new home, often in a land that was to them utterly foreign. It is to this group that Arnold Schoenberg belonged, and we can view his work in the region’s modernist movement through the prism of becoming an American artist, or in his words, “a California composer.”³⁷ To compose meant to find new audiences both locally and nationally, and the degree of acceptance of his ideas and music by American audiences, in turn, directly determined his sense of belonging to his adopted country.

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Schoenberg provides an intriguing case study in American cultural and intellectual history, and there are several reasons to consider more fully the career of this artist in exile. First, as an internationally recognized and highly respected composer and theorist, he readily became a driving force in the modernist movement in Southern California. Second, as a teacher, he was able to communicate his ideas to the next generation – the gift that keeps on giving – and thus attracted students who later made key contributions to modern music in America, such as John Cage and Lou Harrison. Third, his work and ideas evolved considerably in exile, in part

because of a constant interest in experimentation, driven by a desire never to repeat himself. Finally, his experiences as a Jew in America and at American universities yield insights in immigration and integration during a pivotal era in American history.³⁸ Overcoming barriers had formed an essential part of Schoenberg's career in Europe, and he continued to cross artistic, cultural, and even political barriers in the United States as a modernist, as a Jew, and as an exile.

His exile came after a long and often turbulent career that perhaps owed as much to Viennese modernism as it did to reactions against it. First achieving recognition in 1899 in Vienna with a stunningly original work, *Verklärte Nacht*, Op. 4 (Transfigured Night), he steadily sought to overcome theoretical problems in modern music. As a young teacher and composer in the early 1900s in Vienna, he attracted a group of highly talented and dedicated students, notably Alban Berg and Anton Webern, who came to form what scholars have called the Second Viennese School. Together they explored new frontiers of musical expression, each seeking at times to surpass the other, and they placed themselves at the musical avant-garde in a city far more comfortable with the Lieder of Franz Schubert than the atonalism of the modernists. Working against the cultural snobbery and conservatism that preferred tradition over artistic innovation, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, and their colleagues sparked at times intense debate and even fury over what modern music, and modern art in general, should represent.³⁹

Over the next two decades, Schoenberg experienced several breakthroughs in his work while also living through difficult times, both artistically and personally. Major compositions, including the String Quartet No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 7 (1905); a one-act opera, *Erwartung*, Op. 17 (Expectation, 1909); the *Gurrelieder* (Songs of Gurre, 1911); and a pivotal work for chamber ensemble, *Pierrot lunaire*, Op. 21 (Moonstruck Pierrot, 1912), steadily demonstrated a unique and powerful voice in modern music; we will consider some of his musical innovations later in the chapter.⁴⁰ Yet often equally powerful resistance to his music, at times leading to open conflict in concert halls among members of the audience, showed that many concertgoers assuredly did not embrace the innovations of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. The uproar that seemed to surround Schoenberg's music in effect arose over the future of concert music in public life, and Schoenberg and his colleagues in Austria and Germany remained steadfast and active participants in that struggle throughout the 1910s and 1920s. Schoenberg's service in World War I, his tumultuous first marriage to Mathilde Zemlinsky, and his constant search for financial stability added to

the strain of trying to become a recognized and accepted composer during this era of immense artistic and aesthetic changes in Europe.

Schoenberg's stature rose enormously with his appointment in Berlin in 1925 as Professor of Music at the Prussian Academy of the Arts.⁴¹ It is difficult to overestimate this achievement, because in a country that prized hierarchy and *Bildung*, or education, he had risen to one of Europe's most prestigious academic positions in music with no academic degrees. Rather, he was largely self-trained in theory and composition, with only a few months of formal lessons in counterpoint from a colleague, Alexander Zemlinsky (1871–1942). Moreover, the continued animosity of many colleagues against his ideas, and doubtless his Jewish ancestry as well, almost derailed his appointment. Yet almost overnight he received not only vital institutional recognition and support but also, finally, a release from financial hardship. He conducted and heard his works performed across Europe, even though his music was by no means universally accepted. Valuable commissions showed a measure of institutional support for his music, especially by New York philanthropist Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who commissioned the Third String Quartet and attended its premiere in Berlin in September 1927. In the political and economic uncertainty of Weimar Germany, experimentalism cautiously flourished, and despite his institutional position at one of Europe's leading academies of the arts, Schoenberg sought to remain part of that experimental fervor. During this time he was also able to begin recording several of his works, such as *Verklärte Nacht*, the *Suite*, Op. 29, and a humorous one-act opera, *Von heute auf morgen*, Op. 32, which enabled him to reach a far wider audience; fortunately, these recordings have survived.⁴²

His private life also appeared to be happier than before. A troubled marriage with his first wife, Mathilde Zemlinsky (sister of Alexander), produced two children: Gertrud (called Trudi, 1902–47) and Georg (called Görgi, 1906–74). Mathilde was intelligent, well educated, and a classically trained pianist, but there appeared to be unresolved difficulties between them. When she died in 1923, however, Schoenberg expressed deep remorse in a poem, entitled *Requiem*.⁴³ He subsequently married the twenty-four years younger Gertrud the following year, and they eventually had three children, with the first, Nuria, being born in Barcelona, Spain in 1932; two children were subsequently born in California: Ronald (called Ronny, b. 1937) and Lawrence (called Larry, b. 1941). In Germany, the Berlin appointment substantially improved his financial situation, which had been a constant problem during his first marriage. Gertrud, by contrast, proved highly supportive of Schoenberg's career, even working together on *Von heute auf morgen*, for

which she wrote the libretto under the pseudonym Max Blonda. Despite the political and economic upheavals that marked the Weimar Republic, which directly affected the Schoenbergs as residents in Germany during the late 1920s, the couple looked forward to a productive and happy future.

Already by 1929, however, the storm clouds in German politics had been brewing. The Depression affected Germany far greater than it did the United States, mainly because Germany's financial footing was much less secure, despite the American-led restructuring of Germany's postwar debt through the Dawes Plan. One clear sign of the malaise was unemployment, which doubled from three million in 1930 to six million in 1932, meaning that up to a third of the workforce was unemployed, compared to one quarter in the United States.⁴⁴ In some industrial centers, such as Darmstadt or Düsseldorf, the percentage of unemployed workers was far higher. The consolidation of power by the National Socialists in Germany following the March 1933 elections – despite having won less than 50 percent of the vote – made it clear to many in the opposition that they had little future in a country whose government showed immediate disrespect for the rule of law. Schoenberg witnessed this change firsthand when his colleagues at the Prussian Academy of the Arts informed him in May 1933 that he could no longer continue to teach at the institution due to his Jewish ancestry. Even Alfred Einstein, whom he had met and corresponded with briefly, was ejected from the Prussian Academy of Sciences during the same period. Rabbi Stephen Wise, with whom Schoenberg also corresponded, early on recognized these and far worse dangers confronting Jews: “I wonder whether many Jews realize,” Wise wrote to Julian Mack, co-founder of the American Jewish Congress, “that we are facing today, in 1933, a Jewish upheaval which parallels, if it does not surpass in significance, the upheaval of 1881,” when pogroms in Russia forced many Jews to flee.⁴⁵ The growing persecution of Jews, and indeed of any opponents of the Nazi regime, meant increasingly that to stay in Germany was to court disaster.

Schoenberg's identification with Judaism grew slowly but markedly during the 1920s and 1930s. Although raised as an Orthodox Jew, he converted to Christianity at the age of 24, which was by no means uncommon among Jews in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Vienna. He did not convert to Catholicism, however, which would have been the natural step for those seeking to open doors in Austria, such as composer Gustav Mahler and Schoenberg's own composition teacher Alexander Zemlinsky had done. Rather, he chose Lutheranism, for reasons still not clear; perhaps he was inspired by the example of Felix Mendelssohn, who similarly converted to Lutheranism, or perhaps secretly he always wished to remain the perennial