PART I

Schoenberg in Place

CHAPTER 1

At Home
A Conversation with Nuria Schoenberg-Nono

Alexander Carpenter

What are your earliest memories of your father?
I don't know if this is a real memory, or a photograph that I've seen so often, but when I was about five years old we moved to west Los Angeles and a very nice house on a very nice street, which actually ended in the wilds because it was at the end of Los Angeles, going towards the ocean. There was a whole street on which there were still some branches and things, and then there was a gated park . . . it was all different from the rest of Los Angeles. And we used to go for walks . . . *Spazierengehen*, which is going for a walk, is something typically Austrian – Viennese, I think, because they would go to the Wienerwald, to the forest. I'd always heard my whole life about this. Then one day [my father said], 'Well, we're going to go for a walk up the street'. At that time, there weren't that many houses on our street: there were lots of vacant lots, one with two beautiful horses, and movie star houses. It was very interesting. Every house represented something: Shirley Temple's house, Zasu Pitz . . . They were names that didn't mean anything to me – well, Shirley Temple did – but it was kind of an interesting street because I think very special people ended up there, because it was not in the middle of Beverly Hills or other parts of Los Angeles that were more 'culturally fed'.

So, we would go for walks, and pretty soon we would be in the wild and looking at the hills of Southern California. It was fun to do something with my father, always. He was a really good father. And so, when he said, 'let's go for a walk' – he probably said it in German, '*spazierengehen*' – then I really liked that.

Looking at a map and knowing roughly where your family home was, I can see that wilderness to the west of your neighbourhood . . .
Yes, west Los Angeles at that time was really wilderness, though now it's not. But, [my father] wrote this nice letter when he first found the house, in which he's explaining how they bought it, and it was really quite amazing

for him, because it was really a very big house, with a big garden all around it, and tall trees, and lawn and a fishing pond. And then, in the back of the house was a rose garden. It was something that somewhere else would have cost a fortune . . . It was three-quarters of an American acre, and there weren't many neighbours.

It was also very inexpensive because nobody wanted that house, because it wasn't modern. Everyone was buying new houses by famous architects in those days – 1935 to 36, we are talking about – and this was not by a famous architect, but it was a really comfortable house with a big garden and big tall trees.

You said Schoenberg was a good father, and that you liked to spend time with him. What made him a good father?

A lot of different things. He liked to explain things. He made up wonderful stories for children, and would tell them while we were eating, so that we would eat: we (mostly my brothers) got so excited about the story that we ended up eating. And he had this wonderful fantasy . . . He could make up stories, and some of them were full of jokes only he and mother understood, but when he laughed, we laughed too. A lot of puns, things that were partially in German and partially in English . . . I don't think we understood any of them. But they laughed, and so we did too.

He interacted with us a lot. For instance, when my mother was pregnant with my youngest brother, he would fix our school lunches. And they were really very good, except, if we liked something – if we came home and said 'oh, that was really delicious, I really liked those crackers you put in there' – then for the next two months, we always got those crackers. So, you had to be careful what you appreciated.

But he was fantastic, because [our mother] was having morning sickness and so she wasn't doing anything, and he was downstairs early in the morning, getting all of our lunches for us to take to school. I think that's a thing that nobody would have expected of him. Just so nice, so kind to us, making up these stories, playing . . . just very present in our lives, all the way, for as long as he was around (Figure 1.1).

Was he like your friends' fathers? Or very different?

Some [of my friends] were really jealous of me for having such a nice father . . . My best friend – we must have been around fifteen at the time – she came over to our house, and when she came into the living room where my father was sitting at a little table where he often sketched things and worked, he stood up for her. And she couldn't believe it. [He said], 'Oh

Figure 1.1 Photograph of the Schoenberg family (1948). ASC. Used by permission of Belmont Publishers, Los Angeles.

hello, nice to meet you, what are you studying in school, what do you think about this or that? . . . ' He was so polite, but it wasn't just that he was being polite. He was actually interested . . . and sometimes I was sort of mad, because I wanted to go play and he would keep [my friends] for ten minutes, asking them questions . . . which became embarrassing when he would do the same thing to boys who were taking me out. He would say, 'I want her home by eleven', but he would also want to know all about how they thought about everything and he wouldn't let us go. [They would say], 'But Mr. Schoenberg, excuse me, I was going to take Nuria to a movie and it starts soon. Maybe we could continue this conversation some other time?' He didn't want me to go out, you know. That was mainly it.

I read an anecdote you shared about when you were young, talking to a friend who asked what your father did, and you said 'He's a world famous composer'. I wondered how you reconciled this notion of 'Schoenberg the famous composer' with this man who was your father.
I think I said he was 'the greatest composer in the world'! I was quite young, but I knew that.

There was not much of a problem, because, for instance, the Kolisch Quartet would come every few years and play at our house and record, or other musicians were constantly coming, and so I could tell. And also his students – he gave a party for his students in our garden one summer, in 1936, and they were just so excited and so happy to be invited to an Austrian *Jause* . . . He had a really good relationship with young people, I guess because he was young himself, his whole life, you know? And he could relate to people.

He would come home [from class] and say, 'You know, they don't really understand so I'm trying to figure out a way to explain something . . . ' I don't know why, but I have this picture – you know in the comic books how somebody has a little light bulb above his head? – I can see him there with this light bulb above his head, saying, 'Oh, I've finally figured out how to get them interested!' And he worried about that. He was the greatest teacher in the world . . . He thought, well, at least they'll understand something, about what it means to be an artist, or something about life, even if they didn't understand what he was saying about music.

He worried about that, because he loved to teach. And of course, teaching Alban Berg [and] Webern – that was a different thing. He always said that some of the students in his classes [in Los Angeles] were girls who wanted to become nursery school teachers. But music gave you a lot of credits, and it was supposed to be easy! And so a lot of people signed up who had no idea what they were getting into. But he managed to do something for everyone.

He was beloved by his students. We had a big party at our house, and they just couldn't believe it. It was so much fun. They played ping-pong; we had a big rose garden, and mother would give everybody bunches of roses . . . A lot of people were really surprised that there was also that side of him, although he probably spent more time talking about serious things than he did joking. He hated stupid jokes, and dirty ones, too. That was vulgar, and he wasn't interested. But puns he liked, because that has to do with what happens in music . . .

You're describing something that I find difficult to imagine and initially somewhat dissonant: a household centred around a serious artist like Schoenberg, coming from the context of early-twentieth-century Central Europe, but also a homely domestic scene in which there were children and many young American students and colleagues visiting, alongside the cultural elite of Europe who had fled in advance of Nazism, and then musicians like the Kolisch Quartet . . . Different people mixing together but somehow everything worked.

Yes. Well, it worked . . . but there were people who were taking advantage of this. At one point, on Sundays, so many people came – my mother and grandmother baked all morning to make these special Austrian cakes and cookies and things – and then all these people coming back from the beach started saying, 'I'll meet you at Schoenberg's.' And [my father] had the feeling – and he was right – that they were not coming to talk to him or be with him or anything, but it was just a party. So, then we started, at two o'clock in the afternoon on Sundays, to get in our car and mother would drive around for two hours, so there would be no one at home. After we did that a few times they didn't come anymore. It was easier than telling each person that we're not having these Sunday afternoon things.

And then, a teacher at UCLA wrote after [my father's] death about 'Schoenberg in Los Angeles' or something, in *Musical America*, which was quite an important magazine. He wrote that my father lived 'way above his means' – with grandmother, me and mother in the kitchen making all this stuff! Well, the house was [above his means]. But it's a strange thing, because nobody wanted that house. They couldn't sell it, because it wasn't modern, because in those days they were just beginning to have [Richard] Neutra and [Rudolph] Schindler and other great architects in Los Angeles building modern houses. And they bought this one, which was not modern: it was kind of mixed – Spanish, American, French, I don't know what. But it was great. It was big. And then one of his colleagues wrote that [my parents] lived above their means . . . He was right – their means were not very much from what he earned at the university.

But some of those people who never did anything great themselves could somehow explain how wrong [Schoenberg] was . . .

Children often have some regret, after the fact, of not fully appreciating their parents when they are alive. If you had the opportunity to go back and ask your father questions, what would you like to know more about?

Well, I've got things I feel terrible about. Why didn't I ask him about this? Why didn't I let him show me this? But he did show me the things he did in his little hobby room. There he showed everything. He explained how to bind a book, which I learned from him. But when I asked him to teach me music, he gave me a little book by an American author – on the theory of harmony or something, which I already knew about – and said 'Well, read this first.' This wasn't exactly what I expected from him. He wouldn't teach me.

And he was right. I would never have become a composer or musician. Or maybe he just remembered how I played the violin during my lessons, and he would go crazy [shouting] from upstairs: 'No! B-flat!'

The title of this chapter implies that 'Schoenberg at Home' is somehow different from 'Schoenberg in the rest of the world', but our conversation seems to be working against that notion.

Yes! Well, he was also very *streng* – severe – and he would be angry if we did something wrong. Then I would go up in my room and cry, and then after about three minutes he would knock on the door and come in and say 'Are you ok?', and it wasn't as bad as I thought. He would apologize – he just wanted to have a really good relationship with me and my brothers.

I was under the impression that your mother ran the house, but it sounds like your father was very much involved in things at home.

He really respected her so much. He respected everyone, but particularly her. That was also something very special. It was above and beyond love. It was respect for all that she did and wanted to do. I don't know. I can't put it in words.

People always come up to me and say, 'How was your father?' I say, 'nice'. Once I was in Germany, and there was a huge audience. I think it was even on television, and they were interviewing me. And they said 'How was your father?' And I said, 'Well, he was very serious and angry and mean . . . ' And all these German students and musicians, I don't know who they were, they were all nodding, and saying, 'Oh yes, of course, Schoenberg would have been like that.' And then I finally said, 'No! He was not at all like that! He was a loving, sweet father!'

He loved games. He and mother made toys for us. I remember when Ronnie and I were very young, and I had a bicycle and Ronnie had a tricycle, and so [our parents] made a traffic light for us, with lights – red, yellow and green – and mother was the electrician, and [my father] built the structure. They did a lot of things for us, even when they had very little money . . .

At Christmas time, [my father] played carols on the harmonium . . . We had all these big books with Christmas carols in English. And we would sing them while we were waiting for Santa Claus to come, who regularly came. [Santa] was a lady professor from UCLA who wore a beard and a Santa Claus suit and had a low voice: 'Ho, ho, ho! Have the children been good?' And daddy would say, 'Oh yes, Santa Claus,

they've been very good.' And she would leave presents under the tree. In the meantime, we would be singing Christmas carols at the top of the stairs. And then he got on the harmonium and played with us as we sang. That's another thing people don't expect, because he was Jewish and everything, you know?

He was a lot of different things . . .

CHAPTER 2

Vienna

Mirjana Plath

While Schoenberg was living in Vienna, the city underwent many crucial changes: political, cultural, intellectual, aesthetical and urban. The composer witnessed the rise of *Jugendstil*, expressionism, psychoanalysis, a world war and the fall of the Habsburg Empire in his years in Vienna. Schoenberg was born in 1874 and raised in the Austro-Hungarian capital, spending more than half of his life there, with shorter intermissions in Berlin during 1901–3 and from 1911–15, before he moved to Mödling in 1918.

Schoenberg's draft of his autobiography contains many names of artistic personalities that accompanied the young composer during his life in Vienna. His acquaintances included Hermann Bahr, Arthur Bodanzky, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Karl Kraus, Fritz Kreisler, Adolf Loos, Max Reinhardt, Arthur Schnitzler and Alexander Zemlinsky, to name only a few of the various Viennese luminaries in his life. Even though Schoenberg did not get his education and literacy through reputable schools or universities, by simply growing up in a city like Vienna he absorbed and profited from the vast cultural and philosophical richness concentrated in the multi-cultural capital of the Habsburg Empire: Steven J. Cahn calls Vienna 'the city in which [Schoenberg's] artistic personality was formed'.[1] In Vienna, his acquaintances and friendships with better-educated people, his amateur participation in musical societies and his broad interest in art, literature, science, politics and religion were crucial for the formation of Schoenberg's artistic language, intellectual development and worldview.

[1] Steven J. Cahn, 'Schoenberg, the Viennese-Jewish Experience and Its Aftermath', in *The Cambridge Companion to Schoenberg*, ed. Jennifer Shaw and Joseph Auner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 200.

Viennese Politics and Historical Upheavals towards a Modern Metropolis

From around the *fin-de-siècle* until 1918, Vienna was a diverse metropolis: as the capital of a multi-ethnic empire, the city was home to people from many different countries and a wide variety of languages. People from all over the Austro-Hungarian Empire gathered in the city. Schoenberg's family background exemplifies this diversity: his father, Samuel Schönberg, was born in the Hungarian town of Szécsény, while his mother, Pauline Nachod, was born and raised in Prague. Their religious identity was Jewish Orthodox, and when their son Arnold was born in Vienna, he would experience different kinds of religious, ethnic and national backgrounds through both his parents and his birthplace.

Schoenberg went to school in the Leopoldstadt, Vienna's second district: at first to a primary school in the Kleine Pfarrgasse, and from 1885 to 1890 to the 'k. k. Staats-Oberrealschule'. This kind of school education was not designed to prepare pupils for university studies. In contrast to a Gymnasium, which was attended by academically apt children mainly from the upper class, a Realschule was designated for the majority of Viennese pupils. Cahn points out that by attending the latter type of junior high school, Schoenberg lacked knowledge of Greek and Roman ancient history; in his later musical and written works, he therefore often referred to Hebrew culture, with which he was better acquainted.[2]

After the death of his father near the end of 1889, Schoenberg started working as a clerk in the small private bank Werner & Co., where he stayed for five years. Being raised in a working-class family and interested not only in music but also in literature, philosophy and politics, he was subjected to social democratic ideas from a young age. In 1950, Schoenberg would recall:

> In my early twenties, I had friends who introduced me to Marxian theories. When I thereafter got a job as 'Chormeister' – director of men's-choruses – they called me 'Genosse' – comrade – and at this time, when Socialdemocracy [*sic*] fought for an extension of the right to vote suffrage, I was strongly in sympathy with some of their aims.[3]

[2] Cahn, 'Schoenberg, the Viennese-Jewish Experience and its Aftermath', 198.

[3] Arnold Schoenberg, 'My Attitude toward Politics' (16 February 1950). ASC T64.10. https://archive.schoenberg.at/writings/transcription.php?id_transcription=1619&action=view&sortieren=id%20DESC&vonBis=0–19.