

**twentieth-century
analysis:
essays
in
miniature**

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ARNOLD SCHOENBERG: *Spiritual Journey* (I). Is music primarily a magic revelation of the soul or merely a noble caricature? To the Classical period, music was real; resting on a firm theoretical foundation, it could fulfill itself as a scintillating divertimento or as a glorification to God. Music, luckily, at this time had a secure sociological niche and God still had to be contended with. However, the true nature of reality, particularly aesthetic reality, is elusive. Each age thinks that it knows itself only to discover that personal truth is subjective. In the masquerade of history, reality is a fleeting guest, continually changing masks.

Arnold Schoenberg, the man and the music, are caught up in such historical ambiguities. His *Pierrot lunaire*, for example, is a twentieth-century masterpiece divergently judged revolutionary and an extension of the past. Composed in 1912, the work shocked central Europe with its musical daring and lurid psychological overtones. Some musicians felt it to be the music of the future, revealing the tortured abyss of men in much the same way as novelists assumed psychoanalysis to be the ultimate interpretation of men. Other composers, notably Stravinsky, thought the music reminiscent of degenerate Romanticism à la Aubrey Beardsley.

The work is a series of songlike recitations for female voice and seven instruments. Although a descendent of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, *Pierrot* is for Schoenberg a wistful dreamer repelled by the insensitivity of contemporary life. His moods oscillate between ecstasy, buffoonery, and despair. The text derives from a cycle of poems, *Three Times Seven*, based on the German translation by Otto Erich Hartleben of the French poet Albert Giraud's melodrama, *Pierrot lunaire*.

The literary style is expressionistic in its fantastic exaggeration of poetic and visual images. Pierrot's eyes drink the wine of the moon, giant moths kill the sun, a haggard harlot sticks like a sharp nail in his brain, and he gently screws his pipestem into Cassander's skull and blissfully puffs on his fine Turkish tobacco. The twenty-one melo-

dramas divide into three sections dealing with Pierrot's visions. He first appears as a dandy who falls in love with the Madonna (or is it a pale washerwoman?). Eventually succumbing to the perils of the flesh and a melancholy moon, Pierrot turns thief and atheist. In delirium, he sees himself hanging from a gibbet and suffers decapita-

This article is the third in a series of "Essays in Miniature" featuring important musical compositions and developments of the twentieth century. The series will include analyses of works by Schoenberg, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Stockhausen, Cage, and others. The author is Assistant Professor of Theory-Composition, Department of Music, The University of Texas, Austin.

Essay number four, which will appear in the March 1967 *Music Educators Journal*, will discuss Arnold Schoenberg's opera, *Moses and Aron*.

tion. Weary of sin, Pierrot seeks spirituality and finds resurrection in a moonbeam playing on his shoulder.

Sensing the impossibility of setting the texts conventionally, Schoenberg devised a manner of combining speech with song (*Sprechgesang*). While the scansion of words to be spoken is accurately notated, the singer is permitted to slide up or down from indicated pitches; the singer half speaks and sings. The effect is an otherworldly declamation perfectly suited to the poetry's macabre spirit. Instrumentation and scoring (piano, piccolo, flute, clarinet, bass clarinet, and string trio) further emphasizes the bizarre. Each poem exhibits a different scoring (players double on instruments), unusual tessituras are stressed, and contrapuntal conflicts are cruel. This phantasmagoric scoring is the result of severe contrapuntal forms ruled by the discipline and rigors of formal demands.

Unlike his pupil Anton Webern who sought a purely formal musical unity by using canon and passacaglia, Schoenberg employed contrapuntal devices to buttress his dramatic forms. Webern wanted his listeners to follow his delicate contrapuntal lines like fine needle-

work in a tapestry; aural lucidity was of prime importance. A total impression of lines converging was Schoenberg's objective. His term *Klangfarbenmelodie* describes this confluence of linear timbres, the effect of which might be likened to a panorama of multicolored lights at night.

The dissolution of tonality, as an organizing force in the construction of large musical forms, made it necessary for composers to discover new methods for sustaining a formal design. Webern, who was not interested in the expansion of time through form, preferred the musical vignette. Schoenberg wanted and needed to maintain an expansive design. To accomplish this end, he shrewdly concluded that a dramatic plot could in part prolong musical structure. Almost all works of this period are programmatic in content. This solution, however, carried destruction in its wake. In having to sustain dramatic interest, music was forced to ever greater intensity, and intensity meant the morass of chromaticism. The saturation of eight or more note chords weakened the movement of harmonic progression, making it possible to move from one chordal aggregate to another at random. Minus a feeling of acoustical necessity, everything became possible and randomness became chaos. To a creative mind like Schoenberg's, imbued with a high sense of order, the situation was intolerable. Infinite possibilities paralyze creation. Finding the exit from this labyrinth occupied the composer's mind for many years. The solution, a fusion of acute insight, scholarship, and inspired guesswork, was to become the supreme musical innovation of the twentieth century.

Works of historical significance are more than period pieces; they are the flesh and blood of emotional turmoil. What seems vital to one, however, does not always seem so for succeeding generations; aesthetic cornerstones crumble while flesh and blood decay. Nevertheless, in its genre, *Pierrot lunaire* stands alone; it begot no offspring. Related to the arch-Romantic *Tristan*, Pierrot can no longer roam the medieval battlements of Cornwall; instead he is condemned to seek solace amid

a repressed Victorian society whose never uttered secrets were tapped by a bearded Viennese soothsayer (who was himself a Pierrot)—Sigmund Freud. It is not so much that *Pierrot's* musical language is outmoded; it never fails to startle. *Pierrot*, today, suffers from cultural misplacement. The breach between his age and ours is not one of language, but of emotional meaning. Many masterworks have undergone a similar fate. Yet *Pierrot lunaire's* creation was a staggering event, one which could only have been accomplished by a composer frighteningly attuned to his times.

Schoenberg was uncommonly aware of the historical fluctuations and necessities of music and in *Pierrot* he brilliantly realized the furtive dreams and desires of the subconscious into a coherent artwork. *Pierrot* focused on one aspect of Man's twentieth-century emotional life; the darker side of Man's sexuality seeking the flesh as salvation.

It is impossible to overestimate the difficulties which must have beset Arnold Schoenberg in his musical quest. Drawn to the century of Wagner and Mahler, yet cognizant of the old world's passing away, Schoenberg forced himself to become a pioneer in a new century. The immensity of the effort required not only the intellectual forging of a new theoretical system but willingness to inhabit a musical terrain which would certainly expose him to ridicule. German music of late Romanticism was God-intoxicated and *Pierrot* despaired of God, believing Nietzsche's conclusion that God was Dead. And for Arnold Schoenberg the exhaustion of the tonal system signified that music too was dead. Shortly after *Pierrot's* completion, there followed a pause in Schoenberg's output. These years of inactivity must have witnessed a demonic birth struggle for a new music and a new faith. Sick unto death of the world which had failed to nurture him, Pierrot defiantly sang of himself but his heart was consumed by love for the unknowable. Weakened in body, torn in spirit, Pierrot the wistful dreamer struggled with his expiring soul to become an Old Testament Moses. ■