

Schoenberg and Expressionism

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Arnold Schoenberg Biography

"I personally hate to be called revolutionist, which I am not. What I did was neither revolution nor anarchy."

Arnold Schoenberg, (the anglicised form of Schönberg -- Schoenberg changed the spelling officially when he became a U.S. citizen) (September 13, 1874 - July 13, 1951) was a composer, born in Vienna, Austria. He is particularly remembered as one of the first composers to embrace atonality, and for his twelve tone technique of composition using tone rows.

He was largely self-taught (taking lessons only with Alexander Zemlinsky, who was to become his first brother-in-law), and in his twenties lived by orchestrating operettas while composing works such as the string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night) in 1899. He later made an orchestral version of this, which has come to be one of his most popular pieces.

However, much of his work was not well received. In 1907 his *Chamber Symphony No. 1* was premiered. The audience was small, and the reaction to the work lukewarm. When it was played again, however, in a 1913 concert which also included works by Alban Berg, Anton Webern and Alexander Zemlinsky, some of the audience began to shout out abuse. Later in the concert, during a performance of some songs by Berg, fighting broke out, and the police had to be called in. Schoenberg's music had made a break from tonality, which greatly polarised responses to it: his followers and students saw him as one of the most important figures in music, while critics hated his work, on the whole.

Another of his most important works from this period is *Pierrot Lunaire* of 1912, a cycle of songs set to a text by Albert Girard that was unlike anything that preceded it. Utilising the technique of Sprechstimme, or speak-singing recitation, the work pairs a female singer, in a Pierrot costume, with a small orchestra of 13 musicians, who in each of the songs plays a different, and striking instrumental combination.

Later, Schoenberg was to create the twelve-tone method of composition (which later grew into serialism). This technique was taken up by many of his students, who constituted the so-called Second Viennese School. They included Anton Webern and Alban Berg, who were greatly influenced by Schoenberg. Schoenberg excelled as a teacher of music, partly through his method of engaging with, analysing, and transmitting the methods of the great classical composers, especially Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms, partly through his focus on bringing out the musical and compositional individuality of his students. He published a number of books, ranging from his famous *Harmonielehre* (Theory of Harmony) to *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, many of which are still in print and still used by musicians and developing composers.

He was forced into exile by the Nazis in 1933, settled in California and became a US citizen in 1941. He died in Los Angeles, California.

Schoenberg suffered from triskaidekaphobia (fear of the number thirteen); it is said that the reason his late opera is called *Moses and Aron*, rather than Moses and Aaron (the correct spelling with two As) is because the latter spelling has thirteen letters in it. He was born (and, it turned out, died) on the thirteenth of the month, and thought of this as a portent. He once refused to rent a house because it had the number 13, and feared turning 76, because its digits add up to thirteen.

Schoenberg's Work and Ideas

To understand why Schoenberg composed the music that he did, it is useful to begin with his own statement: "Had times been 'normal' (before and after 1914) then the music of our time would have been very different."

Schoenberg and Expressionism

Schoenberg, as a Jewish intellectual, was passionately committed to the concept of unshaken adherence to an "Idea" (such as the concept of an inexpressible God) and the pursuance of Truth. He saw the development of music accelerating through the works of Wagner, Strauss and Mahler to a state of saturation. If music was to regain a genuine and valid simplicity of expression, as in the music of his beloved Mozart and Schubert, the language must be renewed.

These were the same years when the Western world discovered abstract painting and psychoanalysis in the same city. Many intellectuals at the time felt that thought had developed to a point of no return, and that it was no longer possible honestly to go on repeating what had been done before. Between 1901 (*Gurrelieder*) and 1910 (*Five Pieces for Orchestra*) his music changed more rapidly than anyone else's at any other time. When he had written his *Quartet* opus 7 and his *Chamber Symphony* opus 9, he imagined he had arrived at a mature personal style which would serve him for the future. But already in the *Second String Quartet*, opus 10 and the *Three Piano Pieces* opus 11, he had to admit that the saturation of added notes in harmony had reached a stage when there was no meaningful difference between consonance and dissonance. For a time Schoenberg's music became very concentrated and elliptical, as he could see no reason to repeat and develop.

World War I brought a crisis in his development. Military service disrupted his life. He was never able to work uninterrupted or over a period of time, and as a result he left many unfinished works and undeveloped "beginnings". After the war he worked at evolving a means of order which would enable his musical texture to become simpler and clearer, and this resulted in the "method of composition with twelve tones" in which the twelve semitonal intervals are regarded as equal, and no one note or tonality is given the emphasis it occupied in classical harmony. It was the equivalent in music of Albert Einstein's discoveries in Physics, and Schoenberg announced it characteristically, during a walk with his friend Josef Rufer, when he said "I have today made a discovery which will ensure the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years".

This remark, much misquoted and misunderstood, was probably made with Schoenberg's customary wry and ironic humour, referring to the collapse of the dominant political position of the German-speaking world in previous years, and also emphasising his desire to stand with Mozart and Bach.

Even today Schoenberg's method remains controversial, many people refusing to consider it as music at all. Those who do listen to it unprejudiced often come to love it deeply. Schoenberg himself was said to be a very prickly and difficult man to know and befriend. In one of his letters he said "I hope you weren't stupid enough to be offended by what I said", and he rewarded conductors such as Otto Klemperer who programmed his music by complaining repeatedly that they didn't do more. On the other hand, among those who are considered his disciples he inspired absolute devotion. Even strongly individual composers such as Alban Berg and Anton Webern displayed an almost slavish selflessness and willingness to serve him.

Schoenberg was also a painter of considerable individuality, whose pictures were considered good enough to exhibit alongside those of Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky, and he wrote extensively: plays and poems, as well as essays not only about music but about politics and the social/historical situation of the Jewish people.