The musical reactionary

Hanns Eisler

Arnold Schönberg in his garden in Rockingham Avenue, Los Angeles, approx. 1940

The majority of musicians and journalists claim, even when intending to show their approval, that Schönberg's "atonal" works have nothing in common with classical compositions and cannot be explained or understood using existing ideas of music theory. This break with convention in Schönberg's music – and tonality can certainly be described as a convention – was ascribed to a general negation of all musical antecedents. Nowadays, "Schönberg" is not only the name of a great composer, but also a word that signifies a complete subversion

of and break with tradition.

It is easy to understand why Schönberg has only been seen from this perspective. Amid all the arguments about “atonality” and dissonance, the musical structure of his works has been completely neglected. Most people still fail to recognise the more traditionally contrapuntal, motivic, thematic and contoured elements that are present even in his most controversial and “most atonal” works. However, it is precisely these artistic mechanisms which are closely related to the past, or at least originate from there.

Despite their brevity, the works op. 11 and op. 15 to op. 20 are freer and more relaxed in terms of the musical concepts behind them. They could be described as his radical period. However, it is entirely incorrect to believe that only one of these works is art with a “futuristic soul”. Each of the pieces has a healthy musical structure which can certainly be explained and understood using today’s ideas of music theory. Take, for example, the monodrama Erwartung, op. 17. From a formal perspective it is closest to a finale or a “scene and aria” from a pre-Wagnerian opera. It also alternates between cohesive arioso sections and more disintegrated passages. The leitmotif is completely dispensed with, which is an almost reactionary decision. This music goes much further than mere illustration. It is not satisfied with merely playing a leitmotif the instant the protagonist appears on the scene. There is sadly not the space to discuss the wealth of technical details at length here, but even a small selection would have to include the methods with which an arioso section is introduced, the motifs, the melodic constructions, the ways in which connections are made, the transitions between scenes, etc., etc. However, despite the differentness and newness of the material, it is precisely these mechanisms which originate more from the spirit of classical music than the clichéd leitmotif, and the entire work is more akin overall to the style of a pre-Wagnerian opera.

Op. 21 (Pierrot lunaire) heralded the beginning of another transformation of style. In this work, Schönberg revisits earlier forms, returning to writing two and three-part song forms, a waltz, a passacaglia and a fugue. In Schönberg’s most recent works, the two series of Piano Pieces (op. 23 and op. 25), the Serenade op. 24 and the Wind Quintet op. 26, he draws on earlier art forms and pushes the cohesion of the writing so far that his style can in fact be described as quite reactionary. Classical themes, structures and forms reappear and there are even repetitions that would surely horrify a real revolutionary. (When considering the densely packed works so characteristic of Schönberg, it becomes clear that certain sections must be repeated purely in the interests of comprehensibility.) The best example of this can be found in the Suite for piano op. 25. Even though its details are new and independent, this

composition follows the same forms as a Bach suite. There is even a new tonality here, insofar as one may describe the "composition with twelve tones" in this way, and it displays a love of music-making which had been absent for a long time.

Those who really understand Schönberg's personality find it unsurprising that his style had to undergo this kind of transformation. Even in his "most radical" works, Schönberg was never an artist, never a writer, but simply a musician. A sentence from his Theory of Harmony is representative of his artistic disposition and shows the contrast between him and the pompousness and artistry of his era: "If I should succeed in teaching the pupil the handicraft of our art as completely as a carpenter can teach his, then I shall be satisfied."

These are not the words of a subversive person. They could have been the words of a master craftsman from 200 years ago; how different is the nature of this artist to the modern composers who are more concerned with psychology and think they can redeem the world through a six-four chord.

The world of music must adjust to new developments and consider Schönberg less as someone who is to be associated with destroying and undermining existing structures, but as someone who is to be regarded as a master instead. It is now clear to us that he created new material in order to make music amid the wealth and cohesion of the classical composers. He is the ultimate conservative, having even created a revolution simply so that he could then be reactionary.

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