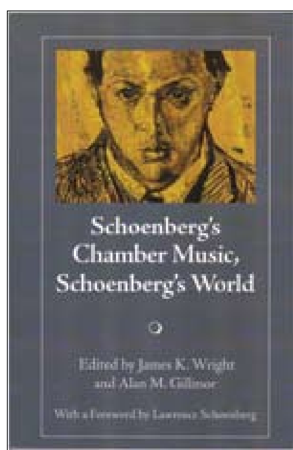
Schoenberg Through His Chamber Music

by Frank J. Oteri



SCHOENBERG'S CHAMBER MUSIC, SCHOENBERG'S WORLD

Edited by James K. Wright and Alan M. Gillmor, with a foreword by the composer's son Lawrence Schoenberg Pendragon, 2009

More than 135 years after his birth, Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) remains misunderstood and ultimately underappreciated. While works by a significant range of 20th-century composers—from Bartók, Britten and Sibelius to Prokofiev and Shostakovich—have now entered the standard repertoire and performances of more recent music have become a regular occurrence at most concert venues, Schoenberg's music has still not entered the mainstream. He is still excluded from many introductory texts on classical music; and his influence on composers, once considered unavoidable, is denied more than acknowledged these days. Perhaps there was no clearer sign that the ghost of Schoenberg had finally receded into the past than the deaths last year of three towering figures in American music, all of whom had deep ties to Schoenberg—composer/theorist George Perle, one of the first Americans to analyze and adopt twelve-tone music; composer/pianist/conductor Lukas Foss, the successor to Schoenberg at UCLA; and composer Leon Kirchner, a non-serialist who was nevertheless one of Schoenberg's most prominent composition students.

Yet Arnold Schoenberg remains a pivotal figure in music history, and his enigmatic personality and creative output continue to elicit the interest of music historians. The latest offering in the ever-expanding bibliography of Schoenbergiana is *Schoenberg's Chamber Music, Schoenberg's World*, edited by James K. Wright and Alan M. Gillmor, with a forward by the composer's son Lawrence Schoenberg. It should be noted, however, that this collection of essays—originally presented in 2007 at Ottawa's Carleton University as part of an international symposium on Schoenberg's chamber music—is definitely not aimed at the public at large. A similar compendium of scholarship, *Schoenberg and His World,* edited by Walter Frisch in conjunction with the Bard Music Festival in 1999, is more reader-friendly. And the most page-turn-inducing book on Schoenberg is still *Arnold Schoenberg's Journey,* a 2002 cross between a biography and an appreciation by Vermont-based composer Allen Shawn, brother of actor/writer Wallace Shawn, and which reads like a treatment for a screenplay. (Perhaps a bio-pic of Schoenberg would be the thing that would finally make Schoenberg's music mainstream!)

On the other hand, *Schoenberg's Chamber Music, Schoenberg's World* (From now on, I'm going to refer to it as *SCMSW*) fills an important void. It purports to be the first book-length study in English on Schoenberg's chamber music, an aspect of

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG IN THE BACKYARD OF THE ST. PETERSBURG PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY, DECEMBER 1912. THE FUR COAT WAS A GIFT FROM THE PIANIST, CONDUCTOR, AND IMPRESARIO ALEXANDER SILOTI.

his compositional output that holds an undeniable position of primacy. The BBC published a 64-page listener's guide in the early 1970s, but the present volume is indisputably more substantive. More important, the essays collected in *SCMSW* make several compelling arguments for a general reappraisal of Schoenberg and reveal that, even though the composer's current effect on musical aesthetics and conventions may be negligible in some quarters, his legacy lives on in chamber music (even though his own works aren't being performed as frequently as they should be). And despite its exclusive focus on chamber music (albeit a broad interpretation of the genre, encompassing solo piano works as well as pieces for chamber orchestra), *SCMSW* offers a multifaceted and wide-ranging view of Schoenberg's compositional trajectory: chamber compositions presaged every development in his evolution—from the waltzes that permeate his juvenilia to the intense Romanticism of his early adulthood to the expressionistic free atonality and subsequent hyperlogical serialism that solidified his reputation and, finally, the almost reconciliatory neoclassicism of his old age.

Not a comprehensive exegesis of Schoenberg's chamber output, *SCMSW* instead focuses on specific themes and uses chamber works by Schoenberg to illustrate them. The book's grouping of the essays into three sections—"Historical Perspectives," "Analytical Perspectives," and "Performance, Perception, and International Influence"—seems somewhat arbitrary, since most of these essays include some history and analysis. But that tripartite division nevertheless provides a solid base for the book. Some of its most intriguing content involves Schoenberg's earliest pieces and fragments of incomplete works. Christian Meyer's essay "The Young Arnold Schoenberg" reveals an aspiring composer totally engaged in the culture of fin-de-siècle Vienna. Even though the waltzes, polkas, and marches he composed at that time—many for violin duo—are not top-shelf contributions to the musical literature, they are delightful works that, if programmed, could dispel the myth that all of Schoenberg's output is extreme, austere, or dour. Meyer offers a few tantalizing score samples and mentions a DVD-audio (issued in 2006 by OgreOgress Productions) containing all of this early music, as well as some later sketches, and featuring performances by violinist Christina Fong and the Rangzen Quartet. Allen Forte's provocative essay "Schoenberg as Webern" posits that Schoenberg might have actually been influenced by Webern to abandon tonality completely, rather than the other way around. He cites as evidence the eight-measure fragment of the never-completed third piece of Schoenberg's abandoned and unpublished Three Pieces for Chamber Orchestra from 1910, illustrated in condensed score, which mines specific nonfunctional harmonies that Webern had employed in his own pre-atonal works at a time when Schoenberg's own harmonic terrain was more on the order of what Forte describes as "hybrid tonal-atonal." In another essay, Yuko Hirota makes a compelling case for exhuming 17 piano fragments composed by Schoenberg during his later career. Hirota also provides extensive score samples (though in some cases the samples are less generous than her text requires for a full understanding of her argument). Unfortunately, a Schoenberg completist still must await recordings of the abandoned chamber orchestra and piano fragments that didn't make it onto OgreOgress's otherwise thorough and fascinating compilation. (The disc also offers several works not addressed in the book, such as a would-have-been-extraordinary 1949 String Quartet No. 5, for which torsos of all four movements exist; music-lovers eager to hear these fascinating missing links would be well served by tracking down this curious recording.)

Equally absorbing in *SCMSW* are chapters devoted to Schoenberg's impact on the Canadian music scene, a benefit of the location of the symposium on which the book is based. Literature abounds on Schoenberg's towering influence in the

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United States, where he lived for the last two decades of his life; but all too little information exists about Schoenberg's impact on our neighbors to the north. Indeed, there's isn't enough attention paid in this country to Canadian composers overall, so it would be great if Elaine Keillor's essay assessing Schoenberg's influence in Canada prior to 1960 could stir some long overdue interest here in the music of such important overlooked figures as John Weinzweig and Serge Garant. And James Wright's contribution, which chronicles the Schoenbergian obsession of another important Canadian, Glenn Gould, should make Gould's numerous fans far more sympathetic to Schoenberg's cause. In his account of Gould's advocacy for this then-cultural contraband during his 1957 Soviet tour, Schoenberg actually emerges as a harbinger of glasnost.

But perhaps the most significant aspect of the collection is the inclusion of several essays that once and for all dispel the myth that Schoenberg was ambivalent about popular music. Severine Neff's "Juxtaposing Popular Music in the Second String Quartet, Op. 10," which analyzes its references to the folksong "Ach, du lieber Augustin," offers a new way to listen to this revolutionary work. And although Schoenberg's fondness for the Viennese waltz is already known to music-lovers aware of his chamber music transcriptions of Johann Strauss pieces—a part of Schoenberg's oeuvre unfortunately not sufficiently explicated in *SCMSW*—Alexander Carpenter's "A Bridge to a New Life: Waltzes in Schoenberg's Chamber Music" and Áine Heneghan's "The 'Popular Effect' in Schoenberg's Serenade, op. 24" reveal how Schoenberg's own compositions are actually also a response to and extension of that tradition.

Schoenberg will forever be famous—or infamous if you are among his aesthetic detractors—for his so-called emancipation of dissonance and for his codification of twelve-tone composition. Perhaps too much has been made about the stark sonic contrast between the music Schoenberg spawned and the late Romanticism that directly preceded it. No one argued more persuasively than Schoenberg himself that these compositional advances were a direct outgrowth and continuation of Romanticism, and the compositions he created before and after the so-called death of tonality offer ample evidence of a direct progression. In fact, Richard Strauss, Schoenberg's nemesis in later years, emerges as a fellow traveler and ardent supporter in James Deaville's "Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 1 in Dresden (1907): Programming the Unprogrammable, Performing the Unperformable."

Schoenberg's decisive break with his immediate past is perhaps most evident in his chamber music. Many of his contemporaries and immediate forebears eschewed chamber compositions, preferring to create vast operas or tone poems with gigantic orchestras. Early on, even Schoenberg himself composed a work requiring one of the largest forces ever assembled—the massive *Gurrelieder,* which calls for 25 woodwinds, 25 brass, 4 harps, 11 percussion, a celesta, and 66 strings, not to mention a narrator, vocal soloists and several choruses. But that gargantuan undertaking is something of an anomaly in Schoenberg's output—he didn't even assign it an opus number. It's telling that the only compositions that Schoenberg named symphonies were two chamber orchestra compositions scored for 15 players, the first of which, the turbulent Opus 9, is the subject of two essays in *SCMSW.*

One might also argue that the perseverance of the string quartet in contemporary music life is at least in some ways attributable to Schoenberg, as is the flowering of the wind quintet. At a time of decline in progressive string quartet composition, Schoenberg returned to it throughout his life—indeed it was the only ensemble for which he composed multiple works. His Wind Quintet, among the most substantive pieces ever created for those forces, proved that this remarkable heterodox ensemble—which had long been the province of lighter fare—was also capable of the profoundest utterances. But, perhaps Schoenberg's most enduring contribution to contemporary chamber music practice is his use of the mixed consort of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano to accompany the Sprechstimme vocals of his 1912 song cycle, *Pierrot Lunaire*. To this day, the so-called Pierrot ensemble, both with and without the addition of a percussionist, is the basis for ensembles as diverse as the Da Capo Chamber Players, eighth blackbird, and the California EAR Unit. Sabine Feisst's "Echoes of *Pierrot Lunaire* in American Music" traces some of the history of this seemingly ubiquitous contemporary music ensemble.

The pre-eminence of small ensemble music today, in all its exciting varieties, owes a great debt to Arnold Schoenberg. While still not as all-inclusive as its subject matter deserves (there's nothing in the book about such remarkable American works as the String Trio and the Phantasie for violin and piano), *Schoenberg's Chamber Music, Schoenberg's World* is hopefully the beginning of a long-overdue repositioning of Schoenberg's chamber music as central to the repertoire. But for that to happen in a meaningful way, this music will ultimately need to be taken beyond the realm of academia and into the concert hall.

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