5 Arnold Schoenberg and Richard Strauss

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The pairing of the names of Richard Strauss (1864–1949) with Arnold Schoenberg is not one that comes readily to mind, certainly not for Schoenberg scholars in any event. Critical commentaries on their music rarely find much common ground when comparing the musical styles of these two diverse composers. Strauss's place in music history is often seen as one of the last viable vestiges of the so-called New German School, taking up the Lisztian-Wagnerian notion of *Musik als Ausdruck* (music as expression), where the poetic idea was the basis for the structure of a work, rather than basing this structure on pre-existing or otherwise inherited musical forms.[1] In the first decade of the twentieth century, Strauss was considered at the very forefront of musical innovation, utilizing some of the most advanced compositional techniques of the day.[2] His work is identified by brilliant orchestration, daring harmonic treatment, and expansive musical expression. Indeed at the very moment when it looked as if the degree of chromatic extension and tonal uncertainty would propel Strauss's music into the very next stage of atonal musical expression, he ultimately stopped short of a total break from tonality. While both the operas *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1908) signaled a headlong rush from extreme chromatic instability into atonality, *Der Rosenkavalier* (1910) was much more conventional, not only in its formal operatic conception but in its tonal clarity, set against a libretto which recounts a bittersweet love story rather than a deeply intense psychological drama.

What is most striking in this context is the fact that Schoenberg himself was going through his own compositional crisis in the years between 1908 and 1910. Works such as the Second String Quartet, Op. 10 (1908) and *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*, Op. 15 (1908–09) take the next step towards the so-called "emancipation of dissonance," whereby dissonance no longer seeks justification through tonal resolution. In the works that followed, including the Three Pieces for Piano, Op. 11 (1909) and the Five Orchestral Pieces, Op. 16 (1909), dissonance is treated with complete independence through the disintegration of functional harmony. It is precisely the divergent paths taken by these two composers at this time that signal what was to be the ever-widening division of their respective musical styles.

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Schoenberg would have first become aware of Strauss's music in Vienna, having at least heard the tone poems performed there. It was during Schoenberg's stay in Berlin beginning in December 1901, when the two composers resided in the same city, that the opportunity for a meeting arose. In November 1898 Strauss had replaced Felix Weingartner as First Conductor of the Berlin Royal Opera in the Unter den Linden. At or near this time, Strauss met the writer Ernst von Wolzogen, beginning a collaboration that culminated in Wolzogen writing the libretto to Strauss's second opera *Feuersnot* (premiered in Dresden in November 1901). Schoenberg came to Berlin in part to begin work with Wolzogen, so it is probable that the writer provided the young composer with an introduction to the older musician.

The first of the extant correspondence between Strauss and Schoenberg is noted in Stuckenschmidt's biography of Schoenberg as a postcard dated April 15, 1902, in which Strauss responds to an earlier letter (now lost) inviting Schoenberg to meet him at his home "every day from three until four."[3] As noted by Stuckenschmidt, the contact was likely continued directly between the two composers immediately after this time, with the unfortunate consequence from a historical point of view that no letters or postcards exist for the three-month period that followed. Schoenberg moved to Augsburger Straße in late 1902, placing him within about three kilometers of Strauss's address in Charlottenburg and close enough to encourage regular face-to-face contact.

The website for the Arnold Schönberg Center in Vienna lists a total of twenty extant items between Strauss and Schoenberg in the correspondence, dating between April 15, 1902 and November 27, 1928, and with the majority sent between 1902 and 1909.[4] The letters during this seven-year period in particular display a closeness and genuine affection between the two composers, with Strauss assisting his younger contemporary with his professional career. In the next letter of July 19, 1902, Strauss writes that he will support Schoenberg's application as a music theory instructor at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin, mentioning that he will personally contact the director, Gustav Holländer, if required. The Conservatory was founded in 1850 initially as the Berlin Conservatory, and was one of the first private institutes for higher music education in Europe. Holländer (1855–1915), a violinist with a background as a performer, teacher, and composer in both Cologne and Berlin, assumed the Directorship of the Conservatory from 1895 until his death.

Strauss also mentions how he is looking forward to seeing Schoenberg's score to *Pelleas und Melisande* once it is completed. It was probably Strauss who drew Schoenberg's attention to Maurice Maeterlinck's five-act drama in the first place, initially suggesting it as

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ideal for adaptation as an opera libretto. Instead, Schoenberg composed the work as a one-movement symphonic poem between April 1902 and February 1903, publishing it as Opus 5.[5] This work shows a close resemblance to late nineteenth-century orchestral writing; indeed in many respects the work displays the mature extremes of German Romanticism. Its uninterrupted single movement is divided into four parts, alluding to the four separate movements of a symphony (with an opening movement, Scherzo, Adagio, and Finale), thus continuing the legacy of the great symphonic poems of Strauss, with a massive orchestral setting and a literal programmatic context. The premiere, conducted by Schoenberg on January 25, 1905, was greeted with much controversy. A famous quote from one critic suggested that Schoenberg be placed into an insane asylum, with music paper kept well out of his reach![6] It is difficult today to see what was so controversial about the work, considering its shifting tonal harmonies were a far cry from the emancipation of dissonance conceived in the works composed a mere three years later.

By late 1902 Strauss employed Schoenberg to assist in copying out the parts to Strauss's massive choral cantata *Taillefer*, Op. 52. Three letters (dated September 15, November 6, and November 25, 1902) refer to Schoenberg collecting the score from Strauss at various times to complete the job. Schoenberg had much to keep him busy. Strauss's sixteen-minute work includes three vocal soloists, an eight-part choir, and an orchestra consisting of 145 performers, including ninety strings, nine timpani and drums, eight horns, and six trumpets. Schoenberg's orchestration for *Pelleas and Melisande* is similar to that of *Taillefer*, which is interesting considering he was copying Strauss's parts at the same time as he was writing his own work.[7] *Taillefer* was commissioned for the Centenary Jubilee celebration of Heidelberg University, and was inspired by a setting of Ludwig Uhland's ballad of the same name, commemorating the Norman Conquest and the heroic role of Duke William's favorite minstrel.

In a letter dated December 5, 1902, Strauss makes good on his earlier promise to Schoenberg. It is in this letter where we first see the extent to which Strauss was supporting the younger composer's professional career:

> Dear Herr Schoenberg,
>
> Today I saw Direktor Holländer [from the Stern Conservatory in Berlin]: he sincerely promised to take you on. He will arrange a small class for you now (so that at least you can call yourself a teacher at the Stern Conservatory.) But from 1 January onwards he hopes to give you a larger class: he also has copying work for you . . . If you are really in need, write a request for support to me as the President of the General German Musical Society: I could tide you over the worst patch with 50 marks. So good luck! Best greetings from Richard Strauss.[8]

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This letter now shows Strauss acting as a true mentor to Schoenberg. There is no doubt that Strauss should take much of the credit for obtaining this teaching position for Schoenberg, as it would have likely been impossible for the younger composer to have secured the position on his own without the support of his famous colleague. In addition, one popular image of Strauss as a materialistic penny-pincher is certainly dispelled here, with his offer of both professional as well as monetary support for Schoenberg.[9]

As can be expected at this stage, Strauss was also working behind the scenes to secure financial support for Schoenberg. Strauss lobbied on Schoenberg's behalf for a Liszt Foundation scholarship – a bequest made to the General German Musical Society by Countess Hohenlohe, daughter of Franz Liszt's mistress, the heiress Countess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein.[10] The trustees of the scholarship were Strauss and his good friend, the German composer Max von Schillings (1868–1933). Intended to support the careers of composers and pianists, ultimately Schoenberg was to receive the scholarship twice, thanks in large part to Strauss's support. Strauss's letter to Schillings on December 18, 1902 makes clear his opinion of Schoenberg:

> I have recommended a man who lives in the most dire poverty and is very talented, to be given urgently a scholarship of 1000 marks a year for some years. Please support me and write a splendid testimonial for him. You will find that his works, if a bit overcharged at the moment, show great talent and gifts.[11]

The next letter of significance, dated September 10, 1903, shows the level of importance Schoenberg had assigned to his relationship with Strauss. Schoenberg informs Strauss that he is planning to remain in Vienna in the hope of finding work with the then newly established publisher Universal Edition.[12] The letter ends with the following heartfelt sentiments:

> So I must say goodbye to you for a long time. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, honoured master, once again for all the help you have given me at a sacrifice to yourself in the most sincere manner. I will not forget this for the whole of my life and will always be thankful to you for it – If I ask you to keep a good memory of me, I hope you will forget the great amount of trouble that I have caused you.
>
> I ask you to give my best regards to Frau Strauss and remain, again with thanks, yours very sincerely, Arnold Schönberg.[13]

There is a brief exchange between the two composers in February 1905 shortly after the premieres of Strauss's *Sinfonia Domestica* in November 1904 and Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande* in January 1905. There is some general discussion of possible performance opportunities for each

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composer, but nothing definite at this stage. There follows a break in contact for over a year and a half until August 31, 1906, when Schoenberg writes a long letter to Strauss, asking again about possible performance opportunities for his works. Schoenberg suggests his *Pelleas und Melisande*, the Six Orchestral Songs, Op. 8, and the recently completed Chamber Symphony No. 1, Op. 9, as possibilities for Strauss's concerts with the Vienna Philharmonic. Strauss answers by saying he is only conducting two concerts in the current season and therefore "couldn't introduce any novelties,"[14] but if Schoenberg were willing to leave the first performances of the latter two works until the summer of 1907, Strauss would once again take a look at them. Schoenberg sent a reply lamenting the fact that he was having difficulties in interesting conductors in performing his music in general, and communicates a general impatience in having to wait too long for premiere performances of his music. Ultimately Schoenberg managed to have the Chamber Symphony premiered in February 1907 in Vienna, and the Orchestral Songs seven years later in Prague; the latter conducted by Alexander Zemlinsky.

In May 1908 the ever-hopeful Schoenberg again asked Strauss about premiering his music, but Strauss replied that the program for 1908/1909 was already decided. Strauss does request that Schoenberg send "a few (not too long) pieces to have a look at and would be very happy if I could find something among them that I could perform to the Berlin Opera House public, which unfortunately is madly conservative, without too great a risk." Schoenberg apparently acted quickly and sent some music to Strauss, including a copy of the Chamber Symphony. On September 27, 1908 Strauss replied that he had read the works with great interest, but that since they would not be suitable with the "bad acoustics" of the Berlin Opera House, he would consider an alternative series to program the works.

A flurry of letters between July and September 1909 brought the situation to a head. On July 14, Schoenberg describes to Strauss a series of short, one- to three-minute orchestral pieces he is composing that should be well suited for a premiere by the Berlin Philharmonic. At the time of the letter, Schoenberg states that three pieces are completed, with a fourth to be added in a few days and the further possibility of one or two more.[15] As cited by Stuckenschmidt, Schoenberg is referring to what ultimately became the Five Orchestral Pieces, Op. 16. Strauss answers Schoenberg's letter on July 22, from his home in Garmisch to say that, while the current performance schedule was already complete, he would be very interested in seeing the score of Schoenberg's new work. Schoenberg sent the score of the now four completed pieces with his letter

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of July 28, stating that a "cheerful" fifth piece was soon to be finished. He ends the letter lamenting the fact that he has had much difficulty in Vienna with securing performances of his works; indeed he exclaims that, at age 35, he has had only one single orchestral performance![16] He asks further for Strauss's help in general, stating that if such an esteemed musician as Strauss were to perform his work, the benefit to Schoenberg's compositional career would be invaluable.

In August the Viennese publisher Universal Edition expressed an interest in the Five Orchestral Pieces. Schoenberg writes to Strauss to ask that the scores be returned, and further states that if Strauss were to perform the works, it would very much help with future negotiations with the publisher. It is not difficult to understand then that Strauss's response of September 2 was a crushing blow to Schoenberg:

> I am very sorry to have to send your scores back to you without a promise of performance. You know I am glad to help people and I also have courage. But your pieces are such daring experiments in context and sound that for the moment I dare not introduce them to the more than conservative Berlin public.[17]

In all fairness, it should not come as a surprise that the older and more experienced composer/conductor was reluctant to program the Five Orchestral Pieces. Even Schoenberg himself underscores the newness of his compositional approach in these pieces in his letter of July 14:

> I believe that this time it is really impossible to hear the music from the score. It would almost be necessary to perform it "with blind judgement." I expect a great deal of it, especially as regards sound and mood. For it is these that the pieces are about – certainly not symphonic, they are the absolute opposite of this, there is no architecture and no build-up. Just a colourful, uninterrupted variation of colours, rhythms and moods.[18]

Clearly, a Berlin Philharmonic audience more accustomed to traditional symphonic repertoire would be highly challenged by this work, particularly a composition by a virtually unknown composer at that stage. The bane of any music director's existence is the careful balancing act that must be maintained between challenging artistic innovation on the one hand and rationalist economic viability on the other, whether artists like it or not! The Five Orchestral Pieces would have certainly tested those limits.

An interesting comparison can be made between the relationships Schoenberg maintained with Strauss during this period, and the one with the Italian composer and pianist Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924). In a similar way to the Schoenberg/Strauss relationship, the differences between the compositional styles of Schoenberg and Busoni suggest few

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points of agreement. Their correspondence consists of thirty-eight letters exchanged between the two composers between 1903 and 1919. Busoni, as Schoenberg, had also lived in Berlin since 1901, and the latter would most likely have been aware of Busoni's concerts there. Schoenberg first wrote to Busoni prior to May 1903 (this letter is lost), apparently requesting Busoni to perform one of his works. The date suggests that this work was probably *Pelleas und Melisande*, as it would correspond to letters written by Schoenberg to Strauss and others during this time requesting possible performance opportunities. Busoni's response on May 14, 1903 is cordial and clever:

> Your letter has pleased and interested me and made me very curious to see your score. So I would be grateful if you would send me the manuscript. Perhaps it will be my lot, as a new Siegfried, to step through the circle of fire which makes your work unapproachable and to wake it from the sleep of the unperformed.[19]

While obviously Busoni did not perform Schoenberg's work, Stuckenschmidt does note that Schoenberg's name did appear on the next orchestral concert conducted by Busoni, which took place on November 5, 1903. Here Schoenberg's orchestration of the Syrian Dances by Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935) was given its first performance.

In his article on the Schoenberg/Busoni relationship, Daniel Raessler provides an outline of the correspondence between the two composers as found in the letters as well as other sources, including brief essays, references in letters to others, and diary entries.[20] Raessler reinforces the comment that there is little obvious artistic connection between Schoenberg and Busoni other than the fact that each was involved with a search for a new mode of musical expression, and as such Busoni might be more sympathetic than others to the musical innovations of Schoenberg – hence the explanation for Schoenberg contacting Busoni initially in 1903.[21] It is easy to see the connection here as with Strauss, since the latter was also considered by many to be the *enfant terrible* of German Romantic music at the turn of the twentieth century.

From July 7, 1909 until July 18, 1910, there is a total of seventeen letters involving extensive discussion and analysis by Busoni and Schoenberg of Schoenberg's *Klavierstück*, Op. 11, No. 2 (1909). Schoenberg's initial letter of July 7, 1909 is a request to Busoni as to whether he might be interested in performing his new work. There then follows an extensive series of detailed discussions between the two composers, where Schoenberg is explaining and attempting to justify his compositional approach in the work, while Busoni is critical of what he sees as imperfections in the music as well as lamenting the impossible demands imposed on both the pianist

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and the instrument. Typical of the exchange is the passage that follows from a letter Busoni wrote to Schoenberg on July 26, 1909:

> I have received your pieces and the letter with them. Both testify to a person who thinks and feels, which I have already recognised in you . . . However, my impression as a pianist is different; I cannot get away from this, perhaps because of my education or because of my onesidedness as a specialist. – The first doubts about your music "as piano pieces" arose because of the small span of the writing in the circumference of time and space. The piano is a short-breathed instrument and one can't help it enough. However, I will work through the pieces again until they really get into my blood – and then perhaps I will think differently.[22]

In a letter from August 2, 1909 Schoenberg replied:

> I have given considerable thought to your objections to my piano style and come to the conclusion that in a certain respect you are absolutely correct . . . Nevertheless, I believe that I may say it does not appear to me as though this deficiency is one that is grounded in the essence of the music. It is, indeed, clear that always when some new ability is achieved, old priorities must fall. And so it also appears to me that with music that is based on so rapid a harmonic consumption, the breadth of the phrase must be just as unusual as it can be common in the broader disposition of the chords. To create decorations and ornaments through chord displacement can be done with ease only when the chord has sufficient length. But, as I see it, the piano phrase is more dependent upon the development of successive chordal elements than upon their simultaneity, that it must result in the phrase losing some of its lustre and splendour.[23]

We do not find this level of musical analysis and candid commentary in the Schoenberg/Strauss correspondence. While Strauss clearly admired Schoenberg's work and attempted to support his career with professional references and even monetary support when it was needed, he does not appear to have engaged himself as directly with Schoenberg's music as did Busoni. In addition, Strauss's professional stature at this stage was more advanced than Busoni's, so it stands to reason that Schoenberg was often more interested in the professional advantage Strauss's support and endorsement would provide his music, rather than being interested in his critical comments about the music itself.

The Schoenberg/Busoni correspondence also includes similar appeals by Schoenberg for financial assistance during difficult times, in spite of the fact that, after 1910, Schoenberg's fame began to increase dramatically, particularly after his successful negotiations with Universal Edition in October 1909 to purchase the rights to Schoenberg's works composed since 1903, as well as the right to his future compositions for the next ten years. Busoni, as Strauss, was also willing to introduce Schoenberg to influential professionals and

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patrons of the arts where appropriate, and to support his applications for performances and funding opportunities when requested.

For all intents and purposes, the close correspondence between Strauss and Schoenberg ended in 1909. There is a very brief exchange of letters in September 1911, with Schoenberg stating his intention of visiting Strauss in Garmisch and Strauss inviting him to do so. There is no record that this meeting took place. Nevertheless, even as late as 1911, Schoenberg, in his *Harmonielehre*, cites Strauss as "a great master of our time" and mentions him in the book more frequently than any other composer.[24]

As an appropriate final chapter to the relationship, Schoenberg came to the aid of Strauss in 1946, just at the time when Strauss's activities during the Nazi era – in particular questions about his level of support for the Nazi regime – were being scrutinized. This level of speculation was not without foundation. In November 1933 Strauss was installed as President of the Reich's Music Chamber, one of the seven so-called Chambers of Culture instituted by Josef Goebbels.[25] It is clear that Strauss saw the main goal of this organization as the general improvement of musical life in Germany, particularly with regard to the protection of copyright and other legal rights for composers, as well as issues including the fostering of music education and the promotion of performances of German music. Although Strauss held this position for less than two years, until July 1935, the fact that he maintained such a high profile in the Chamber of Culture during this time, as well as participating in other major events, such as composing and conducting the Olympic Hymn for the Opening Ceremonies at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, suggested the possibility of a close relationship between Strauss and the political heavyweights of the Nazi Party. In addition, the fact that musicians such as Strauss and the conductor/composer Wilhelm Furtwängler remained in Germany throughout the war years, at a time when other musicians either fled the regime or met with far less fortunate fates, raised further suspicions regarding their moral and political allegiances. Michael Kennedy discusses the question of Strauss and the Third Reich in depth in his 1999 biography of Strauss, and within this discussion includes Schoenberg's comments regarding the question of Strauss's involvement with the Nazis. Beginning by stating that he is "not a friend of Richard Strauss," Schoenberg nevertheless writes:

> I do not believe that he was a Nazi, just as little as W[ilhelm] Furtwängler. They were both *Deutsch-Nationale* (Nationalistic Germans), they both loved Germany, German culture and art, landscape, language and its citizens, their co-nationals. They both will raise their glass if a toast is brought to Germany "*Hoch Deutschland*" and though they estimate French and Italian music and paintings highly, they consider everything German as superior.[26]

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It is obvious that any musical aesthetic relationship between Schoenberg and Strauss was long since past at this stage, as indeed had been the case since Schoenberg's 1914 letter refusing the invitation to write for Strauss's fiftieth birthday, where he stated "[Strauss] is no longer of the slightest artistic interest to me."[27] Nevertheless, this division was not so extreme as to prevent Schoenberg from defending Strauss some thirty-two years later. For Strauss's part, he clearly had a genuine admiration for Schoenberg, even if he was not sympathetic with his musical direction after 1912. The mere fact that Strauss, when appointed as a trustee to the Mahler Foundation in 1911, continued to support Schoenberg by recommending on three separate occasions that Schoenberg be awarded 3,000 kronen, is clear evidence of the continued regard Strauss had for his younger contemporary.

Relationships are often complex affairs that have the uncanny ability to change radically over time, and the relationship in question here is certainly no different in that regard. It is also true that this change is always going to be inevitable when it revolves around two such lofty artistic temperaments as Strauss and Schoenberg. Yet there is a reaffirming sense one gets when examining the circumstances surrounding the relationship between these two composers. Despite their artistic differences, there is a strong bond clearly displayed here. Perhaps it is due to the fact that two successful artists who shared some commonalities in their life experience – goals, challenges, successes, and failures – came together with a shared sense of purpose. In our volatile and highly competitive world, it is rare when two great minds can parallel, but it is even more remarkable when they intersect, even if only for a moment.

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