

PROGRAM NOTES

October 6, 2016

Tonight's program posits a geographical influence on sensibility: three composers matured in the Danube River Basin under the reign of the House of Habsburg, straddling where Western Europe absorbs Slavic influences from the East. This oriental wind blows warm and cool, eliciting a smiling musical language sprinkled with tears. A poignant ambivalence of harmonic mode, never quite major, never quite minor, is intrinsic to the music of Schubert; in Janáček, the idiom is enriched with folk elements foreign to Western scales; Webern transcends tonality (major/minor is thus irrelevant), but a late-Romantic, sweet/sad Viennese yearning underlies and belies his formal astringency. No Strauss waltzes or Lehár operetta tunes tonight, but feeling and sentiment aplenty.

Anton Webern: Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 10 (1911)

Anton Webern published 31 works in 35 years. Their total playing time is a mere 3^{1/2} hours. Given a misunderstanding that at first limited Webern's popularity and then enhanced it for the wrong reasons, it may be worth adducing what is true of all good compositions: his are constructed according to an evolving series of rules, but they are not intellectual exercises for their own sake. They are not aphorisms, or epigrams. They are short happenings, concentrated expressivity. "I cannot imagine a sublime intellect without the ardor of emotion." —Anton Webern, June 23, 1910, writing to Schoenberg.

With this performance, *Espressivo* continues a three-concert link of teacher or protector to student: Gustav Mahler-Arnold Schoenberg-Anton Webern. The latter two (together with the other most prominent Schoenberg student, Alban Berg) searched for a way to preserve the expressive richness of the Romantic movement (Schubert, Schumann, Wagner, above all Brahms) in a language cleansed of what they considered exhausted conventions of harmonic tethers and rhetorical phrase structure. An iconic breakthrough work was Schoenberg's "Pierrot lunaire," performed by us last spring. Surprisingly, Webern's Op.10 precedes his teacher's "Pierrot" by two years (1911/1913), and is perhaps the more revolutionary of the two in its taciturnity. It also in a couple of instances anticipates by a decade his teacher's scheme of sounding all 12 tones of the scale in succession (though, of course, not in ascending or descending order)

before repeating any of them—a concept later conceptualized as “composition with twelve tones.”

Anton von Webern was born in Vienna in 1883, but spent his growing-up years in the provincial towns Graz and Klagenfurt. (The aristocratic ‘von’ was officially abolished with the end of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, but had in any case had little relevance to the Webern's; Anton’s father was a mining engineer in the civil service.) Anton was an avid hiker through the Upper Austrian countryside (near where Schubert also had enjoyed summers), and the cowbells in the third of tonight’s pieces express nostalgia for that landscape, and its distant threatening thunder.

He returned to Vienna for university studies in musicology, writing a doctoral thesis on the Renaissance composer Heinrich Isaac under the supervision of the eminent historian Guido Adler. He had been composing for some time before, and at the age of 20 joined the Schoenberg circle, of which he remained a committed apostle until his farcical death in 1945. Under the American occupation, he stepped outside his son-in-law’s country cottage after curfew for a smoke, was challenged by a nervous G.I., responded inappropriately if at all, and was shot to death.

Like the other composers on tonight’s program, his apotheosis was essentially posthumous. Perhaps because his sparse textures lend themselves to exhaustive analysis, he became the darling of a generation of academic composers and theorists in the 1950s and ‘60s; and an influence on several creative minds of a caliber to assimilate his processes into theirs. (Milton Babbitt, Toru Takemitsu and Pierre Boulez come to mind—even the late Stravinsky.) It was long, however, before Webern was listened to as a major expressive voice.

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Leoš Janáček: Concertino (1925)

It is hard to think of another case in which a composer wrote nothing of lasting import until after his fiftieth year. Had Leoš Janáček lived no longer than Franz Schubert, he would have remained equally obscure in his lifetime. Fortunately for us, he lived over twice as long, long enough to enjoy a measure of fame in his Czech homeland and of gradual recognition abroad. The breakthrough came when the Prague opera produced Jenufa in 1916, in Janáček’s 58th year; it was taken up by theaters across Europe. This success stimulated a trove of masterpieces in the remaining dozen years of Janáček’s life, including four more

great operas. As is true of Schubert, however, it is only in death that he has been given his full due, in his case, as one of the three major opera composers of his generation, along with Giacomo Puccini and Richard Strauss.

(A crucial factor in this reevaluation was the musicological and missionary work of my onetime housemate, perpetual mentor and faithful friend for forty years, the late conductor Sir Charles Mackerras. We converged on Janáček when I had the privilege of understudying Charles in a production of Vêc Makropulos—The Makropoulos Case—at San Francisco Opera.)

Other biographical parallels between Janáček and Schubert may merely reflect music education in the Habsburg empire, even 70 years apart. Like Schubert, Janacek was a choir boy in a state school. Like Schubert, he had a schoolmaster for a father, but his encouraged him to pursue music as a profession. After formal studies that included an unfulfilling few months in Vienna, Janáček started an organ school in his hometown, Brno, which eventually became a full-fledged conservatory; he taught there the rest of his life. He also for many years conducted the leading choral organization in Brno, a midsize town in the Moravian region of Czechoslovakia. (Like Webern, Janáček at times conducted a Workingman's Chorus.) In his late twenties Janáček embarked on a lifelong study of Moravian folk music, whose scale disposition differed from Western tonal sets; an equally important compositional germ was the cadence of Moravian country speech, which Janáček both phono-graphed and notated. The melody of speech became a central element in Janáček's works, the purely instrumental as well as the ones that set text. Related to that is a compositional technique that gives prominence to short, incisive motifs of few notes, repeated and varied. (Janáček himself, an inconvenient man, spoke in staccato outbursts.) The typical Janáček phrase is additive, rather than symmetrically balanced.

Such motivic treatment is fundamental to the first movement of the "Concertino," in which the horn repeats a three-note figure that at first seems to question the assertive opening statement of the piano—"Do you meant that last 'g ' as in this? Or as in this?"—and eventually invades the soloist's material. The three-note motif also initiates the two contrasting ideas in the movement: a lyrical evocation, and a burly dance figure in the lineage of Janáček's musical "grand-teacher," Bedrich Smetana—the connecting generation being Antonin Dvorak, with whom Janáček was on friendly terms.

The "Concertino"'s second movement is also, until the last few measures, like the first movement, a duet. In this case, the partner is the E-flat clarinet, which is to

the normal clarinet what the piccolo is to the flute, though more rarely used. (One of Mackerras's merits was to restore in the orchestral and operatic works Janáček's quirky, inspired orchestrations, which had been civilized, bowdlerized, for two generations.) The "Concertino" as a whole was originally related to depictions of animals (by the composer whose most recent opera had been The Cunning Little Vixen), and though that conception was never publicized, it is known that this movement is the squirrel. A characteristic element in Janáček's vocabulary is the sounds of nature, particularly animals, duly recorded. He is a composer whose roots lie in the country, not the city. He had been seven when he moved from the village of Hukvaldy, remote and forested, to Brno. This is outdoor music.

The final two movements engage the entire ensemble. The third insists on another short motive, repeated at various transpositions, bracketing what is, in effect, the little concerto's slow movement, dreamy, melodic—and as always in Janacek, as in Schubert, changing keys with little or no mediation.

The concluding movement goes back and forth between cascading arpeggios, an angular little idea that eventually turns grandly lyrical, and a high-kicking dance tune.

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Franz Schubert: Octet (1824)

In his teens, Franz Schubert was recognized as an unusual talent by his teacher Antonio Salieri (20 years after the latter had probably not poisoned Mozart), and soon thereafter by the intimate circle of poets and painters who witnessed his short life and helped sustain it as best they could. But he was not a prodigy in the promotable way Mozart was; and when, after he had spent six years as a choir boy, violinist and occasional conductor in the Imperial Seminary his adolescent voice change made him dispensable there, his father, though an avid amateur musician himself, enrolled him to be trained in his footsteps as an elementary school teacher. Schubert didn't last long in this thoroughly inappropriate profession, and was basically a freelancing freeloader the rest of his life. Though he achieved modest recognition among Viennese music lovers in his mid-twenties, his ranking among the very great composers was posthumous (and mediated by discoveries of neglected manuscripts by composers as diverse as Robert Schumann and Sir Arthur Sullivan, he who was not Gilbert).

Schubert's unequalled gift was for melodies, coupled with a tenacious discipline for forging them into persuasive form. When he died at age 31 he had composed a staggering 600 songs ("Lieder" is the German word that has become international for the genre that he basically brought to life), or nearly 40 songs a year from first to last; though a couple of dozen are iconic masterpieces, more striking is how many multiples of that are awaiting the more frequent performances their individual excellence cries out for.

The Octet was written in 1824 for the eminent clarinetist Count Ferdinand Troyer (born in Brno!), who wanted a piece like the Beethoven Septet (1800), and it was first performed by several of the players who had premiered the earlier work. Schubert added a second violin to Beethoven's instrumentation. In other respects — number of movements, their form — the works are similar. Beyond the fulfilling of the immediate commission, however, was an ambition to use the master's model in a more general way as a lesson in larger form. In a letter, Schubert lists the Octet among the works he had recently concluded, saying that "in this manner I will pave my way to a big symphony." At that time he had already composed six such, including the "Unfinished." But he must have been aware that his unique lyric gift was not matched by an instinct for the tensions and balances, the architectural coherence, possessed by his great predecessors, and by the contemporary who loomed even greater — Schubert mentions in the same letter his eager anticipation of the first performance of Beethoven's "Ninth."

In the event, the Octet, though clearly Schubert and not Beethoven, stands up to any comparison. Its outer movements, the "symphonic" ones, allow for moments of relaxation, of well-being, that perhaps slacken the momentum. That is a trade-off, at worst. As a whole, the work, intended to some extent as an entertainment, is never less than layered, attaining to moments of great poignancy.

An idiosyncrasy of the Octet is that both the first and last movements begin with slow introductions that are reintroduced later in the movement. A slow first-movement introduction is frequent in Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, one in the last movement, rare; and their recurrence in the body of the movement rarer still. — After the gentle invitation of the the slow opening, this first movement includes an energetically ascending figure *à la Beethoven*, an evocative "calling" figure (first stated in the clarinet), and a comfortable little chatter. Common to all is a dotted-note rhythm — long/short/long.

Two personal aspects of Schubert's melodic gift are manifest in the second movement. Whereas the traditional phrase of the Classical period is eight

measures long and symmetrically balanced, the initial idea here stretches on and on without sag (a tightrope walker comes to mind) a full twelve measures, of which only the last two are a repeat (albeit with varied harmony). The tune seems to have been born wrapped in its harmonic underlay, the chords under the melody inflecting it with shifting sunlight and shadow, almost note by note. In the course of these twelve measures, the implication shifts from major to minor and back at least six times. Of the great Viennese composers, Schubert is the only native until Schoenberg 75 years later. (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Mahler were all 'immigrants'.) His music speaks the dialect of his hometown—ever ambivalent of affect.

The third and fourth movements—a scherzo and a set of variations—are, however, country excursions, the first a lively dance, the second basing on a 'naive' ditty that wanders from the meadow into the forest.

The fifth movement is a minuet, i.e., a court dance, perhaps in homage to the titled patron of the work.

After that portentous introduction, the last movement begins in relaxed good humor. (Whereas Schubert is often friendly—and sometimes tragic—he is rarely jolly.) A contrasting idea imports the trill figure of the first. The work ends in an up-tempo rendering of the movement's main theme.