

ANTON WEBERN

by
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Anyone who knows anything about music knows assuredly that Webern is one of the greatest composers of all time. More than most his music has the essential ingredient of greatness namely originality.

But he is maligned by some who claim to be musicians and music lovers.

It has been truly said that ignorance makes poor composers to be regarded as great composers and ignorance treats great composers with contempt and disdain so that they are not accepted as great composers whereas, in fact, they are.

Many people dismiss Webern because his music is difficult to perform. Others because it does not have pretty tunes that one can easily hum, which attitude shows a totally wrong concept of music. There are composers who wrote nothing but pretty tunes but their music lacks any sense of purpose or meaning. It is shallow and superficial music.

His songs are angular containing leaps of sevenths and ninths which are not easy to perform and yet for all this, his songs have an original and strange beauty. It is sad to report that most people who say they dislike his songs are those who cannot perform them and are unequal to the task. Webern's work can only be performed by the most skilful of musicians.

Webern believed, and rightly so, that music had to change and move away from the diatonic system of major and minor keys. If you take the seven note of the major scale (the eighth being a doubling of the first) and arranged them in every possible order to make a theme the law of mathematics makes it evident that soon you will run out of original themes. This is why listening to music in the diatonic system there are so many themes or tunes that should so similar. There some who assert that an original tune can still be written in the diatonic system. But consider the total works of Monteverdi, Handel, Haydn and Mozart. How many themes did they write between them? How many separate themes are there in a Monteverdi opera or in a four movement symphony by the great Joseph Haydn? Handel was acutely aware of this problem in the 1720s which is why he regularly repeated existing themes.

Themes in the diatonic system over five centuries must run into thousands if not more. The system must therefore be exhausted.

I would be glad to hear from any clever mathematician who gave work out the permutations of diatonicity on the basis of say a 16 note theme and allowing two accidentals.

The other matter that concerned Webern was the longevity of music particularly that of the Romantic school much of which was repetitious and merely musical verbosity. A lot of it may have been written to fuel the composer's high opinion of himself but often the music was substandard and simply time spinning. If we are honest we can all say that some of the long symphonies have marvellous moments but a lot of it is less inspiring and perhaps even dull.

We have often heard it said that some people use a lot of words when a few will do. Some years ago a stupid expression appeared which serves as a good example. "At this present moment in time" consisting of six words whereas one suffices and that one word is "now".

The composers of 55 minutes or more symphonies are in the "at this present moment in time" composers whereas Webern is a "now" composer.

Sir Adrian Boult once discussed Schubert's Symphony no. 9 with us and said that while the first two movements had too much repetition the final two movements were a bore, merely melodic nullity. Schubert was an "at this present moment in time" composer.

This is ghastly misuse of language. Why six words when one will do? But take the analogy into music.

Webern believed in direct music.

He also believed that enormous forces were not related primarily to music but to effect. We can all be thrilled at the sheer excitement of some full orchestra's blazing away in, say, the finale of Tchaikovsky's Symphony no. 5 (the Silvestri performance is electrifying) and Webern could make a dramatic statement in the Orchestral Pieces, Opus 6, and so he cannot be accused of not being able to write for full orchestra. He certainly could.

He may be a composer's composer. It is probably only musicians that can fully appreciate his incredible skill and talent.



Through no fault of his a Webern cult sprung up and then another called post-Webernism, whatever that means.

His tragic death caused the great Igor Stravinsky to say: "The day of Webern's death should be a day of mourning for all true musicians. We must hail not only this great composer but also a real hero. Doomed to total failure in a deaf world of ignorance and indifference, he inexorably kept on cutting out his diamonds, his dazzling diamonds, of whose mines he had a perfect knowledge."

Webern was man of his time and the remark of Edgar Varèse is relevant, "It is not that composers are ahead of their time; it is that listeners to music are, at last, fifty years behind the times."

To some extent old values were being swept away in the arts. While Verdi had composed an opera about a prostitute it was concealed in that she was described a courtesan. Berg wrote a super opera, Lulu, which dealt with prostitution and sexual perversion. Webern saw that truth, simplicity and economy of style had an elegance. Clear lines

and a simple utterance was more appealing than sifting through pages of full score to find the subject. Conformity to fashion was a hindrance to creative impulses.

Modern parlance uses an expression, "Tell it like it is" whereas the phrase can be reduced to "tell the truth."

This spirit of the age was not only shown in music but also shown in the works of artists. Amadeo Modigliani painted a nude in 1917 which is notable for its simplicity and roundness, its elegance and immediacy. Its directness is powerful with the curved breasts and pubic hair, the closed eyes and the elongated body. It states its message immediately and Webern believed his music should do that.

Webern's conciseness is admirable. The Six Bagatelles for string quartet, Opus 9, have been called melodies in one breath. Arnold Schoenberg wrote of them, "Think of the concision which expression in such brief forms demands! Every glance is a poem, every sigh a novel in a single gesture, a great joy and every trace of sentimentality correspondingly banished."

One cannot say that Webern's music is slushy or schmaltzy.

Henry Cowell, also bowled over by Webern's genius, wrote, "His music is an almost frightening concentrated interest in the possibility of each individual tone."

The serious flaws in the works of other composers are not in Webern's work. He does not repeat to a tiresome tedium as does Schubert, Franck and Borodin where main themes are done to death. He is not pompous or arrogant, seeks no praise, never bombastic or showy. His music is directly to the point and bitter sweet.

There are those who say that his music lacks emotion and is merely cerebral and clinical. While I can see how this point of view is arrived at, if his music is listened to with the same level of concentration that it presents in itself, the sheer content that can touch both the heart as well as the brain will be felt.

As previously said, we all like to see and hear an orchestra in full flight like a big powerful locomotive. But in Webern there is music that is nothing more than a whisper as if a lover is telling you something very private in your ear. It is this intimacy that has a great appeal to many of us. His music is aphoristic and could only further develop into silence. He was aware of this and by his opus 17, the Three Sacred Folksongs for voice, clarinet, bass clarinet and violin his form became more extensive.

Twelve note music or serial music is ridiculed. It is dismissed as a system as if it was something decadent and merely mechanical. Some foolish person said it was music without a heart and yet Berg's sumptuous Violin Concerto has a heart and is serial.

To add to the dilemma there are those who do not know the difference between serial music and atonal music.

Instead of taking the seven notes of a diatonic scale and perhaps a few accidentals to make a tune or theme, the serial composer takes all twelve notes of the chromatic scale and arranges them in an order and an initial rhythmic pattern to form his tone row, or note row, or series, and that could be called the theme. Each note is used once and no note has preference and so no key is indicated. The series can be played backwards, known as the retrograde version, it can be played upside down, known as the inversion and be transposed.



But each time the twelve notes appear.

As to harmony, this is usually based on the row.

Let me quote an example. In Act 1 scene 4 of Berg's *Wozzeck* there is a passacaglia based on this row:

E flat, B, G, C sharp, C, F sharp, E, B flat, A F, A flat and D

If the "melody" first note is E flat and the composer wants four part harmony he may select the next three notes to make up the chord which will be E flat, B, G and C sharp. If the next melody note is C the four part harmony would be F sharp, E, B and A flat and so on. It makes for unconventional chords which someone beautifully called crunchy chords.

Therefore the music avoids predictability.

In the hands of a great composer this form of composition can produce masterpieces such as Humphrey Searle's *Symphony no. 1*, the first four notes of the series are the musical letters for BACH and then he transposes them twice to make up a twelve note row and, in a brilliant and dramatic symphony, he develops that slight material, only four notes, into a towering work of indisputable genius.

Anton Webern was born in Vienna in 1883. His first music lessons were from his mother to whom he was especially devoted. Many of his works are dedicated to her or her memory. His next tutor was Edwin Komauer in Klagenfurt and he composed his first works around 1888–9. He went up to Vienna university in 1902 and had the distinction of studying with Guido Adler who is probably most remembered for being a critic and musicologist. He had been a professor at Prague University and then joined the faculty in Vienna and succeeded Hanslick as professor in 1898 and remaining in that post until 1927. In 1904 he wrote a book on Wagner to counter Hanslick's deflection from his original admiration of Wagner to his later absurd hatred of him. Adler also wrote a book on Mahler.

Webern studied with Hans Pfitzner but felt that he was somewhat anachronistic in his approach and so from 1904 to 1908 he studied with Arnold Schoenberg.

It is wrongly assumed that "modern" composers are against the "ancient" composers. Webern was not. He spent years editing and reviving the works of a 15th century Dutch composer Heinrich Isaak. Neither was he a sour puss. He conducted operettas at various venues from 1908 to 1917.

He formed *Kunststelle*, an excellent amateur choir.

At the time he began his studies with Schoenberg, Webern was having an illicit affair with his cousin Wilhelmina which was ingeniously kept secret until she was found to be pregnant with Anton's child.

Like his pupil Humphrey Searle, Webern had a wonderful capacity for friendship. He and Berg were close friends for over thirty years until Berg's untimely death in 1935.

Searle wrote: "Webern was an idealist. Nothing made him deviate from his chosen path. As to his personality it was simple, direct and charming. He had a remarkable ear which led him to produce effects of extraordinary beauty and subtlety. He had a passionate love of nature."

For four years after the end of World War One Webern assisted Schoenberg in his semi-private society devoted to new music and its performance. From 1922 to 1934 he conducted various orchestras mainly for the working people of Vienna. He came to England five times to conduct for the BBC. This was in 1929, 1932, 1933, 1935 and 1936. He was the conductor of the Austrian Radio Symphony Orchestra between 1927 and 1938.

In his conducting he presented standard works. He was a superb conductor of Brahms and when you think how vastly different his own music was from that Brahms this fact may surprise you. He gave outstanding performances of Mahler and, again, when you think of his views on overblown music, he nevertheless did not despise it but scheduled such works in his concerts. It is wrongly assumed that a conductor only puts on works he likes but, of course, that is not true. Webern interpreted Schubert magnificently but often made orchestrations and arrangements of Schubert's works to correct the mistakes and indiscretions.

But his own music was not liked. The Nazis called it cultural Bolshevism. In Germany and countries which were German speaking his music was not allowed to be played and he was forbidden to teach. He was compelled to be a proof reader for a Viennese publishing house. But in February 1943 his *Variations for orchestra*, opus 30 were premiered in Winterthur by the great conductor Hermann Scherchen a work of simple but profoundly beautiful orchestral effects. The BBC gave Webern some opportunity but after his

death his music fell into oblivion universally.

It was Humphrey Searle who, when a producer at the BBC, revived Webern's work under much hostility and unpleasant criticism. Therefore many composers owe a debt of gratitude to Searle... composers like Stravinsky, Eimert, Stockhausen, Boulez and the very gifted Bruno Maderna.

Webern was a splendid teacher. He did not teach from his own work or serialism primarily. He would talk and demonstrate the property of the triad and refer to works of the so-called great masters. He was a humble man. He did not have a Bayreuth as Wagner did, or the Three Choirs Festival as did Elgar, or the Aldeburgh Festival as did Britten to use almost exclusively for their own works. Webern also dropped his legitimate claim to nobility and wanted to be known as Anton Webern not Anton von Webern.

He composed Three Studies On a Ground for orchestra of 1908 as a preparation for his Opus 1, the glorious Passacaglia for orchestra. The studies are gems and the last is almost a miniature clarinet concerto. They are very brief pieces but show the composer's fascination with light and colour. The music is iridescent. The Passacaglia is a work of tremendous lyrical beauty and often glows ecstatically. The Three Studies were first performed in 1978.

Very few composers can claim that their opus 1 is a masterpiece. But it can be truly said of Webern. Of whom else can it be said?

His opus 2 is a canon *Entflieht auf Leichten Kahnen* for unaccompanied four part chorus but there is a later version with instrumental accompaniment which does not double the vocal lines but adds new lines and colour. The poet, Stefan George, introduces his text with the words *Take flight in lifeboats and asks man to view his passions dispassionately.* The music, although chromatic, is tonal and has an ethereal beauty.

The Symphony, Opus 21, of 1928 is constructed on a four part canon each part of which begins with a statement of the series in a different form. After the canonic first movement there is a set of palindromic variations. At one time, Webern considered a third movement but this did not come to fruition. His love of nature and the smallness of many flowers coupled with their beauty is the inspiration for his work. He wrote: "Between the products of nature and those of art no essential difference prevails."

The Concerto for nine instruments, Opus 24, was intended to be a cantata based on the poem which begins *How can death be so close to love?* It was inspired by the Austrian countryside where his parents grave was located. It shows the composer's interest in fifteenth century polyphony and uses very personal aspects such as the number three which had a great symbolism for him. His notes for this concerto were not only musical notes but comments about nature and locations viz:

- Dachstein, snow and ice, crystal-clear air, cozy, warm, sphere of the high pastures, coolness of the first spring.
- Anninger, first flora, primroses, anemones (*hepatica*, *pulsatilla*).

The Concerto has been called a twentieth century Brandenburg.

This work more than any other established him as the post 1945 Messiah of the avant garde.

He was accidentally shot and killed by a nervous American sentry. Webern had gone outside his house to smoke a cigarette and the light was seen by this American trooper who opened fire. But his music will live on in the hearts of those who respond to his indisputable genius.

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