

Desire and Fear of Freedom: Arnold Schoenberg on the Fiftieth Anniversary of His Death

The Schoenberg year 2001 gave Lombardi an occasion to articulate his position on one of the seminal figures of musical modernism. In his essay he focuses especially on Schoenberg's rediscovery of his Jewish roots—a focus that no doubt has an autobiographical dimension, as Lombardi, after the death of his mother in 1995, has been drawn to explore his own Jewish heritage.

My first encounter with Schoenberg's music goes back to my adolescent years and, if I remember correctly, happened after my exposure to the music of Webern. A miniature score of Webern's *Symphony*, Op. 21, is inscribed with the date February, 1960, when I was 14 years old. I remember a performance of this work at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia before a scornfully uproarious audience making great show of reading newspapers.

Studying this music was for me a clandestine activity and I certainly could not talk about it with my composition teacher at the conservatory. What I might learn about harmony was the “official” reason for my investigation, but for me less interesting than my feeling for the music. The most important part took place at home, where I tried to decipher a piece of music which interested me just for the fact of its having been banned by the conservatory, and where I undertook my first compositional experiments. Among these (I am still speaking of 1960-61) there are pieces using series of five, six, and twelve tones. But only five years later I wrote a true dodecaphonic composition, *Elegos* (1965) for violin and piano, in which I used the twelve-tone series quite freely, and still closer to Schoenberg than to Webern. I still remember my teacher's reaction, at that time Armando Renzi—to whom I owe much in terms of encouragement and support, and whom I remember with affection—praised my composition, but, although surely more enlightened than my previous teachers, took it as a cue to make a tirade against twelve-tone music. Renzi, although at that time in a conservative stance, had been the first to perform Schoenberg's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* in Italy. He especially liked in my composition a passage in which I repeated a certain melodic fragment like an echo, or rather, like a reprise and a continuation of the discourse. This is a procedure that is quite easy to find in Schoenberg, whose music is—regardless of the language he happens to use (tonal, atonal, dodecaphonic)—always a *sprechende* or speaking music.

As a youngster, the first thing that interested me in Schoenberg was therefore the dodecaphony, the aspect of his poetics that I then felt less close to, and still do. Only later did I discover his earlier compositions, those written around 1910 before his settling on the twelve-tone method, the atonal pieces (a term that Schoenberg did not like)—the ones that I like the best. I am thinking of the *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11, the *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke*, Op. 19, especially the *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, Op. 16, and then *Erwartung* and *Die glückliche Hand*, but also of the song-cycle *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* on poetry of Stefan George, Op. 15, and of course, of *Pierrot lunaire*, Op. 21—all pieces written between 1909 and 1913 when the composer was his mid- to late thirties.

The catalog of Schoenberg's works (in all little more than 50 titles), of course, comprises a larger number of great works, works for which one feels respect and admiration (let me just mention *Moses und Aron*), but for me the heart of Schoenberg's production is made up of the works written around 1910. Schoenberg had weighed anchor and had left the no longer quiet waters of tonality, without yet having berthed in the new port of dodecaphony.

In Schoenberg there are features that attract me and others that repel me. Problematic, and yet impressive, i.e., capable of making an impact on the imagination, is his “prophetic” or “messianic” bearing, or, as he says himself, like John the Baptist, “I am only a precursor [...]. I am like John the Baptist (probably because I have a head one could easily imagine on a silver platter) and they cook with the water with which I baptize [...].”—thus he wrote in 1923 (the year of the first full

application of the twelve-tone method.¹

Not that those claims of his were without foundation. To a question posed about his *String Quartet No.2* (in F-sharp minor), in whose final movement he abandons tonality, Schoenberg could legitimately answer: “The development pressed toward this outcome. Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler had a part in this. But also Debussy and Max Reger and even Pfitzner pressed in this direction. I took the last step, and I did it as a logical consequence.”² Consequence, or thinking things through to a logical conclusion: this is surely a trait of Schoenberg’s, perhaps one of his “German” traits. The sense of consequentiality, of systematic and deductive thinking, is deeply rooted in the German language through which, given certain premises, it is inevitable to arrive at certain conclusions or resolutions, be they good or bad. We will see, however, later, that Schoenberg’s poetics are not without contradictions—contradictions that are for me a sign of authenticity and, so to speak, of realism.

But Schoenberg was not only a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, of German language and culture, but also a Jew and it is probable and plausible that the “messianic” component came to him from his Hebrew background, from his biblical interests, that it was after all an integrating element in his way of living Judaism.

I will come back to this point later. Let me return to what Schoenberg said about his *Quartet*: “I took the final step, and I did it as a logical consequence.” Here is a nexus of Schoenbergian poetics and even of the entire music history of the twentieth century: Is it accurate to say that the road taken by Schoenberg and his students, and then after the Second World War by the serial composers, was the only historically legitimate road, or were there not perhaps other possibilities, other pathways to take? And these other pathways were only secondary paths in respect to the Viennese School, or perhaps is it not instead true that they had existed—as even now they exist—different roads, all of them in some way main roads, or at least not secondary, to the extent that every real compositional achievement, every successful work has the right to exist as it is, regardless of considerations of the language, the technique, or the style that it uses. This is, for me, a rhetorical question which I can only answer with yes. Schoenberg’s music and the significance this composer has had in the history of music is an incontrovertible reality. This does not preclude that there have been other composers who have achieved important results by exploring different pathways. First of all Stravinsky, whose *Rite of Spring* is, in my view, the keystone composition of the 20th century; then, of course, there is Bartók, a composer I love like few others; then, for example, Janáček or Ives, not to mention other composers so diverse as Debussy, Puccini, Busoni, or Shostakovich. The twentieth century today appears to be one of the most contradictory—but artistically rich—of centuries. A true kaleidoscope of languages and styles: to single out one figure would diminish the importance of this unique century, whose characteristic is precisely the all-inclusiveness and complementarity of so many diverse endeavors.

As is acknowledged, Schoenberg was politically a conservative and a supporter of the monarchy. He experienced the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a true catastrophe, as the “overturning of everything in which people had believed,” according to what he himself wrote to Kandinsky in 1922.³ In that same letter he states that in recent years his only moral support had been religion, albeit outside of any organizing force, and that this faith of his had found expression in the text of the oratorio *Die Jakobsleiter*, inspired variously by Strindberg, Swedenborg, Balzac, as well as Rudolf Steiner, the theorist of anthroposophy. But there is also a direct link with the Bible, precisely with chapter 29 of the first book of the Pentateuch, containing Jacob’s dream. As Enrico Fubini points out, “this strong ideal aspiration to the achievement of a religious faith was doubtlessly one of those decisive things that impelled him in his return to Judaism.”⁴

1 Eberhard Freitag, *Arnold Schoenberg*, (Reinbek-bei-Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1973), 7.

2 *Ibid.*, 42.

3 *Ibid.*, 70.

4 Enrico Fubini, *La musica nella tradizione ebraica* (Torino, Einaudi, 1994), 103.

And the moral stature of Schoenberg increases when we realize that his re-association with the religion of his forebears came about just when it was becoming (once more) uncomfortable to declare oneself Jewish, and when, in German-speaking countries, there was that recrudescence of anti-Semitism which would result in Nazi crimes. Schoenberg, a composer intimately tied like no others to the Germanic musical tradition, confronted by marginalization and persecution, rediscovers his Jewish roots and begins a process of re-association that will culminate in his re-conversion to Judaism in 1933 in a Paris synagogue. Being a Jew totally assimilated into German culture, Schoenberg now begins a tendency to turn his back on his beloved homeland. In a letter to the philosopher Jakob Klatzkin (probably written from Paris on May 26, 1933, two months after Hitler's rise to power) he writes, "We are oriental and nothing keeps us tied to the West. We have a different destiny [...] our essence is not Western, that is only our outward appearance. We must return to our origins." It is interesting to note that this surprising remark, quoted by Fubini,⁵ is missing in Erwin Stein's edition of Schoenberg's correspondence. One might speculate that Stein decided not to publish such a declaration that could give of Schoenberg an image so different from that already known, one that could seem counterproductive, or even compromising, and that for this reason he censored the letter. Schoenberg's statement surely is surprising also because he often emphasized his own identity as a German composer, going so far as to say that his "discovery" would assure German music's preeminence for the next hundred years.⁶

This apodictic and seemingly arrogant statement has always had a strange effect on me. It could be read, on the one hand, as an expression of Schoenberg's messianic posture, but, on the other, seen as a response to whoever wanted to expunge him, as a Jew, from German culture. A confirmation of this hypothesis comes from the fact that Schoenberg made this declaration to his student Josef Rufer at the end of July, 1921, right when the famous episode of Mattsee occurred. What had happened, then? Schoenberg and his family had made plans to spend their summer vacation in a village in the Salzkammergut, not far from Salzburg. Upon arriving there, at Mattsee in fact, he learned that the area had been closed off to Jews. Schoenberg could have shown his baptismal certificate, since, in 1910 on the occasion of his marriage to Mathilde von Zemlinsky, he had converted to Protestantism, but he chose to leave the district. "From that moment," he writes in a letter of 1934 to the American Rabbi Stephan Wise, "all my steps went in the direction of renouncing assimilation as an undesirable act, and moving towards a healthy and vigorous Jewish nationalism based upon the national and religious faith of our choice. It was then that I decided to devote myself to the cause of propagating the Jewish faith."⁷ And in a 1935 letter to Webern, also not included in Stein's selection, Schoenberg wrote: "For fourteen years [in other words, since that very year of 1921] I have been prepared for what happened to me today. In this long period I have been able to prepare myself thoroughly, and, even if with difficulty, I have definitively freed myself from that which tied me to the West. For a long time I have decided to be Jewish [...]"⁸ Shortly before his death, Schoenberg wrote on April 26, 1951 to Ödön Partos (or Partosh, as Schoenberg spells it): "To your friends who recently visited me in Los Angeles, as well as to you, Director Partosh, I have told how for more than four decades my most fervent wish has been to see the birth of an independent Israeli State—and even more so, to become a citizen of that State."⁹ In speaking of more than four decades, Schoenberg may be making an error in his calculation of time, otherwise one would have to deduce that he had already taken a Zionist stance a decade before that crucial year of 1921.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁶ "I have found something that will assure the preeminence of German music for the next hundred years," Schoenberg supposedly said to his student Josef Rufer at the end of July, 1921. See Matthias Henke, *Arnold Schoenberg* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001), 96.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 104. Nor is this letter contained in the edition by Erwin Stein. Could it be by chance?

⁸ E. Fubini, *La musica nella tradizione ebraica*, 106.

⁹ Arnold Schoenberg, *Briefe*, ed. Erwin Stein (Mainz: B. Schotts Söhne, 1958), 297. Ödön Partos (1907-1977), violinist and composer of Hungarian origin, had moved in 1938 to Palestine. At the time of Schoenberg's letter he was Director of the Israel Academy of Music in Jerusalem. The academy had offered Schoenberg the post of Honorary President, a post that he accepted with great pleasure.

It is worth noting that at a certain point in his life—I am speaking of the early thirties, when Schoenberg was already about 60—he could feel uprooted with respect to the country and culture in which he lived, and that he was aware of belonging to an alien place and culture. It would seem that the painful road that Schoenberg pursued to his creation of dodecaphony and to his returning to Judaism was born from the same imperative to arrive at an order, to a *law* that might give sense to music as well as to life itself. It came about because of a need to react against the forces of disorder, chaos, arbitrariness, moral relativism—against the inevitable loss of the center. The *Umwertung aller Werte*, to borrow Nietzsche’s expression—the change of sign and meaning with respect to all values—is the emblem of these modern times, and with which we must come to terms whether we like it or not.

The first entirely 12-tone work of Schoenberg is the last of the *Fünf Klavierstücke*, Op. 23, composed between 1920 and 1923. Prefigurations of twelve-tone technique may be discerned in the *Jakobsleiter*, written between 1917 and 1922, in which one can see the interweaving of a philosophic-religious subject matter and musical technique. More than an expression of precisely biblical purpose, underscores Fubini, the composition is the expression of an as yet vague spiritualism.¹⁰ Here indeed come together Schoenberg’s mystic-religious readings, from Balzac’s philosophical novel *Séraphita* (which contains the expression “Jacob’s mystical ladder,” hinting at the title of the oratorio), to the theosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg and the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, and of course the Bible (Old Testament), where it speaks of Jacob’s dream: “And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of the Lord were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said: ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants.’”¹¹

From the musical standpoint it is very interesting that into the *Jakobsleiter* found its way a *Scherzo* (composed, it seems, 1914-15), which already contains a presentiment of a tone row, albeit of only six tones in this case. “In order to ensure unity, which has always been my main concern,” wrote Schoenberg around 1950, “I conceived the plan of constructing all the principal themes of the oratorio on the basis of a series of six notes.”¹² “In order to ensure unity, which has always been my main concern”—this is certainly a keystone phrase which throws light on Schoenberg’s thinking, not just his musical thinking. As Giacomo Manzoni points out, “...it is probable that this kind of thematic unity finds its motivation in the words of Gabriel about halfway through the concluding monologue, in the part not set to music: “Lord, deliver us from our singularity! Make us anew to be a whole within that whole of which we are a part.”¹³

And I am in agreement with Manzoni when he affirms: “At the root of the presentiment of the dodecaphonic series and of the laws that govern it, there were doubtlessly philosophical and even metaphysical motivations...: the spiritual turning point induces the musician to resolve the crisis in the sense of recognizing a ‘principle of authority’ within the musical material, rather than impelling it in the direction of a radical deepening of the nascent material-consciousness of the compositions written in the period of the emancipation of dissonance—so that, for example, the contemporary avant-garde was able to more easily reshape itself in these, rather than in those of the later dodecaphonic period.”¹⁴

Schoenberg’s navigation on the open sea had arrived in port. He had devised a law, not only for his music, but for his life. In some way it is as though, demiurge that he was, to the extent in the period of atonality (or, as Schoenberg preferred to say, of pantonality) established from time to time the code according to which he concretely articulated musical discourse—he became now, with

10 E. Fubini, *La musica nella tradizione ebraica*, 107-108.

11 *The Holy Bible*, Moses I, 28, 12-13.

12 Quoted in Giacomo Manzoni, *Arnold Schoenberg: L'uomo, l'opera, i testi musicali* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), 79.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

dodecaphony, the executor of a design contained in a superior order. It is, however, a matter of an order devised and codified by him, even though he is careful to emphasize an obvious phylogenetic necessity in the road that led to it through the dissolution of tonality. As in all human affairs—and perhaps even divine—there are no methods devoid of contradictions. Schoenberg not only used the dodecaphonic method in a free and flexible way, but he also returned on several occasions to tonal composition, which he had never repudiated. In dodecaphony, on the other hand, he finds a new comprehensibility and clarity—the *Fasslichkeit* of which Webern also speaks—that this “new order” ensures him. The “mosaic law” in its turn permits him to find clarity in himself and in his relationship with the world.

It is interesting to read, in this connection, how in those years he affirmed another great Jewish thinker of the twentieth century. In a letter dated September 30, 1934, sent from Vienna to the writer Arnold Zweig, Sigmund Freud stated about his essays on the man Moses, “And my essay received the title *The Man Moses, a Historical Novel* [...]. The material is divided into three parts; the first reads like an interesting novel; the second is laborious and lengthy, the third substantial and exacting. The enterprise foundered on this third section, for it contains a theory of religion which, although nothing new to me after *Totem and Taboo*, is nevertheless bound to be something fundamentally new and shattering to the uninitiated. Concern for these uninitiated compels me to keep the completed essay secret. For we live here in an atmosphere of Catholic orthodoxy.”¹⁵ Surely there are various reasons why both the third essay of Freud and the third act of *Moses und Aron* remain unfinished. It is, however, worthy of note that both thinkers confronted the theme of the origins Judaism, and that for both it was not only possible, but supremely instructive to investigate the ties between the genesis of their achievements and the Hebrew tradition, or to succeed in understanding to what extent both the founder of psychoanalysis and the architect of dodecaphony attributed a specific role in the genesis of their discoveries to their professed Judaism.¹⁶

In his essay *Composition with Twelve Notes*, Schoenberg writes, “The restrictions imposed upon a composer by requiring the use of a single series for every composition are so rigid that only an imagination tempered by a variety of experience can surmount them. This method gives nothing; on the contrary, it takes away much.”¹⁷ And Fubini comments, “It is neither difficult nor risky to find in these quotations anything more than a vague Judaic reminiscence. By substituting just a few terms, in fact, certain cardinal principles of Judaism: the principle of Election, meant not as a privilege but as a harsh and imposed duty and which, if one wants it and can assume it, can lead to a higher level of consciousness; the sense of Law, of its severity and its necessity, its acceptance as a transcendent principle and as an instrument of a higher freedom; and, finally, the sense of Unity, from which every multiplicity descends that does not degenerate into chaos and abstraction.”¹⁸

And again: “It [the twelve-tone series] is imposed as the internal law that governs the composition, that from which everything is dependent; this law is founded upon a unitary principle. One cannot but see an analogy, obviously symbolic, with the very function of law in the framework of Hebrew ethics. Hebrew ethical law neither finds its basis in the nature of man, nor in some natural order, nor in an obvious practical teleology: it is self-justifying only as divine law, given by God to mankind in completely exceptional and unnatural circumstances. The problem arises at that moment when this law, in its purity and distance from nature, must come into contact with Man’s world, with his inclinations, with his sensibilities, with his *nature*. Then there appears a seemingly unbridgeable gap. This is the dilemma of Schoenberg the man, the Jew, the musician.”¹⁹

15 *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (New York: Basic Books, 1960), 421-22.

16 For an investigation into the ties of Freud with the Hebrew tradition, see David Meghnagi, *Il padre e la legge: Freud e l'ebraismo* (Venice: Marsilio, 1992).

17 Quoted in Enrico Fubini, *La musica nella tradizione ebraica*, p. 112. I have modified the translation of Schoenberg’s passage, which Fubini took from the Italian edition of the essay (Arnold Schoenberg, *Stile e idea*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975).

18 *Ibid.* p. 113.

19 *Ibid.* p. 120.

And finally: “No doubt the dodecaphonic series is for Schoenberg a symbol or a metaphor for his way of conceiving of God, and this not only because—just as came about in *Moses und Aron*—the series is an entity and the entire opera is based upon it and draws its origins from it, but also because the series is an abstract and not perceptible thing; thus, in an analogous way, God is ‘unrepresentable, invisible and ineffable’. The series, too, is not perceptible to the ear, at least in any direct way; it becomes so only through effects that it produces, that is, in the *multiplicity* that is extracted by it.”²⁰

The twelve-tone series, therefore, is a symbol of the oneness and unrepresentability of God.

The road that leads Schoenberg to link ever more closely dodecaphony and Judaism ends in the opera—or, perhaps better said, oratorio—*Moses und Aron*, which I cannot permit myself to dwell upon here.²¹ I cannot fail to point out what I consider a fruitful contradiction in Schoenberg—that is the fact that, in spite of his arriving at what may appear a self-contained conception of life and art, he continues to debate this conception returning, at opportune times, to tonal writing. This fact must not be seen only as a contradiction within the path that had led him to the logical convergence of philosophical-religious and musical issues, but it is part of a perspective on music which, despite its severity, was not as sectarian as it would seem to be for many disciples of dodecaphony. Proof of this is the respect Schoenberg had for composers with poetics unlike, if not contrary, to his; I think here of Schoenberg’s contemporary Max Reger, whom he considered a genius, or Darius Milhaud, whom, in 1922, he looked up to as the principal representative of polytonality. “If I like him,” he added, “he is secondary. But I think that he has a great deal of talent.”²² And I recall a letter to Milhaud, in which he praises him for his *Le Bœuf sur le toit*.²³

In this apparent “non-coherence” there is, in my opinion, a close bond between Schoenberg and his time, which, in many aspects, *mutatis mutandis*, is still with us in our time. “Mama, what does ‘modern men’ mean?” thus ends the opera *Von heute auf morgen* (From Today to Tomorrow). What *does* it mean? I fear that our destiny as modern men, that we have lived the greater part of our life in one of the most agonizing periods in history, and that even at the dawn of this new century we must confront human bestiality and stupidity, I fear that our destiny lies in living with our loss of a center, with torment and anguish, and in the impossibility of aspiring—except at the cost of deluding ourselves by constructing a *heile Welt*, an intact and harmonious world—to a philosophical or religious system claiming to prove everything right and to which we can turn to resolve conflicts.²⁴

I like to think that Schoenberg, like a seismograph of his own time, registered musically the tormented, fragmented identity of modern man, and that his music, be it atonal, dodecaphonic or tonal, is the expression of this multiple identity.

20 *Ibid.* p. 115.

21 I refer the reader to the enlightening essay by E. Fubini in *La musica nella tradizione ebraica*, 106-125.

22 See the letter of October 26, 1922 to A. Zemlinsky, in A. Schoenberg, *Briefe*, 81.

23 See *Arnold Schoenberg 1874-1951. Lebensgeschichte in Begegnungen* ed. Nuria Nono Schoenberg (Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1952), 400. I also think of the esteem and admiration Schoenberg had for George Gershwin, about whom he wrote, “For me an artist is like an apple tree when its time comes, whether it likes it or not, it flowers and begins to produce apples; and just like an apple tree, which neither knows nor seeks to know the value that the market experts attach to its apples, a true composer does not ask the experts in the serious arts if his ‘produce’ will be liked: he simply feels that he has something to say, and he says it. There is no doubt in my mind that Gershwin was an innovator. What he realized with rhythm, harmony and melody is not a style, but it is profoundly different from the mannerism of many so-called serious composers.” And again, “I do not have to say if history will consider Gershwin a Johann Strauss or a Debussy, an Offenbach or a Brahms, a Lehár or a Puccini. But I know that he is an artist and composer who has expressed musical ideas that were new, new as the means with which he expressed them” (quoted in G. Manzoni, *Arnold Schoenberg*, 152). I could also mention the irritation Schoenberg felt for the treatment Theodor W. Adorno reserved for Stravinsky in *Philosophie der neuen Musik*: “I thought he was a musician,” it seems he exclaimed—this by way of saying that Schoenberg, with all his idiosyncrasies, was a musician and was capable of recognizing musical worth. [An excursion on Schoenberg’s characterization of “friends” has been omitted.]

24 In a time long past (1986) I wrote, “Whoever does not grab the crutches that beliefs of any kind offer him—religious or lay—cannot help but experience a feeling of dizziness.” See Luca Lombardi, “Tra preistoria e postmoderno,” in *Molteplicità di poetiche e linguaggi musicali d’oggi: Atti del convegno di Nuova Consonanza* (Roma, 6-7 novembre 1986), ed. Daniela Tortora, (Milano: Unicopli, 1988), 27ff.

Thus, *Kol Nidre*, Op. 39, a composition written in 1938, is tonal—in G minor. Personally, this or other presumed contradictions do not disturb or worry me at all; their absence would actually disturb me more. Earlier I observed that in the philosophical as well as musical views of Schoenberg there is room for contradictions that he was unable, or perhaps did not want, to resolve. *Kol nidre* is a traditional Hebrew prayer which is sung on the eve of the festival of forgiveness, or Day of Atonement, or, as it is expressed in German, reconciliation (*Versöhnung*), that is the Festival of Yom Kippur. Schoenberg reworked the original text of the prayer and derived, from various versions of the melody, the theme that is the basis of his composition. The work—written upon the suggestion of Dr. Jacob Sonderling, rabbi of Los Angeles—was begun on August 10, 1938 and completed September 22, 1938. The first performance was on October 4, 1938, the eve of Yom Kippur, in Los Angeles under the direction of Schoenberg himself.

The traditional melody is from the sixteenth century, and there exist many versions. Schoenberg turned to seven of them. “The melody suffers from monotony and sentimentality. This is partly caused by the circumstance that it is composed in a minor-like church mode.”²⁵ At that time, adds Schoenberg, there was not yet a clear difference between the emotional effects of major and minor. Bach, says Schoenberg, would have written it in a major key, because, for him, as for us, the minor mode expressed sad and poignant emotions. If in the 1500s the melody could express “dignity, gravity, solemnity and reverential fear” (“awe”), nowadays, notes Schoenberg, there is a discrepancy between the solemnity of the text and the sentimentality with which it is presented—sentimentality accentuated by embellishments and ornamentation added, over time, by various cantors. Schoenberg brings other criticism to bear on the traditional melody (on all its versions, evidently), saying that it is constructed in an unsatisfying manner—on the contrary, it is not really constructed at all—having no climax and ending without any apparent musical reason: it simply “ceases to go on”; the ending is neither prepared, nor constructed, nor emphasized.²⁶ Schoenberg was surprised by the traditional interpretation of the text of *Kol nidre*, according to which, on the Day of Atonement all commitments undertaken during the year may be considered annulled. Schoenberg was not the first not to understand why the Jews were authorized to make “oaths and vows and promises” that later could be considered null and void. “No sincere and honest man,” comments Schoenberg, “could understand such an attitude.”²⁷

And, in a letter to Paul Dessau, he writes, “I think that this interpretation, since it is really immoral, is wrong. It is in contradiction to the high ethics of all Hebrew law. From the first moment I was convinced (a thing later shown to be true when I read that the *Kol nidre* originated in Spain) that it meant that those who, either spontaneously or as a pretense, had embraced the Christian religion, could, on this Day of Atonement, reconcile with their God and that all the vows²⁸ should be dissolved. Therefore, this does not refer to commercial entanglements.”²⁹ And he continues, listing the difficulties encountered in using the traditional melody:

1. In reality there is no such melody, but a series of formulas [*Floskeln*] clearly resembling each other without being identical, but not always appearing in the same order. 2. This melody is monodic, it is not based on harmony in the sense we attribute to it, and perhaps not even on polyphony. From a selection of versions I extracted the phrases that there are in common and I arranged them in a logical order. One of my principal tasks was to cut Bruch’s cello sentimentality, etc., with some acidity, and to confer upon this DECREE the dignity of a law or an edict. I believe I succeeded. These measures 58-63 are not, at least, in a sentimental minor.³⁰

What happens at measure 58? It is here that the melody from *Kol nidre* appears for the first time. The reader (the Rabbi) says:

25 See “Dokument 1, Aufsatz Schoenbergs ohne Titel,” in Arnold Schoenberg, *Chorwerke II*, ed. Christian Martin Schmidt (Mainz: B. Schotts Söhne—Wien: Universal Edition AG, 1977)—Arnold Schoenberg, *Sämtliche Werke*. Abteilung V: Chorwerke, Reihe B. 19, xi.

26 “Dokument 2, Aufsatzentwurf Schoenbergs,” in A. Schoenberg, *Chorwerke II*, i.

27 *Ibid.*, xii.

28 Schoenberg uses here two synonyms: Gelübde, which means “vow” and Gelöbnis, “solemn promise, vow.”

29 “Dokument 3, Aus einem Brief Schoenbergs vom 22.11.1941 an Paul Dessau,” in A. Schoenberg, *Chorwerke II*, xii.

30 *Ibid.*

All Vows and Oaths and Promises and Plights of Any Kind
wherewith we pledged ourselves
counter to our inherited Faith in God
Who is One, Everlasting, Unseen, Unfathomable—
We declare these null and void.
We repent that these obligations have estranged us
From the sacred task we were chosen for.³¹

The melody (its first fragment) is given to the woodwinds (2 flutes, oboe, E-flat clarinet, clarinet in A, bass clarinet, and bassoon), all in unison and in the same octave; the brasses “wrench” the harmonies (in G, though with an unexpected harmonic development and with a few spurious chords with respect to tonality, G minor with its two flats, even though the tonic is harmonized, both at the beginning and the end of this fragment, in the major); the strings, with a figuration of slightly breathless triplets contrasting with the calm and serene flow of the melody—it, too, in unison, albeit in four different octaves—move around the various harmonic poles.

Then (in m.63) follows the second fragment of the melody; it is scored—still in unison, this time at three octaves—for oboe, bass clarinet and bassoon (the latter in its high register). Of the various versions (Schoenberg spoke of seven, but the critical apparatus accompanying the score in Schoenberg’s *Complete Works* lists of five), Schoenberg chose Schorr’s, which, with respect to the others, is distinguished by an oriental flavor, or, as I feel, a “Russian” one.³²

Oriental inflections appear from the outset of the composition: already in the fourth measure there is a figure in the flute, taken up three measures later by the A clarinet an octave lower (b-flat, c-flat, a, b-flat, a-flat, g) with markedly oriental characteristics, rendered especially, but not only, by the Neapolitan second, a-flat to g. It is noteworthy that Schoenberg gives an oriental flavor to this Hebraic composition of his, not only because in this way he puts himself in tune with the Hebrew text, but also, in the light of what he declared in 1933 to Klatzkin (“We are Orientals and nothing keeps us tied to the West”) and then reconfirmed several times.

The fragment with the Neapolitan second may be considered part of the scale (g, a-flat, b-flat, c-flat, d, e-flat, f-sharp, g), an eminently oriental scale, which was not present in the fragments of the original melody, but appears in descending fashion in Schoenberg’s score in measures 44-45 (the text says, “A light is sown for the pious”); then, almost at the end of the piece, in measures 170-173 (“A light is sown for the sinner”): a, g-sharp, f, e, d, c-sharp.

Apart from the literal quotation of the individual fragments of the traditional melody (in the version worked out by him), Schoenberg uses these fragments like building blocks with which he skillfully orders the structure of the composition. Thus, in measure 15, after an interesting succession of chords (however with a V-I progression in the bass in the main key of G minor), there is a superposition of various and highly different motifs: the low register (tuba) states the inversion of the first phrase of the melody (the one that will be presented in measure 58) in half notes, while the same fragment in shorter note values (sixteenth notes and quarter notes) is presented by the trumpet; at the same time the E-flat clarinet and violins I and II take up an expressive motif—I might even say expressionistic—that can be retraced to the basic material, even though it has been transformed in such a way (mainly by inverting the interval of minor second to a major seventh) as to acquire in reality a completely different meaning (expressionistic, precisely); two figures in addition, presented respectively by the violas and the A clarinet, complete this dense passage, which suitably exemplifies the complexity, layering, and, I would like to add, the synthesis of diverse expressive spheres. But it is not appropriate here for me to enter further into an analysis of this marvelous

31 *Ibid.*, 39.

32 *Ibid.*, 15. Another “Russian” fragment (common to the versions of Schorr, Heller and Kornitzer, bottom of p. 18) is practically identical to a passage in Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, introduced by the flute in G at measure 5 in number 93 (“Cercles mystérieux des adolescents”).

score more worthy of an entire essay. Together with its beauty and expressive dynamism, what strike me in this composition are its freedom and severity (two qualities that go hand in hand in great music). Schoenberg does not hesitate to use tonality (the composition, as I have pointed out begins in G minor and ends in G major with a great deal of V-I progressions in the chorus and plagal chords in the brasses, cellos and basses), nor to use procedures from traditional musical rhetoric, such as progressions (which recur many times) or illustrative gestures: for example, when the Rabbi proclaims, “In the beginning God said, ‘LET THERE BE LIGHT,’ a thirty-second-note figure given to the three clarinets (E flat, A and bass) flies up in a zigzag into the highest register in m.32. At “lighting of the lamp” also come into play piccolo and flute (in the highest register), trumpet, flexaton, suspended cymbal and—an interesting choice—not the violins, but the violas, and only in their relatively high register. One could mention many other examples of these illustrative gestures. Vice-versa, a figure with dotted rhythm (derived, as well, from a fragment of the traditional melody) is used in a way that I would call Mahlerian—likewise appear other Mahlerian passages, and perhaps one could say that the common denominator, what links Schoenberg to Mahler, is that Hebrew (musical) substratum.

As is well known, Schoenberg’s return to tonality—*Kol nidre* is not a twelve-tone composition nor does it have anything dodecaphonic about it—cannot be seen as a *Zurücknahme*, or a retraction (to use a notion dear to the pseudo-Schoenberg in Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*). There is nothing ideological about the work; its motivations are both practical (the wish to write a composition capable of being used during the ceremony of Yom Kippur) and musical. From this free and “pluralist” stance there is much to be learned.

I should like to conclude these thoughts, as I began them, on a personal note. My relationship with music, with other composers of the past and present, does not come about, as much as it is possible, through ideological mediations—not to say intellectual or intellectualistic—but is ultimately some kind of physical, almost visceral reality. Music takes over the entire body, brain and viscera included. In this sense it is a long time that that I have not been “Brechtian”³³ and, as far as I am concerned, regarding physical involvement (“physical” also includes the brain), I feel very close (and the *Kol nidre* is here a glaring exception) to the Schoenberg who around 1910 was composing “without a net.” To Schoenberg the explorer of a new musical reality, to Schoenberg who—with the words of Stefan George—in the *Second Quartet*, Op. 10 (1907-1908), says, “I have the presentiment of air from another planet [...] I dissolve into sounds [...] surrendering, free of desires, to the great breathing.”³⁴ And I feel close to the Schoenberg of *Erwartung*, Op. 17, and of the *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, Op. 16. The most famous of these pieces is the third, with the title *Akkordfärbungen*, in which Schoenberg gives an extraordinary example of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, from a rib of which was born—to give just one, but significant example—an important element of the post-second-world-war period: Ligeti. The notes of the chords used in this movement migrate from instrument to instrument while individual pitches are replaced relatively slowly by others, producing a marvelous balance between orchestration and formal articulation. The latter seems to be a function of the former. And yet—something unknown to most, and again a magnificent example of Schoenberg’s ability to craft an innovative bridge between past and present and, in this case, even the future—the piece is a fugue.³⁵

[Source: Typescript “Desiderio e paura della libertà: Arnold Schönberg a cinquant’anni dalla morte,” final version of 2002. Published under the same title in *Rivista Italiana di Musicologica* XXXVII (2002, N.1), 143-157; Becheri 02,3.]

33 Brecht—as a child of his times *sachlich* or *neusachlich*—claimed to be suspicious of any *hitzig* (“hotheaded”) music, music that, as he liked to say, would make the body temperature rise. This, in his opinion, would not happen with the music of Bach, which he particularly loved. But how can we reconcile that with his declared love of *Tristan*? Even Brecht—thank heaven—was not without contradictions!

34 Arnold Schoenberg, *Streichquartett II* (Wien–London: Universal Edition, n.d.), 4th movement.

35 See Max Deutsch, “Das dritte der Fünf Orchesterstücke, opus 16 ist eine Fuge,” in *Musikkonzepte Sonderband: Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn (Munich: edition text+kritik, 1980), 20-28.