

## Rethinking Schoenberg

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*As [the dead] are defenceless, at the mercy of our memory, so our memory is the only help that is left to them.* – Theodor W. Adorno<sup>1</sup>

2024 marks the 150th anniversary of Arnold Schoenberg's birth.<sup>2</sup> For a composer with fewer than fifty works appearing regularly in the global concert repertoire, his fame largely rests on performances in Europe and the USA of his music, which has been given a rather uneven reception – at times revelatory and confounding.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising that a digital search for performances of his music in his anniversary year reveal the bulk of that which have been programmed by today's orchestral and chamber groups consist of the same half a dozen pieces – that is, the more popular ones.<sup>4</sup> Mainly they comprise music from the early tonal and atonal periods, including *Transfigured Night*, Op. 4; the *Chamber Symphony*, Op. 9; *Five Orchestral Pieces*, Op. 16; *Erwartung*, Op. 17; *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21, and *Gurrelieder*.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, works written in and after the 1920s continue to be underappreciated, even more so during the 150th-year celebration.

The foregoing issues also arose when Stelios Chatziiosifidis and I organized the “Schoenberg at 140” conference a decade ago in Canterbury. One reviewer made the cursory comment that ours was the only event to commemorate the anniversary, thus emphasizing the diminishing legacy of the composer at least within the Anglosphere.<sup>6</sup> The currency of Schoenberg scholarship and criticism seems to have been overshadowed by other issues, given the recent restructuring of the musicology curriculum in the UK and USA.<sup>7</sup>

This special issue of the *European Journal of Musicology* attempts to reinvigorate interests in some of the less known and understudied pieces drawn from Schoenberg's later period – including the Four Orchestral Songs, op. 22, Piano Piece, op. 33b, Violin Concerto, op. 36, Second Chamber Symphony, op. 38, and the Theme and Variation for Wind Band, op. 43a. It will also offer comments on Schoenberg's thinking and ‘rethinking’ processes behind each of these musical compositions *qua* performances. Readers will come to realize that the word ‘rethinking’, that is chosen as the theme for this issue, refers to both the contributors' own rethinking of the music as well

1 Theodor W. Adorno, “Marginalia on Mahler [1936],” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert and trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 612.

2 I would like to thank Severine Neff and Alexander Carpenter for their comments and suggestions for this essay. Any errors are mine alone.

3 Over the quarter of a century, writers are still pointing out that Schoenberg's music are “rarely performed”. See Lynn Cavanagh's review of Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (eds.), *Constructive Dissonance: Arnold Schoenberg and the Transformations of Twentieth-Century Culture*, in *Canadian University Music Review* 18, no. 2 (1998): 93 and John Adams's review of Harvey Sachs' *Schoenberg: Why He Matters*, in *The New York Times*, July 28, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/28/books/review/schoenberg-why-he-matters-harvey-sachs.html> (accessed 6 January 2024).

4 Schönberg150: <https://www.schoenberg150.at/index.php/en/music-events/eventsbyyear/2024/> (accessed 13 October 2023).

5 Walter Frisch, *The Early Works of Arnold Schoenberg, 1893-1908* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 258–59.

6 Alan Street, “New World, Old World: Schoenberg Now and Then.” *Music Analysis* 34, no. 3 (2015): 364–409. To be sure, there was another symposium in October that year at the Arnold Schönberg Center. See *Programm*, 9/2014-2/2015 [https://issuu.com/schoenbergcenter/docs/asc\\_vk\\_092014\\_aktuell](https://issuu.com/schoenbergcenter/docs/asc_vk_092014_aktuell) (accessed 6 February 2024).

7 These changes comprise the consideration for decolonization and racial minority composers and performers. Cf. Matthew D. Morrison, “Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 781–823; Shzr Ee Tan, “Preface: Decolonizing Music and Music Studies.” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 30, no. 1 (2021): 4–8.

as a ‘rethinking Schoenberg’, that is, Schoenberg as an individual, who thinks and rethinks about how both his self and his works fit within the larger scheme of things.

Six scholars and a performer have thus stepped up to the cause of upholding the prevalence of Schoenberg Studies in contemporary times. The articles are divided into two groups: performative and historicist praxis. The performer often takes on the main responsibility of translating score to sound. However, the composer and the analyst can also partake in the larger performative discourse and intervene in the performer’s execution. Directly or indirectly, the decisions of the performer *qua* interpreter come under the composer’s influence. The historicist approach on the other hand is a reading of Schoenberg’s music along the temporal and sociocultural grain. The authors in the last three essays of this special issue decipher his music to account for the symbolic imaginations within specific American, Jewish, and Viennese milieus.

Several Schoenberg experts have pointed out the projection and promotion of the composer himself as a public figure either through textual or physical presence. Joseph Auner describes a sense of ‘intense self-consciousness’ in the manner in which Schoenberg catalogs and chronicles every single piece of writing, fragmentary or otherwise, as well as communicates across a rhizomatic network of colleagues, students and followers in both Europe and the USA.<sup>8</sup> In addition to his fervent participation in the Society for Private Musical Performances, Schoenberg also reaches out to his listeners via radio and records to elicit and maintain mass appreciation of his creative ideas.<sup>9</sup> His acute grasp of different echelons of a mediated society enabled him to harness these resources as vehicles for his music and their geneses, part or whole.

To a large extent, Schoenberg was himself a product of his times given the decline of aristocracy and rise of democracy by the mid-nineteenth century. Both art music and folk music had to vie for the selfsame appeal of the masses. From his middle age onward, Schoenberg as a creative producer appeared to have set upon a public relations strategy in claiming and disclaiming his turfs. Take, for instance, his vociferous response to a false allegation in the *Neues Wiener Journal*, to which he retorted, “I have not taken care of my reputation for more than twenty years only to now allow myself to be mocked.”<sup>10</sup> Words travel and leave lasting impressions, and when one is embroiled within such a volatile ecosystem the thinking and rethinking of one’s social compass becomes inevitable.

Leaving epistolary and other texts aside, the contributors to this special issue turn or return to the musical outputs themselves as evidence of Schoenberg’s rethinking tactics. A couple of essays re-orientate readers with Schoenberg’s historicist approach toward conventional forms and the malleability of reified genres, such as the symphony (Pow) and the waltz (Carpenter). Two other articles interrogate the motivic and temporal negotiations (Chatziiosifidis and Hamao respectively) that Schoenberg has worked and reworked during and after the performance.<sup>11</sup> It is thereby unsurprising for Schoenberg as a ‘rethinker’ that the eventual appearances of the Violin Concerto and Second Chamber Symphony, to take but two examples, would be relatively short-lived for their overly abstract qualities.<sup>12</sup>

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8 Joseph Auner, “Composing on Stage: Schoenberg and the Creative Process as Public Performance.” *19th-Century Music* 29, no. 1 (2005): 67.

9 See Jack Boss, “Schoenberg’s Op. 22 Radio Talk and Developing Variation in Atonal Music,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 14, no. 2 (1992): 125–49.

10 Quoted in Auner, 74.

11 Two other factors that made Schoenberg contemplate but are not mentioned in this special issue are the work’s instrumentation/timbre and publication avenue, such as the cases of *Herzgewächse*, Op. 20, and the Serenade, op. 24.

12 Cf. Ben Earle, “Taste, Power, and Trying to Understand Op. 36: British Attempts to Popularize Schoenberg,” *Music & Letters* 84, no. 4 (2003): 608–643.

Adhering closely to the theme of this special issue, a trio of practitioners (Crispin; Rice and Napolitano) reconsider the extent to which Schoenberg provided leeway for the interpreters of his music by drawing on musical examples from his Opp. 20 and 33. In his endeavor to achieve posterity and publicity, what Auner calls Schoenberg's 'poietic imperative'—an apparent traceability from the idea to the sketch; from the fragment to the finished work—came to the fore albeit obliterating the agency of the performer.<sup>13</sup> With an emphatic consideration over the musician's autonomy, Schoenberg in his middle age challenges the emotional and physical dexterity of his collaborators.<sup>14</sup> His pursuit for formal coherence juxtaposed with the 'real' begs the question of the performer's (and correspondingly, the analyst's) capacity<sup>15</sup>. An exception to this positional myopia, as revealed in Hamao's article, is Schoenberg's addition of metronomic markings as performative directions for more precise tempo indications and increased comprehensibility of his earlier works.

There is, however, another group of people of whom Schoenberg thinks and takes seriously, and these are his composition students. Here in this special issue we have included a case of Schoenberg as a teacher, who rethinks his pedagogy by writing and rewriting a textbook for beginners in composition. Gordon Root differentiates the *Models for Beginners in Composition* from other books by Schoenberg; it is proposed that the short volume is at once a theoretical thesis, a textbook, a guidebook, and a pseudo-sketchbook tailored strategically to elementary students as well as the American lay public. In all of these guises, Schoenberg is clearly rethinking the presentation of his teachings to diverse audiences. His decision to compose for the wind band (Op. 43a) similarly deviates from an earlier generic straitjacket—string quartets, solo piano and operas – and hints at a creative flexibility that would allow him to gain popularity and accessibility with a larger demographic.

In the same vein, Schoenberg, at different points in his life, became conscious of his position—vis-à-vis the Viennese and Jewish doxa—as a people's composer. The conflation of his ethnic or religious rethinking and his creative process gained momentum with structural permutations and symbolic connotations operating in tandem. Distinct elements associated with the Viennese waltz and Jewish traditions emerge in the later parts of his oeuvre. As the contributors to this special issue rethink the conventional wisdom of appreciating or, for some others, assessing the provenance of Schoenberg's thinking and rethinking processes, it is our endeavor that this tranche of essays would situate the composer's music as a vessel to also rethink other issues—business relations, biographical subjectivity, topical semiotics, etc. – within musicology. Here's wishing Mr. Schoenberg a very happy 150th birthday!

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<sup>13</sup> Auner, 83.

<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to Avior Byron for highlighting the different ways Schoenberg communicated his intentions in the correspondences with various performers, including conductors and instrumentalists.

<sup>15</sup> A case in point would be where Schoenberg indicated to Hermann Scherchen that the latter's interpretation of the Adagio section of the *Chamber Symphony*, Op. 9, was too fast and required a "deep feeling" for better clarity. See Arnold Schoenberg's letter to Hermann Scherchen on 1 February 1914. *Letters*, ed. Erwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 47.

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