

The Idea is Timeless Some Aspects of Schoenberg's Thought and Work

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Summary

This article deals with the main aspects of the thoughts and works of Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951). The starting point is Schoenberg's aesthetic and religious views. The context as well as the relationship of these to the composer's works is discussed. Among other things, Schoenberg's attitude to neo-classicism and the musical heritage of the past is highlighted, as is the innovative character of his expressionist stage works. The final part of the article gives a brief overview of the most important stages in the composer's life.

Throughout his life, Schoenberg considered the spiritual foundation, the thought (*der Gedanke*) and the idea (*die Idee*), to be fundamental – whether it was related to existence, religion or creation. This was the reason for his incessant need to make sense of what he was doing and to explain his views. Schoenberg was certainly one of the greatest advocates of the spiritual among 20th century composers; his discourses, whether delivered in lectures or in written form in his numerous essays, were at least as influential as his compositions. Indeed, his discourses and his musical works should be seen as a whole. Schoenberg's views may have changed over time and may have contained contradictions, and it is true that he had a tendency to think in 'dialectical oppositions' (Cherlin 2007: 44), but he never betrayed his loyalty to the three components that formed the basis of his thinking and of his works, which were also the yardstick of his life and of his artistic expression: the idea (or thought), the truth (*die Wahrheit*) and the expression (*der Ausdruck*).

In 1934, on the occasion of Schoenberg's 60th birthday, Alma Mahler-Werfel, Gustav Mahler's widow and a friend of the Schoenberg family, wrote: "Arnold Schoenberg showed music fundamentally new paths. Those who acknowledge this go along with them full of joy – enemies against their will – but all have learnt from him" (Arnold Schoenberg ... 1998: 31). This sums up the meaning of Schoenberg: it is not necessary to be a Schoenbergian, it is not necessary to write atonal or dodecaphonic music, but it is useful to reflect on Schoenberg's aspirations and ideas. Even if the environment and society of Schoenberg's time have undergone radical alteration, there is still much to be found in his ideas, in his search for God, in his demands on himself and on the artist in general. We should not allow ourselves to be irritated by the occasional contradictions in his opinions. Taken together in their entirety, they form a whole that has one foot in the 19th century and the other in the future. Schoenberg's faithfulness to the idea, to the thought, to inspiration and to the Judeo-Christian God is reminiscent of the 19th century religion of art, which placed art on an almost equal footing with God. However, Schoenberg's liberationist atonality, or the emancipation of dissonance, as Schoenberg himself called this extreme change in music, expanded the world of composers and the music public in an unprecedented way. With the dodecaphonic method of composition Schoenberg hoped to create a system that would ensure the hegemony of German music for at least a century (Schmidt, Chr. M. 2005: 1593), and in his constructive experiments he was inspired by the past – for example, by the compositional techniques of the Dutch Renaissance polyphonists. Schoenberg always wished to see his innovations as being in line with tradition, or rather, in line with the need to change tradition in order to keep the art of music alive.