anton webern

the path to the new music

universal edition

ANTON WEBERN

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Translated by Leo Black

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

A note on some frequently-occurring terms may be appropriate. " Unity "= " Zusammenhang ". The German can imply both connections, relationships between entities or parts of the same entity, and also the " relatedness ", cohesion or unity brought about by these connections. The latter is its usual meaning in these lectures, but at the end of the second series Webern even refers to " Zusammenhänge ": " unities " was clearly impossible, and here " connections " has been used.

" Shape "= " Gestalt ". At different points the word could have been translated as " feature ", " idea ", " form ", " structure " and " content ": for the sake of consistency the ugly but literal " shape " has been used.

" Note "; perhaps apologies are due to American and German readers who would have preferred "tone ". The translator's resolve to adhere to the English form was strengthened by the consideration that in " Die Reihe ", to which this volume is in a sense a companion, " tone " is frequently used with its specific English meaning of a pure impulse devoid of overtones.

L.B.

PREFACE

It is unnecessary to justify publication of the sixteen lectures given by Webern early in 1932 and 1933 in a private house in Vienna, before an audience paying a small entrance fee; what does need explaining is the long delay in publishing them, which was the result of unusual circumstances. My friend Dr. Rudolf Ploderer, a Viennese lawyer who took his own life in September 1933, was also a close personal friend of Webern, and took down the lectures in shorthand. We wanted to print them verbatim in the musical periodical " 23 ", which I published in Vienna at that time. But the periodical's small circulation temporarily prevented their publication, and later their sharp attacks on the cultural politics of the Nazis would have exposed Webern to serious consequences. Not until long after the war and Webern's tragic end could I go through the archives of the periodical, which were safe in Switzerland, and it was then that Ploderer's transcripts, already quite yellow with age, also came to light. Universal Edition at once agreed gladly to my proposal that the lectures should now be published.

They are here reprinted exactly according to the shorthand notes; only a few obvious stenographic errors have been corrected. In this form they offer not only their own valuable contents but also a highly life-like idea of Webern's curiously drastic, unforced way of talking, and thus of his wonderful and pure personality, which reconciled high erudition and the keenest artistic thinking with an almost child-like expression of feeling.

Here the chronological order of the two cycles of eight lectures has been reversed, for objective reasons that will immediately be obvious. In this way there is a natural progression from the elementary ideas treated in 1933 to the complex circumstances of twelve-note music sketched in 1932. The extraordinary brevity of some of the texts, particularly from the 1932 cycle, is explained by the fact that on those evenings Webern spoke less and played whole works or individual movements on the piano instead. The occasional repetitions were used quite consciously by Webern to intensify and heighten his remarks, as were frequent long pauses and deep intakes of breath. All this was an essential factor in the unprecedented urgency of his lectures and the shattering impression they made on all their listeners.

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It is very characteristic that Webern should have called both cycles " paths." He, who was always " under way," wanted to show others the way too. First

he wanted to show what had at various times over the centuries been " new " in music, meaning that it had never been said before. From the laws that resulted in the course of this, he would then reveal the law governing the onward course of what was at present new.

Here Webern adopted Goethe's view, which he explained with copious quotation. It could be a matter only of " getting to know the laws according to which nature in general, in the particular form of human nature, tends to produce and does produce when she can." Man is only the vessel into which is poured what " nature in general " wants to express. Just as the researcher into nature strives to discover the rules of order that are the basis of nature, we must strive to discover the laws according to which nature, in its particular form " man ", is productive. And this leads us to the view that the things treated by art in general are not " aesthetic " but are determined by natural laws, and that all discussion of art can only take place along these lines. Goethe's remark about the art of antiquity, which Webern quotes, also follows the same line: " These high works of art were at the same time brought forth as humanity's highest works of nature, according to true and natural laws. Everything arbitrary or illusory falls away: here is necessity, here is God."

Just as Goethe defines the essence of colour as " natural law as related to the sense of sight," Webern wants to see sound appreciated as natural law in relation to the sense of hearing, and removed from all human arbitrariness. He wants to smooth the way to the great masters of music, but only for those equipped with this realisation and with reverence for the secret of artistic creation.

*

The musical literature of recent years may have given many readers an idea of Webern's spiritual personality quite different from the one that emerges from these lectures. Free fantasy of that kind can only be countered by saying that there is not a word here which Webern did not himself speak, in the fiery yet controlled way that made each meeting with him an unforgettable experience. These lectures are handed down to posterity as a reflection of those experiences; as a token of gratitude for all the beauty and profundity he gave us by precept and example; as documentation of his lofty spirit, as a monument to his noble humanity. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

Willi Reich

THE PATH TO THE NEW MUSIC

I

I think we go about it this way—I begin by outlining my plan. As it has all started so late—originally it was to last three months—we shall be meeting eight times to discuss things.

I expect many of you have no professional contact with music, and that I should talk to you as laymen, so to speak. I want my lectures to take these people into account, at the risk of boring the " better-informed "—there's nothing I can do about that. But perhaps they will be interested, too.

I want to take as broad a view as possible and my first question will be this; what is the point, for a layman—(of course I take for granted that musicians already know it all)—so, what is the value, for people not professionally concerned with music, for laymen, of getting involved with these disciplines that are self-evident to the musician? What value can it have?

Here I want to refer to Karl Kraus' essay on language in the last issue of " Die Fackel."* Everything in it can be taken literally as applying to music. Karl Kraus says in this essay how important it would be for people to be at home with the *material* that they are constantly using, so long as they are alive and able to talk. In the last sentence he even says about language, " Let man learn to serve her!" Kraus says—and note this very carefully, it's immensely important and we must clearly be agreed about it—that it would be foolish to set about dealing with this material, which we handle from our earliest years, as if the value involved were aesthetic. Not, then, because we want to be artistic snobs and dilettantes. What he says is that our concern with language and the secrets of language would be a moral gain. We must say the same! We are here to talk about music, not language, but it is all the same, and we can treat this as a starting point.

Here is Karl Kraus: " The practical application of the theory, which affects both language and speech, would never be that he who learns to speak should also learn the language, but that he should approach *a grasp of the word-shape*, and with it the sphere whose riches lie beyond what is tangibly useful. This guarantee of a moral gain lies in a spiritual discipline which ensures the

* A Viennese periodical published by Karl Kraus; it first appeared in 1899 and existed for over thirty years. From 1911 onward Karl Kraus wrote all of it himself. " Fackel "=" Torch."

utmost responsibility toward the only thing there is no penalty for injuring—language—and which is more suited than anything else to teach respect for all the other values in life . . . Nothing would be more foolish than to suppose that the need awakened or satisfied in striving after perfection of language is an aesthetic one." So it goes on, sentence after sentence!—" It is better to dream of plumbing the riddles behind her rules, the plans behind her pitfalls, than of commanding her." And so that we do not imagine we can learn to command: "To teach people to see *chasms* in truisms—that would be the teacher's duty toward a sinful generation."

I said earlier, " What value can there be in laymen getting involved with these elements, with the riddles behind their rules?" Just this: to teach them to see chasms in truisms! And—that would be salvation . . . to be spiritually involved!

Now do you begin to see what I'm getting at?

What we discuss should help you to find a means of getting to the bottom of music, or let us say the only point of occupying yourselves in this way is to get an inkling of what goes on in music, what it is, and, in a broader context, what art of any kind is. And if, when I've drawn your attention to various things, you're able to look at certain manifestations in present-day music with a little more awareness and critical appreciation, that in itself will have achieved something positive.

Perhaps for the moment I prefer to speak quite generally and say all art, and therefore music too, is based on rules of order, and our whole investigation of this material, which we shall be carrying out, can only aim at proving these rules to some extent. Here I want to quote to you some wonderful lines by Goethe, which must be fundamental to all the things we shall discuss, and which are convincing, to me at least. I quote them so that we shall be at one about our basic assumptions, which could not be more general.

In the introduction to his " Theory of Colour," Goethe speaks aphoristically of the " impossibility of accounting for beauty in nature and art . . . We want to sense laws . . . one would have to know them." But Goethe sees this as almost impossible—but that doesn't make it less of a necessity " to get to know the laws according to which nature in general, in the particular form of human nature, tends to produce and does produce when she can . . . "

What was that? Goethe sees art as a product of nature in general, taking the particular form human nature. That is to say, there is no essential contrast between a product of nature and a product of art, but that it is all the same, that what we regard as and call a work of art is basically nothing but a product of nature in general. What is this " nature in general?" Perhaps what we see around us? But what does that mean? It is an explanation of human productivity, particularly of genius. You see, ladies and gentlemen, it does not come about as " Now I want to paint a beautiful picture, write a beautiful poem," and so on and so forth. Yes, that happens too—but it's not art.

And the works that endure and will endure for ever, the great masterpieces, cannot have come into being as humanity, more's the pity, imagines. What I mean by that must be clear to you from those Goethe sentences. To put it more plainly, man is only the vessel into which is poured what " nature in general " wants to express. You see—I would put it something like this: just as a researcher into nature strives to discover the rules of order that are the basis of nature, we must strive to discover the laws according to which nature, in its particular form " man," is productive. And this leads us to the view that the things treated by art in general, with which art has to do, are not " aesthetic," but that it is a matter of natural laws, that all discussion of music can only take place along these lines.

Here laws exist, and probably not all of them are in fact discoverable. But some of them have already been recognised, and applied in what I like to call our craftsman's method. To be specific about music: in the craftsman's method with which the musician must concern himself if he is to be capable of producing something genuine.

Another quotation from Goethe, because it expresses our line of thought so wonderfully. He spoke of the art of antiquity: " These high works of art were at the same time brought forth as humanity's highest works of nature, according to true and natural laws. Everything arbitrary or illusory falls away; here is necessity, here is God." " Humanity's works of nature "—again the same idea! And something else emerges here: *necessity*. We shall have to strive to pin down what is necessity in the great masterpieces. No trace of arbitrariness! Nothing illusory! And I must quote still another passage from Goethe. You know Goethe wrote a " Theory of Colour "; he tries to fathom why it is that everything has a colour, and so on . . . And he says, " But perhaps those of a more orderly turn of mind will point out that we have not yet even given a definite explanation of what colour in fact is . . . Here again there is nothing left but to repeat: colour is natural law as related to the sense of sight."

Since the difference between colour and music is one of degree, not of kind, one can say that music is natural law as related to the sense of hearing. Basically this is the same as colour and what I have said about it. But it is surely the truth, which is why I say that if we are to discuss music here we can only do it while recognising, believing, that music is natural law as related to the sense of hearing.

Perhaps that's enough for the moment to show you my point of view and to convince you that things are really like that. It's natural that when one approaches and looks at and observes great works of art, one must approach them, whether as believer or unbeliever, in the same way one has to approach works of nature; with the necessary awe at the secrets they are based on, at the mystery they contain.

But whether we have yet recognised it or not, one thing must be clear to us—

that rules of order prevail here, that we cannot conceive these laws differently from the laws we attribute to nature; natural law as related to the sense of hearing.

Now a word about the title of my lectures, "The path to the new music." —Were any of you at Schoenberg's lecture?* He, too, spoke of "New music." What did he mean by that? Did he want to show the path to modern music? My own remarks take on a double significance when related to Schoenberg's remarks; new music is that which has never been said. So new music would be what happened a thousand years ago, just as much as what is happening now, namely, music that appears as something never said before. But we can also say, " follow the course of things through the centuries and we shall see what new music really is." And perhaps then we shall know what new music is today—and what obsolete music is.

So we want to fathom the hidden natural laws in order to see more clearly what is going on today. Then we shall have covered the path to the new music.

Now I must get down to practical matters and treat something of a more general, but musical nature, touch on something quite general, because otherwise we shall misunderstand each other and because it follows directly on what we said earlier, in referring to Goethe's views. Enough of talking about art let's talk about nature!

What is the material of music? . . . The note, isn't it? So already we ought really to start looking here for rules or order, and for the ways the rules of order manifest themselves. I don't know whether this is so well known to you all, but I should like to discuss it with you: how did what we call music come about? How have men used what Nature provided? You know that a note isn't a simple thing, but something complex. You know that every note is accompanied by its overtones—an infinite number, in fact, and it's remarkable to see how man has made use of this phenomenon for his immediate needs before he can produce a musical shape—how he has used this thing of mystery.

To speak more concretely: whence does this system of sound come, which man uses wherever musical works exist? How has it come about? Now, so far as we know, Western music—I mean everything that has developed since the days of Greek music up to our own time—Western music uses certain scales which have taken on particular forms. We know of the Greek modes, then the church modes of bygone ages. How did these scales come about? They are really a manifestation of the overtone series. As you know, the octave comes first, then the fifth, then in the next octave the third, and if you go on, the seventh. What is quite clear here? That the fifth is the first obtrusive note, that is to say it has the strongest affinity with the tonic. This implies that the latter note has the same relationship with the one a fifth lower. So

* " Neue und veraltete Musik oder Stil und Gedanke " (New and Obsolete Music or Style and Idea), given by Schoenberg to the Vienna Kulturbund in January 1933.

here we have a kind of parallelogram of forces, " equilibrium " is produced, there is a balance between the forces pulling upwards and downwards. Now the remarkable thing is that the notes of Western music are a manifestation of the first notes of this parallelogram of forces: C (GE)—G (DB)—F (CA). So the overtones of the three closely neighbouring and closely related notes contain the seven notes of the scale.

You see: as a material it accords completely with nature. Our seven-note scale can be explained in this way, and we may infer that it also came into being in this way.

Other peoples besides those of the West have music—I don't understand much about it; Japanese and Chinese music, for example, when they are not an imitation of our music. These have different scales, not our seven-note one. But the special consistency and firm basis of our system seem proved by the fact that our music has been assigned a special path.

(February 20th, 1933)

II

If we go on meeting, I should like it to be our practice that each time someone should give a brief summary of what we discussed last time. We shall then be able to take up more consciously where we left off. We shall try to work things out among ourselves, so as to see ever more clearly.

Last time we set out from Karl Kraus' " word-shape " (he could also have said " linguistic form " or " linguistic shape "), corresponding to a musical shape. So we get beyond material and arrive at a grasp of musical ideas.

Here I want to digress a little, to show how important it is to treat all this, if one is to appreciate musical ideas. It's quite remarkable how few people are capable of grasping a musical idea. I don't mean the broad masses, who haven't much time for things of the mind; I want to take a look at blunders by great minds! You'll have noticed already what a remarkable attitude to music Schopenhauer had, for example. His ideas about music were unprecedented, yet he made the stupidest possible judgment—he preferred Rossini to Mozart! When a contemporary is concerned, blunders are easier to forgive—but he was dealing with things long past—a historical error, in fact!

And again, Goethe—what did he like? Zelter! Schubert sends him the " Erl-King "—he doesn't even look at it. Goethe's famous meeting with Beethoven was certainly not as it's usually described, for Beethoven knew his way about in society very well; he was not a " crazy fool." Of course he lost his temper, but we shouldn't imagine he was a " wild man." Again, Nietzsche! Schopenhauer, Goethe, Nietzsche; all illustrious names! Nietzsche—again, his contact with Wagner was not musical, only intellectual and philosophical. In " Parsifal " Wagner switched to different spiritual territory, and Nietzsche

wouldn't have it. Obviously he was forced to find a substitute, and saw Bizet as the man. The Catholicism of " Parsifal " was the official reason for the split—you see, something extra-musical.

It's always the same: mediocrities are over-valued and great men are rejected. For a man like Nietzsche surely weighed every word he said and wrote. Since he was talking about music he should not have let anything extra-musical make him break with Wagner. We see how hard it obviously is to grasp ideas in music. Otherwise these exceptional minds wouldn't have gone wrong! But it was precisely the ideas that they didn't understand. They didn't even get anywhere near them!

Again, Strindberg! Have you read what he says about Wagner? That all his good passages are stolen from Mendelssohn. And there was a further confusion of ideas; he identified the Valkyrie with Nora—and he couldn't stand Ibsen.

But most recently—Karl Kraus! This is an interesting problem. I needn't say what Karl Kraus means to me, how much I revere him—but here he is constantly making mistakes. Take his well-known aphorism about " music that washes against the shores of thinking." This shows clearly that he is quite incapable of imagining that music can have an idea, a thought, hidden in it. I remember—it was long ago—there was a wild and woolly man called Herwarth Walden, who was a great admirer of Karl Kraus, made propaganda for Kokoschka, and also composed. There was even something of his printed in " Die Fackel." The most miserably amateurish stuff, not a trace of music or musical ideas! Yet Karl Kraus printed it!

If we compare notes with the visual arts, this sort of nadir is unthinkable. It's so absurd that Karl Kraus should have gone wrong in this way! What's the reason? Some specific talent, which one must have got from somewhere, seems to be necessary if one is to grasp a musical idea.

So how do people listen to music? How do the broad masses listen to it? Apparently they have to be able to cling to pictures and " moods " of some kind. If they can't imagine a green field, a blue sky or something of the sort, then they are out of their depth. As you listen to me now, you must be following some logical train of thought. But someone of that kind doesn't follow notes at all. If I sing something simple, a single part—a folk tune, or the shepherd's melody from " Tristan "—so that the musical idea takes up only a little space, without a deeper dimension, doesn't everyone realise that there's a " theme," a melody, a musical idea there? For anyone who thinks musically, at least—and that's where I hope to help you a little—there's no doubt what's going on there. I recognise whether I am faced by a vulgar, banal idea—that has nothing to do with whether it's a well-known idea—, I know how to tell a banal idea from a loftier, more valuable one. That whole sentence from Karl Kraus about " the shores of thinking " is so typical! Surely it's meant disparagingly. Is what Bach and Beethoven wrote " a vague mess of feeling "

round and about ideas? What is it, rather, that corresponds to the theory of language which Karl Kraus—rightly—so values? The *laws* of musical form-building!

The second thing Karl Kraus starts from is the " moral gain." When one gets an inkling of the laws, then one's bound to find one's relationship to such minds entirely changed! One stops being able to imagine that a work can exist or alternatively needn't—it *had* to exist. Where something special has been expressed, centuries always had to pass until people caught up with it. That's the " moral gain."

Then I quoted Goethe to you, to give you a better idea of my approach to art. This is why: so that you should recognise the rules of order in art just as in nature. Art is a product of nature in general, in the particular form of human nature.

What perspectives this opens! It's a process entirely free from arbitrariness. I recall a saying of Schoenberg's when he was called up; one of his superiors asked him, in surprise, " Would you perhaps be the composer, by any chance?" to which Schoenberg replied, " Yes—nobody wanted to be, so I had to volunteer for it."

Concretely; notes are natural law as related to the sense of hearing. Last time, we looked at the material of music and saw this rule of order. My constant concern is to get you to think in a particular way and to look at things in this way.—So, a note is, as you have heard, complex—a complex of fundamental and overtones. Now, there has been a gradual process in which music has gone on to exploit each successive stage of this complex material. This is the one path: the way in which what lay to hand was first of all drawn upon, then what lay farther off. So nothing could be more wrong than the view that keeps cropping up even today, as it always has: " They ought to compose as they used to, not with all these dissonances you get nowadays!" For we find an ever growing appropriation of nature's gifts! The overtone series must be regarded as, practically speaking, infinite. Ever subtler differentiations can be imagined, and from this point of view there's nothing against attempts at quarter-tone music and the like; the only question is whether the present time is yet ripe for them. But the path is wholly valid, laid down by the nature of sound. So we should be clear that what is attacked today is just as much a gift of nature as what was practised earlier.

And why is it important to take this into account? Look at the music of our time! Confusion seems to be spreading, unprecedented things are happening. So there is talk of " directions."—But that comes later!—Or, " What direction should we go in, believe in?"—You'll know what I mean by these " directions."

I repeat: the diatonic scale wasn't invented, it was discovered. So it's given, and its corollary was very simple and clear: the overtones from the " parallelogram of forces " of the three adjoining, related notes form the notes

of the scale. So it's just the most important overtones, those that are in the closest relationship—something natural, not thought up—that form the diatonic scale. But what about the notes that lie between? Here a new epoch begins, and we shall deal with it later.

The triad, the disappearance of which so provokes people, and which has played such a role in music up to now: what, then, is this triad? The first overtone different from the fundamental, plus the second one—that's to say a reconstruction of these overtones, and an imitation of nature, of the first primitive relationships that are given as part of the structure of a note. That's why it sounds so agreeable to our ear and was used at an early stage.

Yet another thing which, so far as I know, Schoenberg was the first to put into words: these simple complexes of notes are called consonances, but it was soon found that the more distant overtone relationships, which were considered as dissonances, could be felt as a spice. But we must understand that consonance and dissonance are not essentially different—that there is no essential difference between them, only one of degree. Dissonance is only another step up the scale, which goes on developing further. We do not know what will be the end of the battle against Schoenberg, which starts with accusations that he uses dissonances too much. Naturally that's nonsense; that's the battle music has waged since time immemorial. It's an accusation levelled at everyone who has dared to take a step forward. However, in the last quarter of a century the step forward has been a really vehement one, and of a magnitude never before known in the history of music—one need have no doubts about saying that. But anyone who assumes that there's an essential difference between consonance and dissonance is wrong, because the entire realm of possible sounds is contained within the notes that nature provides —and that's how things have happemed. But the way one looks at it is most important.

But something else is just as important: we have already spoken before about musical ideas. So for what purpose have men always used " what nature provides?" What stimulated them to make use of those series of notes? There must have been a need, some underlying necessity, for what we call music to have arisen. What necessity? To say something, express something, to express an idea that can't be expressed in any way but sound. It can not have been otherwise. Why all the work, if one could say it in words? We find an analogy in painting: the painter has appropriated colour in the same way. It tries to tell people something, by means of notes, that couldn't be said in any other way. In this sense music is a language.

As regards the presentation of musical ideas, obviously rules of order soon appeared. Such rules of order have existed since music has existed and since musical ideas have been presented.

So we shall try to put our finger on the laws that must be at the bottom of this. How have musical ideas been presented in the material given by nature?