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Alban Berg's Five Orchestral Songs after Post-Card Texts by Peter Altenberg, Op. 4

René Leibowitz

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René Leibowitz (1913–72), composer, teacher, writer, and theorist, was a major figure in the worldwide diffusion of the work of the Second Viennese School after World War II, and, as the teacher of Boulez and others, an influence on postwar serialism. Attacks on Leibowitz and his work by Boulez and others caused his importance in postwar European music to be rather unfairly downgraded. This excerpt consists mainly of the introduction to his essay on Berg, with the descriptive analysis omitted.

This score is not only one of Berg's most extraordinary works but also perhaps one of the strangest compositions in contemporary music. Written in 1912, it is the first "independent" work by Berg, since the preceding composition, the String Quartet, Op. 3 (1910), was done under the supervision of Schoenberg.¹ At the beginning of 1913 Schoenberg, who had decided to have some works by Webern and Berg performed, organized a concert which took place, under his direction, on March 31 under the auspices of the *Akademischer Verband Für Literatur und Musik* of Vienna. The program was to consist of Webern's Six Pieces for large orchestra, Op. 6, Schoenberg's *Kammersymphonie*, Op. 9, some of Zemlinsky's songs, Nos. 2 and 4 of Berg's Op. 4, and Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*. Even while the first two works were played there were all sorts of hostile demonstrations; during the performance of Berg's songs there was such a commotion that the music could hardly be heard. The concert finally ended up with the participants in the police court. The Berg songs—unpublished up to now (except for the last one, which was printed in a small periodical that did not survive a few issues)—have never been performed since.

Such anecdotes as this would no doubt be unnecessary within the framework of this study if the “scandalous” nature of the occurrence were not associated with elements inherent in the work itself. To tell the truth it was unavoidable that such a work should rouse the opposition to a state of frenzy at that time. For, in its very essence, Berg’s Op. 4 is a “scandalous” work.

The first piece of evidence in support of this thesis is furnished by Berg’s choice of text. The poet Peter Altenberg (Richard Engländer), who lived just outside of Vienna, sent his friends and enemies postcards covered with his impetuous and frantic scrawl, in which he presented all sorts of non-conformist ideas and erotic allusions in the form of aphorisms. Of course, it goes without saying that Berg chose such texts not because they would shock people, but because they corresponded to the artistic and compositional needs of the inner structure of a work that is in itself “shocking”. In order to understand this statement, we must try to discover the place of these songs in Berg’s entire *oeuvre* as well as their relation to the musical trends that produced them.

The songs were written in 1912, that is to say some four years after Schoenberg had begun writing music that completely transcended the classic tonal functions,² a bold innovation in which he was closely followed by Webern and Berg.³ Berg’s first experience of this kind takes place in the last of the four songs for voice and piano, Op. 2, composed in 1909. In this song, Berg not only transcends tonality, but also transgresses the limits of the song itself. In fact, certain elements of this piece tend to destroy the traditional *Lied* form, and foreshadow the dramatic achievements of the future author of *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*.

One is tempted to suppose that Berg wished to signalize the act of shaking off the shackles of tonality by a real gesture of revolt, by writing something “scandalous”. This explanation is doubtless not without its basis but it is incomplete. It is strange to contrast this attitude with the fact that one of Berg’s chief aims was to consolidate the new discoveries of his master with the traditions of the past. We may now conclude that Berg becomes bolder and more traditional at the same time. Thus the shocking element in each of Berg’s new works lies precisely in his paradoxical dialectics: when he seems to be destroying and denying all tradition, he is actually organizing, consolidating, and confirming it. We shall have further occasion to convince ourselves of this.

The second stage of the suspension of tonal functions is found in the String Quartet, Op. 3. Here the form itself necessitated a less

aggressive attitude; Berg had to devote his principal efforts to the realization of the large symphonic form without the aid of tonality. Up to a certain point, the Quartet is still the work of a pupil, not because it was composed under the strict and minute supervision of Schoenberg—in fact, the Quartet and the works that preceded it already display an exceptional mastery in which there is nothing of the school exercise—, but because one still feels in it a certain prudence, the deliberation of a composer who is developing for himself a technique that is capable of encompassing all problems and that will later permit him to indulge in the most audacious innovations.

This audacity strikes us in the songs of Op. 4. Berg's delight in his newly gained artistic freedom found free play in this first completely independent work. Also, the enthusiasm generated by his familiarity with the resources of the new world of sound, free of tonal reminiscences, achieved full expression here. Berg's deep conviction⁴ that, at the age of 27, he was master of his craft, as well as his consciousness of having wholeheartedly committed himself to the new evolution of polyphony—all this brought him profound satisfaction. So there is no reason to be surprised at the violent explosion of so much strength, joy, and enthusiasm in this music, and it is hardly surprising that such an explosion shocked and scandalized the average listener, who was far from understanding the ideals and goals of the activity of Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg—ideals and goals that were responsible for one of the most passionately experienced moments in musical history.

But there are still other aspects from which we must examine the significance of the five songs in Berg's own development and in the general history of polyphony.

Let us first consider the instrumental problems. Up to now Berg had composed a piano work (the Sonata, Op. 1, 1908), songs with piano accompaniment (the abovementioned songs, Op. 2, as well as the *Seven Early Songs* of 1905–07) and a chamber work (the String Quartet, Op. 3). In all these the instrumental style, without being exactly “revolutionary”, takes advantage of certain recent technical acquisitions; this is especially evident in Berg's keen awareness of the diversity of treatment required by these different media as well as in his exploitation of the individual properties of the instruments.⁵

But he had not yet written an orchestral work; and it was precisely in orchestral style that Schoenberg had just introduced some of his most daring innovations, in the Five Pieces, Op. 16, and in *Erwartung*. This sufficiently explains why Berg's first work to use an orchestra (the songs under consideration), which displays the profound

influence of the two Schoenberg compositions just mentioned, was not only the most daring one the young master had composed up to then, but was to remain one of the most daring works in his entire output. . . . It is the boldness of the orchestral conception of Berg's Op. 4 that constitutes what is perhaps the most shocking aspect of the work.

We have just said that this work is Berg's first orchestral score; but it is more than that since it consists of songs. Quite aside from the fact that Berg's choice of songs for his first orchestral work is indicative of his future development as a dramatist (a development to which we shall return later), the very act of composing songs with orchestral accompaniment creates new and important problems.

In a general way, it may be said that the song with orchestral accompaniment is the creation of post-Wagnerian composers, especially Hugo Wolf, Richard Strauss, and Gustav Mahler. One could doubtless trace its origins as far back as Mozart's numerous and perfect "concert arias"; but this might be slightly misleading, since these arias were, in reality, nothing but opera arias pure and simple. Of course, they were intended to be sung independently in concerts, but they could—and often did—replace genuine operatic arias, and were often even interpolated in operatic scores. The orchestral song of Wolf and Mahler proceeds in the opposite direction. Certainly these men profited from the achievements of Wagner, but their problem was to transfer these gains of musical dramaturgy to the realm of pure musical forms. Thus these composers expanded the genre of the song, which was now enriched with the nuances and possibilities of variation furnished by orchestral tone color.

Mahler, in works like the *Kindertotenlieder* and the *Sieben Lieder aus letzter Zeit*, and Schoenberg, in certain sections of the *Gurre Lieder* and in the *Six Orchestral Songs*, Op. 8, bring this genre to perfection. Here we already find the effort to change the instrumental setting from one song to the next of the same series, in order to create a special atmosphere for each piece (a device that has its roots in 18th-century opera); this process results in greatly intensified contrasts. But—and this is even more important—the instrumentation of works such as these plays an essential part in the architectonic expression of each piece. The various structural elements are underlined, often very subtly, by variations in tone color and other similar procedures. For example, recapitulations often take on a quite new character through changes of instrumental setting which also place the vocal part in fresh relief.

Berg displays mastery of these techniques in his Op. 4. It may be said that he advances beyond his predecessors and thus foreshadows Schoenberg's remarkable set of Four Songs, Op. 22 (as well as certain vocal works of Webern), in which this type of composition reaches the apex of its development. . . . Let us add that Berg treats this genre in a specifically dramatic way which is foreign to the intentions of its creators (a tendency that was already manifest in the last song of Op. 2). This dramatic character is evident not only in the treatment of the vocal part but also in many features of the orchestration. Voice and orchestra make free use of vocalises or unusual instrumental effects, which burst the bonds of the song and tend towards the opera.

This new "shocking" aspect of Op. 4 is but a further instance of the strange dialectics of Berg's compositional attitude. The orchestral song, which had become "pure" music because of its essentially symphonic workmanship, is treated both traditionally and boldly by the future author of *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* in such fashion as to return to the dramaturgy from whence it came. . . .

We must consider one more problem of tradition posed by the songs: the problem of extremely small forms. We must remember that this problem, raised for the first time in Schoenberg's *Six Little Piano Pieces*, Op. 19, had a special meaning and that its solutions were often extremely radical, especially in the work of Webern. For Berg, the problem was never quite so serious, for his essentially lyric and dramatic genius always unfolded itself in large forms; that is why he never composed any more songs after Op. 4, since he realized clearly that what he had to say in the realm of vocal music demanded the vast dimensions of opera or of the concert aria—*Der Wein*—and that he had never really felt comfortable in the *Lied* form.

However, Berg, with his clear comprehension of the evolution and the tradition of polyphony, could not simply pass by a compositional problem as important as that of the very small form. This explains why he left us such a typical example of the genre as the Four Pieces for Clarinet and Piano, Op. 5, in which the problem, although approached differently than in the corresponding works of Schoenberg and Webern, is basically the same. We may, then, consider Op. 4 a first step in this direction, since some of these songs are extremely short and all of them except the last tackle the essential problem of the small form.

It must be added that the strange disproportion between the extremely small dimensions of most of the pieces and the enormous orchestral apparatus, as well as the exuberance of vocal and instru-

mental effects, is one of the most "scandalous" aspects of Berg's Op. 4. . . .

In a general way, it may be said that Berg's work clearly takes its place in the evolution of polyphony as already determined by the evolution of Schoenberg's work. This composition has not only dispensed with the tonal functions, but has also made significant use of the resources of chromaticism which are responsible for the breakdown of tonality. The very first measures of this score are already based on the twelve tones of the chromatic scale, and the full resources of chromaticism are employed in this way throughout the work. Furthermore, the conscious use of this material in the third and fifth songs (twelve-tone chord and melody) tends towards an entirely consistent organization; chromaticism produces functional thematic elements. In this attempt to organize the resources of chromaticism we may observe certain essential elements of the future twelve-tone technique, which is also foreshadowed by many other elements of Berg's Op. 4.

In this sense the most important characteristic of these songs (not only with reference to twelve-tone technique, but also with respect to Berg's entire compositional attitude) is the spirit of structural and architectonic economy. . . . We have tried to emphasize the various manifestations of this attitude. They all result from the same fundamental concept—the concept of *variation* carried to its most radical extremes. This is the principal gain arising out of Schoenberg's compositional activity and the most important element of his instruction. While composing these songs, Berg, like Webern at the same period, was strongly imbued with the spirit of this instruction, and succeeded in handling the variation technique with such rigorous mastery, that he attained an astonishing equilibrium between abundance of invention and complete coherence. . . . The following factors are most characteristic: 1) developments beginning with the smallest possible interval, the half tone; 2) the technique of elaborating "remainders" to create new figures which can always be reduced to the motivic germs that engendered them; 3) subtle connections between the various songs (common motifs, etc.)—the last song synthesizes the content of the whole work; 4) unity between melody and harmony, particularly evident in the last song, where the subject is already treated like a tone-row, especially in the cadence, where the tones of the subject furnish the material for the chord that terminates not only the song but the entire work.

I shall not stress the other aspects of the originality of Berg's musical language (instrumentation, vocal problems, etc.). . . . Here as

elsewhere, Berg, although strongly influenced by his master's ideas, displays individual mastery of his means and adapts these ideas to his own compositional plan.

That Berg's score has remained unpublished and unperformed since its incomplete presentation in 1913 is a shocking state of affairs. Without saying any more about the lamentable situation of one of the greatest composers of our time, who was never able to hear any of his own most important scores, I must remark that the musical world has deprived itself of one of the richest treasures of our time in refusing to hear this work of Berg's.

Notes

1. For more details on the following and on Berg in general, see Egon Wellesz, *Arnold Schoenberg*, Vienna, 1921; Willy Reich, *Alban Berg*, Vienna, 1937; and R. Leibowitz, *Schoenberg et son Ecole*, Paris, 1947.

2. The last movement of the Second Quartet in F-sharp minor, Op. 10 (1908), the Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11 (1908), the Fifteen *Georgelieder*, Op. 15 (1908), the Five Orchestral Pieces, Op. 16 (1909), the two dramatic works, *Erwartung*, Op. 17 (1909) and *Die Glückliche Hand*, Op. 18 (1909–13), the Six Little Piano Pieces, Op. 19 (1911), and the song, *Herzgewächse*, Op. 20 (1911).

3. The following works of Webern transcend the principles of tonality at this period: the two sets of songs with piano accompaniment Opp. 3 and 4 (1909), Five Movements for String Quartet, Op. 5 (1909), Six Orchestral Pieces, Op. 6 (1910), Four Pieces for Violin and Piano, Op. 7 (1910), and Two Songs for voice and instruments, Op. 8 (1911–12).

4. Expressed in a letter to Webern, Sept. 23, 1911.

5. See my *Qu'est-ce-que la Musique de Douze Sons?* (Liège, 1948) and *Schoenberg et son Ecole* (paragraph: *La nouvelle écriture instrumentale*).