

PART III

Schoenberg between the World Wars

10 Schoenberg as teacher

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Schoenberg's impact as a composer is rivaled by his remarkable legacy as a teacher. Among the hundreds of students he taught in Europe and the United States, many went on to distinguished careers as composers, performers, and teachers in their own right; many more were left with an indelible impression of the encounter.¹ The deep devotion Schoenberg inspired in his pupils is evident in their accounts which reveal a brilliant, generous, and indefatigable teacher who could also be an authoritarian, capable of sarcasm and even intimidation. Something of the intensity of his relationship with his students can be gleaned from Heinrich Jalowetz's comments in a testimonial volume from 1912:

Schoenberg *educates* the pupils in the fullest sense of the word and involuntarily establishes such compelling personal contact with each one that his pupils gather around him like disciples about their master. And if we call ourselves "Schoenberg pupils," this has a completely different emphasis from what it does for those who are inseparably linked to their teacher by virtue of a fingering that will make him happy, or the creation of a new figured bass. We know, rather, that all of us who call ourselves Schoenberg pupils are touched by his essence in everything that we think and feel and that we thereby feel in a kind of spiritual contact with everything. For anyone who was his pupil, his name is more than a recollection of student days; it is an artistic and personal conscience.²

This chapter examines Schoenberg's teaching career from three perspectives, beginning with an overview of his teaching activities, including his private studios and various institutional affiliations. His didactic writings and recollections of his students then provide the basis for a discussion of his pedagogical methods. The chapter concludes with a consideration of his mentoring practices, as exemplified in his complex relationship with Hanns Eisler.

Teaching in Europe and the United States

[137] Schoenberg's teaching career was one of near-constant private instruction punctuated by periods of institutional employment. From 1898, when he

accepted Vilma Webenau as his first student in Vienna, to 1933, when he left Berlin under the shadow of the Nazis, Schoenberg shuttled back and forth between the two cities, accepting teaching posts at a variety of schools, all the while teaching privately at his frequently shifting residences. He moved to Berlin in December 1901; a year later, on the recommendation of Richard Strauss, he was offered his first formal teaching position at the Stern Conservatory, a private German–Jewish institution, where he taught music theory from December 1902 to July 1903.

After returning to Vienna in 1903, he began teaching at the progressive Schwarzwald School for girls founded by feminist Dr. Eugenie Schwarzwald, who would continue as a major supporter of Schoenberg for two decades.³ The noted musicologist Guido Adler sent him several pupils from the University of Vienna, including Anton Webern who started private lessons in 1904, the same year Alban Berg began studying with Schoenberg after family members saw Schoenberg's newspaper announcement that he was seeking students. In 1910 Schoenberg petitioned for a part-time position as *Privatdozent* (roughly comparable to a present-day adjunct) at the Academy of Music and Fine Arts. Theory instruction at the Academy was in a state of crisis and his selection as the best candidate to set the program aright, despite his lack of formal education, attests to the reputation he had already established as a teacher.⁴ At the end of the year his application for full membership at the Academy was blocked by an organized anti-Semitic faction. Stung by the rejection, he repaired to the Stern Conservatory in Berlin in 1911. When the Academy in Vienna reconsidered later that year, he declined the offer despite his dire financial straits. He remained in Berlin until 1915, cultivating his career as a conductor and teaching a handful of private students, including the pianist Eduard Steuermann.

Shortly after returning to Vienna, Schoenberg began the first of two periods of military service (1915–16 and 1917). After World War I he pieced together a living from classes at the Schwarzwald School and through private instruction. His classes attracted significant numbers of pupils: in 1918–19 fifty-five students enrolled in the composition seminar; the following year it had twenty-two. The founding in 1918 of the Society for Private Musical Performances, discussed further below, also had an impact on his teaching activities. From 1918–25 he taught private students at his home in Mödling (fifteen kilometers south of Vienna). Among his students in this period were Hanns Eisler, Rudolf Kolisch, Paul Pisk, Karl Rankl, Erwin Ratz, Rudolf Serkin, and Viktor Ullmann.⁵

In 1925 he was awarded the most prestigious academic post of his career: upon Ferruccio Busoni's death, Schoenberg was appointed his replacement at the Prussian Academy of the Arts in Berlin. The selection was not without

controversy; conservatives feared him as an iconoclast, while young modernists found him too traditional. Students in his composition seminar came from the United States, Switzerland, Austria, Romania, Russia, Greece, Spain, and Yugoslavia.⁶ They included the American Marc Blitzstein; Josef Rufer, who became a prominent musicologist and twelve-tone scholar; and the composer Winfried Zillig. Despite the tremendous promise of this generation, many aspirations were thwarted by the exigencies of Nazi politics and World War II. When the Academy notified Schoenberg that his contract would not be honored on May 23, 1933, he was already in exile in Paris.

Schoenberg escaped Europe by accepting a one-year post at the newly founded Malkin Conservatory in Boston. Assisted by Adolph Weiss, who had been the first American to study with him in Berlin, he taught one class in Boston and one in New York.⁷ The brutal New England winter and weekly travel wreaked havoc on his health (although eventually the Boston students came to him in New York to spare him the commute), and in 1934 he moved to Los Angeles. Private students sought him out on the West Coast soon after his arrival. In 1935–36 he taught part-time at the University of Southern California in the Alkin Chair of Composition before accepting a full professorship at UCLA, where he taught until his retirement in 1944. Among his pupils in California were the composers Wayne Barlow, John Cage, Lou Harrison, Earl Kim, Leon Kirchner, Leroy Robertson, and several students who would become his assistants and important proponents of his work: Dika Newlin, Richard Hoffmann, Leonard Stein, Clara Silvers Steuermann, and Gerald Strang.⁸ He was also popular as a composition teacher in Hollywood circles, numbering among his students many major figures from the film industry, including Oscar Levant, David Raksin, Edward Powell, Alfred Newman, Hugo Friedhofer, and Franz Waxman.⁹ Schoenberg continued teaching after retirement out of financial necessity. He held a seminar for composition students at UCLA in 1949 and lectured at the University of Chicago and at the Music Academy of the West, but mostly he taught at home, where he conducted classes and received some private students.

This extraordinary work history foregrounds two features: Schoenberg taught private students almost continuously between 1898 and 1951; and he enjoyed only two prolonged periods of stability in an erratic academic career (1925–33 at the Academy in Berlin, and 1936–44 at UCLA). His controversial reputation, lack of formal education, and Jewish identity impeded his ascension in the ranks of the European professoriate, but this also meant that a master teacher was redirected to a wide array of educational institutions – Jewish, feminist, university, private, public – where many students, who never would have encountered him within the standard system, benefited from his tutelage.

Pedagogy

His early association with the composer Alexander Zemlinsky notwithstanding, Schoenberg was essentially an autodidact, and that experience was the bedrock of his pedagogy. Unencumbered by the indoctrination of any curricular paradigm, he taught theory and analysis to his students as he had taught it to himself: as the bases for acquiring the craft of composition, and less as independent disciplines.

General course of instruction

Student accounts of his teaching are remarkably consistent, regardless of when and where they worked with him.¹⁰ Schoenberg taught pupils of all levels, individually, in groups, and in formal classes; sessions tended to be several hours long. The trajectory of a composition course progressed from composing a classically constructed theme to mastering sonata form. For beginners he prescribed a study of harmony followed by counterpoint, leading eventually to composition; more advanced pupils studied analysis, compositional technique, and orchestration. Models for solving specific compositional problems were drawn almost exclusively from the Austro-German masters (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, Bruckner, and Mahler); he made occasional use of his own compositions as well, choosing examples mostly, but not exclusively, from his tonal works. Analysis was of vital importance, since Schoenberg believed that “comprehension and appreciation of an ideal represented by great achievements of the past went beyond training in composition to form part of a moral education that developed the whole personality.”¹¹ This general course of study is detailed in *Theory of Harmony*, his magnum opus first published in 1911. It was one of his first works published by Universal Edition, a relationship that proved fruitful not only for Schoenberg but also for his students. It was to have been the first in a series of such teaching manuals that he envisaged as comprising a comprehensive “aesthetic of music.”¹² Others that remained incomplete were a counterpoint book *Composition with Independent Voices* (1911), and the more wide-ranging *Coherence, Counterpoint, Instrumentation, Instruction in Form* (1917).¹³

The harmonic theory of Simon Sechter, filtered through his student and successor at the University of Vienna, Anton Bruckner, is apparent throughout *Theory of Harmony*. Sechter’s work is typical of Austrian *Stufentheorie* (step theory), in which all chord progressions are grounded in the diatonic scale.¹⁴ The unfinished instruction manuals cited above are indebted to nineteenth-century scholars, including, for example, the formal theories of A. B. Marx.¹⁵ He also drew upon Heinrich Bellermann’s

1862 treatise “in the Fuxian tradition of species counterpoint,” which included a noteworthy history of contrapuntal theory.¹⁶ Grounding the *Theory of Harmony* in this theoretical canon served the same purpose as linking his compositions to the German masterworks: it endowed his project with authority and legitimacy. Of course, Schoenberg did not transmit this legacy precisely as he received it. He took what was useful and adapted or rejected the rest. He was primarily concerned with divorcing this inheritance from what he regarded as its impotent pedagogy, which had been grounded in aesthetic and stylistic criteria. Instead, he called for a modern pedagogy, infinitely pragmatic in nature. The speculative, even heretical, aspects of *Theory of Harmony* are most apparent in the chapter entitled “Non-Harmonic Tones,” in which he asserts that any simultaneity can be a “chord,” describing the evolution of harmonic technique as an “apparently endless climb up the overtone series.”¹⁷ He also posits that “dissonant harmony had a structural significance in tonal composition which though independent of consonant harmony” is still related to it.¹⁸ These claims substantiated the new direction he had taken recently in his own compositions.

The *Theory of Harmony* begins with the statement, “this book I have learned from my students.” Indeed, the dated assignments found in Berg’s student papers occur in precisely the same sequence in which those exercises and topics are presented in the textbook.¹⁹ Berg’s instruction may be taken as a template, since Schoenberg used some of the same exercises when he taught at UCLA. Berg studied formally from 1904 to 1911; for the first three years he worked on harmony, counterpoint, and music theory, with some composition; thereafter he focused on composition. He began with the C major scale, described the chord for each diatonic pitch, and then composed musical progressions with them. Schoenberg’s pedagogical innovation is evident even in this simple exercise, the pragmatism of which is in stark contrast to the standard manner of teaching harmony in Europe at this time, which simply required the realization of figured bass provided for the pupil. From there Berg’s vocabulary of chords was expanded: 6/4 chords, seventh chords and their inversions, and diminished sevenths in major keys. Once Berg demonstrated proficiency in using these in original harmonic progressions, the process began again with minor keys. Finally, he learned cadential patterns, which prepared him for modulation via chromatic harmony.

When Berg advanced to the study of counterpoint, he found that Schoenberg retained the traditional five species based on rhythmic value, thus adhering closely to Bellermann, although with far more interest in the resulting harmonic progressions. The assignments progressed from whole-note cantus firmus exercises to two-part imitation with entries at different

intervals, and culminated in the combination of all the species simultaneously. Next came canon and fugue, for which the pupil generated original themes suitable for invertible counterpoint. He “graduated” from counterpoint studies with the fugue for piano and string quartet in 1907. Although Berg had been writing pieces while studying harmony and counterpoint, he now began a dedicated course of composition. A comparison of his lessons with the textbooks Schoenberg would write in the United States reveals that the method of teaching composition also remained essentially unchanged. Everything emanated from the musical motive as the smallest unit. The pupil learned the principle of developing variation by composing a theme and variations that exploited a particular thematic motive. Concurrently Berg wrote short pieces, such as minuets and scherzos, in which the contrasting middle passage was treated as a development. The ultimate goal was a well-crafted work in sonata form, which Berg produced in his single-movement Piano Sonata, Op. 1 (1907–08).

Schoenberg’s other theoretical books were written in the United States, beginning with the unfinished *The Musical Idea and the Logic, Technique, and Art of Its Presentation*, much of it drafted in 1934–36, but drawing on material he had been developing for some time.²⁰ The final four manuals addressed the specific needs of his American students, whom he considered industrious, intelligent, and creative, but inadequately prepared. These are *Models for Beginners in Composition* (published in 1942, revised edition, 1943); and three other books published after Schoenberg’s death: *Structural Functions of Harmony* (written 1948, published in 1954); *Preliminary Exercises in Counterpoint* (written 1936–50, published 1963); and *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (written 1937–48, published in 1967). As Dorothy Crawford notes, they “gave him many years of trouble but were clearly important enough to the legacy he intended to leave that he was willing to sacrifice much time from his own composition.”²¹

Organizations for training musicians

In addition to the work he did within established institutions, Schoenberg was keen to develop new organizations for training musicians. In 1927 he drafted plans for an “International School for the Formation of Style” to expose musicians to the styles of composition and performance from the leading musical nations; he later also considered a “Musical Conservatory in Keeping with the Times.”²² In Los Angeles he wrote a proposal for a “School for Soundmen” for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It was to have trained not only composers, arrangers, and orchestrators, each according to his particular subfield, but also sound technicians, engineers, and mixers.²³

The most significant plan to come to fruition was the Society for Private Musical Performances.²⁴ Founded in Vienna in 1918, it sponsored regular concerts until December 1921 and occasional concerts until December 1923. Initially closed to the public and to critics, it provided a forum in which contemporary music was presented in well-rehearsed performances. Its significance for the sustenance of modern music is widely acknowledged, but its pedagogical value should not be underestimated. The Society provided students with invaluable experience in arranging, conducting, performing, and coaching; recruiting musicians; scheduling and overseeing rehearsals; and operating an arts organization. Its pedagogical significance is evident in the arrangements prepared by his students. Schoenberg believed that this task provided “great familiarity with an important piece of music and basic experience with the elements of composition,” and allowed the audience to hear music it might not otherwise hear.²⁵ The first two seasons featured arrangements of orchestral works by Mahler, Strauss, Reger, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, Webern, Berg, Busoni, Bartók, Skryabin, Hauer, and Zemlinsky; the third season, overseen by Erwin Stein in Schoenberg’s absence, included the master’s own music for the first time.²⁶

His instructions regarding principles of arranging were not recorded, but students followed the practices evident in Schoenberg’s own arrangements. Doublings were eliminated throughout, and essential divisi parts reassigned; three wind instruments played the parts of “firsts”; a harmonium picked up remaining wind and horn parts and some inner voices; piano covered the harp and some brass; strings played their parts as is, after divisi were removed.²⁷ When Erwin Stein proposed a chamber setting of Schoenberg’s Op. 8 for the 1920–21 season, the project was given to the youngest generation of students. The arrangers began by annotating a full orchestral score to indicate reduced instrumentation. They then produced an ink score of their chamber version, and this was professionally copied into parts.²⁸ Like so many arrangements for the Society these were never performed, but the pedagogical purpose was fulfilled nonetheless.

The twelve-tone method

Schoenberg is alternately blamed for and credited with what some perceive to be the tyranny of dodecaphony in the mid to late twentieth century, and it is often assumed that this was a primary agenda advanced in his teaching. It is noteworthy that none of the instructional manuals above broach the subject, and he rarely presented it in his classes. Early on, after he announced the method to his circle in the spring of 1923, he did not instruct them further in the details of its use.²⁹ Mostly the disciples

gleaned what they could from poring over his recent scores. Webern started sketching with twelve-tone rows in 1922; in 1924 Eisler wrote the twelve-tone *Palmström*, while Erwin Stein was the first to explain it in print; Berg used twelve-tone rows in 1925 in the song “Schliesse mir die Augen beide,” and in the Chamber Concerto. In a letter to Schoenberg Eisler reported that Steuermann had shown him Opp. 23 and 25 and explained them thoroughly; he praised the works, but noted that “one must study them closely in order to understand.”³⁰ Lore circulated informally among the faithful, who worked it out among themselves and developed their own approaches to it. Later, in the United States, Schoenberg was more forthcoming; he analyzed his dodecaphonic Third String Quartet in great detail for a class, and taught an entire seminar devoted to his works based on theme and variation form in 1948–49.³¹ Occasionally an advanced student might bring a dodecaphonic work to him for advice, just as Lou Harrison did with his Suite for Piano (1943), but Schoenberg would not review serial compositions by students who had not demonstrated mastery of sonata form, as was the case with Cage.³²

Schoenberg as mentor

Schoenberg’s students were fiercely devoted to him, particularly those he taught in Europe. Berg and Webern neglected personal relationships and their own careers in order to attend to the needs of their master. Testimony to the allegiance he inspired and, some might say, demanded, is found in the volumes students published in his honor, such as *Arnold Schönberg* (1912), the first book about him in any language,³³ and a special issue of the journal *Musikblätter des Anbruch* to mark his fiftieth birthday (1924). That year he also received an album of student photographs and tributes.³⁴ Such loyalty is attributable to personality and pedagogy, but also to Schoenberg’s enormous investment in mentoring. Though less well known than the relationships with Berg and Webern, Schoenberg’s decades-long association with Hanns Eisler provides a particularly interesting case study.³⁵

Eisler came to Schoenberg in 1919, penniless and in ill health.³⁶ Schoenberg accepted him as a student knowing that he could not pay for his lessons, subsidizing his participation in the master class with tuition paid by others who could afford it. He procured for Eisler a part-time job as proofreader at Universal Edition, thus providing him with a bit of income, access to new music, and contacts in the publishing industry. By 1920 Eisler was in a group that met twice weekly for four-hour lessons at Schoenberg’s home in Mödling. In the winter of 1920–21, Eisler and Max

Deutsch accompanied Schoenberg to the Netherlands as his assistants.³⁷ When they returned to Vienna in March, they devoted themselves to the Society for Private Musical Performances. Eisler was a member of the board, and arranged works for performance (Schoenberg's Op. 8, No. 1 and Op. 16; Bruckner's Symphony No. 7). In August 1922 Schoenberg wrote to a patron who had asked him to pass on a small donation to worthy musicians, saying he would send it to Eisler and Rankl. He described them as follows: "both as poor as they are gifted, as ardent as they are sensitive, and as intelligent as they are imaginative."³⁸ Ever insolvent, Eisler expressed his gratitude in music. In 1920 he wrote the Scherzo for String Trio built on a motive derived from his teacher's initials, A–E flat (eS in German), and he dedicated *Three Little Songs on Poems by Klabund and Bethge* to Schoenberg in 1922.

Eisler continued to be plagued by respiratory troubles, and he convalesced at the Schoenberg home on more than one occasion. He was there under such circumstances in 1923 when Schoenberg announced his discovery of the twelve-tone method. On March 29 the master determined that Eisler had completed his studies; his graduation piece was the Piano Sonata, Op. 1. Schoenberg instructed Steuermann to perform it at a Society concert in Prague, and recommended it to Universal for publication. He also agreed to be the dedicatee. Eisler thanked him profusely in a letter dated April 13, 1923:

For years you have worried and fretted over me. If anything useful comes of me, it will be all thanks to you! Right now I am just a passionate beginner and a fluff, but what would have become of me if you had not taken me as your student!!! And I am indebted to you not only musically, for your teaching, your works, and your example. I hope I have also improved myself as a person . . . You always worried about my material condition, and I will never forget how you created a job for me at UE in the terrible winter of 1919–20. Otherwise I would literally have starved to death. Also the sojourn to Holland saved me from medical catastrophe, as my doctor confirmed for me at that time. I owe you everything (perhaps even more than I owe my poor parents), and I can only give you my word that I will do my best to please you, and to be a tribute to the name "Schoenberg student." [. . .] In highest veneration and gratitude, your very faithful student Hanns Eisler.³⁹

His formal studies had ended, but Schoenberg continued to attend to Eisler's well-being. A month later he attempted to recruit a patron for his perennially impoverished pupil: "[he] . . . suffers from a lung condition due to malnutrition and a difficult assignment during the war . . . he is very gifted and poor and as a result of his compositions he will receive high praise, but no money!!!"⁴⁰

In 1924 Eisler was hailed as the third great composer in the circle, next to Berg and Webern. He held that lofty position but briefly. In a harbinger

of his imminent commitment to leftist politics, he expressed frustration to Zemlinsky about the insularity of the new music scene in 1925. Zemlinsky reported the conversation to Schoenberg, who received Eisler's complaints about modern music as a personal betrayal. In 1926 they exchanged emotional letters in which the former student stood his ground while reaffirming his devotion to Schoenberg, but to no avail; the master would not abide such impudence. The prize student became *persona non grata*.

Eisler still idolized Schoenberg, despite the difficulty of reconciling his music with the workers' movement to which Eisler was now fully committed. The common experience of exile brought a rapprochement in California. He remained in Schoenberg's thrall, as Bertolt Brecht observed in 1942: "Schoenberg is an old tyrant and Eisler confesses with a smile that he trembles and worries about his tie being straight or arriving ten minutes too early."⁴¹ He used Schoenberg's musical anagram A–eS–C–H (A, E flat, C, B natural) in the dodecaphonic quintet *Fourteen Ways to Describe Rain*, and presented it to his teacher on his seventieth birthday. His Third Piano Sonata (1943) also invoked the A–eS motive, just as his Scherzo had twenty years before. Thanks to the Rockefeller Foundation grant Eisler received to support his film music research, he was finally in a position to repay some of Schoenberg's generosity, giving his former teacher \$300 toward surgery for his son. The older man was reluctant to take the money and "Eisler jokingly said he might take a few lessons in return, whereupon Schoenberg said hastily 'if you still haven't learnt it I can't teach it to you.'"⁴²

Eisler's leftist politics drew the attention of the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947, and he returned to Europe. Even in East Germany he was a staunch proponent of Schoenberg, a decidedly unpopular position in the communist state at that time. When he learned of his teacher's passing in 1951, he mourned his death in an essay that began with a Chinese proverb: "he who does not honor his teacher is no better than a dog."⁴³ Such was the devotion Schoenberg the teacher elicited in his pupils, a legacy virtually unrivaled in twentieth-century art music.