

articles

Schoenberg's George-Lieder: The Relationship between Text and Music in Light of Some Expressionist Tendencies

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According to Schoenberg, the song cycle *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* (Opus 15, 1908), which is based on poems by Stefan George, occupied a unique position in the composer's works. In the program notes written for the premiere of these songs, Schoenberg stated: "In the 'George-Lieder' I have succeeded for the first time in approaching an ideal of expression and form that has been in my mind for years. Until now I lacked the strength and confidence to realize this ideal. Now that I have definitely entered upon this course, I am aware that I have gone beyond the limits of traditional aesthetics."¹ Apart from the obvious reference to the beginning of so-called atonal music, a fact which has received ample attention in musicological scholarship, this statement also implied a new aesthetics of songwriting. Focusing particularly on the relationship between text and music, my article will deal with some of the aesthetic principles underlying these songs.²

Whenever Schoenberg refers in his writings to this relationship, he expresses ideas that are unorthodox if compared with 18th- and 19th-century principles of songwriting. In his essay "Das Verhältnis zum Text" (1912), for instance, he asserts that his musical interpretation of some songs by Schubert, well known to him except for the texts, did not have to be altered in the least after he discovered what was actually happening in the underlying poems. He claims, furthermore, that he was also quite unconcerned about the happenings in the poems he himself set to music. In both cases he had immediately and fully understood the essence, or what he calls the "real content" (*wirklicher Inhalt*) of the poems, without having undertaken an analysis of them.³

Schoenberg defended this concern with the real content of a work of art, while ignoring the particulars (the "surface layer of meaning"—*die Oberfläche der Wortgedanken*) of the underlying text, by arguing that the work of art is similar to any complete organism and that it therefore reveals its truest and innermost essence in every detail. If one hears a line of a poem or a measure of a musical composition, he said, one is able to grasp its totality.⁴ Furthermore, the composer wanted to break with the view that the literal meaning or the ideas of a poem should be recognizably mirrored in the music. He therefore rejected the "conventional" parallelism between poem and music, in which situation tempo and intensity of a particular passage or section of the text must be reflected in the music. Of greater interest and importance to him was the organic development of purely musical themes, as a consequence of which a tender thought could be rendered by a vehement

musical expression (one might speak here of a nonmimetic character of the music in the song). Probing into the real content of a poem enabled him, he argued, to arrive at a relationship between text and music which, if not closer, was at least as close as the conventional one.⁵ Thus it can be said that whenever he set a text to music he “formed everything so much from within that the music is fully justified even if one does not know the ‘program’. Everything in this case, as is the case with all great works of art, is expressive art.”⁶

Such an attitude toward the text-music problem explains Schoenberg’s somewhat radical view that a composer approaches a text in a disinterested or neutral manner (he was thinking here, of course, of the “surface layer” of the text), and that “those singers are most satisfactory who sing it [the text] in as pleasing a manner as a well-understood ‘Doremi.’”⁷ This statement has to be understood in light of Schoenberg’s intentions to create music which is as free as possible from all extramusical connections and ideas. (Schoenberg disparages the “conventional” musical language “which composes and thinks for everyone”—*eine Sprache, die für jeden dichtet und denkt*.⁸) With the Doremi he refers to songs which first and foremost should be sound phenomena. Hand in hand with this goes the statement that he had completely heard and comprehended Schubert’s songs (including, of course, the underlying texts) and George’s poetry as sound phenomena only; analysis and synthesis, he said, could not have resulted in a more exact or better understanding of the poem or song.⁹

One must therefore conclude that it is the sound aspect of a poem, especially the “first words,”¹⁰ that serves, so to speak, as the initial point of contact with the “real content.” Or, in the words of Kandinsky, the coeditor of *Der Blaue Reiter* (in which Schoenberg’s “Das Verhältnis zum Text” appeared):

A work of art consists of two elements: the *inner* and the *outer*. The inner element . . . is the emotion in the soul of the artist. This emotion has the capacity to evoke a similar emotion in the observer. . . . Thus feeling is a bridge between the immaterial and the material (artist) and again between the material and the immaterial (observer).¹¹

In other words, the emotion in the soul of the artist evokes a similar emotion in the observer through the so-called “material aspect” (i.e., “feeling”) of a work of art. This term is taken from Hans Mersmann, according to whom words have not only an intellectual and communicative function; of equal importance is their elemental nature, which in poetry becomes a creative force through rhyme and through the musical flow of vowels. It is to the latter that the composer is especially susceptible.¹² This is expressed in similar terms by Kandinsky, who states, “Form is the material expression of the abstract content,”¹³ and by Hermann Broch, who says that the “linguistic structure” (*Spracharchitektur*) of a poem transforms both its “rational-communicative content” (*rationale Mitteilung*) and its “emotional

content" (*gefühlsmässiger Ur-Inhalt*) and lifts them into a "sphere of totality" (*Totalitätssphäre*) which exists beyond the finite and the rational. This transformation becomes even clearer when the linguistic structure is subjected to a "musical structure" (*musikalische Architektur*). Yet a relationship between music and words could not exist if structural elements common to both did not form a bridge between the two.¹⁴ This means that a key factor in the composer's relationship to poetry is the musicality of poetry. Speaking, for instance, about Richard Dehmel's poetry, Schoenberg states that he primarily and initially approached it with his musical sense (*Klang-Verstand*), and only then was he able to penetrate the real content (here, *Sinnen-Sinn*).¹⁵ Schoenberg's pupil Webern, writing to the poetess Hildegard Jone, expresses a similar view:

And how well words lend themselves to perception by the *ear*. I mean: *in my case* more intensively than by the eye while reading! Then "connections and relationships resound!" And the idea appears before me in visible form. As you put it: "Then everything resounds . . . then radiance floods the ear. . . ."¹⁶

"Idea" and "*Sinnen-Sinn*" (letter to Dehmel) are obviously the same as "real content."

To what extent does the concept "real content" determine or affect the relationship between text and music in the *George-Lieder*? The emphasis on "real content" could lead to a type of song in which a direct or obvious parallelism between text and music did not necessarily have to exist. As a matter of fact, the lack of this kind of parallelism is quite characteristic of the songs in this cycle, so much so that they seem, rather, to be constructed on the basis of a law of polar attraction between poem and music. For instance, the rich sonority of George's rhymed poetry has as a counterpart music that is almost austere in nature. Analogous to this is the rhythmic relationship between poetry and music: to the even and metric rhythm which supports the sonority of the poetic line is juxtaposed a declamatory rhythm, or a prose rhythm, as it were, so that George's strict verse (including the strophic patterns) seems to be transformed into prose.

The lack of parallelism may well be due to an attempt at redefining the partnership between poetry and music in a situation where new music and traditional verse have to be reconciled to each other. A frequent aspect of traditional verse is its lyrical quality, which is basic to many poems of 19th-century *Lieder* and, with certain modifications (e.g., stylization), to the ones in this cycle. In lyrical poetry the subject is usually in accord with the world surrounding it (object); form and content are inseparably and uniquely united; sound and rhythmic qualities tend to overshadow the semantic significance as well as the grammatical and logical functions of the words; both sound and rhythm set in motion a kind of evocative resonance. In other words, in the sphere of lyricism, which is, as it were, a magical sphere and one of illusion, all poetic elements are harmoniously united.¹⁷ And the 19th-century composer extended and related his music to this sphere by

unifying both text and music in it,¹⁸ whereas Schoenberg created music whose relationship to the text has to be defined primarily in terms of polarity.

Since traditional musical form is dependent on tonality, the dissolution of the latter would affect the former. Referring to this, Schoenberg stated that most of his works written during the period of transition from tonality to a new music were based on texts for the sake of unity and coherence.¹⁹ It may well be that George's poetry provided Schoenberg with a suitable basis for a new music because of its rigid structure, as well as its sonority and its strict rhythm. It is therefore possible to argue that George's poetry was selected because, as a strong structural core, it could function as the desired counterpart in the polar relationship between text and music. But the text does not hold or absorb the music; rather, the music dissolves it by a process in which structural strength of the text seems to be essential. In other words, Schoenberg needed something that was tightly structured in order to be able to dissolve and transform it,²⁰ hence his predilection for George's poetry, the rhythm of which George himself described—by implication—as being rather more like ice than like water.²¹

In conclusion, it can be stated that Schoenberg, although dealing with traditional poems, nevertheless applied unconventional techniques to them. The avoidance of mirroring the sound and rhythmic patterns of the poems in the musical structure indicates that he tended to neutralize the material aspect of art, thus showing in this work a trend typical of Expressionism, namely, that of dematerialization. Schoenberg himself had definite views on dematerialization. He expressed his antipathy toward the "animal warmth of music."²² Comparing poetry and music, he said of the former that it is still rooted in the material realm and thus is denied direct and pure expression; music, however, he implied, is free from such material shackles.²³ The following statement by Adorno, although referring specifically to twelve-tone music, applies also to the music of the *George-Lieder*: "The structure [*Stimmigkeit*] of twelve-tone music cannot be directly 'heard'—that is the simplest name for its non-sensual aspect. All one perceives is strict adherence to a system . . . [Schoenberg] renounces the material aspect of art."²⁴ The purpose of dematerialization could only be to lay bare and to make more visible the real content of art (another concept that is quite typical of Expressionism). In this process the music functions as an agent: it depoeticizes the text in the sense that it undermines the autonomy of poetic resonance, typical of lyrical poetry²⁵; the music also fragmentizes the text. Adorno has pointed to the fragmented structure of Schoenberg's music in which, as he says, the artist becomes dissociated from his creation and thereby freed from the grip of the material aspect of music. Fragmentation therefore leads to a liberation of that which is significant ("*bedeutend*") in art,²⁶ i.e., the real content. Thus Schoenberg's music dematerializes, depoeticizes, fragmentizes, and transforms into prose a highly refined and lyrical text.²⁷ It is in this respect that Schoenberg went beyond the limits of the traditional aesthetics of songwriting.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Egon Wellesz, *Arnold Schönberg* (Leipzig: Tal, 1921), p. 24. All translations in this article are by the author.

² For an extensive analysis of the *George-Lieder*, see Karl Heinrich Ehrenforth, *Ausdruck und Form: Schönbergs Durchbruch zur Atonalität in den George-Liedern Op. 15, Abhandlungen zur Kunst-, Musik- und Literaturwissenschaft*, vol. 18 (Bonn: Bouvier, 1963). Other analyses, either of individual songs or of the whole cycle, are by Reinhold Brinkmann, "Schönberg und George: Interpretation eines Liedes," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 26 (1969): 1–28; Carl Dahlhaus, "Schönbergs Lied 'Streng ist uns das Glück und spröde,'" *Neue Wege der musikalischen Analyse* 6 (1967): 45–52; and Harald Kaufmann, "Struktur in Schönbergs Georgeliedern," *Neue Wege der musikalischen Analyse* 6 (1967): 53–61.

³ Arnold Schönberg, "Das Verhältnis zum Text," *Der Blaue Reiter* (Munich: Piper, 1912), pp. 31–32. Essay also in *Style and Idea*, trans. Dika Newlin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), pp. 1–6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

⁶ Wellesz, *Schönberg*, p. 81.

⁷ Schönberg's statement is quoted in Hermann Broch, "Irrationale Erkenntnis in der Musik," *Arnold Schönberg zum 60. Geburtstag* (Vienna: Universal-Edition, 1934), p. 49.

⁸ Schönberg, "Das Verhältnis zum Text," p. 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹¹ "Malerei als reine Kunst," *Der Sturm* 4, nos. 178–79 (1914): 98.

¹² "Freiheit und Bindung im künstlerischen Schaffen," *Musikalische Zeitfragen*, vol. 8 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1960), p. 10.

¹³ Kandinsky, "Malerei als reine Kunst," p. 98.

¹⁴ Broch, "Irrationale Erkenntnis in der Musik," p. 56.

¹⁵ Joachim Birke, ed., "Richard Dehmel und Arnold Schönberg: Ein Briefwechsel," *Die Musikforschung* 11 (1958): 285.

¹⁶ *Briefe an Hildegard Jone und Josef Humplik*, ed. J. Polnauer (Vienna: Universal-Edition, 1959), p. 46 (letter of 26 May 1941).

¹⁷ The definition of lyricism used here is based on Emil Staiger, *Grundbegriffe der Poetik* (Zurich: Atlantis, 1951), pp. 13–84.

¹⁸ Compare with Alfred Einstein, *Music in the Romantic Era* (New York: Norton, 1947), "Music as Sound," pp. 32–35, and "Music and Word," pp. 21–25.

¹⁹ Arnold Schönberg, "Gesinnung oder Erkenntnis," *25 Jahre Neue Musik, Jahrbuch 1926 der Universal-Edition*, ed. H. Heinsheimer and P. Stefan (Vienna: Universal-Edition, 1926), p. 28.

²⁰ Compare with Ehrenforth, *Ausdruck und Form*, p. 47.

²¹ Stefan George, *Blätter für die Kunst*, vol. 8 (1910), reprint, ed. R. Boehringer (Munich: Küpper, 1967), p. 5.

²² Quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1958), p. 114.

²³ Schönberg, "Das Verhältnis zum Text," p. 29.

²⁴ Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, pp. 113–18.

²⁵ Compare with Emil Staiger, *Musik und Dichtung* (Zurich: Atlantis, 1947), p. 74.

²⁶ Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, p. 113.

²⁷ Compare with Ehrenforth, *Ausdruck und Form*, p. 137.