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A marriage of Brahms and Wagner

Before his journey into atonality, Schoenberg composed the surprisingly accessible *Verklärte Nacht*

At a time of change in our political relations, it is fruitful to take up the theme of musical transformations, and focus on those compositions which appear to usher the classical canon from one form of expression to a quite different one. Two works, both written in the 19th century while romanticism was still at its height, are often said to chart the way out of that comfortable idiom towards the rebarbative, unmelodic dissonances of the second Viennese school, and thence to the language of contemporary music.

The first of these works, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (premiered in 1865), is widely known and its significance well recognised; the second is Arnold Schoenberg's string sextet *Verklärte Nacht*, written 120 years ago at the same time as Elgar (that most Germanic of English composers) was completing his distinctly un-revolutionary *Enigma Variations*. One of *Verklärte Nacht*'s earliest critics opined that it "sounded as if someone had smeared the score of *Tristan* while it was still wet", and the remark has fashioned an enduring link between the two compositions, a connection which also exists in purely musical terms.

The "transfigured night" of the title refers to a poem by Richard Dehmel, which Schoenberg had read in 1896. The poet was an advocate of uninhibited sexuality and an opponent of so-called bourgeois values, and Schoenberg admired him as a representative of the *Zeitgeist*. In 1899, Schoenberg began a relationship with Mathilde, the sister of his friend Alexander Zemlinsky. (She later became his wife.) He composed the sextet in three weeks that September, while on holiday with the pair. The erotic glow expressed in Schoenberg's Dehmel compositions of the period are expressive of this great passion. As in the case of Schumann, emotional engagement fired his creativity.

Dehmel does not enjoy much esteem these days. The composer Richard Swift writes that "despite the present low ebb of his literary reputation, these poems enjoyed a considerable vogue in pre-war Germany and Austria"; he refers to their post-Baudelairean and Nietzschean sensuousness of imagery and language, giving "an impression of sexual candour so typical of *Jugendstil*". Schoenberg himself said in 1950 (disloyally to his younger self) that concentrating simply on the music of *Verklärte Nacht* "can perhaps make you forget the poem which many a person today might call rather repulsive".

Dehmel's verses depict a couple walking in a cold, moonlit grove. A woman confesses to her companion that she is carrying another man's child. She had yielded to him in despair, hoping to find fulfilment through motherhood. Now she fears that life will take its revenge, and that the true lover whom she has since found will reject her. After a brooding pause, he answers her: "May the child you have conceived be no burden to your soul; see how brightly the universe gleams about us!" He accepts them both, and declares that their love will make the child his own. They kiss and walk on, the formerly barren night transformed by hope and devotion.

Looking at the poem on its purely literary merits, it is indeed difficult not to wince, or, at the mention of the man grasping the woman's "*starken Hüften*" (sturdy hips) suppress a snort of derision. However, the poem deserves to be taken seriously precisely because it does not stand on its own. Somewhat similarly to certain Schubert songs, the rank ordinariness of the verse contributes to a work of art in the first rank of beauty. Dehmel himself wrote to Schoenberg in 1912: "Yesterday evening I heard your *Verklärte Nacht*, and I should consider it a sin of omission if I failed to say a word of thanks. I had intended to follow the motives of my text in your composition; but I soon forgot to do so, I was so enthralled by the music".

Schoenberg and beauty are words that rarely occupy the same sentence. Arguably the most influential composer of all time, his fame derived from his abolition of tonality—the harmonic system of the previous centuries, in which melodies and harmonies relate to the tonic (the home) of a given key. While detractors still demonise him for having destroyed music, the largely self-taught Schoenberg saw his work as a logical evolution of tradition. Frustrated that tonality seemed exhausted and had reached its limits (in other words, what did classical music have to say after Wagner?), Schoenberg felt that he must transcend its constraints. His solution was to equalise the 12 notes of the conventional scale, releasing them from their anchor points and predictable progressions so that they could interrelate freely. While many criticised this as anarchic, Schoenberg found it liberating, an open-ended approach empowering composers to follow their personal creative impulses—expanding upon, rather than rejecting, the approaches and techniques of the past. The new system, however, required basic rules of its own. Chief among these was Schoenberg's serialism, a system in which all 12 tones are assembled into a "row" whose order (whether original, transposed, inverted or reversed) organises the composition by using each note horizontally or vertically before any is repeated. This joyless system, which by the way the ordinary human ear is quite unable to detect, exemplifies what musicologist Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt refers to as "the vitriolising power of Schoenberg's aesthetics".

In 1899, all this lay in the future. At that time, the principal musical influence on the 25-year-old composer was the traditionalist Brahms. The latter's music—its density, richness and rigour—had a profound influence on Schoenberg's development, and his engagement with it continued throughout his career: for example, his (1937) orchestral arrangement of Brahms's piano quartet in G minor has become a staple of the repertoire. From him, Schoenberg learned the creative possibilities of the perpetual manipulation and development of tiny motivic cells, an approach that would eventually underpin the twelve-tone technique. The other discernible influence on *Verklärte Nacht* is that of Wagner, to whom Schoenberg had been introduced by Zemlinsky, his only real musical teacher. (The harmonic language of the sextet can be said to pick up from where *Tristan* left off.) "His love embraced Brahms and Wagner and soon thereafter I became an equally confirmed addict. No wonder that the music I composed at that time mirrored the influence of both these masters." The notorious Brahms-Wagner rivalry was largely an affair of the press, whipped up by critics; Brahms actually professed admiration for Wagner's music on many occasions. Nonetheless, at a time when the two men were perceived as embodying irreconcilable aesthetic approaches, it was Schoenberg in *Verklärte Nacht* who succeeded in marrying their influences.

It is an irony that this work remains the most frequently performed and the best-loved of all Schoenberg's compositions. The atonal and dodecaphonic works written during the subsequent 50 years exercised a tremendous influence on music (and led to a famous spat with Thomas Mann, who portrayed the system novelistically in *Doktor Faustus*), but audiences at large did not take them to their hearts. It is therefore not unusual to respond warmly to *Verklärte Nacht* and dislike most of the composer's other output. It would certainly be a pity for the general listener to avoid the work merely because of the off-putting effect of Schoenberg's name. For all its occasionally wild chromaticism, it is actually a less radically subversive departure for its time than *Tristan und Isolde* had been. Thus, the

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sextet recognisably begins in the sombre key of D minor and concludes conventionally in the corresponding major. Wagner (who had begun his opera in an unknown key and with an unknown chord) was a true revolutionary. Schoenberg was to become one. But that destiny lay in the next century.

What is novel about *Verklärte Nacht* is that it is almost the first piece of chamber music to tell a story. Numerous orchestral works had already been written which were programmatic in this sense, from Beethoven's *Wellingtons Sieg* to Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* and Strauss's tone poems. But among chamber works, there was only the *finale* of Beethoven's Op 135 quartet (a half-exception) and Smetana's explicitly autobiographical quartet *From my Life*. As Swift writes: "Schoenberg chose a poem with internal structural relations that could be correlated with purely musical processes. The music is not a meandering fantasy or loose improvisation illustrating an anterior verbal plan, but a determined manifestation of the tonal principles of sonata structure." He sees the man's and the woman's utterances as separate sonata form movements contained within introductory, transitory or concluding material. The form of the piece is therefore A-B-A-C-A, where A represents the natural world, and B and C the protagonists within it.

The story is easy to follow in the music. The mood of the surrounding night is invoked first. Afterwards, the woman speaks. So close is the music to the letter of the poem that several melodic passages follow precisely the syllables of the verse. Between the end of her neurotic utterance and the contrasting entry of the man's voice, there is another inanimate passage. Then comes the turning point of the work, as the man's love and generosity suffuse the music in the most straightforward and glowing of harmonies. Whereas the woman's narration is agitated, tonally unstable and metrically insecure, the man's response is poised, metrically secure and tonally stable. But in musical terms his acceptance of the woman is not to be understood as a patronising or patriarchal gesture, whatever one may make of the poem. For just after his opening statement, there is a short *piano* phrase which Schoenberg originally marked *weich*, meaning soft, yielding or tender; the word is etymologically cognate with "weak". This moment is the fulcrum on which the whole emotional arc of the piece depends: a single phrase reveals the fact that his love is as helpless and needful as hers. At the piece's conclusion, the transfigured night of the title is invoked in the vibrating luminescence of D major; rolling arpeggios supported by deep-seated pedal points not only sound harmonious—as the paroxysms of the preceding emotions recede into inaudible euphony—but also create in the visual appearance of the score's final page another kind of beauty.

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The work, premiered in 1902, enjoyed an inevitably controversial reception. At an early performance, the players "responded to the furious hissing of the audience with bows and smiles quite as if they had received the most enthusiastic ovation, and when the audience persisted in its protests they calmly sat down to play the complete work a second time." Zemlinsky submitted it for a performance sponsored by the Wiener Tonkünstlerverein, who rejected it because it contained a chord (a ninth in fourth inversion) which could not be found in the theory books. As Schoenberg later wrote with heavy irony: "Only now do I understand the objection, at that time beyond my comprehension, of that concert society which refused to perform my sextet on account of this chord. Naturally: inversions of ninth chords just don't exist; hence no performance either, for how can one perform something that does not exist?"

Although in 1917 he arranged the sextet for string orchestra, Schoenberg at least in later life preferred the chamber version, saying that "I am quite sure that nobody would buy the orchestral version anymore if the original string sextet is on the market." In either case, the composer warned against an excess of expression and sentimentality in performance. Like most music, *Verklärte Nacht* speaks for itself and does not need to have things done to it by those who play it. So strongly did Schoenberg feel the desirability of restraint that in his 1943 revision he removed from the score descriptive adjectives such as "tender", "passionate" and "warm", as well as several brief swells in the musical lines. Yet this apparent shying away from raw or literal emotion was not unqualified or without internal contradiction. On the one hand, his 1950 notes for a Columbia recording state that the piece "does not illustrate any action or drama, but was restricted to portraying nature and expressing human feelings." Elsewhere he had written that "in all music composed to poetry, the exactitude of the reproduction of the events is as irrelevant to the artistic value as is the resemblance of a portrait to its model." On the other hand, the same 1950 notes go so far as to specify the musical themes which correspond, for example, to the woman "in desperation now walk[ing] beside the man . . . fearing his verdict will destroy her" or the fact that "his generosity is as sublime as his love". Schoenberg even refers to the woman's marriage to the child's biological father, though no such marriage is mentioned in the poem.

What is the listener to make of these conflicting indications? The composer Charles Ives stated in glib terms the dilemma which, as he saw it, applies to all music with an external programme: "Does the success of programme music depend more upon the programme than upon the music? If it does, what is the use of the music? If it does not, what is the use of the programme?" This apophthegm sounds clever, but actually proceeds on the false premise that the listener must choose between the two. Where music is conceived by the composer with reference to an identifiable external programme, why should we not pay close attention to it? Naturally we should do so in an imaginative, not a literalist spirit, but to ignore (in this case) the poem means that we immediately alienate ourselves from the conditions under which the composer wrote the music. It would be quixotic, for example, to disregard the fact that the violin concerto written by Schoenberg's pupil Berg was dedicated and contains several musical allusions to the memory of Manon Gropius, Alma Mahler's daughter, who died at the age of 18.

In the case of *Verklärte Nacht*, the formal qualities of the music also play their part in the realisation of the programme. For when we hear the affirmative motives and cadences of the sextet's radiant second half, we discover that the means by which this music is built are essentially the same as those which make up the first half's contrasting ambience, and that slight alterations of harmony or in the melodic line engender quite different emotions and associations. The transfiguration of the lovers' states of being and their perception of the natural world about them is happily achieved by a corresponding transformation of the musical ideas out of which the whole piece is constructed. Despite the elderly Schoenberg's fastidious repudiation of Dehmel's poem, we therefore need to embrace its narrative, for without it we will never fully enter into the parallel worlds of story-telling and music which the 25-year-old composer alloyed with such passionate ingenuity. S

Detail of "Portrait of Arnold Schoenberg", 1907, by Richard Gerstl