

Anton Webern's "Mein Weg geht jetzt vorüber," op. 15, No. 4

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During the years from 1915 to 1925, Webern was preoccupied almost exclusively with the composition of *Lieder*. Totalling over forty settings (complete and fragmentary) of Latin liturgical texts, pious folk texts and poems by George Trakl, these songs chronicle his continued experimentation with atonal writing and gradual adoption of the twelve-tone method. "Mein Weg geht jetzt vorüber," composed in 1922 and published as No. 4 of *Fünf geistliche Lieder*, op. 15, is the earliest-known composition documenting Webern's awareness of this method.

Sketches for this song, now at the Paul Sacher Stiftung (published in part in Moldenhauer's Webern biography),¹ reveal the formation of a prime form with its basic permutations (retrograde, inversion, and retrograde inversion), followed by a tritone transposition with its permutations. The language of the final setting, however, may best be described as protoserial. Only the opening vocal line articulates a complete row (the melody through "dein" in measure 4 presents a statement of the untransposed prime form). The remainder of the song is based on motivic pitch cells that are related to, but not systematically derived from, the basic set. Stylistically, the setting resembles earlier works like the Trakl *Lieder*, op. 14 (1917-1921), which feature jagged, irregular rhythms and an expressionistic predilection for registral extremes and atomized gestures.

This manuscript preserves an intermediate stage of composition. A fair copy in ink of the first poetic stanza (recto and top of verso) is followed by pencil sketches for the second and last stanza (bottom of verso). The music for stanza one is virtually identical to that of the published score. The most significant differences include: the removal of the descriptive instructions "espress." from measures 3, 4, and 6 and "zart" from measure 7; rhythmic revisions to the vocal line (e.g., "ist mir" in measure 5 is sketched with a syncopated rhythm on the blank staff above); and additional refinements of phrasing, articulation, and dynamics.

Pencil sketches beginning in measure 8 complete the setting but indicate as well that Webern reconsidered ideas for the second stanza. He apparently began this manuscript in ink, intending for it to serve as a complete fair copy (he generally reserved ink for this stage of composition) and then switched to pencil in order to revise the second stanza. A later, more definitive fair copy of the setting in ink is now preserved in the Robert Owen Lehman Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library.

The sudden dearth of indications for phrasing, articulation, and dynamics, and the disappearance of textual underlay at this point in the setting suggest that Webern became absorbed with elements like pitch and rhythm. Indeed, the rhythmic declamation for the final two phrases of the poem (measures 11-13, "in Gottes Fried und Gnaden / fahr' ich mit Freud' dahin.") is completely recast, with halfnotes changed to quarter notes and vice versa.

Equally important changes are made regarding the ordering, registration, and voicing of pitches. While the pitch content of successive phrases remains consistent, individual gestures are recast, with pitches reordered and exchanged between parts. In measure 9, for example, the melodic figure "beladen" is revised from F-sharp-A-F to F-A-F-sharp. This redefines the relationship between flute and voice, so that the vocal line now echoes rather than mirrors the preceding flute figure. Sketches for measure 10 on staves 5-9 show that while each musical line is recomposed, the actual pitch content of the measure is literally preserved. This precise yet flexible approach to pitch suggests a musical language based on well-defined note fields rather than a strict serial ordering.

The larger significance of this setting concerns chronology. Webern composed "Mein Weg geht jetzt vorüber" in July 1922, when he and Schoenberg were vacationing in Traunkirchen. As Moldenhauer observed, this setting--which began with a deliberate charting of rows and permutations and opens with a complete row statement--thus predates Schoenberg's now famous meeting of February 1923, when he formally explained the twelve-tone method.² Webern's attempt to compose with a twelve-tone row is all the more noteworthy, given that Schoenberg himself did not devise a linearly ordered, chromatically complete row until October 1922, in the sketches for the Sonett movement of the *Serenade*, op. 24.³ Schoenberg also claimed that until his official announcement in 1923, he had intentionally withheld information on the twelve-tone method from Webern:

He [Webern] kept secret everything "new" he had tried in his compositions. I, on the other hand, immediately and exhaustively explained to him each of my ideas (with the exception of the method of composition with twelve-tones--that I long kept secret, because, as I said

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to Erwin Stein, Webern immediately uses everything I do, plan or say, so that--I remember my words--"By now I haven't the slightest idea who I am."⁴

Schoenberg's sensitivity regarding his authorship of the twelve-tone method led him to issue a number of highly polemical and potentially misleading statements about this period. He may well have withheld information from Webern at some point; however, strong evidence suggests that Webern did, in fact, have access to Schoenberg's latest ideas at various times during the crucial period, from 1915 to 1923.

Correspondence dating from 1915 to 1917 preserves detailed discussions on the theoretical and philosophical basis of Schoenberg's earliest protoserial work, *Die Jakobsleiter*, and Webern's own stage project, *Tot*. Included in these letters is discussion of a twelve-tone theme that Schoenberg had drafted for an instrumental scherzo. (Schoenberg later acknowledged this exchange of information with Webern, wryly predicting, "An historian will probably some day find in the exchange of letters between Webern and me how enthusiastic we were about this.")⁵ In December 1922, Webern informed Berg of a recent conversation with Schoenberg, in which their mutual admiration for *Wozzeck* led to a discussion of *Zusammenhang* (unity) and *Fasslichkeit* (comprehensibility), concepts fundamental to Schoenberg's formulation of the twelve-tone method:

Your work [*Wozzeck*] is wonderful! I believe what you have accomplished is epoch-making: to compose *dramatic* music on the basis of this theme (melodic and harmonic); a music in which the "comprehensibility" (according to Schoenberg) demanded by the drama is realized to the highest and purest... He (Schoenberg) instantly agreed with me and theorized further, proceeding from his ideas on "coherence," on "comprehensibility."⁶

Schoenberg also acknowledged to Josef Matthias Hauer in December 1923, that while he had not yet formally taught his new method, he had been refining his ideas in preliminary studies with pupils "for a few years."⁷ This was later confirmed independently by Schoenberg's student, Paul A. Pisk.⁸ Regarded as one of Schoenberg's chief "sentinels" during these years, when he guarded his ideas so carefully,⁹ Webern very likely also numbered among these "pupils."

Perhaps most significantly, Webern joined Schoenberg at Traunkirchen on July 17, 1922, and remained there until mid-September. The two composers had been engaged in various professional activities during the course of the year, and their summer retreat to Traunkirchen provided a much anticipated opportunity to renew their friendship and focus more directly on composition.¹⁰ Webern began drafting "Mein Weg geht jetzt vorüber" on July 26. By this point in the summer of 1922, Schoenberg had experimented with many of the ideas that would come to define the twelve-tone method, but he had not yet composed a chromatically complete row, nor had he assimilated his recent ideas into a single composition.¹¹ In July he resumed work on *Die Jakobsleiter*, but eventually abandoned the project and turned to the *Sonett* sketches early in October.

Webern's twelve-tone experimentation in the sketches for "Mein Weg geht jetzt vorüber" and his uneasy handling of the row in the final setting may well reflect his desire to realize musically the ideas that Schoenberg was on the verge of solidifying. This would explain Schoenberg's hard feelings toward Webern and his later attempt to deny any foreknowledge of the twelve-tone method on Webern's part. Webern may, in fact, have alluded to this setting during the February 1923 meeting, for as Schoenberg would later recall, "Curiously, when I had shown the four basic forms, Webern confessed that he had written also something in twelve tones (probably suggested by the *Scherzo* of my symphony of 1915), and he said: 'I never knew what to do after the twelve tones!'"¹²

Webern's revisions for the second stanza of "Mein Weg geht jetzt vorüber," as seen in this manuscript, clearly suggest that he did not yet comprehend the full potential of the row. The uneven marriage of twelve-tone resources and atonal motivic procedures in this setting is particularly instructive; indeed, the song is extremely valuable as one of Webern's few truly transitional compositions in which elements of both musical languages can be seen to coexist.¹³

¹ For a black-and-white facsimile of these sketches, see Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of His Life and Work* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 310. A color facsimile is found in Hans Oesch, "Webern und das SATOR-Palindrom," in *Quellenstudien I: Gustav Mahler--Igor Stravinsky--Anton Webern--Frank Martin*, ed. Hans Oesch (Winterthur: Amadeus, 1991), pp. 114-15.

² Moldenhauer, op. cit., p. 310. On the circumstances surrounding this meeting, see Joan Allen Smith, *Schoenberg and His Circle: A Viennese Portrait* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), pp. 183-219.

³ On the dating and evolution of Schoenberg's *Sonett* movement, see Jan Maegaard, *Studien zur*

Entwicklung des dodekaphonen Satzes bei Arnold Schoenberg (Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen Musik-Forlag, 1972), vol. I, pp. 24, 104-5, and Ethan Haimo, *Schoenberg's Serial Odyssey: The Evolution of His Twelve-tone Method, 1914-1928* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 78, 90-93.

⁴ "Anton Webern: *Klangfarbenmelodie* (1951)," in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975),
p. 484.

⁵ "Composition with Twelve-Tones (2) c. 1948," *Style and Idea*, p. 247. These letters, many still unpublished, are currently housed in the Schoenberg Collection at the Library of Congress and the *Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, Musiksammlung*.

⁶ "Dein Werk ist wunderbar!... Ich glaube, was Dir hier gelungen ist, ist epochal: auf Grund dieser Thematik (Melodik und Harmonik) eine *dramatische* Musik zu schreiben: eine Musik, welche die vom Drama geforderte 'Faßlichkeit' (nach Schoenberg) aufs höchste und reinste erfüllt...Er (Schoe) stimmte mir sogleich zu und formulierte gleich, ausgehend von seinen Ideen über den 'Zusammenhang,' über 'Faßlichkeit'." Letter from Webern to Berg, December 25, 1992, WSLB/MS.

⁷ "Unterrichtet habe ich das wohl noch nicht, weil ich es noch durch einige Kompositionen erproben und in einigen Richtungen erweitern muss. Aber im Vorunterricht der Schüler verwende ich zur Definierung der Formen und Formelemente, und insbesondere zur Erläuterung der musikalischen Technik, sehr viel davon seit einigen Jahren." Letter from Schoenberg to Hauer, December 1, 1923, in Erwin Stein, ed., *Arnold Schoenberg: Ausgewählte Briefe* (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1958), p. 109.

⁸ See Elliott Antokoletz, "A Survivor of the Vienna Schoenberg Circle: An Interview with Paul A. Pisk," *Tempo* 154 (1985): 18.

⁹ Reminiscences of Marcel Dick, cited in Joan Allen Smith, op. cit., p. 181. More recently, Anne Shreffler has proposed that even if Webern did not receive direct information from Schoenberg, he may have gotten second-hand reports from other members of Schoenberg's "inner circle," including Josef Rufer and Erwin Stein. (Conversation with the author, November 10, 1991.)

¹⁰ See H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Schoenberg: His Life, World and Work*, trans. Humphrey Searle (London: John Calder, 1977), pp. 279-84, and Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern*, pp. 247-49.

¹¹ For a chronological and analytical account of Schoenberg's works leading up to this period, see Haimo, op. cit., pp. 69-105.

¹² Stuckenschmidt, *Schoenberg*, pp. 443-44.

¹³ For a more detailed examination of "Mein Weg geht jetzt vorüber," the source materials for the song, and the special place it holds in the evolution of Webern's twelve-tone style, see Anne C. Shreffler's fine article, "'Mein Weg geht jetzt vorüber': The Vocal Origins of Webern's Twelve-Tone Composition," in *Journal of the American Musicological Association*, Vol. 47, no. 2 (summer 1994): 275-339, which appeared after this essay was written.