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## PRELUDE

Historians of twentieth-century music often allot pride of place to Schoenberg's development between 1899 (when he was twenty-six) and 1909. More radically and more rapidly than any other European composer, Schoenberg moved from the mastery of late romantic symphonic chamber music embodied in the string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* to the post-tonal expressionism of the monodrama *Erwartung*. He did so by way of a remarkable succession of works in many different genres – a large-scale orchestral tone poem, two string quartets, a chamber symphony, a good number of songs and piano pieces. If that were not enough, he also made substantial progress with his largest completed work, *Gurrelieder*.

Music historians with a taste for dramatic generalisation can assert that, single-handedly, Schoenberg transformed music from something recognisably rooted in the familiar tonal traditions of Wagner and Brahms, Strauss and Mahler, into a kind of atonal expressionism that proclaimed the viability of truly new music at a time when the new century had barely begun. With its predominantly secular tone, Schoenberg's entire output over that decade might be thought of as essentially preliminary to the kind of struggles between the material and the metaphysical explored in later works such as *Die Jakobsleiter* and *Moses und Aron*, and preliminary also to the productive tensions between fixed and flexible moods and materials made possible by the development of the twelve-tone method after 1920. Yet the innovative eruptions specific to the decade 1899 to 1909 have had a profound influence over later compositional developments, to the present day: and, preliminary or not, at least some of the compositions from these years are more often heard, and more frequently discussed, than those from Schoenberg's later years.

Much of the most authoritative and substantial discussion of Schoenberg's rapid and radical evolution from post-Wagnerian

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romantic to post-tonal expressionist has appeared over the past ten to fifteen years, a time when many assumptions inherent in terms such as 'romantic' and 'expressionist', or 'tonal' and 'atonal', have been questioned as intensively as the music itself has been technically expounded. This handbook therefore has the opportunity to respond to these materials in ways which are accessible to a less academically specialised readership – not just those interested in Schoenberg, but those concerned with the whole nature of twentieth-century music's relation to the diverse stylistic traditions that preceded it. Much reference is made below to writings that offer far more extensive score quotation and far more elaborate technical explication than is possible, or perhaps desirable, in this handbook. Here the main objective is to place the compositions described in as wide-ranging and stimulating a collection of contexts as possible. More than a century on, Schoenberg's 'Night Music' retains its power to fascinate as well as to disturb, and those qualities gain in profile when some of the wider considerations of the 'Night Music' concept are brought forward into the light.

### The Character of a Genre

'*Night Music* is cast in one large movement with four distinct sections. It inhabits a world of dreams, nightmares, moonlight, and darkness, beginning in a quasi-somnambulant state with a blurring of melodic lines and harmony.'<sup>1</sup> Writing about his fifteen-minute 2014 composition for cello and piano, the British composer Mark Simpson (b. 1988) continues with a descriptive account of musical moods and textures but no longer emphasises matters nocturnal. In this way, Simpson follows the common tendency to take a very basic initial aesthetic concept – Night Music – without then attempting to prescribe a set of characteristics so specific that they could not possibly be applied to any other aesthetic concept. Such a concept nevertheless becomes particularly significant for composers who use it frequently, in works of some substance. Two British composers, considerably more senior than Simpson, fit this label: Harrison Birtwistle (1934–2022), with his Dowland-haunted orchestral piece *The Shadow of Night* and Celan setting 'Tenebrae', and Brian

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Ferneyhough (b. 1943) with the guitar pieces *Kurze Schatten II* and the opera *Shadowtime*. In such cases, the night-referring titles fit with a particular musical atmosphere that is much more pervasive in the composers' oeuvre than restriction to compositions whose titles directly reference nocturnal images would allow, an atmosphere that tends not to be found – or is only occasionally hinted at – in the music of composers with markedly different aesthetic and technical orientations.

An early work of Ferneyhough's – *Sonatas for String Quartet* (1967) – has an unusually restrained episode, with the marking 'nottornamente', which inspires a Schoenberg allusion from commentator Lois Fitch; it 'proceeds ... from a calm chordal passage into the closing polyphonic material of the section, in high register, marked "sereno e chiaro", the whole episode a transfigured night'.<sup>2</sup> Ferneyhough's music is a particularly interesting example in relation to this book's central subject – an aspect of Schoenberg's aesthetic that highlights a distinction between theological and materialist motives, and which makes a suitably tentative comparison between the thinking of the cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin (the subject of Ferneyhough's opera) and Schoenberg's compositional trajectory. There is a world of difference between the philosopher's way with such themes, as explored by the Benjamin commentator Graeme Gilloch,<sup>3</sup> and the composer's concern to use sound materials to animate ideas that might appear wholly materialist, wholly theological or to involve interplay between the two. That 'world of difference' requires a narrative that questions parallels as it explores them and dramatises the distinction between a central, ever-present subject, the composer, and a hovering, often submerged, context-provider, the philosopher. If this form of words puts the reader in mind of Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*, and the tragicomedy of the exchanges between Schoenberg and Mann about its allusions to Schoenbergian twelve-tone technique, so much the better!<sup>4</sup>

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All days are nights to see till I see thee  
And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 43, of which these are the last two lines, is a celebrated exercise in antithesis, as well as in the use of visible and sounding similarities between words which embody difference – 'thee', 'me'. Writers on music are quick to point out that their chosen subject matter is no less remarkable than English or any other language in its ability to organise itself around patterns of difference and similarity, and that such differences and similarities can be aurally recognisable – a mental process of identification comparable to that brought to bear by readers of poetry or prose. Yet the fact remains that Shakespeare's art is based on materials – words – which are no less relevant and useful to real life in the everyday world. The meaning of terms such as 'night' and 'day' – or their equivalents in other languages – is readily accessible to all humans, but the musical materials used by any composer setting Shakespeare's text (as Benjamin Britten did in his *Nocturne* of 1958) have no equivalent real-life meaning. As numerous publications attest, it is perfectly possible to describe in words what those materials consist of, and to explain why the particular musical combinations and characteristics chosen by Britten suit Shakespeare's poem. But saying that 'the purely instrumental *Nocturne* from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music, like Britten's setting of Sonnet 43, can be categorised as Night Music' is only to imply that the musical materials of both, as pitches, rhythms and timbres, are capable of being characterised in a manner appropriate to the title and association of things nocturnal. The same generic marker, as verbal definition, could be applied to quite different musical materials, whether a nocturnal text is present or not.

The connotations of 'night' are not confined to the hours of complete darkness. Shakespeare's sonnet is not just about the temporal divisions of night and day, sleeping and waking, but about the associations between these events and a lover's perceptions about himself and the one he loves. Other texts set by Britten in *Nocturne* (the extract from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*,

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particularly) explore different mental and physical states, where sleep is disturbed, and darkness as menace is the governing image, and it is through the common strands of content rather than the individual characteristics of each separate text that the collective label of 'Night Music' becomes viable. Compositions focusing on the nocturnal in this way might well be regarded as belonging to the even-wider category of Nature Music, acknowledging the common purpose of musical works that resist the lure of some kind of entirely abstract, 'purely musical' genre, such as fugue or canon. It is indeed the effect of experiencing the natural world at night, as distinct from experiencing particular emotions or events at night within an enclosed indoor space so that the 'night-ness' is essentially mental, that characterises many compositions which respond to texts or ideas of this kind, ranging in tone from the serene sublimity of Schumann's setting of Eichendorff's 'Mondnacht' to the nightmarish scenario unfolding in Schoenberg's setting of the Giraud/Hartleben poem 'Nacht' in *Pierrot lunaire*; and non-vocal compositions whose expressive characteristics (and titles) seem to have things in common with such settings might well attract the 'Night Music' label.

*Pierrot lunaire* will feature in some detail later in this text, but it is useful to mention one particular study of that work at this preliminary stage, one which does not directly describe it as Night Music but rather as 'Lunar Nexus'. In his article, Michael Cherlin argues that 'Schoenberg's early practice' emerges from a Romantic tradition where 'naturalistic images' were central, 'so it should come as no surprise that naturalistic tone-painting is fairly common in his music during the first decades of the twentieth century'. Cherlin instances *Verklärte Nacht*, *Pelleas und Melisande*, *Gurre-Lieder*, *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* and *Erwartung*' before noting that after World War I, with the emergence of the twelve-tone technique, 'naturalistic tone-painting seemed no longer to be part of Schoenberg's practice'.<sup>5</sup> What replaced it remains a matter of debate within Schoenberg studies, and a relatively recent indication of the challenges which arise when this issue is addressed in more than strictly compositional, technical terms can be found in a book by Matthew Arndt.<sup>6</sup> In

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essence, Arndt's thesis is that the 'musical thought' central to such works as *Verklärte Nacht* and *Erwartung*, in which 'naturalistic tone-painting' features prominently, has little need to engage with the aspects of spirituality that Arndt's title signals as salient. The real challenge therefore becomes to find ways of coherently conveying what those 'aspects of spirituality' involve.

The whole point of this book is to consider the nature of what I call Schoenberg's Night Music, not the music that displaced it, but it will still be useful to provide at least an outline of what that other Schoenberg was like. He had formally converted from Judaism to Protestantism at the age of twenty-three in 1898 and remained, officially, a Christian until July 1933, after more than a decade of experiencing the intensification of anti-Semitism in Europe that would drive him into American exile well before the outbreak of World War II. The association between religious faith and compositional concerns – between 'aspects of spirituality' on the one hand and thinking about issues connected to both traditional tonality and twelve-tone technique – is a topic many writers have explored, but a particularly specific interpretation is posited by Matthew Arndt in his claim that 'Schoenberg's return to Judaism coincides with his invention of twelve-tone composition in 1921–3 – and with his intense study of Schenker in 1922–3' (57).

For Arndt, something commonly represented in terms of complete opposition between Schoenberg, and a conservative music theorist, Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935), can look very different when what (in Arndt's view) Schoenberg and Schenker held 'spiritually' in common is brought into focus:

Schenker's and Schoenberg's conflict is a reflection of contradictions *within* their musical and spiritual ideas. They share a particular conception of the tone as an ideal sound realized in the spiritual eye of the genius. The tensions inherent in this largely psychological and material notion of the tone and this largely metaphysical notion of the genius shape both their musical *divergence* on the logical (technical) level of theory and composition, and their spiritual *convergence*, including their invention of the *Ursatz* and twelve-tone composition and their simultaneous return to Judaism. (3)

Arndt shares with other music theorists the perception that tonal music as Schenker defined it and non-tonal music as Schoenberg

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conceived it converged on the process of creating and then solving a problem: 'A piece of tonal music solves its problem by erasing all doubt about the ground tone, whereas a piece of non-tonal music solves its problem by erasing all trace of the ground tone as such'; Arndt then argues that 'Schoenberg's references to "renouncing the tonal centre" in his music are best understood as shorthand for "the negation of a tonal centre's *domination*"' (106–7), and it is erroneous to assume that 'renouncing the tonal centre' means literally abandoning or destroying tonality. In addition, Arndt sees these technical formulations as embodying an overriding ambition, which is to overcome the materiality of art, as Schoenberg arguably sought to do with some consistency from around 1912 onwards. Before that, and especially in his *Night Music*, Schoenberg had shown how beguiling or disturbing 'materiality' in music might be, resisting alienation to offer a measure of reconciliation with mundane reality.

Considerations of how Schoenberg's music might formulate and (in some cases) resolve technical problems arising from the changing character of his compositional style will feature later in this discussion. First, however, a few more preliminaries around the theme of words and music are in order. There are many reasons for writing about composers. A common strategy is to express admiration for the compositions themselves, and to try to convey what it is about their character and content that is admirable; the writer's appreciation seeks to gain the assent of other admirers, as well as to encourage and even convert more sceptical readers. For example, if I say that 'Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony begins with unprecedented and unsurpassed exuberance and eloquence', this is a statement difficult to dispute on its own terms, despite being unqualified, simply because it is likely to be understood as enthusiastic opinion rather than the kind of clinically technical, analytical dissection that could withstand any amount of attempted counter-argument. Clearly, in avoiding specific details about harmonic progression or rhythmic organisation, my assertion about the *Eroica* implies but glides over the entire context of musical history from the beginning ('unprecedented') to the present day ('unsurpassed'). There may not have been an earlier symphonic movement that can be shown to provide an exact model for

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Beethoven's, but it cannot be denied that in formal outline and this or that technical procedure, Beethoven was not literally creating something completely new. Similarly, while the euphoric sense of a fresh approach to a traditional genre, the symphony, might be vividly apparent every time one listens to the *Eroica*'s first movement, later examples from Mendelssohn's 'Italian' Symphony to Brahms's Symphony No. 3 and beyond can be claimed to equal, and even perhaps surpass, Beethoven's innovatory exuberance.

Of the favoured contexts for compositions seen by writers as admirable, matters of culture and philosophy loom large. That a composition emerges at a specific time and in a particular place locates it culturally, socially and historically, and that can bring any number of other social contexts to do with politics and/or religion, for example, not to mention gender and nationality, into play. But what of philosophy? As creative enterprises, writing music and writing philosophy might be regarded as parallel activities, conceiving an idea and presenting a working-out of its consequences. Yet to move from parallels to interactions, interpenetrations, is risky, at least if it is assumed that music can directly embody philosophical principles so naturally and completely that listeners informed of the connection and appreciative of what is involved will inevitably assent to the fusion of the two disciplines, composing and philosophising, provided it is understood that there is still a separation: the philosophy has come first (e.g. Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, written in 1883–5), and the composer, Richard Strauss (consciously or, conceivably, unconsciously) invents an appropriate musicalisation of philosophical ideas, or at least their expressive tone, in his tone poem with the same title (1895).

A concrete example is called for. In an important essay whose line of argument is fundamental to the present study and can be thought of as complementary in some respects to the work of Matthew Arndt, William E. Benjamin identifies a connection between Schoenberg's writings on music and Schopenhauer's idea that 'the composer reveals the inmost essence of the world and utters the most profound wisdom in a language which his reason does not understand'. But for a more evolved connection between Schoenberg's music and philosophy, Benjamin prefers



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Nietzsche to Schopenhauer, at least for the short but crucial period between 1908 and 1911, when Schoenberg seemed closest to the Nietzschean idea of Dionysian ritual, where 'individuals merge in a paroxysm of annihilation, in which the pain of being destroyed recedes before the joy of becoming part of a higher creativity, that of the unitary life force'. As Benjamin reinforces the point, his own central idea is that 'Schoenberg's early atonal music instantiates Nietzsche's conception of Dionysian art – by reflecting a vision of life (nature) as essentially multiplex and conflicted'.<sup>7</sup> But, while listeners familiar with Nietzsche could well intuit some such connection without any knowledge of Schoenberg's own awareness or otherwise of any philosophical texts, listeners to *Erwartung* or Schoenberg's settings of Stefan George may hear the complexity and conflictedness without any necessary link to Nietzschean Dionysianism. The specific connection is a critical refinement born of breadth of knowledge and appreciation of the state of culture around 1909.

Aspects of these ideas will feature prominently in what follows, but for the moment it is useful to consider the very different interpretative context that arises when a different philosopher – one who actually wrote about Schoenberg – enters the frame. Whereas William Benjamin's essay makes much of what he describes as Schoenberg's 'shift from the emotional and necessarily private to the deliberate and communal' after 1912, Theodor Adorno's response to Schoenberg's overall development from late romanticism and 'free atonality' to the twelve-tone method can be defined in entirely musical terms. According to Alastair Williams, Adorno believed that although 'Beethoven marks the entry into modernity . . . it was not until the innovations of Schoenberg that the implications of Beethoven's artistic challenge were fully realized'. In strong contrast to Benjamin, who regards the religious impulse as central to Schoenberg's embrace of the 'unknowable' in his later twelve-tone music, Adorno retained Schoenberg's connection with 'the heart of Enlightenment rationality' as the composer struggled after 1920 'to invent a musical medium that would simultaneously enable more freedom and greater discipline'. 'Adorno put the dilemma as follows, still with music rather than some other

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context in the centre: “the question that twelve-tone music directs the composer towards is not, how can musical meaning be organized, but rather: how can musical organization become meaningful?”<sup>8</sup> Whether that ‘meaning’ has to do primarily or even exclusively with a philosophy, a religion, a political tendency or simply an aesthetic intuition seems to be a secondary matter.

As it happens, one of Adorno’s earlier essays (1929) has the title ‘Night Music’ (*Nachtmusik*), though the reader will not find the concept or its significance spelt out in Adorno’s actual text.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore a provocation to speculate both on that title and also on Adorno’s dedication of the essay to his own teacher Alban Berg, in the year when Berg was beginning concentrated work on his second opera *Lulu*. The brief indication of different aspects of musical meaning that come into focus when either Nietzsche (as read by Benjamin) or Adorno (as read by Williams) provides the context underlines the inevitable tension between compositions as ‘notes on paper’ or ‘sounds as sounds’, and compositions as signifying entities whose titles, texts and contexts suggest interpretative associations which can vary enormously from critic to critic. My own choice of ‘Night Music’ as a consistent point of reference suggests concreteness rather than abstraction, an emphasis on the material to cloud if not entirely exclude the metaphysical, and on the physical and psychological specifics of periods of time known to the whole of humanity as the marked opposite of day. With the broad evolutionary context of music history in mind, and particularly the differences between expressionistic early modernism and the romanticism that preceded it, Night Music after 1900 is distinct from earlier Night Music. Even if one has some sympathy with those like Christopher Hailey who have downplayed the relevance of expressionism to music, as ‘more descriptive convenience than historical reportage, an evocation of a syntax that is distorted, violent, or emotionally tortured’, something ‘vague’ enough to be applied to both Charles Ives and Gesualdo<sup>10</sup> as well as Schoenberg and Webern around the years 1908–13 is also distinctive enough to be differentiated from other varieties of emotional intensity and formal instability. The expressionist sense of night as a time of fear, unease, even of