

# “Examining Anew”: Schoenberg’s ‘Spontaneous Melody’ in his *Herzgewächse* Op. 20. Reconsidered from a Performance-oriented Perspective

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It is indeed our duty to reflect over and over again upon the mysterious origins of the powers of art (*Kunstwirkungen*). And again and again to begin at the beginning; again and again to examine anew for ourselves and attempt to organize anew for ourselves. Regarding nothing as given but the phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

These lines appear in the first chapter of Arnold Schoenberg’s *Harmonielehre*, entitled ‘Theory or System of Presentation?’. They serve as a useful caution when attempting any interpretative examination of his works – “Regarding nothing as given but the phenomena” – but also, paradoxically, as an encouragement for such an enterprise in their underlining of our duty to “examine anew for ourselves and attempt to organize anew for ourselves”. They thus provide a tantalizingly ambivalent context for this article and for its questions, which revolve around performative, rather than analytical or theoretical, issues and which, above all, concern themselves with the nature of ‘voice’ in Schoenberg’s creative project. Ambivalent because, in seeking to define “the phenomena” that constitute the only given, it cannot be ignored that there lingers a tension between Schoenberg’s view of the experiential nature of the artistic material itself, its further unfolding through performance, and how all of this is given context through various forms of theorizing. And tantalizing because, as we “examine [...] and attempt to organize anew” it is inevitable that our readings should become mutable, even fragile, however robustly Schoenberg may have thought that his injunction encapsulated and vindicated his own views concerning the primacy of the musical idea.

The work that is the subject of this article, Schoenberg’s *Herzgewächse*, Op. 20 for high soprano, celesta, harmonium and harp, is rarely performed, even by the general standard of his compositions. By contrast, it has received considerable critical attention, not least because of its particular position in Schoenberg’s musical evolution. It was composed when his engagement with a diversity of art practices and media fused with processes of highly spontaneous, rapid composition that relied upon intuition and inspiration—a *modus operandi* that would become increasingly elusive to him with the passing of time:

I personally belong to those who write very fast, whether it is ‘cerebral’ counterpoint or ‘spontaneous melody’... I composed three-fourths of my Second String Quartet in one-and-a-half days each. I completed the half-hour music of my opera *Erwartung* in 14 days. Several times I wrote two or three pieces of *Pierrot Lunaire* and the song-cycle *Hängenden Gärten* in a day. I could mention many such examples.<sup>2</sup>

Beneath this narrative of white-hot inspiration, the consistent evolution of Schoenberg’s musical project continued apace, as documented in his own accounts. Assertion of this coherence of trajectory is, of course, in keeping with the way that he characterized his work to posterity; accordingly, a number of theoretical and critical responses to *Herzgewächse* attempt to substantiate

1. Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony (Harmonielehre)*, trans. Roy E. Carter (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), 8.

2. Arnold Schoenberg, “How One Becomes Lonely,” in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1975), 105.

the claim of coherence, albeit through divergent critical approaches. While some commentators focus upon the material integrity of the work itself,<sup>3</sup> others are more intent upon reading it in light of its rather remarkable historical context.<sup>4</sup> More recently, Gordon Root has fused historical and analytical readings to propose that *Herzgewächse* functions as an open-ended, cyclical work, relating this to wider questions about the insoluble nature of the musical thought, or *Gedanke*, and how non-solution becomes a compositional trope in Schoenberg’s life project.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of *Gedanke* links to other discourses on Schoenberg’s music that are taken up by Alexander Goehr<sup>6</sup> and Julian Johnson,<sup>7</sup> both of whom propose readings of his compositional project that link it with the critical mission of the Viennese satirist, Karl Kraus, and, in the process, to a much broader questioning of the nature of ethics in the creative outputs of both men. I shall have more to say about this later. Goehr’s side-reference to *Herzgewächse* is telling; he relegates it to the category of ‘ornamentalism’, proposing a trajectory for Schoenberg’s progress that leads “away from the eroticism that characterizes his work from *Verklärte Nacht* to *Erwartung*, away from the ornamentalism of *Herzgewächse*, towards a personal version of the Jewish God in *Moses und Aron* and towards the inexpressible, all-pervasive Idea.”<sup>8</sup>

Our understanding of Schoenberg’s musical project may be enhanced through all of the perspectives above; but the nature of critical writing around his work, while enriched by more recent examples that emphasize perspectives that admit flexibility and allow for ambiguity,<sup>9</sup> remains dominated by the positivistic readings of twentieth century theory. Conversely and, to my mind, regrettably, approaches via performance studies are quite rare.<sup>10</sup> There are a few encouraging signs; after a long period in the twentieth century when Schoenberg’s music was much discussed but less often performed, recent scholars have more willingly embraced the idea of reflecting on its performance. These developments are welcome, but they remain the exception, rather than the rule.

Arising from this is a scarcely acknowledged but important lacuna in Schoenberg scholarship; a sense that the nature of the interface between the composer and his performers is insufficiently addressed. This is especially relevant in the context of the exceptional demands Schoenberg places upon the soprano in *Herzgewächse* (and this in context of a corpus of work that constantly makes onerous requirements of performers and, arguably, female singers in particular).

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3. Analytical approaches to *Herzgewächse* Op. 20 include Allen Forte, “Sets and Nonssets in Schoenberg’s Atonal Music,” *Perspectives of New Music* 2 (1972): 43–64, and Wolfgang Ruf, “Arnold Schönberg’s “Herzgewächse””, in *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 41, H. 4 (1984): 257–273.

4. See Bryan Simms, *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg, 1908-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 113–119; Bonny Hough, “Schoenberg’s *Herzgewächse* and the Blaue Reiter Almanac,” *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 7, no. 2 (1983): 197–221, and Thomas Clifton, “On Listening to *Herzgewächse*,” *Perspectives of New Music* 11, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1973): 87–103.

5. Gordon Root, “Schoenberg’s *Herzgewächse* and the Cycle of Endless Longing,” *Indiana Theory Review* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 41–78.

6. Alexander Goehr, “Schoenberg and Karl Kraus: The Idea Behind the Music,” *Music Analysis* 4, no. 1/2 (1985): 59–71.

7. Julian Johnson, “Karl Kraus and the Schönberg School.” Arnold Schönbergs Wiener Kreis – Viennese Circle, Report of the Symposium 12–15 September 1999, *Journal of the Arnold Schönberg Centre*, 2 (2000): 179–189.

8. Goehr, “Schoenberg and Karl Kraus: The Idea Behind the Music,” 69.

9. See, for example, Michael Cherlin, *Schoenberg’s Musical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Sabine Feisst, *Schoenberg’s New World: The American Years* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

10. For some examples of Schoenberg studies that do take a performative approach, please refer to the dialogical performance and analysis work of the pianist Pina Napolitano and theorist Hugh Collins Rice in “Performing Form: A Dialogue between Performance and Analysis” in this volume, and Hugh Collins Rice, “The Interaction of Form and Material in Schoenberg’s *Klavierstück* Op. 33b,” *Tempo* 66, no. 259 (2012): 24–30. For further consideration, see Avior Byron, “The Test Pressings of Schoenberg Conducting *Pierrot Lunaire: Sprechstimme* Reconsidered,” *Music Theory Online* 12, no. 1 (2006), and my own writings on the piano music of the Second Viennese School, for example, Darla Crispin, “Of Arnold Schoenberg’s *Klavierstück* op. 33a, ‘a Game of Chess’, and the Emergence of New Epistemic Things,” in *Experimental Systems: Future Knowledge in Artistic Research*, ed. Michael Schwab (Leuven University Press/Orpheus Institute, 2013), 68–86. Pianists also have an excellent resource in Jean-Jacques Dünki’s *Schönbergs Zeichen – Wege zur Interpretation seiner Klaviermusik* (Vienna: Verlag Lafite, 2006).

The composer/performer interface deserves closer exploration because of the possibility that the unmaking and remaking of the voice in this work—alongside the re-conception of the ‘orchestra’ which it also embodies – has implications for how we might read and stage it today. More significantly, it provides routes into a deeper understanding of Schoenberg’s development as a composer. His treatment of instruments but, above all, of the voice throughout this work deserves to be reconsidered as an outcome of a much more complex and ambiguous process than might first be thought, and one that raises questions about the ‘making abstract’ of human endeavors.

Undertaking this enquiry raises the questions of authorship being posed by a new generation of performance studies and artistic research scholars. Despite our veneration of Schoenberg, I believe that we must ask these same questions of him, and show our willingness to experiment with the materials of his work, seeing how far they may be tested through innovative performances and a re-imagining of the material. And, in fact, it could be argued that, in proposing this, I am only moving forward the much-quoted agenda set by Schoenberg himself in 1911:

[...] If it is possible to create patterns out of tone colors that are differentiated according to pitch, patterns we call ‘melodies’, progressions, whose coherence (*Zusammenhang*) evokes an effect analogous to thought processes, then it must also be possible to make such progressions out of the tone colors of the other dimension, out of that which we call simply ‘tone colour’...

[...] Tone-color melodies! How acute the senses that would be able to perceive them!  
How high the development of spirit that could find pleasure in such subtle things!

In such a domain, who dares ask for theory!<sup>11</sup>

The visionary quality of Schoenberg’s language here encourages us to revisit his musical project, in particular via its auditory and performative aspects. When we do so in relation to *Herzgewächse*, fundamental questions are raised: What would be the material and ethical implications of making readings of the work that take into account the experiences of performers—and the demands imposed upon them? How might these demands – so exceptional for the soprano—be understood as translating into the conceptual development of sound worlds by the composer? To what extent, if any, does the performer have a stake in that development? Does the work embody a kind of ‘erasure’ of the singer for the sake of ‘the work’, and if so, what are the ethical implications of such a subordination?

Arguably, and especially within its broader context of Schoenberg’s collective contributions to the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, *Herzgewächse* embodies precisely the kind of ‘composerly’ isolation and domination in reaction to which our contemporary dilemmas about creation in-and-through musical practice, performance research and performative ethics have arisen. Understanding the nature of Schoenberg’s music in terms of an *ethics of musical utterance* may help us work with many of the refractory qualities of its character and content; it also enables a richer insight into the milieu in which it was generated. The same kind of ethical dilemma was essential to the satirical writing of Karl Kraus, and this is one reason why understanding Kraus’ relationship to the Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School is so informative.

At the core of this relationship between ethics and utterance in Kraus’ case is the fact that he was a *performer*, as well as being a satirist through the medium of the written word. The importance of the focus upon *hearing* cannot be over-estimated if one is trying to understand the relationship between Kraus’ style of performance, the compositions of the Second Viennese School, and performances of their works. In the surviving recordings of his recitations, we can hear how Kraus shapes the lines of his speech in a precise manner, with acute sensitivity to gestural aspects

11. Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony (Harmonielehre)*, 421–422.

within speech, such as refrain. Elias Canetti gives an account of how Kraus’ recitations may be understood as instructions about the nature of language:

[...] far more important was the fact that you were simultaneously learning how to *hear*. Everything that was spoken, anywhere, at any time, by anyone at all, was offered to your hearing, a dimension of the world that I had never had any inkling of. And since the issue was combination – in all variants – of language and person, this was perhaps the most important dimension, or at least the richest. This kind of hearing was impossible unless you excluded your own feelings. As soon as you put into motion what was to be heard, you stepped back and only absorbed and could not be hindered by any judgement on your part, any indignation, any delight. The important thing was the pure, unadulterated shape: none of these acoustic masks [...] could blend with the others.<sup>12</sup>

“Learning how to hear,” in this case, is also about becoming more sensitive to ideas that are communicated within the recitations, and thus about learning to become a more ethical human being. Canetti’s idea of the potential objectivity of suspended ‘judgment’ and the absence of ‘acoustic masks’ is also striking because it is precisely this quality of judgement-free focus upon unadulterated shape that is concentrated to a point of objectification, unhindered by “any judgement [...] any indignation, any delight”. This meant that, for Schoenberg and his associates Kraus was both an ideological beacon and a performative exception:

Karl Kraus funded his production of *Die Fackel* through very popular and fashionable public readings. In these performances Kraus played all the parts. He was not, apparently, a great singer in the usual sense of the word, and we read in a review by Schoenberg’s pupil Paul A. Pisk that he had little sense of pitch. This prompted an irate letter to *Die Fackel* from Steuermann, co-signed by Rudolph Kolisch and Alban Berg, interestingly, and for our purposes relevantly, suggesting that although Kraus was not in any sense a trained musician he could convey the meaning of the music, and to do this did not depend entirely on hitting the right notes [Note: *Die Fackel* No. 118, 1929, p. 91ff. See Kraft, *op. cit.*, p. 198]. If this letter is to be taken seriously, it would suggest that the meaning (or idea) of music can be conveyed by gestures approximating to the shape of the musical phrases.<sup>13</sup>

Just as Schoenberg himself was treated, by Kandinsky and others, as exemplary in his painting despite his lack of training, Kraus is lauded as uncovering the ‘real’ idea of what he sings and speaks, perhaps precisely because his voice does not serve a ‘school’ of singing, but goes straight to the heart of the words and language.<sup>14</sup> This reveals the ethical imperatives of that language, something that, as Goehr notes, Kraus and Schoenberg shared, in their respective fields.

[On Schoenberg] His expression is strident, sometimes laconic, elsewhere quite long-winded; and his arguments and logic frequently reveal contradictory pressures and aspirations. In his music, the characteristic gesture is the rapidly rising voice, the forceful when not actually foreshortened closure. This is partially the mark of his times and his tongue; but far more it is the voice of the man himself. ... it is quite possible, indeed probable, that he should have given Moses words which expressed his own innermost beliefs about the nature of his work and his personal ethics; especially so, if we come to recognize that an ethical concern distinguishes him from run-of-the-mill composers.<sup>15</sup>

*Herzgewächse* stands as a laboratory for the observation of these characteristics, especially in light of its wider context within the *Blaue Reiter* Almanac project. Moreover, it prompts questions around the poetic narrative, questions that relate to an ethics of performance:

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12. Elias Canetti, *The Torch in my Ear* (London: Granta, 1999), 220.

13. Goehr, “Schoenberg and Karl Kraus: The Idea Behind the Music,” 64–65.

14. Schoenberg’s relationship to music performance is complex; Sabine Feisst argues convincingly that Schoenberg’s stance toward performers, and the role of performance, changed during his American years: “Although he consistently adhered to the idea that a performer needs to be an ‘advocate of the work and its author’, he took a more democratic stance toward performers, regarding them at a higher status than he did in his European years,” in Sabine Feisst, *Schoenberg’s New World: The American Years*, 157.

15. Goehr, “Schoenberg and Karl Kraus: The Idea Behind the Music,” 60.

[...] narrative is not just the structure of the object [...] but a way of speaking, of manipulating time, of using figural language, of constituting events, and the *context of performance* in which narrating occurs.<sup>16</sup>

The collaboration that led to Schoenberg's participation in the *Blaue Reiter* project is well-known.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, some salient details should be mentioned here. Schoenberg's contributions to the Almanac comprised *Herzgewächse*, the essay 'Das Verhältnis zum Text' and two self-portrait paintings: one of the series of 'gazes' ('*Braunes Selbstportrait*', *Catalogue raisonné* 12, 16/III/1910) and the 'self-portrait from behind', whereby the viewer sees Schoenberg's back as he walks away ('*Gehendes Selbstportrait*', *Catalogue raisonné* 18, 1911). This diversity of medium was in keeping with the conception developed by Kandinsky and Frans Marc, the editors of the Almanac, "to present a summary of modern art as a utopian *Gesamtkunstwerk*."<sup>18</sup>

The setting by Schoenberg of Maeterlinck's poem from *Serres chaudes* was also clearly consistent with the ethos of the project. Both Kandinsky and Schoenberg admired Maeterlinck, and the text to be set in *Herzgewächse* had rich possibilities:

Using an elaborately metaphorical language, Maeterlinck describes a soul shut off from life, trapped alternately in a hothouse, under glass or ice, in a prison or hospital, in a diving bell or aquarium, or in the depths of sleep. All these isolate the psyche from the external world and from any active involvement with life or nature. But within the walls of the isolated hothouse has grown a richly imaginative vegetation of dreams, memories, feelings, and presentiments of death.<sup>19</sup>

As was often the case in his composition of pieces during the period in which he wrote atonal music, Schoenberg had to race to complete *Herzgewächse* in time for Kandinsky's deadline. The evidence is that he wrote it down as a full score; no sketches exist for the work, although there are two manuscripts of the piece in the Arnold Schönberg Center, "one of which has rehearsal notes for a projected performance in 1912" – which did not take place.<sup>20</sup> The non-performance of *Herzgewächse* is not difficult to understand: it is a piece whose difficulty is out of all proportion to its duration. However, I would further maintain that part of its performance challenge stems from the fact that what is staged within the work is nothing less than the erasure of the singer as a body at precisely the most vocally-demanding moment of the piece.

Stuckenschmidt reports Anton Webern's strong reaction to *Herzgewächse*, which has significance for a reading of the work that considers the nature of the voice in more detail:

"This is the highest quality in music!", said Webern, "the vocal part goes right up to F in alto with coloratura passages. And it goes down to G". [actually, G sharp]<sup>21</sup>

Despite the seemingly relentless focus on 'ideas' that characterizes the composers of the Schoenberg School, Webern here sounds almost like a gushing 'operaphile', mesmerized by the highest and lowest notes of the piece. Interestingly, however, he is not honoring the achievement of an accomplished singer; he is honoring Schoenberg, for inscribing these vocal extremities into *Herzgewächse* (see **Example 1**).

16. Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 28.

17. Simms, *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg*, 115.

18. *Ibid.*, 114.

19. *Ibid.*, 115.

20. *Ibid.*, 116.

21. Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, *Schoenberg: His Life, World and Work*, trans. Humphrey Searle (London: John Calder, 1977), 151.

**Example 1: *Herzgewächse* Op. 20, Measures 26-28, high F via leap of just over 2 octaves (by permission of Universal Editions AG)**

The image shows a musical score for measures 26-28 of *Herzgewächse* Op. 20. It consists of four staves: Soprano (Sop.), Celeste (Cel.), Harp (Hm.), and Harpsichord (Hr.). The Soprano part features a long, high note (F) that spans across measures 26, 27, and 28, marked with 'pppp'. The other instruments provide accompaniment with various textures and dynamics.

This is significant in terms of the arguments being made here; the idea of ‘authorship’ in relation to works, and the question of where specific aspects of that authorship are imprinted. It becomes a point of tension, and one that challenges Webern’s exclusive focus upon the autonomous nature of the notes that so enthrall him and divorced from any need for them to be given voice. This is because, in a real sense, the work is never really fully realized until the vocal performance happens, until the real difficulty of the singing is made manifest.

Webern’s excitement about the extraordinary vocal range of the piece appropriates the performative aspects for the composer, keeping an ideal of the work that is abstract and erasing the singer and her labor, so that what remains is ‘sound itself’, conceived with an intensity that does not require the substantiation of physical performance. From this perspective, the piece as a whole may be regarded as an abstract speculation pertaining to sonority, to sounds that exist solely in the conceptual resonating chambers of the mind. Willi Reich notes how the piece’s instrumentation suggests aspects of sound-experimentation pertaining to orchestration:

[...] it is for high soprano, celeste, harp and a harmonium whose part contains many indications as to registration, suggesting an orchestral sound that was probably in the composer’s mind at the outset. The vocal part must surely be Schoenberg’s hardest, from a technical point of view.<sup>22</sup>

This extreme technical difficulty must partly account for the paucity of performances of *Herzgewächse*. The Shoaf Discography, housed within the Arnold Schoenberg Centre’s website, lists only eight main entries for recorded performances of the work; for *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten*, Op.15, there are 25 entries; for *Erwartung*, Op. 17, 19, and *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21, 49.<sup>23</sup>

22. Willi Reich, *Arnold Schoenberg: A Critical Biography*, trans. Leo Black (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1971), 73.

*Herzgewächse* is a composition expressly created for a printed publication (and a visually-oriented one at that). Practical considerations of performability – who the soprano soloist might be; how any actual soprano might encompass in one voice and body all the vocal skills required – would therefore not have weighed as heavily as they would in an act of composition for which there was a specifically intended performance/performer. For the purposes of the *Blaue Reiter*, Schoenberg would also have conceived the composition in relation to his other contributions to the publication, including his essay ‘Das Verhältnis zum Text’. In this, his emphasis on the abstract level of meaning, as opposed to the superficial (but, for this, also read corporeal) level of expressivity is key. He seems almost not to recognize the hyper-charged latent expressivity of his score, later referring to this as a feature which, at a time when his theoretical preoccupations were moving away from expressive music, he had perhaps retained unconsciously.<sup>24</sup>

In this context, it is worth unpacking the idea of the metaphor of the ‘hothouse’ in *Herzgewächse*. In Maeterlinck’s collection of poems, of which *Feuillage du Coeur/Herzgewächse* is one, it is a pervasive image that could stand well for the paradox of an unconsciously expressive music. Inside the glasshouse all is luxuriant growth and fecundity but its hermetic enclosure means that the phallic, thrusting lily, despite rising above the other foliage, is paradoxically paralyzed and feeble (‘rigidement débile’ in Maeterlinck’s original, ‘starr in ihrer Kränklichkeit’ in Ammer’s German translation). It can only communicate with the real world outside via a ‘white mystic prayer’ (‘mystique prière blanche’) which rises above the ‘foliage of grief’ (‘feuillages douloureux’). Despite its erotic undertones, the cloistered artificiality of the imagery may be said to have seeped into the musical language and setting, arguably de-sensitizing Schoenberg to the headiness of the expressive atmosphere he was generating.

Schoenberg’s choice of the soprano voice makes practical sense in the context of the principal image of the second half of the poem – the lily rising above the surrounding foliage and petitioning the moon. He needs a voice that can soar above the general texture and he does not restrict himself in the demands that he places on the potential singer in achieving this. At the same time, he also needs the lower register to suggest the gloomy waterlilies and cold mosses of the first two stanzas. Again, he makes few concessions in terms of the depths to which he asks the soprano voice to sink (low G sharp), although he does exercise care in the instrumental sounds with which he surrounds the voice at these points so as to minimize the danger of its being smothered (see **Example 2**).

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23. See extracts from the discography of the Arnold Schoenberg Centre: <http://213.185.182.233/av/tontraeger.php> (last accessed February 10, 2024).

24. See Arnold Schoenberg, “Opinion or Insight?,” in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1975), 258–264.

**Example 2: Herzgewächse Op. 20, Measures 5-6, voice in low range (by permission of Universal Editions AG)**

The image shows a musical score for measures 5 and 6 of 'Herzgewächse' Op. 20. It features four staves: Soprano (Sop.), Cello (Cel.), Horns (Hm.), and Harp (Hf.). The vocal line (Sop.) is in a low range and includes the lyrics: 'nas, und der nun er - starrt in sel-nem Schlum-mer. Sinn - bild-'. The instrumental parts include an Oboe (Ob.), Horns (Hm.), and Harp (Hf.). Dynamics range from *pp* to *ppp*. The score is in a key with two flats and a 3/4 time signature.

Overall, the vocal range of *Herzgewächse* is only slightly short of three octaves, while the increasingly sustained lines of the later passages mean that the voice is taxed hardest when stamina is most under threat. As already noted, there is therefore a disproportionality between the scale of the song and the effort that the singer must invest in it (much more than is demanded of the instrumentalists, even though their parts – and their co-ordination – are far from straightforward). Schoenberg’s insouciance about this feels like a counterpart to his ‘unconscious expressivity’, as though both expressivity and difficulty are inessential—even irrelevant—to what he is striving for in the piece.

Does this matter? Is the hierarchy between composer and performer a neutral phenomenon, or does it have an ethical dimension? And when a male composer writes many of his most fiercely unforgiving vocal parts for a female singer, is there a particular strand of exploitation to be remarked upon—even if it would not have been viewed as such in 1910? And, in the specific context of *Herzgewächse*, do the near-inhuman demands of the vocal line have the effect of ‘de-gendering’ the soprano voice? Finally, if such a de-gendering is unconsciously taking place, is it unconscious in the sense of being *accidental* or are we to detect a far-from-accidental *subconscious* at work in the enlisting of the female voice to articulate male feelings while ensuring that, in the process, this female voice should be stripped as much as possible of its womanly status?

Given all these questions, it is readily understandable that the unrealizable aspects of *Herzgewächse* affected those who wished to perform it. “Schoenberg wanted it to be performed by Martha Winternitz-Dorda at a concert of songs in Berlin – perhaps at a matinee in Max Reinhardt’s Chamber Theatre” – but this performance did not take place.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, although the score was made available in print in 1920, separately from the *Blaue Reiter* publication, a further

25. Stuckenschmidt, *Schoenberg: His Life, World and Work*, 151.



eight years were to elapse before its eventual Schoenberg-approved premiere in Vienna in April 1928.<sup>26</sup>

The Vienna premiere, conducted by Webern, was largely met by the typical bewilderment that characterized Schoenberg reception in the German-language press. By contrast, Berg, reporting on the event to Schoenberg, who was not present, is fulsome in his praise:

We reveled in those sounds, sounds we had scarcely dreamed of. It is so wonderful; every one of your works creates an unprecedented sensation in the listener on first hearing – even if it is 20 years old, like this one.<sup>27</sup>

Berg's account goes on to praise the performance as well as the music:

The performance was fabulous in every way. There were moments such as at the words 'sinnbildhaft ist seiner Blumen Zier' and the entire ending when we completely forgot to breathe – and that's how it affected everyone in the hall, I'd venture to say – not just me. And it was the same – only more so – during the second performance of the Lied – which was not given for, say, pedagogical reasons; the musicians were actually forced into it by the audience, which simply would not cease applauding.<sup>28</sup>

Although Berg does not single out the female soloist for any particular praise, the fact that he found the performance “fabulous in every way” suggests that she acquitted herself well. This is corroborated by the plaudits given to the singer in question, Marianne Rau-Hoeglauer, by one particular critic, Paul Pisk of the *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*. Writing in the issue for 21 April 1928, he praises her in the following terms:

The singer is not only the technical master of all difficulties, but also has the purest intonation and strong empathy for Schönberg's world of thoughts.<sup>29</sup>

But there is something missing in accounting for the exaggeratedly delayed first performance of *Herzgewächse* as being merely a function of its vocal demands. The language that Schoenberg employs for his high soprano in *Herzgewächse* suggests a potentially radical agenda around remaking the music ensemble as a medium for conveying ‘sound’ as something different from and, perhaps, beyond music itself:

Especially in *Herzgewächse* and *Pierrot Lunaire*, the power of connection between the two arts was sound per se, the distinctive tone of instruments and voices and their varying contributions, which could be made to agree with the underlying sound that the composer intuited from the poem.<sup>30</sup>

In his 1931 essay, “A Self-Analysis”, Schoenberg writes of his first encounter with a new poem as awakening “an unnamable sense of a sounding and moving space”.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, this has aspects more akin to a high Romantic than a Modernist agenda. Schoenberg appears to be hearing and understanding poetry as music:

26. A previous performance had taken place as early as 1923 in the United States, conducted by Carlos Salzedo and featuring the soprano Eva Leoni; it was one of several bold US premieres of Schoenberg's works sponsored around that time by the International Composers Guild, of which Salzedo was co-founder, along with Edgard Varèse (see Feisst, *Schoenberg's New World: The American Years*, 28).

27. From the account given on relevant webpages of the Arnold Schoenberg Centre, <https://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/joomla-license-3/herzgewaechse-op-20-1911-e> (accessed 11 December 2016).

28. Ibid.

29. Dr. Paul A. Pisk, “Schönberg-Aufführung in Wien,” *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, April 21, 1928, translation mine. A transliteration of this review appears as an Appendix to this article. Reviews of Rau-Hoeglauer's performance also appear in the *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung* (April 19, 1928), the *Breslauer Neueste Nachrichten* (April 20, 1928) and *Die Stunde* (April 19, 1928). Interestingly, the US performance referred to in footnote 26 also prompted a call for an immediate repeat of the work and elicited praise for the beauty of the singer's voice from at least one commentator (see Feisst, *Schoenberg's New World: The American Years*, 28).

30. Simms, *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg*, 118.

31. Reich, *Arnold Schoenberg: A Critical Biography*, 238, fn. 15, 234.

Schoenberg asserts the practical relevance for the composer of the music heard by Verlaine and Novalis in poetry, music that for Schoenberg was not just metaphor but an actual tone or sound that a composer could imitate in the orchestration and harmony of a new work. *Herzgewächse* and *Pierrot Lunaire* were his two most immediate applications of his theory, and gradually – in *Pierrot Lunaire* and the *Four Songs Op. 22* – he also diminished the surface expressivity of the music, leaving the instrumental and vocal sonority as the principal vehicle for expression of the text.<sup>32</sup>

But this introduces dilemmas that have already been discussed in relation to the singer and her identity. The removal of the human presence and agency in favor of an abstract notion of sound as idea in itself has the potential to be an ethical aporia. At the very least, it necessitates a re-conceptualization of the singer’s voice:

But there is also a radical autonomization of the human voice that occurs, in varying degrees, in all vocal music. The sound of the singing voice becomes, as it were, a “voice-object” and the sole center for the listener’s attention. That attention is thus drawn away from words, plot, character, and even from music as it resides in the orchestra, or music as formal gestures, as abstract shape.<sup>33</sup>

This is an important locus of thought in the consideration of Schoenberg’s vocal ‘experiments’; the desire to control the voice is readily apparent in Schoenberg’s interfaces with performers and in the means through which he curated ‘approved’ performances. We could conceive of his approach to instrumentation as a continuous interrogation of what constitutes ‘voice’. Focusing upon this via his innovations in the use of pitch, tone-color, melody and the relationships between these can give us a more nuanced understanding, both of *Herzgewächse* itself and, more generally, of how atonality, instrumentation and orchestration were often mediated by the presence of the voice. Doing so foregrounds the voice, and the singer, as a creative force, but it also problematizes the singer’s role.

The idea of ‘essence’ is important here: in the highest note that she sings in *Herzgewächse*, the singer’s voice merges into a more neutral, yet ‘essential’ sound as a result of the choice (or necessity) of minimizing vibrato. At this point, the voice vacillates between being a living sound and one that is emergent from a [human] machine. In *Herzgewächse*, one may decry the aspect of the ‘stolen’ voice that makes the compositional feat take precedence over the vocal one, but it is the singer who prevails, provided she can master the material. Yet even here is a paradox: as soon as that mastery occurs, the singer sets up for herself the kind of phantasmagorical screening that her singing might have circumvented. The singing/singer is ‘real’ in the moment of hazard, but that reality is lost when the near-impossibility of the work is made to seem easy.

In more affirmative terms, what becomes clear as one listens to the modern recordings currently available is the extent to which female identity can reassert itself in the act of performance. This manifests in the varied styles of performance that, in turn, are mediated by the special nature of each individual voice. The long legato lines and sparse use of vibrato in Eileen Hulse’s performance – in which the climatic ‘F’ sounds almost ‘non-human’ – contrasts with the pitch-accurate but less legato version of Christine Schäfer, as it does with the theatrical and dramatic version by Dorothy Dorow (which is due, in part, to the particularly dark quality of her low voice) and the more vocally orthodox version of Lucy Shelton, who is actually able to color the long high ‘F’ with a slight vibrato.

So, however much the idea of the voice might have been one of abstraction in the original conception of the work, each specific female voice in these recordings imprints itself upon the music in its own style: it is indeed the women, in this case, who have the highest – and therefore potentially the most authoritative – voices. The diverse strengths of their performances demon-

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32. Simms, *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg*, 118.

33. Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 10.

strate the necessity, with each interpretative project, to “examine anew and attempt to organize anew”, but the distinctive results of their endeavors have the effect of creating nothing short of new “phenomena”, potentially imprinting their performing presences upon the materiality and very nature of the musical content. As such, they both embody the precepts of Schoenberg’s injunction and challenge precisely the notions of the immutability of the idea which his arguments seem to have been intended to shore up.

But perhaps the contention is less deep-rooted than it might appear. Schoenberg goes on to focus his primary criticism on attempts by art theorists to draw generalized explanations – especially those deemed to hold good into the future – from “our direct knowledge of the phenomena” present in a given case, where art theory “is not content to be merely the attempt to find laws; it professes to have found the *eternal* laws.”<sup>34</sup>

If we detect in this statement the glimmer of a readiness to accept that the musical idea itself could be an evolving phenomenon, rather than something fixed for all time and all performing contexts, this offers the prospect of an altogether more dynamic and fruitful relationship between the reified musical composition, music theory’s search for laws and the ineffable singularity of musical performance. In such a relationship, the *pas-de-deux* between the living voice and the specter of the composer would become a rich site for creative work and the special nature of *Herzgewächse* would make it a work that particularly invites innovations in production and post-production, curation and presentation.

Reconsidering the nature of voice points to ways of reconceiving Schoenberg’s entire project. Clearly, the real-world considerations of performance have a bearing upon the nature of his work and his relationship with the world. Yet, as we have seen, this is in constant contradiction with his *idea* of the work and of the nature of music itself:

Music is not to be considered as a vehicle for the expression of ideas or sensations derived from words. It is non-referential, both out of a meditation on the real world and presumably about things in the real world, but expressed according to the laws of music.<sup>35</sup>

To work with the music and ideas of Schoenberg is to be in a constant flux between the referential and the non-referential, the ‘real’ and the ‘idea’. Performance and scholarship still have much to do to truly understand, map and navigate this strange zone. However, perhaps a closer scrutiny of the subtle but potentially far-reaching distinction between laws and eternal laws may provide inspiring perspectives in this task.

## A Appendix

### Transliterations of German language press reviews for *Herzgewächse* Op. 20

#### Schönbergs «*Herzgewächse*»

*Die Komposition für hohen Sopran, Celesta, Harmonium und Harfe (nach einer Dichtung Maeterlincks) stammt aus der Zeit der Pierrot Lunaire-Lieder. Also – übersättigt mit revolutionären Radikalismen, die vollständige Auflösung der Tonalität in Polytonalität, die Atomisierung einer ohne-dies schon auf Achtelnoten eingestellten Teil-thematik, die Umwandlung der Singstimme in ein Instrument und der Instrumente in Klangfarben, gewollt bahnbrechend – ins Freie, wie die anderen meinen, in eine Sackgasse – aus einem schwerwiegenden Grund zum Altern ohne gehört zu werden verurteilt. Die Sängerin, die vom kleinen Gis bis zum dreigestrichenen F singen kann, war nie zu finden. Erst jetzt wurde sie in Frau Marianne Rau-Höglauer entdeckt. Diese seltene Künstlerin*

34. Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony (Harmonielehre)*, 8.

35. Goehr, “Schoenberg and Karl Kraus: The Idea Behind the Music,” 63.

singt Unwahrscheinlichstes; ihr Können streift das Wunderbare. Ihr und den Instrumentalisten, den Damen Erna Gal (Harmonium) und Hanni Haumer (Harfe) und Herrn Steuermann (Celesta) und dem Dirigenten Webern ist der Erfolg der späten Uraufführung des Schönbergschen Opus 20 zu danken. Stürmischer Beifall, der die sofortige Wiederholung der die überlieferte Musik ad absurdum führenden und doch bedingungslos problematischen Komposition ermöglichte.

R. K.

Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung 19.04.1928

### Schönberg-Aufführung in Wien

Das 20. Werk Schönbergs «Herzgewächse», nach einem Text von Maurice Maeterlinck für hohen Sopran, Harmonium, Celesta und Harfe komponiert, wurde bis jetzt überhaupt noch nicht aufgeführt, denn Schönberg verlangt in der Singstimme dieses Stücks, um die starken Stimmungsgegensätze des Textes auszunützen, einen Umfang von fast drei Oktaven und führt den Sopran bis zum dreigestrichenen F, das als lange Note in leisen Klangschattierungen gehalten werden muss. Es ist klar, dass es nur einem günstigen Zufall zu danken ist, wenn sich eine Sängerin findet, die den Schwierigkeiten eines solchen Werkes gewachsen ist. Marianne Rau-Höglauer aus Leipzig hat nun in Wien dieses Stück im Rahmen eines gemischten Konzerts des Wiener Streichquartetts zur Uraufführung gebracht. In den «Herzgewächsen» macht Schönberg den erlesenen Klangwirkungen der einzelnen Instrumente, die auf ihre Möglichkeiten hin bis ins letzte ausgenützt werden, Gebrauch. Nicht nur die Celesta mit ihren klaren Glockenklängen und die Harfe, bei der auch Flageolett und Tremola vorkommen, fordern; auch die verschiedenen Register des Harmoniums vom Holzbläserklang bis zu dem gedämpfter Posaunen werden verwertet. Über das Klanggewebe hinaus führt eine thematische Arbeit von höchster Eindringlichkeit, und über dem ganzen schwebt die Singstimme als einigende Kraft. Das Werk wurde unter der Leitung von Anton Webern gespielt und fand so stürmische Aufnahme, dass es unmittelbar nachher vollständig wiederholt werden musste. Der Sängerin ist nicht nur die technische Beherrschung aller Schwierigkeiten, sondern auch reinste Intonation und starke Einfühlungskraft in Schönbergs Gedankenwelt nachzurühmen.

Dr. Paul A. Pisk

Berliner Börsen-Zeitung 21.04.1928

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