



 Musical lives

The life of
Webern

KATHRYN BAILEY

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Musical lives

The books in this series will each consider an account of the life of a major composer, considering both the private and public figure. The main thread will be biographical, and discussion of the music will be integral to the narrative. Each book thus presents an organic view of the composer, the music, and the circumstances in which the music was written.

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to the memory of my husband, Derrick: had he lived to read this,
it would have been a better book

PREFACE

In 1901 the seventeen-year-old Webern wrote to his cousin Ernst Diez: 'And what about Art, which means everything to me, for which I would be ready to sacrifice myself! What I imagine . . . is just this: . . . that I will . . . live exclusively for art, and not from art simply to earn money.' The thoughts expressed in this youthful rapture describe with almost chilling accuracy the life that was to unfold for Webern over the subsequent forty-four years. Ironically Webern, the composer who was to be seen by many as the originator of the hyperintellectualised integral serialism of the decades immediately following his death and whose own music most people found thoroughly bewildering upon first hearing, was by nature an ardent romantic who held feeling – and comprehensibility – to be important above all else in art. Throughout his life he was completely convinced of the validity and the worth of his own work, in the face of continuing denunciation and criticism. His life was spent in poverty as a result of his lack of concern for practicalities, his belief in the value of the brief moments of music he produced never wavering.

Several things are particularly striking about the young Webern: his inability to make decisions and fulfil commitments, his unquestioning loyalty to his teacher Schoenberg (an attitude sometimes carried to the point of absurdity), his absolute belief in the rightness of the direction he was taking in his musical composition. The first of these resulted in a toing and froing in the years 1908–20 that could

hardly have been improved upon by Feydeau, with some twenty-seven changes of residence during these years, not including the six postings during his intermittent periods of military service in 1915 and 1916. His feelings towards Schoenberg exhibited all the fervour of a love affair: consider his wish, expressed in 1917, to buy a farm where his family and Schoenberg's could live so that he (Webern) could till the soil and raise food for Schoenberg while he (Schoenberg) composed and carried on his great work. At the same time Webern's conviction of the value of his own work led him to make a number of choices that would seem to have been – and that indeed at the time did seem, to both his father and Schoenberg, to be – quite imprudent.

Webern's love of the Carinthian mountains and the alpine flowers that grew there was an important part of his makeup. The Voralpen were almost an obsession with him, and his love of the peace and solitude to be found there, as well as his fascination with the flora – paralleling his interest in Goethe's theories of the *Urpflanze* – had a direct bearing on his music. Artistically his sympathies lay with the lyric painters and poets of his day, as well as, later, with the strange mystical poetry of Hildegard Jone, whose texts he set exclusively from the time of their meeting in 1926. His idiosyncratic concept of lyricism is an important aspect of his approach to art and music.

Finally, his romantic naïveté led Webern to express a blind faith in the moral rightness of Germany through two world wars, and this, in the case of the second, in spite of the fact that his beloved teacher and many of his closest friends had been forced to emigrate or go into hiding (often with Webern's help), and his own compositions had been banned. Webern's attitude to Hitler and the Third Reich is complex and, to an outsider, perplexing.

The first Webern biography was written in 1966 by Friedrich Wildgans, clarinettist, composer, Professor of Music at the Vienna Academy, and for a time President of the Austrian chapter of the International Society for Contemporary Music (hereafter ISCM), a man who had known Webern for a number of years. It was translated

immediately into English.¹ This was followed in 1975 by Hanspeter Krellmann's biography,² which unfortunately has never been translated. Both of these works were modest in scale (their respective 185 and 156 pages give a misleading idea of their length, since the Wildgans is set in an expansive typeface, with nearly half of the book devoted to a 'Critical Catalogue of Works', short essays by other people and a bibliography/discography, while a large proportion of the Krellmann is, as indicated in the title, devoted to photographs). Both were based on Webern's diaries and correspondence and various other original documents which were in the archives of the Vienna Stadtbibliothek and Universal Edition, or in the possession of Webern's family and friends, and both are faithful to the materials consulted. Wildgans' picture of Webern is coloured by personal loyalty and by Wildgans' expressed mission of countering what he rightly saw to be widespread misconceptions about the composer and his music. Krellmann's is an objective and excellent compilation of the material available.³

Meanwhile, in 1958 (or 1959; his own accounts differ) the German-American pianist and educator Hans Moldenhauer had begun his single-minded and tireless quest for Webern memorabilia. He at first took possession of Webern's death (in the form of an unsolicited personal investigation of the events surrounding that event which resulted in a book, *The Death of Anton Webern*⁴), then in 1961 and the years following proceeded to amass the materials of the composer's life. In this he was greatly aided by Webern's eldest daughter, Amalie Waller, who unilaterally gave him nearly everything of her father's that

¹ *Anton Webern*, trans. Edith Temple Roberts and Humphrey Searle (London: Calder and Boyars, 1966). It was published in German only in 1967 (Tübingen).

² *Anton Webern in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1975).

³ It is also the most accurate of any to date, according to Maria Halbich-Webern, Webern's second daughter.

⁴ *The Death of Anton Webern: A Drama in Documents* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1961).

remained in the family's possession. By 1966 Moldenhauer's personal collection of Webern memorabilia was quite considerable (a catalogue of its contents was published in that year⁵).

In 1978 Moldenhauer, with the assistance of his wife Rosaleen, wrote the definitive biography of Anton Webern, based primarily on the original materials in their possession.⁶ This was not a modest effort: its 803 pages touch on just about all there is to know about Webern. It is an unwieldy book: the way in which it is organised and its stultifying comprehensiveness – it is a compendium of dates and documents – make it more useful as a reference tool than as a biography. It is an exasperating experience for someone attempting to get a clear view of chronology, and I have met very few people who admit to having read it 'straight through'. I find Moldenhauer's attitude towards the woman who gave him the family jewels irritating (and so, indeed, does at least one of her sisters): he misses no opportunity, and invents several, of extolling the qualities of Amalie Webern and of identifying her repeatedly as Webern's favourite among his children, while largely ignoring the other three. Moldenhauer's high-profile pursuit of Webernalia and his subsequent sequestering of the results for his own use were off-putting to many, as perhaps was the morbid fascination of his first Webern publication. A readable book that sets out the more important events of Webern's life and dispenses with the mass of details is needed. Something of this sort was offered in 1995 by Malcolm Hayes, but as his only source was Moldenhauer he repeated Moldenhauer's mistakes without giving any new insights on either the man or his music.⁷

⁵ In *Anton von Webern Perspectives*, compiled by Hans Moldenhauer and edited by Demar Irvine (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966).

⁶ *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of his Life and Works* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1978).

⁷ *Anton von Webern* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995). I find it curious – and the several people who have contributed to the wider knowledge of Webern biographical information in the last fifty years must find it inexplicable, not to say irritating and irresponsible – that Hayes seems to have looked no further than Moldenhauer, even to the extent of knowing that there is any more to look

In the present book I hope that I have done something more than this. In approaching the project I was determined to read and translate the original materials myself. Since most of the Moldenhauer Webern Archive is now located in the Sacher Stiftung in Basel and the Library of Congress in Washington, and the bulk of the correspondence that was never owned by Moldenhauer is located in New York, Washington and Vienna it is possible to do this. I have seen and transcribed a considerable portion of this material. I have used my own translations of the material that I have seen, and I have endeavoured to use as far as possible photographs and facsimiles that have not been published before, though this has been difficult, particularly in view of the abundance of photographs in the Krellmann book and the publication *Webern 1883–1983*.⁸ I have also tried, to the extent that it has seemed germane rather than simply dogmatic, to incorporate portions of the diaries and letters that were not quoted by the Moldenhauers. But one of the results of a considerable time spent in close scrutiny of the Webern materials has been an increased respect for the Moldenhauers and for the really quite monumental work that they did between 1959 and 1978. Early Webern is difficult reading (though a slightly older Webern was the composer of some of history's tidiest music, the young Webern was not a careful writer, and he never quite mastered spelling) and the Moldenhauers give a careful and for the most part accurate reading of all of these materials (including a large number of letters that were never a part of their collection and therefore must have been consulted elsewhere) as well as a good eye for the bits that were most important. Their translations are also good, in my opinion: though they often improved the elegance of the original, the meaning has been retained with considerable faithfulness. This

at. His Preface begins: 'Anyone writing a biography of Webern at the present time is in the unusual situation of having only one major published source of documentation on which to draw.'

⁸ A Festschrift for the hundredth anniversary of Webern's birth, edited by Ernst Hilmar with an introduction by Henri Pousseur (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1983).

turned out to be particularly fortunate for me, as I have had to rely on their translations of more of the letters than I had hoped would be the case. Whenever I have used their translation this is indicated in the text. In the end I feel compelled to express my deep respect for their work and its importance for all subsequent Webern studies. Their book is still the comprehensive source on Webern's life and is recommended to anyone who wishes to find out more facts and details.

There remains, however, the need for an accurate and carefully composed small biography in which the approach is scholarly but the apparatus is not, which sets out the chronology of Webern's life clearly, and in which perhaps a few new perceptions about both his personality and his music will be offered and seen to have some value. It is my hope that the present volume will fulfil this need.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

I include a short bibliography of works consulted, which will be of interest to anyone wishing to fill in the gaps necessarily left in a volume of the dimensions of this one. In the attempt to keep footnotes to a minimum I refer to a few frequently quoted sources by abbreviations in brackets within the text. The following abbreviations are used in this way:

- | | |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Berg | Berg, <i>Letters to his Wife</i> |
| BSC | Brand et al., eds, <i>The Berg–Schoenberg Correspondence</i> |
| DAW | Hans Moldenhauer, <i>The Death of Anton Webern</i> |
| HM | Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer, <i>Anton von Webern</i> |
| Jone | Webern, <i>Letters to Hildegard Jone and Josef Humplik</i> |
| PNM | Webern, <i>The Path to the New Music</i> |
| Smith | Joan Allen Smith, <i>Schoenberg and his Circle</i> |
| Zem | Zemlinsky, <i>Zemlinskys Briefwechsel mit Schönberg, Webern, Berg und Schreker</i> |

Complete publishing information for these books can be found in the bibliography. The translations from the Zemlinsky correspondence are my own.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of my greatest pleasures during the preparation of this book was meeting Maria Halbich-Webern, Webern's second daughter. Frau Halbich, who bears a great physical resemblance to her father (and who says that everyone, especially her mother, always remarked that she was like him in other ways as well), is a very spirited and engaging person, and spending time with her felt uncannily like meeting her father first-hand, though she is now more than twenty years older than he ever got to be. If my thoughts about Webern have shifted slightly simply as the result of observing her (and they have) I make no apology: I believe that such intuitions are not to be repudiated. I wish to thank her for her generosity, first of all in spending considerable time in conversation with me and secondly in allowing me to transcribe her father's correspondence and to reproduce both the Jone painting used on the book cover and photographs that once belonged to her family. For permission to use the photographs, which are now part of the Webern Nachlass of the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, as well as material from the eight notebooks and five sketchbooks also in that collection, Webern's letters to Ernst Diez, the Dallapiccola recollections and various other letters and documents, I am also extremely indebted to that institution, and particularly to Felix Meyer, who has been, as always, helpful and accommodating. I wish to express my thanks to Lawrence Schoenberg and the Schoenberg family for their kind permission to see and use letters from the

Webern–Schoenberg correspondence, and to the Stadt- und Landesbibliothek in Vienna, where I was shown many of these letters, as well as a ninth notebook, the existence of which I had not been aware of previously.

Many people have helped me in various ways: Inge Dupont, Vanessa Pintado and Katherine Reagan at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and Christine Dreier, Sabine Hänggi-Stampfli, Ingrid Westen, Tina Kilvio Tüscher and Johanna Blask at the Sacher Stiftung in Basel were all extremely generous with their time and showed remarkable patience. The weeks spent in these two libraries will always be remembered as most pleasant times. Theophil Antonicek, archivist at the University of Vienna, sent me unpublished information about Webern's university career and Rosemary Moravec-Hilmar, curator of music sources and documents at the Austrian National Library, offered me a copy of her own extensive list of the Berg–Webern correspondence, and pointed me in several of the right directions. David Lewin of Harvard University was very generous with his reminiscences about Steuermann, and William Drabkin of the University of Southampton helped with some difficult translation. My visits to Basel and Vienna were made memorable by the great kindness of Ingrid and Martin Metzger and Helga Vedral, to all of whom I am very grateful.

The last months of work on this book were done at what turned out to be an extremely difficult time for me, and in the event I was unable to do personally some of the things that I had intended to do. I am most grateful to all those people who helped me to fill in the gaps. Both Christopher Hailey and Wayne Shirley were very generous with information about and reproductions of Webern materials at the Library of Congress in Washington, which I was in the end unable to visit. And I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Morten Solvik, who became my man in Vienna, sorting out a miscellany of loose ends and tracking down many elusive but necessary things for me with great good humour and efficiency. I am ever grateful to Allen Forte for his constant encouragement, and for letting me use the picture of Mittersill.

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KATHRYN BAILEY
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CONTENTS

List of illustrations viii

Preface ix

Note on the text xv

Acknowledgements xvii

Prologue 1

- 1 1883–1902 Childhood and school years 5
- 2 1902–8 Shaping forces 26
- 3 1908–14 Instability makes itself known 52
- 4 1914–21 Vacillations continue 82
- 5 1922–8 Changes of direction 103
- 6 1929–33 The path to new music 132
- 7 1933–8 Before the Anschluß 148
- 8 1938–45 After the Anschluß 164

Epilogue 193

Notes 196

Select bibliography 207

Index 209

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 The garden house in Maria Enzersdorf in 1944 page 2
- 2 Cover of art book from which shoe soles were cut by soldiers billeted in the Weberns' house in Maria Enzersdorf, 1945 3
- 3 Carl and Amalie von Webern with their three children, Rosa, Maria and Anton (1890s) 6
- 4 Anton von Webern, 1912 60
- 5 Erwin Stein, Arnold Schoenberg and Anton von Webern in Holland, 1914 70
- 6 Partitur of the third of the Op. 11 pieces for cello and piano, 1914 78
- 7 String quartet at Leoben with Webern playing the cello, 1916 87
- 8 Anton and Wilhelmine Webern, 1923 106
- 9 Webern in his garden in Maria Enzersdorf, 1933 142
- 10 Webern in his study at Maria Enzersdorf, 1940 (photographed by Hildegard Jone) 143
- 11 Webern and his friend Ludwig Zenk, 1937 163
- 12 Postcard to Webern from Hildegard Jone dated Advent 1941: line drawing self-portrait with opening text of third movement of Webern's Cantata No. 2, Op. 31 180
- 13 Line drawing of Webern done by Hildegard Jone in 1943, with opening bars of fifth movement of Webern's Cantata No. 2, Op. 31 181
- 14 Peter Webern, 1943 183
- 15 Mittersill in 1989 (photograph by Sharland) 184
- 16 Christine and Benno Mattel's three children, Karin, Ute and Liese, 1944 187
- 17 Last page of Webern's Notebook 6, on which Wilhelmine recorded Webern's death 192

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