

Prologue

At the beginning of December 1945 I happened to visit the house owner Frau Fasching, in whose house Webern had lived. When she knew that I had been a friend of the deceased, she asked me whether I should like to see the house, and she took me to Auholz [Im Auholz 8, in Maria Enzersdorf, the Weberns' last Vienna address]. Of the beds only the iron frames remained; many of the floor boards had been burned as fuel, as well as odd pieces of the furniture. Parts of the library were on the cellar stairway, where they had been piled, in spaces between old broken fruit jars. A score of Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* (a conducting score), books, pictures were piled in a veranda of which the windows had been smashed. Many of the book covers were in tatters, or were sodden or crumpled. She [Frau Fasching] took me to the little garden house, through the roof of which the rain had drenched letters that were strewn about there. On a strip of the lawn the remnants of ashes could be seen: there scattered letters had been burnt. The rest the house owner had stuffed into coal sacks to use as kindling for her stove. I asked her to let me go through the coal sacks. There I found, mixed up with dirt, bones, dead mice, epaulettes and uniforms, upwards of a thousand letters from Webern to his wife, manuscripts, sketches, several hundred letters from Alban Berg, Arnold Schoenberg, Alma Mahler, Marx and so on. I offered to return all the things that I have described here to Webern's widow if she would visit Mödling. The letters from Berg and Schoenberg she asked me to put in order for their eventual publication. This task will be finished soon. The

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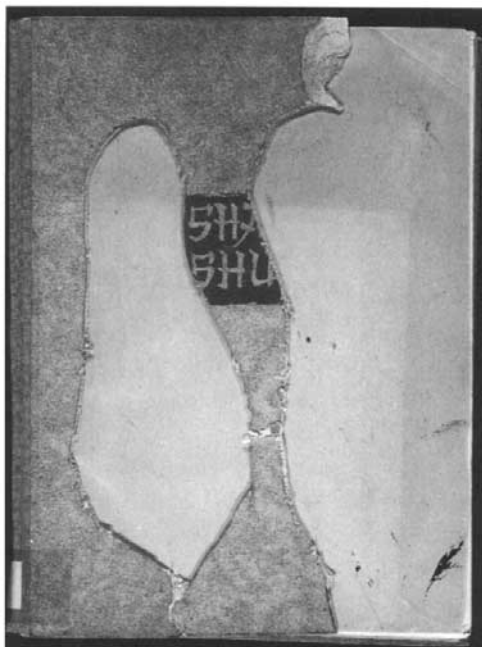
1 The garden house in Maria Enzersdorf in 1944.

Weberns' daughter-in-law had removed the library and the further remains of books by car in the previous year. Presumably everything that was saved at that time, including Webern's grand piano, is now either with the daughter-in-law or at the home of Webern's widow in Mittersill bei Zell am See, Burkhalter 31. The letters in the probably twenty coal sacks were naturally completely crumpled, much of the ink had run, many had been gnawed at by mice, and everything was all mixed up, with the several pages of individual letters in this or that sack. In many cases only fragments had survived. Another portion of the letters had been thrown on the coal heap, along with letters belonging to the other occupants of the house. The work of sorting that was done in the cellar where there was only a candle for light took many days, that of the coal sacks something like two weeks. It was unspeakably sad to see this devastation of such precious things.

Thus were the home and belongings of Anton Webern – composer, conductor and teacher; mountain climber, nature-lover and human being – described by Dr Werner Riemerschmid – actor, poet and brother-in-law of Webern's close friend Josef Hueber – in March 1947, some eighteen months after Webern's death.¹ There are a great many

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- 2 Cover of an art book from Webern's personal library from which shoe soles were cut by soldiers billeted in the Weberns' house in Maria Enzersdorf in 1945.

things about the end of this life that can only be described as 'unspeakably sad'.

Webern took a rather long time to 'grow up': though he wrote music from an early age, he was nearly forty when he finally settled into the conducting career that was to bring him modest recognition as well as badly needed income. By this time he had already been struggling for a number of years, with varying degrees of success, to support a wife and four children. But history was not to be his friend. Once achieved, this new life would last for only some dozen years before being severely curtailed by the National Socialists. In 1935, when he was fifty-two, Webern conducted his last radio broadcast in Vienna; in the following year he conducted for the last time anywhere. After the *Anschluß* in 1938² he and his music were on the proscribed

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list: Webern, who had all his life been an ardent German nationalist and for whom the sun rose and set in Vienna, could now no longer conduct, nor could his music be either performed or published in Germany or Austria. His professional life was in tatters some years before his personal worldly goods suffered that fate literally.

The death of this peace-loving and scrupulously honest man four months after the war had ended, from the bullet of a soldier who would not have been there had it not been for the black-market activities of Webern's son-in-law, was for him, finally, the last of a series of ironies. For his widow the grief would continue. And for the world, confusion. Confusion about what had really happened in Mittersill, about the fate of his belongings, about what to make of the man and his music.

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I so often make such plans, such beautiful ones – but perhaps I also suffer delusions of grandeur!

Webern to Ernst Diez, 22 July 1901

Anton Friedrich Wilhelm von Webern was born on 3 December 1883 at the home of his parents, Carl and Amalie (née Geer¹) von Webern, at Löwengasse 53a in Vienna's Third District. Though he was the fourth of five children, two of these – a daughter and a son – had not survived infancy, the second having died some twenty months before Anton's birth.

The Weberns were a middle-class family, descended from an Austrian aristocratic family that had lived in Carinthia since at least the sixteenth century. The full name, bestowed in the sixteenth century, was Weber Freiherr von Webern; Webern's father dropped the title 'Freiherr' but retained the 'von', which in turn had to be dropped in 1918 to conform with an edict forbidding the use of noble titles following the First World War. Though the name 'von Webern' does not occur for some time after 1918, it reappears on the letterhead of Webern's personal correspondence dating from the 1930s and 40s, as well as on some concert programmes from these years. Schoenberg also used it on letters to Webern written during this time.

Carl von Webern was a mining engineer who was highly regarded and the receiver of several decorations. He was one of the founders of

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3 Carl and Amalie von Webern with their three children, Rosa, Maria and Anton, in the 1890s.

the Mining College in Leoben, from which he later received an honorary doctorate. He held a series of government positions, involving a number of changes of residence. Amalie Geer was the third daughter of a master butcher in Mürzzuschlag, in Styria. The von Webern family lived in Vienna until 1889; Webern's schooling began there. In 1890, when he was seven, his father was promoted to a position that necessitated the family's move to Graz, and four years later a further advance brought them to Klagenfurt. A subsequent promotion, recorded in Webern's diary in May 1902, brought the family back to Vienna, coinciding neatly with Webern's entry into university there.

Carl von Webern had inherited his family's country estate in Lower Carinthia, and, though the family never used it as a permanent resi-

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dence, the Preglhof was a much beloved retreat and an important focal point of family life for many years. It was surely there that the seeds of Webern's lifelong love of nature were sown and nurtured, and it was there during family gatherings that he spent long hours in the company of his greatest childhood friend, his cousin Ernst Diez, talking about art and poetry and music, and the meaning of life.

Webern's two surviving siblings were sisters: Maria, three years older than he, and Rosa, two years younger. His sister Rosa's memories, written down many years later, after Webern's death, describe a comfortable, happy and unexceptional childhood. The family was close, and she relates a number of childhood incidents in which her brother emerges as a child who loved nature, possessed a vivid imagination and was sensitive to the point of being nervous – all prominent attributes of the mature Webern. She also writes, predictably, of his early musical interests. The child she describes was not a Mozart, but a typical toddler sitting beside his mother as she played the piano and attempting to imitate her, later asking for his favourite tunes (from *Hansel and Gretel* and, unexpectedly, *Lohengrin*) and singing along ('with complete accuracy', according to his sister), dancing happily with his young sisters to music from the puppet theatre, and receiving at successive Christmases a toy drum, a trumpet and finally a violin.

Webern's mother started teaching him to play the piano at the age of five. When the family moved to Klagenfurt in his twelfth year he began lessons with Edwin Komauer, on both piano and cello. His prowess on the latter instrument led to a family trio, with his older sister Maria playing the piano and Rosa the violin ('halfway decently', according to her modest report). It is noteworthy that the composers she names as forming their repertoire are Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven: these composers would continue to occupy positions of dominance throughout the whole of Webern's life. The young Anton's first surviving compositions date from 1899, when he was fifteen. These are, not surprisingly, two pieces for cello and piano.

It was apparently at the beginning of 1900 that Webern began to

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keep personal notebooks, a custom in which he would continue for most of his life. Nine of these notebooks survive; internal evidence suggests that there were more. The earliest two of these, one of 119 pages and one of 93, were in use simultaneously. The one that bears the number 1 (although the numbers on these books appear to be in Webern's hand they do not accurately represent their chronology: this book was not the first to be used) covers the time from October 1900 to the end of 1906.² Poems and miscellaneous bits of prose have been copied into this book, and in it the young Webern wrote out the programmes of concerts that he heard or participated in, along with brief commentaries on the works and the performances. This book also served as a personal diary, containing longer records of performances that were especially important to him during these years; the most notable of these – and one often quoted – is the account of what he optimistically entitled his 'first trip to Bayreuth'. (It was to be, in fact, his only trip to Bayreuth.) The first page of the book is dated 'October 1900, Klagenfurt'. The second notebook is devoted more consistently to the poems and essays of other people, though there are some personal notes – memos rather than reminiscences – here as well. The first date to appear in this book is on page 38; this is the date of a long essay on Richard Strauss' *Don Juan* (pp. 38–51), copied from the *Grazer Tagespost* of 26 January 1900. Since the only things to appear before this are all, like it, the writings of other people, it is reasonable to suppose that this book was begun at the new year and used immediately to record a number of things that Webern had recently found interesting. This book contains very few dates, but the last two entries are a list of all the operas scheduled for performance in Vienna during the 1902–3 season and Webern's schedule of university lectures for that same winter, so it is safe to assume that it was not in use after the spring of 1903, and perhaps not as late as that.

Throughout these early books there is a clear distinction between the handwriting used for the diary entries and that used for the copied material. When he is recording his own ideas, or making notes on events that engage him personally, the young Webern's handwriting

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is often inconsistent and hurried, a Gothic script that is sometimes quite difficult to read, written variously in ink or pencil. Spelling is somewhat haphazard. But roman script is adopted for copying favourite poems and essays, this is always done in ink, and on these occasions the letters are carefully formed and even. It is the difference between the teenager making hasty notes to record his rapidly changing thoughts and the young student writing meticulously in his copy book.

Musical experiences and thoughts about music dominate these notebooks. The first entry to have been made is a pair of long essays on *Das Rheingold* and *Siegfried* that were copied on pages 1–9 and 10–22, respectively, of Nb2. The same book contains an essay (on pp. 31–3) by Felix Weingartner on Brahms' Second Symphony and the already mentioned piece on *Don Juan*. Interesting as it is to see what the young Webern considered important enough to copy into his journal, it is probably more so to read the records of his own musical experiences. At the age of seventeen, when his home was in Klagenfurt, where concert life was surely less active than it was in the capital, he was already a frequent concert-goer, and in his notebooks he recorded his opinions – with neither hesitation nor apology – of both the works and the performers that he heard. Notebook 1 contains programmes of and commentary on nine concerts that he attended between 29 October 1900 and 10 March 1901 (pp. 6–14), and this is followed by the account of an event that was clearly of considerable significance: a journey to Graz in Easter week of 1901 for a performance of *Tristan and Isolde* (pp. 15–16). No other concerts are recorded until a similar journey to Vienna one year later, this time to see *Götterdämmerung* (the account of this performance is on pp. 24–7 of the same book). The seven pages between these two Easter treats are devoted to poems by Hermann Ubell and Robert Graf, and to an enthusiastic account of Webern's first acquaintance with a Mahler score (all of which we shall return to presently). Nor is any mention of concerts during this missing year (the 1901–2 season) to be found in Nb2. Thus it seems likely that at least one additional notebook must have been in use during the time

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between 1900 (when surviving records begin) and the autumn of 1902 (when Webern entered university and moved to Vienna, and began once again to record concerts in NBI), but no others survive from these years.

The result of this apparent loss, of course, is that although we have a good idea of what events shaped Webern's musical life and what his opinions were in the winter of 1900–1, we have no similar record for the following year. During the season that surrounded his seventeenth birthday he made brief but focused records of two chamber music evenings: the first contained an adequate performance of Beethoven's first quartet which however 'left a good deal to be desired' – the Adagio was picked out especially as having given extraordinary pleasure – and an 'absolutely splendid' performance of Brahms' Piano Quartet in G minor, a work described as a 'supremely powerful tone poem', of which 'the first and third movements especially are of great beauty'. The second chamber music evening did not fare so well: it contained a Dvořák quartet (described as an excellent work, but badly played), the Beethoven Septet (which was 'completely messed up in many places') and songs sung by a singer who was described as having 'a few good notes in the middle range' but being otherwise 'quite bad'. This was dismissed as an unsuccessful evening altogether.

On 11 December two instrumental soloists, the violinist Franz Ondříček and the pianist Wilfred Klasen, shared a programme. Webern was entranced. 'He [Ondříček] played simply divinely. An amazing technique, together with the greatest precision, a profound performance. Of the works I liked best Bach's "Air". The pianist is also distinguished. I was delighted with Liszt's B minor Ballade, which Klasen played very beautifully.'

There was a preponderance of singing in the programmes of the season, particularly as most concerts of any type seem to have included some lieder to fill in the gaps, as in the chamber music concert referred to above. Webern reported on four evenings devoted entirely to lieder, all of which he thought successful. Edyth Walker from the Vienna Opera sang 'in a soft, very wide-ranging contralto voice', accompa-