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## HOW OLD! HOW NEW! – SOME NOTES ON SCHOENBERG'S PETRARCH SETTING FOR THE 'SERENADE', OP. 24

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**Abstract:** As the first systematic 12-tone composition, the Petrarch movement from Schoenberg's *Serenade* has been associated with 'newness'. Yet it has conservative features. Medieval notions of isomelody and isorhythm, as well as Renaissance concepts of paralleling a poem's prosody and emotional content, are here. Moreover, 12-tone composition itself is an evolution of 'Chromatic Completion' – a technique already flourishing in Haydn and Mozart. Ultimately, what matters most is Schoenberg's understanding of the aesthetics of love. To appreciate this, the essay makes use of the philosophy of Aesthetic Realism, founded by the great American poet and scholar Eli Siegel. Beauty, he taught, is 'a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves'. And love, he explained, has an aesthetic basis: it is 'proud need'. This essay indicates technical ways in which Schoenberg illustrates the truth of these concepts.

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Schoenberg in 1912.  
Photo: Schlosser-Weinrich, Prague

In his 1936 article, 'What is Modern Music?', Alan Bush, after calling Schoenberg 'one of the most radically modern of composers', noted that 'his isomelodic system ...[is] analogous to the isorhythmic system of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries'.<sup>1</sup>

Bush could have gone further; for in the *Ars Nova* there was much overlap between these two techniques: many isorhythmic motets also featured isomelodic tenors, with the other voices left free. And just that – an isomelodic principal voice, surrounded by several other independent lines – is what is found in Schoenberg's setting, for bass-baritone and a chamber sextet consisting of clarinet, bass-clarinet, guitar, violin, viola and cello, of the Petrarch sonnet 'far potess' io vendetta di colei' ('could I but take revenge on her') in his *Serenade* of 1923.<sup>2</sup>

Schoenberg's isomelody, heard only in the vocal part, is a constantly repeating 12-tone row; this movement being, in fact, his first systematic 12-tone composition; and just as some composers of the *Ars Nova* contrasted the number of tones in an isomelody with the number of notes in an isorhythm – creating, in effect, very engaging structural 'cross-rhythms' – so Schoenberg, while not employing the medieval notion of isorhythm, nevertheless does something akin: his vocal melody unfolds in unbroken and untransposed 12-note units, yet each phrase (that is, each structural rhythmic unit) contains only 11 of these notes. This implies an architectonic cross-rhythm. No phrase is complete on its own, from a melodic point of view; the first note of the phrase which follows is required to complete the chromatic aggregate.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 63<sup>rd</sup> Session (Vol. 63/1) p.22.

<sup>2</sup> For an engaging study of Schoenberg's earlier engagement with the poetry of Petrarch, see Robert R. Holtzer's chapter 'Schoenberg Sets Petrarch: Schopenhauer, Mahler, and the Poetics of Resignation', in *Schoenberg and Words: The Modernist Years*, eds. Charlotte M. Cross and Russell A. Berman (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000), pp.65–102.

<sup>3</sup> As Allen Shawn notes in *Arnold Schoenberg's Journey* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), such a design is called by theorists a series of 'rotated set statements' (p.205).

Now many things result from Schoenberg's decision to sculpt the piece in this manner. The most obvious is this: nearly every phrase has a unique pitch series, and all have unique melodic contours. Even the last two phrases are given melodic individuality by means of different octave registrations and rhythms, even though, by virtue of the mathematics involved in setting a sonnet with its 14 lines, they are compelled to repeat the linear pitch structure of the initial pair of musical phrases. Compare:

Example 1a: Lines 1–2

O könnt' ich je der Rach' an ihr ge - ne - sen,  
die mich durch Blick und Re - de gleich zer - stö - ret,

Example 1b: Lines 13–14

wenn die nun spricht und weint \_\_\_\_\_ und sie um - fan - get.  
dass fort \_\_\_\_\_ sie schläft, wenn sol - ches sie ver - nom - men.

What we hear, then, as this setting of the Petrarch unfolds, in 14 separate units, is inexorable, unyielding mathematics and delightful sonic freshness. And quite obviously, this is not in the original Italian; Schoenberg used the standard German translation of his day: that of Karl August Förster.

### Conservative Revolutionaries

Both Petrarch and Schoenberg were *conservative revolutionaries*. Each looked towards the old as a way of leaping forth into the new. Petrarch (1304–1374) was the first great scholar of antiquity. As *Chambers' Biographical Encyclopedia* puts it: '[he] may be considered...the earliest of the great humanists of the Renaissance'.<sup>4</sup> And what was the Renaissance but an assertion that the future's greatest ally might be the distant past? Yet Petrarch was one of the most innovative of poets. He was, to the sonnet, what Monteverdi would be to opera, or Haydn to the string quartet.

Schoenberg (1874–1951) occupies a parallel position. His atonal music marked a break from the past such as Western culture had never before known. Meanwhile, in his fervent belief in the expressive power of strict mathematics, he was more akin in his thinking to late medieval composers than to the vast majority of the musicians born in his own generation. Just consider the music of Rachmaninov, born the year before, or Ravel, the year after – each a superb musician, but nei-

<sup>4</sup> ed. J.O. Thorne (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962), p.1001.

ther given to the exploring the expressive potential of sharply defined numerical structures.

An interesting fact about Petrarch is that he was a close friend of the leader of the *Ars Nova*: Philippe de Vitry (1291–1361). So, were we to imagine the poet crossing the centuries, and sitting in at the première of the *Serenade* (in Donaueschingen on 20 July 1924, with Schoenberg conducting<sup>5</sup>), while Petrarch would undoubtedly have been dumbfounded by the music, at least one aspect might have seemed familiar: the presence of isomelody. Likely, it would have to been necessary to point it out to him in the score; it not being particularly easy to 'catch' by ear! But, then again, that was also true of nearly all of the isomelodic structures of his own day.

Meanwhile, we shouldn't give the impression that Schoenberg's only retrospective tendency was his love of music as mathematics. Radical as his atonal setting was, a detailed examination of this melodic line shows that it hews closely to proven principles of vocal composition; one of which was that musical metrics should closely parallel verbal prosody.

Consider how, for the opening quatrain, his rhythmic and melodic designs perfectly support the translator's iambs.

O könnt' ich je der Rach' an ihr ge - ne - sen,  
die mich durch Blick und Re - de gleich zer - stö - ret,  
und dann zu grös - serm Leid sich von mir keh - ret,  
die Au - gen ber - gend mir, die sü - ssen, bö - sen!

Example 2: Lines 1–4

By contrast, the melodies Schoenberg gives lines 5 and 6 begin with long notes. Why? – to reflect the substitute trochaic feet with which these lines begin.

So mei - ner Gei - ster matt \_\_\_\_\_ be - küm - mert We - sen  
sau - get mich aus all - mäh - lich und ver - zeh - ret,

Example 3: Lines 5–6

<sup>5</sup> There were, earlier, two private performances of the work at the home of Dr. Norbert Schwarzmann of Vienna.

Another ‘conservative’ aspect is his structural design, which perfectly mirrors the four subdivisions of Petrarch’s sonnet. There are instrumental interludes after each poetic unit: the two quatrains which comprise the octet, and each of the following triplets which, combined, create the sestet.

As that great historian of verse rhythms, George Saintsbury, noted in his 1901 classic, *The Earlier Renaissance*, a danger in the rhymed poetry of Petrarch’s time was a kind of rhythm with excessive skippingness – a ‘tumbling’ effect, as he calls it.<sup>6</sup> And he praises Petrarch for arresting that tumble through the irregular stoppages created by his intricate rhyme schemes, especially those in his most successful forms: the sonnet and sestina. Schoenberg, emphasizing those divisions, is sensitive to the poet’s technique.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that his mirroring of Petrarch is only cool and structural. It is also warmly expressive. Each of his 14 vocal phrases reflects the specific poetic lines being set.

Here are a few instances. The most aggressive and cruel word in Petrarch’s first line, ‘revenge’ (*der Rach’*) is set as a painful, rising minor ninth, given additional emotional emphasis by falling, after a whiplash rhythm, on a strong downbeat. In line 6, we meet the idea that Laura, Petrarch’s unattainable love, is consuming his spirits. This Schoenberg mirrors by means of instrumental glissandi which precede and accompany the word for ‘saps’ – *sauget*. In a remarkable touch, the same instrumental technique is employed in line 7, to reflect a very different image: the roaring of a lion! Nor does it hurt that the sonnet’s highest note occurs here, on the word *brüllend* (roaring). And as Schoenberg sets Petrarch telling about night and the choice to go towards rest (line 8 of Förster’s translation) the melody slows, and becomes more restful. This line requires a bit more than five full measures – longer than any previous line.

Example 4: Lines 7–8

und brüll - lend, wie - ein Leu, \_\_\_\_\_ ans Herz mir fäh - ret

die Nacht, \_\_\_\_\_ die ich zur Ru - he mir er - le - sen!

### The Art of ‘Chromatic Completion’

The fact that Schoenberg set Petrarch in a German translation has important consequences, for while the Italian poet is flexible in his syllable count – giving each line anywhere from 11 to 14 – his translator, Förster, is rigid: 11 syllables each. But Schoenberg is not dismayed by this strictness; instead, he highlights it and seems to relish it. In fact, he sets the poem without a single melisma! Nevertheless, the music has great rhythmic freedom.

In this music, security is at one with adventure; the familiar, with the fresh; the old – in short – with the new. And since phrase by phrase we hear only 11 notes, we have yet another dramatic situation of opposites: as a line *completes* itself, the chromatic aggregate remains *incomplete*; as there is a *break* between lines, there is also *continuity* as the ear is pulled forward, waiting for the missing tone.

<sup>6</sup> (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1901), p.122.

It is useful, I think, to give a hint of the stylistic evolution that led up to the particular technique Schoenberg employs in this work: ‘eleven tones’ yearning for completion through a long-awaited twelfth tone. It is a technique which, as I’ve indicated in various published works, has its roots in music as far back as Palestrina and which reached a particularly rich flowering in the music of Haydn and Mozart.<sup>7</sup> In my research, I have encountered no evidence indicating that Schoenberg was conscious of just this fact as he was developing his very personal dodecapronic technique, a technique first presented to the public in the *Serenade*; but certainly its precedents were ‘in the air’.

Consider a piece by Mahler which we know he loved: the Sixth Symphony in A minor, premièred in 1906. Example 5 gives a reduction of the opening portion of its Andante. Notice where I have placed each asterisk: each falls at the end of a process of unfolding, where the chromatic aggregate has fulfilled itself with the arrival of the twelfth tone. The first such point appears at the end of m.7, with the arrival of the pitch Db; the second, with the arrival of G natural at the end of m.9; the third with the arrival of A and the end of m. 17. Each point, as is evident upon close inspection of the score, is significant from both a structural and an expressive point of view.

Example 5

<sup>7</sup> Among these are my doctoral thesis, *Chromatic Completion in the Late Vocal Music of Haydn and Mozart – A Technical, Philosophic, and Historical Study* (New York University, 2008), and the journal essays ‘Bach and Chromatic Completion – A New Field for Analytic Research’, *Bach Notes*, issue 9 (2008), and ‘Haydn’s Secret “Dodecapronic” Art’, *Journal of Music and Meaning*, issue 8 (2009).

Example 6

Only a year later, 1907, Schönberg premièred his own Chamber Symphony No. 1, and here is its principal lyrical theme:

This phrase is nine bars long, and like Mahler's melody, it also seems impelled, however subconsciously, by the logic of chromatic completion: the logic of saturating musical space with eleven tones, and then having the ear long for the appearance of the tone which will provide us with what has been missing. Here, that tone is a G natural, and it appears just before the melody cadences on the downbeat of the ninth measure.<sup>8</sup>

That these two melodies, by Mahler and the younger Schoenberg, seem each to be, on expressive terms, something of a 'love song', is an interesting coincidence; but no more than that. Still, the technique, as I implied earlier, was perfectly fitted to Schoenberg's artistic needs as he set Petrarch's love sonnet. In fact, as I hope now to suggest, it is as apt, on philosophic terms, as any technique could be.

### Schoenberg, Petrarch, and Aesthetic Realism

The question emerges: is what we have just noted, this 11 versus 12 matter, simply 'gee-whiz' technical stuff, or does it have an expressive purpose? And since this is a love sonnet, might it indicate a depth of understanding, on Schoenberg's part, of Petrarch's vision of love?

<sup>8</sup> Apparently, the first scholar to notice the strong presence of the technique of chromatic completion in early Schoenberg was Charles Rosen – though he prefers the term 'saturation of chromatic space'. See pp. 57-62 of *Arnold Schoenberg* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975).

To answer this, it is crucial to keep in mind the great philosophic principle stated by Eli Siegel, the founder of Aesthetic Realism:<sup>9</sup> 'All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves'<sup>10</sup> – an idea which I see as true, a conviction come to after decades of testing the point in relation to music across all chronological and geographical boundaries, as well as distinctions of genre.<sup>11</sup>

In this short essay, I have already touched upon the opposites of strictness and freedom, logic and emotion, continuity and discontinuity. We now go to other crucial dialectical situations which Petrarch implies are present in love: for and against, closeness and distance, the complete and the incomplete.

The poet tells us, in his opening lines, how angry he is at Laura. Her power over him is so large, his ego can't bear it and he wishes he could take revenge. Yet anger is not the whole story. The verb (whether heard in the original Italian, or in the German translation) is cast in the subjunctive – so this revenge is a very uncertain thing. There is the clear implication it is something the poet could never bring himself to do! And the rest of the poem backs the implication up – for Petrarch's verbal music is rich and cherishing. Even as he tells us of the pain he feels as Laura remains beyond his grasp, there is pleasure and resonating beauty in the verbal music. For example, listen to the resplendence of the concluding triplet:

Meravigliami ben s'alcuna volta,  
Mentre le parla et piange et poi l'abbraccia,  
Non rompe il sonno suo, s'ella l'ascolta.

The sound of this poetry, simply as sound, is anything but irritable.

In English, the lines could be rendered this way:

I marvel if, sometime,  
While my soul speaks, and weeps, and then embraces her,  
Her sleep is not disturbed – if she is even listening.

For Petrarch, Laura was the very embodiment of love, and what is implied in the sonnet – not so much in its surface, denotative meaning, but in the deeper, poetic meaning contained in the *music* of the Italian syllables as they meet each other in a perfect flow of verbal melody – is that it is a good, beautiful, and pleasure-giving fact that in love there is always something beyond our physical grasp. And Schoenberg's technique also implies it: we are pulled line by line onward, always searching for that twelfth and completing tone.

Turning from music to life, and pursuing the analogy, the question is: doesn't love require the oneness of these same opposites? – because when we love, truly, we want another person to affect all of us. There is something complete. We don't hide; we don't keep part of ourselves immune and distant. At the same time, the incomplete also has to be honored. We *never* own a person, never possess them. They have the mystery of reality in them, and always will. We don't insult them by

<sup>9</sup> See two essays by the present writer for an introductory perspective on the life and work of this philosopher: 'A Note on Two Conceptions of Aesthetic Realism', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 45/4 (October, 2005), pp.438-440, and 'Eli Siegel' (a Google Knol) at: <http://knol.google.com/k/eli-siegel#>.

<sup>10</sup> Siegel, Eli, 'Aesthetic Realism and Beauty'. Lecture of 5 August 1949. Excerpt in *Aesthetic Realism: Three Instances* (New York: Definition Press, 1961) p.2.

<sup>11</sup> For a compact summary of the reasoning for this statement, with a representative sample of 35 instances of world music supporting the contention, see a conference paper co-authored by myself and anthropologist Arnold Perey, given originally in Graz at the First International Conference on Interdisciplinary Musicology (sponsored by ESCOM) in 2004, and accessible on-line at: [http://www.perey-anthropology.net/world\\_music/escom\\_1.htm](http://www.perey-anthropology.net/world_music/escom_1.htm).

acting as if we already understand them. On the contrary, we are proud to acknowledge incompleteness, and happy to try every day to know another person more fully.

As Plato, Shelley, and so many others who have written profoundly on its meaning, have noted: in love one feels, in an ecstatic way, that our incomplete selves are completed through closeness to another. Eli Siegel observed that love is an emotion of 'proud need' – the most succinct, profound, and clear definition of the word this author has encountered.<sup>12</sup> For it is true: in love, the world as different from ourselves completes ourselves. Metaphorically speaking, our 11-note phrase needs another phrase to express all of who we truly are. And this kind of mathematical yet expressive symbolism was what Schoenberg was adept at; as were medieval musicians.

Were this an exhaustive kind of essay, one might analyze Schoenberg's music in full, and demonstrate many other ways in which the composer parallels Petrarch's drama of human feeling: a drama of inner emotion as contractile and expansive, rising and falling, straightforward and subtle, vehement and tender. But to aim at 'completeness' of this kind would be against the very meaning I am pointing to! Instead, I invite the readers of this purposefully 'incomplete' essay to provide the missing elements.

### The Large-Scale Rhythmic Design

However, there is one further fact about Schoenberg's setting of Petrarch (via Förster) of a more 'over-arching' nature, which I definitely want to note: the music grows ever more tender and ruminative as the song goes on. It slows, structurally, bit by bit across the entire composition as a desire to embrace Laura overcomes the poet's initial talk of revenge.

The opening quatrain, filled with that angry hope, takes 11 measures. Like anger, it is compact, contractile, hard. The second quatrain takes 17. The first half of the sestet, a poetic triplet, takes a full 18 measures; proportionately it is significantly slower. Here, we learn how Petrarch feels his soul is leaving him and flying to the sleeping Laura.

Example 7: Lines 9–11

Die See - le, die sonst nur der Tod ver - drän - get,  
 trennt sich von mir, und, ih - rer Haft ent - kom - men,  
 fliegt sie zu ihr, die drö - hend sie emp - fän - get.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. chapter 7: 'Love and Reality', pp.167-192 in *Self and World: An Explanation of Aesthetic Realism* (New York: Definition Press, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p.165.



For the concluding triplet, the composer asks for a ‘quieter’ tempo. In this more relaxed pacing the final triplet takes 15 measures, making it at least as long as its predecessor. In fact, the final line of the sonnet is set in a more expansive manner than any before: at this slower tempo, it takes a full seven measures to unfold.

Example 8: Lines 12–14

The image shows three staves of music in bass clef, with lyrics underneath. The first staff contains the lyrics: 'Wohl hat es manch - mal Wun - der mich ge - nom - men,'. The second staff contains: 'wenn die nun spricht und weint \_\_\_\_\_ und sie um - fan - get.' The third staff contains: 'dass fort \_\_\_\_\_ sie schläft, wenn sol - ches sie ver - nom - men.' The music features various note values, including a triplet in the final line, and rests indicated by lines.

Taken as a whole, Schoenberg’s setting reflects both the turbulence and deep repose of love, its discontent and delight, its tendency to incite, even inflame, and also to provide peace. Again, by virtue of its striking clarity and concision, I cite a definition by Eli Siegel. ‘Happiness’, he wrote, is a state of ‘dynamic tranquility’.<sup>13</sup>

On artistic terms, this is something both Schoenberg and Petrarch were plainly trying to achieve. And, if my ear doesn’t betray me, they succeeded.

Music Examples from the *Serenade* Copyright 1924 © by Wilhelm Hansen, Copenhagen

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