

THE VIENNESE LIED, 1910-1937

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VIENNA's musical aspect is determined by a small group of artists, united by social as well as artistic ties. Faith in their friendship is as strong as a belief in their common task. The reciprocal dedications of works, the reverence in which the mature artists, Berg and Webern have held Schönberg, the master, are signs of an altogether unique relationship.

Schönberg represents the bridge to Gustav Mahler. In 1913 he professed this simple conviction: "I believe firmly and irrevocably that Mahler was one of the greatest men and artists." In Vienna today the memory of Mahler is preserved with almost fanatical devotion by a small number of intellectuals. They feel his spirit lives in the works of the present and believe a sincere gratitude is due him for a boundless artistry and spirituality on which others may build further. Thus Mahler and the Schönberg group form a unity of masters, each professing to be but a humble and grateful pupil.

To review the *Lieder* of this group is to touch the center of their artistic creation and describe a medium through which they discover new fields of style. From Mahler's first symphony through Schönberg's works, up to Alban Berg's last, the *Violin Concerto*, it can be seen that song is cherished as a special, self-sufficient organism with instrumental appanages to make its symbolistic power clear.

Schubert, the ancestor of the Viennese school, made the song a model for the musical structure of his instrumental works. To Mahler it was rather the symbol of a definite feeling towards nature and life. In contrast to his important contemporary, Hugo Wolf, Mahler's composition tends toward the folksong. His intention was to conceal spiritual truths behind a familiar aspect, a realistic facade, and so produce an unexpected and startling

revelation. He knew how to bare the abyss that lies beneath the apparently harmless surface of folksongs. He pursued, as we might formulate it, the miracle of contradictions which is the law of all great collective art creations—the silent, embittered struggle between inflexible, external symbols and the naked, vital emotions of the soul. He dared to write simply as well as conventionally (even in the *Lied von der Erde*), preserving the stanza form and interspersing the accompaniment with thirds and sixths. But since he was only greatly gifted and not a “natural force” like Schubert, he could not conceal his tendencies in the final product. They remain “songs in folk-style.” They are too intellectual to become folksongs.

Mahler's texts themselves reveal the path by which he progressed. He starts with songs from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, and his own poems in the same style, and in 1900-1901 reaches a climax with declamations on Rückert's poems, especially in the songs about children dying, which he interprets in a fashion similar to that of Wolf with Mörike, and Debussy with Verlaine. What frightful experiences has Rückert embodied in these verses! What a gruesome negation of life, transforming the flourishing body and cheerful soul into a rotten material. The words of this poetry are unadorned, the pain in them is lifeless and still. Mahler uses all the sweetness of his music to objectivize on a super-personal plane the ghostliness of recollection in contrast to sensory reality.

One of the few who faithfully follow Mahler is Alexander Zemlinsky, brother-in-law and teacher of Schönberg. The song *Sie kam zum Schloss gegangen*, from the cycle published in 1914 on texts by Maeterlinck, is constructed with a Mahler-like harmony, melody and atmosphere, and is related to songs like *Tambourg'sell* and *Wer hat dies Liedlein erdacht*.

Schönberg himself has chosen quite different roads. In his speech about Mahler (1913) he expressed himself admirably on the *Ninth Symphony*: “It conveys an almost passionless embodiment of beauty perceptible only by those who can renounce animal warmth and feel at home in the coolness of the spirit.” It is thus apparent that he was more influenced by Mahler's general ascetic attitude and, by the increasingly transparent

diction of his instrumental works, than by Mahler's folksong style. Mahler too realized the implications for form inherent in his attitude

DER ABSCHIED in LIED VON DER ERDE, 1908-1910

Es we-het Kühl in Schat-ten mei-ner Flus-sen. Ich ste-he hier

und han-ge mei-ner Freun-de;

PPP

but apparently later, and certainly not to such a revolutionary degree as Schönberg in his George-cycle, *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten*, 1908.

Als wir hin-ter dem be-blich-ten To-er end-lich nur der eig-

ne Han-chen spä-ten

PPP

What Mahler felt and only indicated is boldly developed to the furthest limits by Schönberg; he has abandoned the body in favor of the spirit.

Song plays an essential part in Schönberg's compositions both as a self-sufficient form accompanied by piano, orchestra or single instruments, and as a complete unit within the frame of chamber music. With its aid Schönberg has refined and simplified diction and atmosphere in the highest degree and has thus freed his energies for new problems. In his early period of composition, the musical settings of words outnumbered instrumental works, but the order is reversed after he established his twelve-tone theory with Opus 23. After his early songs, with their labored, flowing melodic and opaque, complicated harmony, songs, as Berg calls them in the sense (of the form, we may add) of Schubert, Schumann or Mahler, Schönberg found the poet who had achieved in words what he as a musician still sought. In the polished verses of Stefan George there was the same attitude of esoteric foreboding, the aristocratic aloofness of concept and speech.

George will probably continue to be the preferred poet of the Viennese school. Associated with him are poets of the same dignity, Mombert, Rilke, Hölderlin.

With characteristic logic Schönberg dedicated himself to George's poetic art to such a degree that he practically sidetracked all purely musical elements in order to realize the verbal content. He renounced form and firmly followed the course of the poem. He changed the melody into an immaterial singing, or rather into a sort of melodically intensified declamation. He lightened the corporeal harmony, and with unadorned, intricately stratified chords attained a fixed ecstasy unknown to earlier music. (See example, page 138)

True to his "inner compulsion" "which is stronger than education" as he proclaimed in the program of a concert in 1910, he followed his inexorable course. In Opus 20, *Herzgewächse*, based on a poem by Maeterlinck, and scored for celesta, harmonium, harp and soprano (with a range of three octaves!) the music is hardly more than an aphorism. Melody and rhythm are spasmodic, as bizarre and unhealthy as the visions of the text. This composition appeared in the collection, *The Blue Knight*, 1912, which also contained an essay entitled *Anarchy in Music* with its significant pronouncement "External laws do

not exist. Anything is permitted against which the inner voice does not protest."

In his highly informative article, *The Relation to the Text* (reprinted in part in the commemorative publication for his sixtieth birthday) Schönberg says "Those who ask about the text, the earthy matter, soon have nothing left to ask about" and further "In many of my songs, enchanted by the sound of the first words, I have written on to the end, not concerning myself in the slightest about the further course of events in the poem, even, in the frenzy of composing, not grasping them in the slightest. . . . Thus I have been able completely to assimilate Stefan George's poems entirely through their sonority."

Now it is only a step to *Pierrot Lunaire*, Opus 20, for which Schönberg wrote "Melodramen" on the title page. The singing is transformed into a rhythmized speech, which must maintain prescribed pitches. It is an infinitesimally modeled recitative, with such extreme directions as "tonelessly whispered" in one place, appropriate to the inflated and defeatist poetry of Giraud. *Pierrot Lunaire* is the end of a road which Schönberg unerringly pursued, stimulated on the one hand by Mahler's intellectuality but tied on the other to the decadent form introduced to Germany by Wagner with the song *In the Hothouse*. The germs of the new style are apparent in the more strongly accented embroidery of rhythm and the purely musical principles of canon, imitation, basso ostinato.

At all events, with this work, Schönberg reached the high-point of his development as a revolutionary composer of songs, destroying a musical diction that was more than four hundred years old. What follows, Opus 20 (poems by Rilke and Dowson) and Opus 24, chamber-music, with a song on a text by Petrarch as the fourth movement, brings tranquillity and clarification. The melody gradually gains in plasticity and cantabile.

Anton von Webern's songs follow the path of his master. The only mark of further development is that Webern tries to make the Schönberg style more difficult than it already is. As Hans Mersmann has said in *Die Tonsprache der Neuen Musik* "no follower can go further." Apparently the composer himself now realizes that his path grows narrower at every step, and that a complete

halt, if not an about-face, is necessary.

A far more self-sufficient personality, and, if we are not mistaken, the most gifted of the Vienna group was Alban Berg. He owed a determining direction to Schönberg. But even in the songs on transcendental poems by Mombert, he yielded to their influences without losing individuality. His diction, despite all lightening and reshifting of elements, remains clear and plastic. He always preserves the inner aspect of the text and never exploits it as "material" for a super-individual interpretation. He is the only one in the Schönberg circle who possesses gaiety. Even in his early songs, contemplativeness and humor are developed in a genuine lyricism. He stems from Schumann, Strauss and Wolf, but from the very beginning he has been freer and healthier than the oversubtilized and discontented Schönberg. The melodies of his songs are delicately curved and soar in powerful balance.



What chiefly marked him off from the group to which he remains allied despite all his individual traits, was undogmatic attitude. In his opera, *Wozzeck* he employed every kind of vocal expression, from extensive, difficult leaps (such as appeared in Schönberg's early works), and rhythmized speech of high pitch (as in *Pierrot Lunaire*), to ordinary speech, and folk melodies.

Though Berg also dedicated a large part of his composition to the intoning of text, he did not abandon the solo song style which, as a frame for intimate feeling, has become almost a sign manual of the Viennese school. Without any apparent qualms of conscience, he wrote a real aria, *Der Wein* (text by Baudelaire, translated by George) and, by the most simple melodic steps, connected himself with the past.



How far he advanced from his early works, is revealed by the

