

Piano Concerto, Op. 42

Arnold Schoenberg

Arnold Schoenberg was a multi-faceted composer of many achievements, but he is remembered, above all, for one: a “Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Which are Related Only with One Another,” from his 1945 book *Style and Idea*. He developed the concept of writing 12-tone music over many years, and demonstrated the breadth of its possibilities through thoughtful theoretical discourse and magisterial compositions. But Schoenberg did not start out as a 12-tone composer, nor did he aspire to be one. “The method of composing with twelve tones,” he wrote in a 1941 essay, “grew out of necessity.”

Because Schoenberg came from a family of modest means he was not able to benefit from — or be limited by — a conservatory education. As a result he was largely an autodidact until he began consulting with his future brother-in-law, Alexander von Zemlinsky, who had attended the Vienna Conservatory and who served as a sounding board. Around the turn of the century Schoenberg began producing works that remain in the repertoire to this day, including the richly textured string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* (*Transfigured Night*, 1899) and the immense post-Romantic effusion *Gurre-Lieder* (*Songs of Gurre*, 1900–01).

During the first decade of the 20th century Schoenberg’s music reflected the period’s fascination with Symbolism,

but by the second decade it was veering into a more overt form of Expressionism. Over the same period, his harmonic language was also evolving, as was that of such other adventurous composers as Mahler, Debussy, Richard Strauss, and Ives. In Schoenberg’s case, the pungent chromaticism of the late-19th century started to overflow the container that had formerly held things in place. By 1909 traditional tonality stopped fencing in his richly contrapuntal music, and he allowed his lines to propel themselves in the directions they wanted to go, without the constraints of what had formerly been viewed as inviolable laws of harmonic tension and repose.

After a decade and a half of producing atonal works, Schoenberg came to feel that music would still benefit from some organizing harmonic principal — one that was inherently different from traditional tonality. Thus was born his 12-tone concept, which was firmly in place by 1924. In this entirely democratic approach to harmonic behavior, each of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale occupies a specific context, and none exhibits greater pull than any other. “The main advantage of

In Short

Born: September 13, 1874, in Vienna, Austria

Died: July 13, 1951, in Los Angeles

Work composed: July–December, 1942; dedicated to Henry Clay Shriver

World premiere: February 6, 1944, in New York City, by the NBC Symphony, Leopold Stokowski, conductor, Eduard Steuermann, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 6, 1954, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor, James MacInnes, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 6, 1986, Zubin Mehta, conductor, Alfred Brendel, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 21 minutes

this method of composing with twelve tones is its unifying effect," declared Schoenberg.

General audiences were perplexed by the sound of 12-tone music. As this approach became ubiquitous in academically sanctioned composition from the 1940s through the '70s, many listeners drew a line in the sand, declaring their distaste for the genre. Indeed, much work from that period displayed a stultifying lack of imagination, but the best 12-tone works can provide tremendous sensual pleasure as well as intellectual stimulation. Schoenberg's Piano Concerto, from 1942, stands as testimony.

Its four movements, discrete but connected, trace the contours of a traditional piano concerto as they unroll through a 20-minute span. The first movement is not cast in a sonata form, as in most traditional concertos (being based on the hierarchy of tonality, sonata form would be illogical in a 12-tone context), but rather as variations on a gracious,

In the Composer's Words

Being a radical is not an easy calling. It rarely lands one in the lap of luxury. Schoenberg spoke of this in a letter he sent to several people who had contributed to a publication honoring him in 1951, just before his death. He wrote:

I am somewhat embarrassed by all these hymns of praise. But I nevertheless also see something encouraging in them. For: Is it so much to be taken for granted if in the face of the whole world's resistance a man does not give up, but continues to write down what he produces?

I do not know what the great have thought about this. Mozart and Schubert were young enough not to have to come to close terms with this problem. But Beethoven, when Grillparzer called the Ninth [Symphony] a jumble, or Wagner, when the Bayreuth scheme seemed about to fail, or Mahler, when everyone found him trivial – how could they go on writing?

I know only one answer: they had things to say that had to be said. Once, in the army, I was asked if I was really the composer Arnold Schoenberg. "Somebody had to be," I said, "and nobody else wanted to, so I took it on, myself."

Listen for ... the Opening Tone Row

Serialism, or dodecaphony, or 12-tone composition may sound terribly technical when described in prose, but when used by a true master it can become as unobtrusive as any underlying structural process. That is true of the tone row – the ordering of the 12 tones of the chromatic scale – with which Schoenberg opens his Piano Concerto. As the late Michael Steinberg, a former New York Philharmonic Program Annotator, wrote in his essential compendium *The Concerto: A Listener's Guide*:

A row, as well as being a matrix – or, as the composer John Adams has put it, the genetic code of the piece – may also be a theme in the familiar sense of the word. It is that in Schoenberg's Piano Concerto. The first thing you hear is the piano playing alone a lyric melody in a gentle waltz tempo. It begins with a phrase of eight measures, a nicely symmetrical twice-four. ... The piano melody up to this point is a statement of the row:



Everything that happens thereafter is an outgrowth of the patterns of intervals those pitches define.

easily remembered waltz theme enunciated by the piano at the outset. The second movement is a vigorous scherzo (nervous, anguished, or violent, depending on the interpretation); the third is an ardent *Adagio*; then, following a short cadenza for the soloist, the fourth is a humorous, potentially charming, rondo-finale.

Schoenberg had fled Europe for America in 1933, shortly after the Nazis rose to power, and he accordingly envisioned the trauma of Europe from afar. He later revealed that autobiographical sentiments had

inspired his Piano Concerto: its movements reflect the ideas “Life was so easy” (initially, “Life was so pleasant”), “Suddenly hatred broke out,” “A grave situation was created,” and, for the finale, “But life goes on.”

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bells, gong, cymbal, xylophone, bass drum, snare drum, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

Angels and Muses



Oscar Levant

Among the entourage that was drawn to Schoenberg when he settled in Los Angeles was Oscar Levant, the mordant, cigarette-inhaling, piano-playing sidekick of radio (later TV), talk shows, and quite a few music-oriented movies. For a while he studied with Schoenberg, and the eminent composer even extended an offer to Levant to become his teaching assistant. Levant declined, feeling himself inadequate to the task. At one point, Levant reported in his book *The Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, he asked Schoenberg to compose “a slight piano piece” for him, and tendered a modest sum to cover the commission:

Suddenly, this small piece burned feverishly in Schoenberg’s mind and he decided to write a piano concerto. ... However, I wasn’t prepared for a piano concerto Among other things, the fee grew to a vast sum for which, as the dedicatee, I was promised immortality.

In any event, the bill for \$1,000 – then Schoenberg’s going rate for a full-scale piece – was picked up by Henry Clay Shriver, a counterpoint pupil of Schoenberg’s at UCLA, and it is his name that stands at the head of the score as dedicatee.