

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator

## ***Im Sommerwind (In the Summer Wind): Idyll for Orchestra, after a Poem by Bruno Wille***

### **Symphony, Op. 21**

#### **Anton Webern**

Today we admire Anton Webern as the most exquisite of composers, but of all the musical creators who emerged at the dawn of the 20th century he must have seemed the most completely enigmatic. The compositions of Schoenberg, Berg, Stravinsky, and Bartók were certainly groundbreaking, but Webern's coeval works surpass even those in the audacity with which they depart from received traditions. (Only Ives can have been as radical; but his music went mostly unheard at the time.)

Nonetheless, the styles of even radical composers tend to evolve gradually. Webern's earliest pieces, including the orchestral movement *Im Sommerwind* (1904), reveal a mastery of late-Romantic musical processes and the fin-de-siècle sentiment of decadence and neuroticism that is also to be found in works written at the time by Mahler, Schoenberg, and others. Before the century's opening



#### **Alan Gilbert on This Program**

**"The reason to put Webern and Mozart on a program with Schumann's Second Symphony is that I think Schumann's music directly alludes to so many other types of music. In fact, his Second Symphony does so even more strongly than his other works, with the obviously old-fashioned counterpoint of Bach, the sort of forward-looking melodic elements that Webern picked up. The concert as a whole presents a kind of story that I think audiences will understand, in the way that the symphony itself is a microcosm of a series of stories."**

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#### **In Short**

**Born:** December 3, 1883, in Vienna, Austria

**Died:** September 15, 1945, in Mittersill, near Salzburg

**Works composed and premiered:** *Im Sommerwind*: composed summer 1904; completed on September 16; premiered May 25, 1962, in Seattle, Washington, by The Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy, conductor

Symphony, Op. 21: begun in November 1927; composed mostly in 1928; brought to its final form that August in Mödling, near Vienna; dedicated "Meiner Tochter Christina" ("To my daughter Christina"); premiered December 18, 1929, in New York City, at a concert of the League of Composers, Alexander Smallens, conductor

#### **New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances:**

*Im Sommerwind*: first performed January 26, 1984, Zubin Mehta, conductor; most recently on January 25, 2003, Zubin Mehta, conductor

Symphony, Op. 21: first performed January 26, 1950, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor; most recently on March 12, 2002, Bramwell Tovey, conductor

**Estimated durations:** *Im Sommerwind*: ca.12 minutes; Symphony, Op. 21: ca. 10 minutes

decade had passed, Webern had reached a more advanced modernism that combined harmonic freedom, melodic severity, and an apparent sparseness of material that earned his scores the description “aphoristic.”

***Im Sommerwind (In the Summer Wind)***, which Webern subtitled “Idyll for Large Orchestra,” is the pinnacle of his early works, developing in magnitude beyond anything he had attempted previously. At first glance, one might view the size of the orchestra itself — which includes such extravagances as four clarinets (in addition to bass clarinet), six horns, and two harps — as an act of hubris, especially in a composer’s virgin attempt at an original orchestral composition. One must remember, however, that Webern was avidly attending concerts in Vienna that routinely stretched the limits of traditional orchestral forces in scores by such composers as Richard Strauss and Mahler.

*Im Sommerwind* comes across as assured and controlled rather than pretentious and overwrought, which accounts for its surviving as the earliest Webern composition to stake a place in the more or less standard repertoire. Webern based his “idyll” on a poem by Bruno Wille (1860–1928), published in that author’s 1901 collection *Offenbarungen eines Wachholderbaums (Revelations of a Juniper Tree)*, a lengthy paean to nature cast in the form of impressions of a summer day spent wandering through woods and fields. Webern chose not to set the text itself; instead, he followed its action (such as it is) through precise musical depiction. The resulting structure is highly episodic, with contrasting moods and instrumentations following each other in rapid succession as the “narrative” unfolds. On the one hand, this avoids the tendency toward inertia that weighs down many a musical idyll; on the other, it does to some extent obscure the work’s sense of inevitable destination — a

## Saved from Obscurity

*Im Sommerwind* was never played in Webern’s lifetime, although years later he would show it to his students as an example of how originality may be developed through a grounding in tradition. It remained generally forgotten until 1961, 17 years after the composer’s death, when the Webern scholar Hans Moldenhauer prepared a performing edition. Eugene Ormandy and The Philadelphia Orchestra had the honor of unveiling the work in 1962 to open the First International Webern Festival, hosted in Seattle by the University of Washington.

One wonders how Webern’s development might have been affected if he had been able to hear this lush and evocative composition in performance. Possibly he would have further explored the landscape of orchestral grandeur; but already in this early work we find indications of Webern’s preternatural inclination toward detail, selectivity of musical materials, and rigorous finesse.

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tendency toward pastoral leisureliness that had characterized Austrian music all the way back to Schubert.

Webern’s most direct inspiration, however, would seem to have been Richard Strauss, with Wagner also peering in from a greater distance. The lush sound of the orchestra, the ecstatic sweep of numerous phrases, the harmonic sidestepping — all of these characteristics can be traced to Strauss’s tone poems. (Then, too, one might point to Schoenberg, and especially to his 1899 string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* as an untexted instrumental work specifically derived from a poetic text.)

Yet, an original voice can also be found in this idyll. Webern’s attention to tone color is remarkable, and he uses the large orchestra with a restraint uncharacteristic of a 21-year-old. The six horns, for example, rarely play all at once, so we appreciate their power when they finally do, and he extracts solo strings from the orchestral texture to poignant effect. It is quite remarkable that Webern deprives himself of the entire lower-brass complex of three trombones plus tuba, a standard part of

the late-Romantic orchestral complement, one born to offer power. In this piece Webern is in search of specific and original instrumental combinations, and in retrospect we can view that as a harbinger of things to come. One is similarly struck by the precise instructions he inscribes above passages in the score, not just musical indications but emotional ones as well: “as tender as possible,” “shouting for joy,” “very peaceful and solemn.” Not once but twice do we find in this piece *pianississimo* passages from which a diminuendo leads to the marking “to complete inaudibility.”

A decisive step in Webern’s musical upbringing arrived in the autumn of 1904, when he and Alban Berg began studying composition with Arnold Schoenberg, who was only nine years older than Webern. Schoenberg did not mandate that his students adopt his own compositional methods, but it was natural that Webern’s development should in some way reflect his teacher’s progress in moving from traditional tonic-anchored harmony into a harmonic region so chromatic that it would become known as “atonal.”

Although he stopped studying formally with Schoenberg in 1908, Webern remained close to his mentor, and in certain aspects — particularly in matters of harmonic and structural organization — their work traced related pathways. Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg were viewed as a sort of interconnected research team; wags referred to them as the “Vienna Trinity,” comprising “Schoenberg the Father, Berg the Son, and Webern the Holy Ghost,” with Webern earning that ghostly identifier thanks to the wispy aspect his works increasingly displayed.

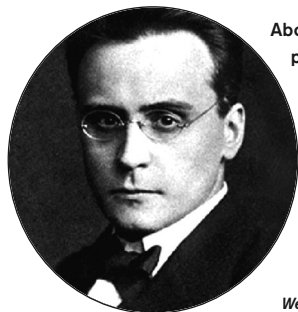
By the 1920s the group’s thinking had arrived at a point where it could be codified into a theory of Composition in Twelve Tones. In his **Symphony** of 1927–28 we find Webern wielding this approach with imagination and sophistication as the individual notes of his melodies are handed off, relay style, from one instrument to another.

Webern’s only Symphony took a while to find its ultimate form. In late 1927 he described the three-movement plan that he imagined: “Rondo: lively — sun; Variations: moderately; and Free-form: very calmly — moon.” He ended up rejecting the Rondo as

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## On the Way to Twelve Tones

The complete embrace of twelve-tone composition was achieved in several works that Arnold Schoenberg wrote in the early 1920s, and he promulgated his theory formally in 1923. But the idea had been in the air for some time. In a 1932 lecture, Webern, who studied composition with Schoenberg, recalled:



About 1911, I wrote the *Bagatelles* for string quartet (Op. 9), all very short pieces, lasting a couple of minutes — perhaps the shortest music so far. Here I had the feeling, “When all 12 notes have gone by, the piece is over.” Much later I discovered that all this was a part of the necessary development. In my sketchbook I wrote out the chromatic scale and crossed off the individual notes. Why? Because I had convinced myself, “This note has been there already.” ... In short, a rule of law emerged; until all 12 notes have occurred, none of them may occur again.

Webern in 1912

an unnecessary encumbrance and then reversed the order of the “free-form” movement (which in the meantime had taken on a form that was far from free) and the variations. Two movements is an unusual structure for a symphony (Schubert’s two-movement *Unfinished Symphony* was, after all, unfinished), but, Webern reported,

In respect to form, I was finally put at ease by the example of so many two-movement sonatas by Beethoven and also by two-movement orchestral works by Bach.

There are indeed six such Beethoven piano sonatas; the Bach reference, one supposes, must be to the Third *Brandenburg Concerto*.

In Webern’s *Symphony* the listener is faced with a spirit of the ephemeral as Webern’s sounds slip away almost quicker than they can be grasped. Many have found his music perplexing, yet it is undeniably beautiful when it is well performed. Webern himself could not see what was so mystifying about his music: “In 50 years,” he said, “one will find it obvious, children will understand it and sing it.” He was a bit wide of the mark in that prediction, but at least he grew to be revered by all self-respecting serialists, many jazz visionaries, and even the hard-to-please Stravinsky, to whom goes the last appreciation of Webern:

Doomed to a total failure in a deaf world of

## Twelve-Tone Composition

In scales, which are groups of conjunct notes, the various notes occupy a hierarchy of importance and they play specific and largely predictable roles in fitting into the overall harmonic behavior of the music. Twelve-tone composition rejects the preeminence of major and minor scales and replaces them with twelve-tone rows, groupings that include all 12 notes of the chromatic scale (often arranged in disjunct patterns) and that use each note only once before repeating the pattern. No pitch is more or less dominant in the lineup – all carry equal weight, and each relates to the others in an equal relationship. From another point of view, one might say that the twelve-tone row itself assumes the responsibility formerly held by the tonic note. Twelve-tone composers freely interpreted the idea of deriving the notes of a piece from the underlying row: one could sound the row frontward or backward, or create mirror images of either, essentially turning the rows upside down. One could transpose those patterns to any degree of the scale, and one could draw on those permutations of the rows in whole or in part.

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ignorance and indifference, he inexorably kept on cutting out his diamonds, his dazzling diamonds, the mines of which he knew to perfection.

**Instrumentation:** *Im Sommerwind*: three flutes, two oboes and English horn, four clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, six horns, two trumpets, timpani, triangle, cymbals, two harps, and strings. *Symphony*: a small orchestra of clarinet and bass clarinet, two horns, harp, and strings (no double basses).