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Schoenberg & His School

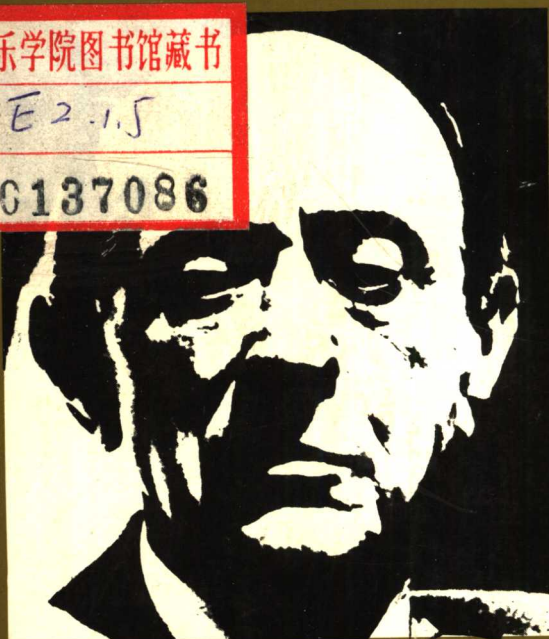
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The Contemporary Stage of the Language of Music

René Leibowitz

Translated from the French by DIKA NEWLIN

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Schoenberg and His School

THE CONTEMPORARY STAGE
OF THE LANGUAGE OF MUSIC

By René Leibowitz

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
DIKA NEWLIN

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SCHOENBERG AND HIS SCHOOL

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

It is gratifying to be able to say that many of the hopes I had when I wrote this book have already been fulfilled. Only a few months after the original French version was published I received letters from readers throughout the world, expressing agreement and telling me they had found this work valuable in revealing the real music of our time. This is all I had hoped to achieve.*

Therefore, when I was given the opportunity to present my work to the American public, I immediately undertook to fill certain gaps which—some through involuntary carelessness on my part, some because of existing circumstances—remained in the first edition. I am both pleased and grateful, now, to believe that the United States, which is privileged to claim Arnold Schoenberg as a citizen, will profit from an improved effort to understand and explain the music of this greatest living master of composition.

In translation, the original process of thought inevitably undergoes some transformation. But this transformation can be fruitful, because the fundamental problem is seen in a new light, thus providing an opportunity for one to become more lucid and to measure more precisely one's own limits.

A translation should not only aim to facilitate communication with the world of a different language; it should be in itself another approach to the basic problem—in this case, the international “language” of music. It is my hope that this translation will deepen and widen the comprehension of some of the most beautiful contemporary works of art. And every step taken in this direction

* As for those who, full of preconceived ideas and lacking any genuine knowledge of the subject, have always been hostile to these ideas, this work has increased their hostility. This, too, is a good thing.

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brings us nearer to the point where these works will find the high position which should be theirs.

Perhaps only a few readers will appreciate fully the difficulties faced by the translator, as well as the courage, generosity and skill which she has spent on a task from which the cause of true music can only benefit. However, what every reader can know is the sincere and friendly gratitude expressed here to Miss Newlin for her work.

RENÉ LEIBOWITZ
Paris

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

How often it occurs that, after a period of comparative silence or neglect, a particular subject is suddenly "in the air" everywhere at once! Thus it can happen that a number of works on such a subject will, though conceived quite independently of each other, appear at almost the same time. Surely this is no mere coincidence, but has to do with certain all-pervasive spiritual or philosophical movements which, at a given time, seem to affect all those of a given turn of mind with a certain inevitability.

It was immediately after the publication of my own book on Schoenberg and his predecessors that my attention was called to the present work, then newly issued. I was forcibly struck by its masterly handling of a theme which I had approached in a somewhat different way—Schoenberg as a continuation of the past equated with Schoenberg as a projection into the future. The further development of this idea—the presentation of Berg as the incarnation of the sense of the past, Webern as that of the future—seemed but the logical consummation of the concept of Tradition and Revolt in Schoenberg, which had occupied my mind for some years.

Here, then, was the book which those of us who consider the Schoenberg tradition the most fruitful trend of today had been wanting for years. That so revelatory a work should have appeared in France seemed a matter of profound significance. The great musical tradition of Vienna had been rooted out of its native country. It was—and is—now up to musicians of other lands to carry it on, and, in so doing, to give fresh proof (if such be needed) of its truly universal values. The great international values of music must not, cannot be destroyed by the aberrations of a single country.

Because of all this, it gives me great joy to have the oppor-

tunity of helping to place the work of René Leibowitz before the English-speaking public. The sincerity, enthusiasm, and devotion, coupled with the exact and exhaustive knowledge, which he has brought to his study of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern cannot fail to impress the reader already instructed in these matters. May his labor of love also win new friends and listeners for three of the greatest composers of our time!

DIKA NEWLIN
Western Maryland College
August, 1947

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I have learned this book from those of whom it treats.

In writing this sentence, I do not mean merely to pay tribute to the three great musicians with whom I am concerned here, and who have been and still are—in the most profound and genuine meaning of the term—my masters; I should like, above all, to express something still more real and fundamental.

I am not a music critic, any more than I am a historian or an esthetician. I am a musician. Since this is so, most of my life is spent in direct contact with forms of sound, whether I myself make the effort of inventing and coordinating them or whether I find myself in the presence of the musical scores of others. As far back as I can remember, I have been delving into these scores for the instruction which my conscience demands. So I may be excused for seeming to want to reduce music—as far as it concerns me—to its simple didactic functions. To tell the truth, the reading or the hearing of any kind of musical work—and I have read or heard thousands of them—has never been, to me, an excuse for pleasure, distraction, relaxation, or even a manifestation of my curiosity. If certain readings or hearings of music have perforce brought with them pleasure and relaxation—or, for that matter, boredom and irritation—these qualities are *superimposed* on the musical exercises in question, exercises whose origin and real intention are quite different. Every time I hear music, whether in my imagination or through my senses, I begin anew to question all that I know, all that I am. Such questioning automatically enforces the participation of all one's intellectual faculties, which are thus made keener and stronger by each new experience. It is in this gradual progress towards a greater intellectual lucidity that

the *instructive qualities* of music, to which I referred above, are to be found.

But there is still more to the question. Composing music and being a composer, making music and being a musician, are not necessarily synonymous. It is comparatively easy to compose, to *make* music. A minimum of gifts and of technical means (which latter may be acquired comparatively painlessly) is sufficient. To *be* a composer or a musician demands more than that. Now, those who become composers begin (just like those who do *not* become composers) by *making* music or composing. But at one time or another there comes to them what some would call a revelation, and what I like to call a *sudden consciousness* of the true meaning of the language of music. From that day forward, if the activity of composing or of making music is carried on with the intention of solving those profound problems which have confronted the consciousness of the individual, that individual has a chance to become a composer, a true musician.

In the case of the composer, this sudden consciousness comes at the moment when, in the work of a contemporary musician, he discovers what seems to him to be the language of his epoch, the language which he himself wants to speak. Up to that point, he may have assimilated, in more or less accurate fashion, the language of the past; he may have believed that he has profited from certain excursions into a style which seems to him to furnish fresh possibilities. But his real consciousness of *being a composer* cannot be foursquare and unshakable until some master of our time brings him the assurance, the irrefutable evidence of the necessity and the authenticity of his personal language.

That is what happened to me on my first contact with the music of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. I did not immediately understand the language which their works speak; I must even add that it took me a long time to become familiar with it, and I do not know whether even today I have grasped (in a general way) its wealth of implications. But without having understood it completely, I understood from the beginning that it was the only genuine and inevitable expression of the musical art of our time. Since then, my certainty of this has grown, to the extent

that my activity transformed the first *intuition* into *knowledge* which became ever more lucid and profound. But I owe all this activity, its very meaning and intensity—this activity, thanks to which I have acquired my knowledge—to the example of the three masters whom I have named. It is in this sense that I can say that I learned this work from them—this work which is nothing but the theoretical synthesis of the present extent of my knowledge with regard to the meaning of this musical language, the assimilation of which is the chief goal of my existence.

These remarks will make the reader understand the spirit in which this book is written. It represents, I believe, the first effort to make a profound study of the three composers who dominate our contemporary musical art. That such an attempt should have taken place in France—a land which is not the home of these three composers, a land which, in a certain sense at least, is not my home either, but in the midst of which I have meditated upon the lesson of my masters, a land whose language I use to preserve the results of these meditations—all this seems to me of the highest significance.

In the first place, it pleases me to see here one more proof that France is the very place where the most violent passions may be unleashed and where the maelstrom of intellectual and artistic life becomes so turbulent as to necessitate (before this problem arises anywhere else) a positive and constructive synthesis of the factors which have led to this state of affairs.

For, if it is in France that the music of Arnold Schoenberg and his school has provoked the most exacerbated hostility, it is also in Paris that there is now springing into being, for the first time since the existence of this school, a group of musicians who claim it as their own, but none of whom has been directly influenced by Schoenberg, Webern, or Berg.

This ought not to give the impression that the following pages are conceived in a spirit of propaganda for the school in question. The works of our masters have no need whatsoever for such support. If I wanted to make propaganda for Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, I would have nothing to say—except that they are among the most powerful, most original, and most virile composers of

whom the history of music may boast. But this would not be nearly enough, and that is why I have set myself quite a different task.

Before I define this task, I shall say that in undertaking it I have been aware of the difficulties which it entails. The works of artists such as those whom we discuss are complex individual worlds. When on top of all this we are concerned with contemporary works, it is possible that we do not have sufficient perspective to view them in their total significance. Trying to comprehend the *unique* features of their meaning seems to me, then, an undertaking which is at least risky, if not foredoomed to failure. That is why I have chosen to approach the works of Schoenberg and his school not by considering them as self-contained phenomena, but by placing them in relation to the tradition which has produced them and of which they represent, in my opinion, the most advanced phase at the present time.

Such a method has a chance of being fruitful, and this is why: the fact that the music of the school which interests us is virtually unknown, not only to the general public, but also to the majority of musicians the world over, is explained chiefly by the innumerable difficulties which this music entails. No other music of today demands such arduous and constant effort—whether on the part of the performer, the listener, or the critic—to be understood, appreciated, and penetrated. The essential difficulty appears in that lost feeling which overwhelms most of those coming in contact for the first time with some page of Schoenberg, Berg, or Webern—a feeling caused by forms of sound which seem to have no relation to those with which we are familiar, and which appear to be quite incapable of producing a musical discourse such as we are generally accustomed to hearing. It is evident that such a state of affairs must be attributed primarily to the specific temperaments of our composers. Once again, I have nothing to say about these temperaments, except that in their force and originality they are comparable to those of all the great masters of all time. But it goes without saying that this force and this originality express themselves in a coherent and perfectly articulated musical language. Now, the very term *language* implies a tradition which

possesses a *meaning*, and we are permitted to question this meaning. This *traditional meaning* is a matter of *historicity*, a concept which it becomes of prime importance to define.

Here again I can say that I have learned this book from those of whom it treats. In fact, the reader should not imagine that everything which applies particularly to the abovementioned *historicity*, or merely to questions of history, is the result of erudition in the proper sense of the word. I am not at all erudite, and the least musicologist would doubtless feel himself far above me in this respect (I confess that I gladly grant him this feeling of superiority). However, the music of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, the problems which it poses, the acquisitions which it displays—all this has opened my eyes to the problems of composition which belong to *all* periods. The extreme novelty of the language spoken by our three composers is a logical consequence of their specific attitudes; but it is also the quality which belongs to every truly creative act. And nevertheless this language obeys general rules which have existed as long as polyphony itself, principles which we may call immutable because they are common to all the great masters, whatever their epoch.

It is in this way that Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern have taught me to consider the past of the art of music: not as a history of classified events, of interest only to the musicologist; not as the "good old days," the "Golden Age" which can never be surpassed, beloved of those whose creative impotence keeps them from looking ahead; not even as the semi-miraculous trysting-place of several masterpieces, likewise miraculous, which delight the hearts of the esthetes; but as the succession of generations of musicians who were men like us, who strove and struggled, who had to take into account the same problems which confront us, and who carried out their resolves with the means at their disposal, that is to say with those furnished by the language of their time—men who sometimes happened to make mistakes, who followed the wrong road for a time, and who then took hold of themselves and found the right answers. When considered from the viewpoint of compositional problems, the history of the musical past becomes fertile, its knowledge indispensable. That is why I have felt it necessary

to discuss extensively, in the first part of this book, the living chain of polyphonic activity from which is born the long series of masterpieces that constitutes the tradition of our musical language. But I must also add that most of the notions about the compositional problems which concern us are subject to so much confusion and such misuse of terminology, and are so often insufficiently thought out and badly defined, that I have not considered it superfluous to begin, in the following introductory section, by questioning the fundamental evidence as to the very structure of the apparent art of music.

After all, should not every serious work, especially when it attempts to synthesize, begin by approaching all the problems which have arisen up to this point with the most radical skepticism? It is not until we have put all our "knowledge" in quotation marks that our conscious judgement can attain that unhackneyed freshness, allied with propulsive force, which will permit us to present clearly and lucidly the problems which we are about to attack.

In this sense, I can say that it is the same effort which has produced the various parts of this work. The *Introduction*, which contains the initial question as to "the essential factors of Occidental music and the conditions of their comprehension," is followed logically by the first section, *Prolegomena to Contemporary Music*, which does not constitute a résumé of historical facts, but a *reactivation* of the meaning of the evolution of polyphony in its continual synthesis.

The second part, devoted to Arnold Schoenberg, treats of the "birth and origins of contemporary music." The way in which the musical past is realized in Schoenberg's consciousness during his early works, forming a premise of which the acquisitions evidenced in the later works are but the logical sequence; these new acquisitions themselves, as well as the evolution which they determine—all this will make us understand how the contemporary art of music has succeeded in finding a form of expression which grants it a legitimate and indispensable place in musical tradition.

The two following parts discuss the works of Alban Berg and Anton Webern. Besides expounding the individual characteristics

of the two musicians in question, these studies should contribute to a better comprehension of the problems discussed earlier. In effect, Berg and Webern were the very first pupils and disciples of Schoenberg. The interest of this fact is not merely anecdotal, for the uniting of these three names gives us the key to many a personal characteristic of each one of them. The friendship and love which characterize their relationship are remarkable; the fidelity to the teachings of the Master, never betrayed by the younger men, is deeply significant.

It does not seem to me an exaggeration to say that, without the addition of the two others, no one personality of this group would have a complete meaning. Such a hypothesis (which, as we shall see, does not belittle any one of the personalities in question) is obviously most applicable to the rôle of the master with regard to the two disciples. Without the teaching and the example of Arnold Schoenberg, the very existence of the art of Berg and Webern would be inconceivable. Appearing as prolongations of the activity of the Master, and forming contrasts among themselves, the activities of the two disciples, while shedding a new light on the problems posed by Schoenberg, acquire their own distinct and clearly individualized directions. In the same way, the powerful and integral personality of Arnold Schoenberg takes on a higher meaning and a more universal significance through the contributions of those whose genius he was able to discover and to guide.

Finally, the last part, stating in a new and precise form certain notions about musical language, and drawing certain conclusions from the activities observed in the preceding sections, attempts to show how this language is constituted in its basic essentials—those which are valid for our time.

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No doubt I shall be reproached, as I have often been before, for my exclusiveness, my bias, and Heaven knows what else! To limit oneself to the study of the works of the three artists in question is conceivable, since this limitation is imposed by the bounda-

ries of the task which I have undertaken: but to limit genuine contemporary musical activity to the work of these three artists, to annihilate, so to speak, the rôle played by all the rest of the contemporary musical world, may appear inadmissible.

My answer is this: doubtless there are, among the other musicians of our time, a certain number of important personalities. My silence about their work, and the anathema on them which this silence implies, is doubtless unjust. I cannot help it, for I do not have the time to concern myself with everything. In my opinion the true artist is the one who not only recognizes and becomes completely aware of the deepest problems of his art, but who also proceeds to their solution with the utmost integrity and with uncompromising *moral strength*. I thus can be concerned only with what appears essential to me, with what seems to me the result of such an attitude in such acceptance of artistic *responsibility*. I find the fullest development of this attitude only in our three musicians, whom I consider the only musical geniuses of our time. (I personally do not find it depressing that our century has produced *only* three musical geniuses. There have never been more at one time in any period of musical history.)

The future will show whether I have made a mistake. It is a risk which this book gladly runs, for it, too, is a complete acceptance of responsibility on my part. And in that respect, as well, I have learned it from those of whom it treats.

RENÉ LEIBOWITZ

Paris, May 1946.

INTRODUCTION

THE ESSENTIAL FACTORS OF OCCIDENTAL MUSIC AND THE CONDITIONS OF THEIR COMPREHENSION

Contemporary music is not an isolated phenomenon. By this we mean that it cannot be considered as a sort of excrescence without any connection with the musical art which preceded it. On the contrary, the music of today, issuing from a long tradition, crowns ten centuries of Occidental musical activity. Occidental music differs radically from all other known forms of musical expression. Whether we think of ancient music or of music in its exotic forms—Greek, Hindu, Byzantine, Gregorian, African, Chinese, Balinese, Arab or Inca—all these manifestations of the art of sound have one thing in common: they are *monodic*, that is to say they exclude the notion of simultaneity of sound. If sometimes, as in certain forms of Far-Eastern music (Japanese and Balinese, for example), the mixture of timbres caused by percussion instruments on different levels creates, in passing, the simultaneity of different sounds, this simultaneity is sporadic and accidental. In any case, such an occurrence is hardly ever sought *for its own sake* by the musicians, and it never constitutes an element of the musical structure, since it completely escapes the control of those who cause it. The only elements over which such control is exercised are those melodic and rhythmic elements which are necessary and sufficient for the realization of monody.

Basically different in this respect from all other forms of musical expression, the Occidental art of sound has been *polyphonic* for about a thousand years. This polyphony may be considered as the very key to its existence, which means that, at a given moment, Occidental musicians *consciously* introduced a new