

# Theory of Music – Jonathan Dimond

## Early Schoenberg

(version September 2009)

### INTRODUCTION

Arnold Schoenberg's (1874-1951) works fall into four main categories:

- 1) Early Tonal, chromatic (1899-1908)
- 2) Free Atonal, expressionist (1908-1914)
- 3) 12-tone "classic" serial (1923-1938)
- 4) Late/mature (1940-1951)

Note that he was inactive from 1915-1922 – quite a long hiatus for any composer!

As a person, Schoenberg was an impassioned, driven character and not just a cold intellectual. His personality was formed in part by his Hungarian Jewish heritage. A totally systematic and thorough learner, Schoenberg's logical mind and inventiveness emerge when one reads his books "Preliminary exercises in counterpoint" and "Theory of harmony" – two books which interestingly, were written during his free atonal period. This is one of many pieces of evidence that support the notion that Schoenberg viewed his atonal and serial practice as a logical extension of tradition. Schoenberg's compositional approach was impulsive and compulsive, and he was driven to express in other artistic ways, such as painting. Very often, Schoenberg's lyrics and subject matter were drawn from passionate and heart-melting writers, such as those that inspired *Verklärte Nacht* and *Gurre-Lieder*.

## TRANSFIGURED NIGHT Op.4 (1899)

### **Background**

This string sextet is his considered Schoenberg's first masterpiece. It combines Wagnerian passion and the classical balance of form of Brahms (two approaches considered mutually exclusive and probably the cause of the piece's rejection at its first public performance in 1902).

Through definitely chromatic, it makes reassuring glances back to tonality, and is really only one small step away from our previously studied work – Wagner's "Tristan". The instrumentation is two violins, two violas and two celli.

The piece is programmatic, based on a poem by German poet Richard Dehmel (1863-1920). This story is of a couple walking at night in a cold, moonlit forest. Upon the female's confession that she was pregnant with the child of another man, the male declares that he will remain her loving partner and will commit to being the father. Her sin is thus "transfigured" by his love and understanding. The night is thereafter "transfigured" from D minor to D

major, and showered with orchestral lightness. (The score is marked 'une éclat' = "gleaming light").

Transfigured Night is the first symphonic poem composed for a chamber group. (Schoenberg reorchestrated it for a larger ensemble in 1917.)

## Form/Structure

Though the music is continuous for 30 minutes, it is clearly divided into five sections with different emotive characters. These correspond to the five stanzas of Dehmel's original poem.

- 1) Introduction (slow). {dark foreboding mood.}
- 2) Sonata form. (Together with the first section making a Classic 1<sup>st</sup> movement form that contains an introduction (usually slow), followed by a clear exposition, development and recapitulation.) {agitated mood.}
- 3) Transition. (Introduction treated *fortissimo*.) {agitated mood.}
- 4) Sonata form. {Related to the 2<sup>nd</sup> section, but with more warmth, representing the spirit of the man's reaction to his partner's confession.}
- 5) Coda (Rich harmonies and the aforementioned shower of orchestral lightness {peaceful, content, representing the uniting lovers}.

The following analysis is by Arnold Schoenberg, 1950 and sourced from: [http://www.schoenberg.at/6\\_archiv/music/works/op/compositions\\_op4\\_programnotes\\_e.htm](http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/music/works/op/compositions_op4_programnotes_e.htm)

My notes are in curly brackets and track times for the CD are in square brackets.

Promenading in a park,



[0:00] {Introduction} {steady D pedal representing the slow walking pace.}

in a clear, cold moonlight night,



[1:26] {Introduction}



[2:11] {Introduction}

the wife confesses a tragedy to the man in a dramatic outburst.



[2:57] {Section 2}

She had married a man whom she did not love. She was unhappy and lonely in this marriage,



[3:52] {Section 2} {woman's memory of loneliness}

but forced herself to remain faithful,



[5:27] {Section 2} {develops into succeeding "wild" motive}

and finally obeying the maternal instinct, she is now with child from a man she does not love. She even had considered herself praiseworthy for fulfilling her duty toward the demands of nature.



[6:59] {Section 2}

A climactic ascension, elaborating the motif,



[9:03] {Section 2} {"wild" motive. Represents woman's urgent speech. Actually marked "wild" in the score...}

expresses her self-accusation of her great sin. In desperation she walks now beside the man,



[12:53] {Section 3}

with whom she has fallen in love, fearing his sentence will destroy her. But the voice of a man speaks, a man whose generosity is as sublime as his love.



[14:43] {Section 3}

The preceding first half of the composition ends in E-flat minor, a), of which, as a transition, only B-flat (b) remains, in order to connect with the extreme contrast in D-Major, (c).

Harmonics,



[16:41] {Section 4}

adorned by muted runs, b, express the beauty of the moonlight and introduce above, a glittering accompaniment,



[16:58] {Section 4}

a secondary theme,



[17:15] {Section 4}

which soon changes into a duet between Violin and Cello.



[18:25] {Section 4}

This section reflects the mood of a man whose love, in harmony with the splendor and radiance of nature, is capable of ignoring the tragic situation: "The child you bear must not be a burden to your soul."

Having, reached a climax, this duet is connected by a transition with a new theme.



[18:55] {Section 4}

Its melody, expressing the "warmth that flows from one of us into the other", the warmth of love, is followed by repetitions and elaborations of preceding themes. It leads finally to another new theme,



[21:33] {Section 4} {rising P.4ths representing renewed optimism expressed by man.}

which corresponds to the man's dignified resolution: this warmth "will transfigure your child, " so as to become "my own ".

An ascension leads to the climax, a repetition of the man's theme,



of the second part.

[22:50] {Section 4}

A long coda section concludes the work. Its material consists of themes of the preceding parts, all of them modified anew, so as to glorify the miracles of nature, that have changed this night of tragedy into a transfigured night.

[23:24] {Section 5}

*It shall not be forgotten that this work, at its first performance in Vienna, was hissed and caused riots and fist fights. But very soon it became very successful.*

Copyright by Arnold Schoenberg,  
August 26, 1950

from: Arnold Schönberg : Self-Portrait. A collection of articles programme notes and letters by the composer about his own works. *Edited by Nuria Schoenberg Nono*. Pacific Palisades 1988, p. 119-123

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## **Other Observations**

A summary of the overall chord/key progression of the five movements:

D min – Db maj – F# maj – Db maj – D maj

A more detailed list of the sequence of keys within the aforementioned five sections:

- 1) & 2) D min, Bb maj, F# min, F min, E maj
- 3) D maj
- 4) & 5) F# maj, Eb min, Db maj, F maj, Db maj, D maj  
{NB F# maj to Eb min - the brightest to the darkest! Key opposition!}

The piece ends with successive codas trying to stabilize D major. Eventually, a semitonal resolution occurs – Eb to D major. This is the last time Schoenberg ever does this! (Future resolutions are never of this kind, and his music tends to feature transitions more than resolutions.)

At the setup for “Look at how the stars are sparkling in the night sky” which occurs in the transitional 3<sup>rd</sup> section, Schoenberg sounds V7 of D (the home key), but changes into the new key of F# major. This is one of many deceptive cadences.

First used in section 2 [3:17] {see manuscript}, this deceptive cadence sequence moves from D minor, the home key of the section, through to what is expected to be a perfect cadence after a sequence of chromatic voice-leading. (The top line and bass line move in contrary step-wise motion.) Just when the suspense seems to be resolved, the A7 cadences to an F# dim.7 chord and on to C minor. It sets up the cello theme that recounts the woman’s loneliness, and that she had married a man whom she didn’t love.

As per Wagner’s “Tristan”, there is a sense with Schoenberg here of “developing variation” and a gradual unfolding of motives (leitmotifs) which take on new levels of meaning as the story progresses.

Early in the introduction [1:10], Schoenberg sounds a rising arpeggio figure in Dm13, resting on the major 2<sup>nd</sup> of the key of D minor {see manuscript}. This motive is repeated with the characteristic violin trills and cello responses. I found it strangely reminiscent of a Bjork composition called “Hidden Place”, the first track on “Vespertine” [0:49] which is sounded as a prominent link into and during the chorus. This line is sounded by the choir and strings, and stands as the most prominent (read – singable) feature of the Bjork composition. {Play Bjork CD}

## **STRING QUARTET No. 1 in D minor, Op. 7 (1905)**

We take a brief look now at a work which embodies several mature concepts which were to stay with Schoenberg throughout his composing career, while still being tied to late Romantic extended tonality.

These theoretical concepts include:

- Relatively small number of motifs;
- Speech-like construction of themes (with rhythmic variety and irregularity – “musical prose”);
- Coincidence of thematic statements with their countersubjects;
- Melodic statements of varied and irregular length (i.e. uneven, asymmetrical and changing phrase periods);
- Rapid development of motifs (with rhythmic and harmonic variation occurring rapidly);
- Highly contrapuntal and polyphonic texture;

In this string quartet, the 45-odd minutes of music contains a relatively small number of motifs, but their variations are woven into a texture which is dense both vertically and horizontally. The listener will gain a paradoxical feeling of extreme planning and control on the compositional process while it delivers a free-wheeling and highly emotional outpouring of expressive ideas. I feel this is not exclusive to String Quartet no.1, but rather quite common in all of Schoenberg's works.

**Task:** Listen to CD and read score.

**Task:** Read *Why is Schoenberg's Music so hard to Understand?* (Berg, 1952)

**Task:** Attempt to compose two 2 ½ bar phrases in D minor in the style of the opening bars of Schoenberg's quartet. Start with a thematic statement in violin 1 and follow it with a sequential reply. Then chose a lower voice a write a contrapuntal countersubject.

## ***“I Feel a Breath of Air from other planets”***

### **STRING QUARTET No.2 Op.10 (1908)**

#### ***Background***

This quartet has an intimate, personal tone and is not nearly as extroverted as its predecessor. It was produced during the tumultuous year when Schoenberg's wife Mathilde was caught having an affair with Arnold Schoenberg's painting teacher, the 25 year old Richard Gerstl. Gerstl reacted by throwing all his work on a bonfire, stabbing and hanging himself. Schoenberg himself considered suicide, as is evidenced by several wills and personal diary entries:

*“I have cried, behaved like someone in despair ... had thoughts of suicide and almost carried them out, have plunged from one madness to another – in a word, I am totally broken.”* (Shawm, p.46)

(<http://www.scena.org/columns/lebrecht/031022-NL-Schoenberg.html>)

The second string quartet stands on the precipice of tonality, and although the work begins clearly in F# minor, and ends with an F# major chord, and is titled as being in F# minor, it is the last composition in which Schoenberg uses a key signature. During the course of the work, despite there being recognizable triads and seventh chords, the harmony is intersected with chromatic lines which do not offer the type of resolution found in “Transfigured Night”.

If “Transfigured Night” is considered like Wagner's “Tristan and Isolde” but “played with the ink still wet and smeared down the page” (as one critic puts it), the 2<sup>nd</sup> String Quartet defies such analogies with past similar works.

This four-movement, 21 minute work has the following titles, keys, and tempi:

1. Maßig (Moderate), F sharp minor
2. Sehr rasch (Very brisk), D minor
3. "Litanei", langsam ("Litany", slow), E flat minor
4. "Entrückung", sehr langsam ("Rapture", very slow), No key signature

The third and fourth movements contain a surprising addition: the strings are joined by soprano voice, singing lyrics by the German poet Stefan George. His work is called "The Seventh Ring", and is translated below:

#### **Litany**

Deep is the sadness that gloomily comes over me,  
Again I step, Lord, in your house.  
Long was the ride, my limbs are weary,  
The shrines are empty, only anguish is full.  
My thirsty tongue desires wine.  
The battle was hard, my arm is stiff.  
Grudge peace to my staggering steps,  
for my hungry gums break your bread!  
Weak is my breath, bringing the dream,  
my hands are hollow, my mouth fevers.  
Lend your cool, douse the fires,  
rub out hope, send the light!  
Fires in my heard still glow, open,  
inside my heart a cry wakes.  
Kill the longing, close the wound!  
Take my love away, give me your joy.

#### **Rapture**

I feel a breath of air from other planets.  
I faintly through the darkness see faces  
Friendly even now, turning toward me.  
And trees and paths that I loved fade  
So I can scarcely know them and you bright  
Beloved shadow--summon my anguish--  
Are only extinguish completely in a deep  
glowing  
In the frenzy of the fight  
With a pious show of reason.  
I lose myself in tones, circling, weaving,  
With unfathomable thanks and unnamed love  
I happily surrender to the great breath.  
A violent wind passes over me  
In the sway of commitment where ardent cries  
In dust flung by women on the ground:  
Then I see a filmy mist rising  
In a sun-filled, open expanse  
That includes only the farthest mountain  
hatches.  
The land looks white and smooth like whey,  
I climb over enormous canyons.  
I feel as if above the last cloud  
Swimming in a sea of crystal radiance--  
I am only a spark of the holy fire  
I am only a whisper of the holy voice.

**Play CD by Rudolf Kolisch – CD 1 Tr.6 Schoenberg's commentary.**

**Play CD of Quartet – Montreal and Kolisch versions.**

*"My second string quartet caused, at its first performance in Vienna, December 1908, riots which surpassed every previous and subsequent happening of this kind. Although there were also some personal enemies of mine, who used the occasion to annoy me - a fact which can today be proved true - I have to admit, that these riots were justified without the hatred of my enemies, because they were a natural reaction of a conservatively educated audience to a new kind of music. Astonishingly, the first movement passed without any reaction, either for or against. But, after the first measures of the second movement, the greater part of the audience started to laugh and did not cease to disturb the performance during the third movement "Litanei," (in form of variations) and the fourth movement "Entrückung." It was very embarrassing for the Rosé Quartet and the singer, the great Mme. Marie Gutheil-Schoder. But at the end of this fourth movement a remarkable thing happened. After the singer ceases, there comes a long coda played by the string quartet alone. While, as before mentioned, the audience failed to respect even a singing lady, this coda was accepted without any audible disturbance. Perhaps even my enemies and adversaries might have felt something here."*

Arnold Schönberg, introductory note for the private recording with the Kolisch Quartet, Los Angeles 1936/37; vgl. Fred Steiner "A History of the First Complete Recording of the Schoenberg String Quartets," in Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute 2 (February 1978), no.2, 122–137)

The collision of tonal and non-tonal languages in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Quartet apparently troubled Schoenberg himself. He wasn't happy with the inconsistent use of tonality, nor sounding of chromatic passages with functional cadences tacked on the end. In his own words:

*"It seemed inadequate to force a movement into the Procrustean\* bed of tonality without supporting it by harmonic progressions that pertain to it."*

(Shawm, p.50)

\* Procrustean refers to a legendary Greek robber who tortured and maimed his victims by stretching or amputating them to make them fit on his bed.

Note the title of this lecture ("I feel a breath of air from other planets") featured in the 4<sup>th</sup> movement. Also listen for the melody that the second violin quotes of a Viennese folk song "Oh, dear Augustin, it's all over" ("O du lieber Augustin, alles ist hin"), in the trio of the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement. {See manuscript.} Both are pointing toward the personal crisis in his life and that of conventional harmony, which was "all over" in the following years, and the "other worldliness" of the new language.

[http://www.schoenberg.at/6\\_archiv/music/works/op/compositions\\_op10\\_notes\\_e.htm](http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/music/works/op/compositions_op10_notes_e.htm)

## Form/Structure

1. Maßig (Moderate), F sharp minor  
A sonata form movement with a subjective mood. Five thematic ideas grow out of the first, and refer back to the home key.
2. Sehr rasch (Very brisk), D minor  
A psycho mood! Panic! Hyperventilation! Large number of theme groups, colliding and developing initially from the first theme of the first movement but moving well beyond this. The aforementioned folk melody appears in violin 2 during the trio section before the anxiety-ridden conclusion.
3. "Litanei", langsam ("Litany", slow), E flat minor  
The third movement may be viewed as a development section for the two preceding movements. It remains relatively set in its home key of E-flat minor, even if it is richly contrapuntal. It is less prone to modulation, its variations closely adhering to the form of the poem. The theme of "Litany" comprises four figures extracted from the first two movements and function as 'leitmotifs' within the work's underlying program. In the first variation, the soprano voice enters with a melody that retains its thematic independence throughout the remaining variations.
4. "Entrückung", sehr langsam ("Rapture", very slow), No key  
Discussing the finale in his "Notes on the Four String Quartets," Schönberg remarked:

*"The fourth movement, Entrückung, begins with an introduction, depicting the departure from earth to another planet. The visionary poet here foretold sensations, which perhaps soon will be affirmed. Becoming relieved from gravitation – passing through clouds into thinner and thinner air, forgetting all the troubles of life on earth – that is attempted to be illustrated in this introduction."*

Despite the progressive tonal language of this finale (fitting with the "Ich löse mich in tönen" line of the poem), it otherwise adheres to a standard classical design:

Introduction,  
Main Group (verses 1 to 3),  
Second Group (verses 4 and 5),  
Development (verses 6 to 8),  
Coda.

In juxtaposition to sections that entirely suspend the feeling of key – in particular the Introduction, which sets up "twelve-tone" fields, but organizes them around fifth relationships –, other passages offer conspicuously tonal cadences. As in the scherzo (2<sup>nd</sup> movement), the writing generally employs a free-floating tonality.

For the performance of "Entrückung," Schönberg gave priority to the quality and expressive projection of timbre, as is particularly evident in the handwritten instructions he entered in one of his manuscripts. Here, for instance, is how he imagines a musically transcendent depiction of a gossamer mist as it slowly dissipates:

*“The whole passage must be like a breath. Nothing should stand out. Only the voice may be emphasized, and then in timbre only, not in loudness.”*

[http://www.schoenberg.at/6\\_archiv/music/works/op/compositions\\_op10\\_notes\\_e.htm](http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/music/works/op/compositions_op10_notes_e.htm)

## ***The Role of Motives in creating Form***

The intrinsic role that form plays in creating a musical masterpiece is well understood by Schoenberg. His assertion that something needs to be structurally beautiful in order to be beautiful demonstrates the perspective of this aesthetic. In his own words:

*“The principal function of form is to advance our understanding... And though the object of form is not [itself] beauty, by providing comprehensibility, form produces beauty.”* (Schoenberg, 1975, p.380)

It deserves reiterating that in the pantonal chromatic world which was being introduced in parts of the Second String Quartet, polyphony comes to the fore as the principal texture. Furthermore, with the absence of conventional cadences as harmonic punctuation marks and providers of structural landmarks, Schoenberg places formal importance on the motive as the chief force in creating unity. The motives in this work are aurally recognizable very clearly even on first listening, even though their transformations may surprise us.

Examine the music from the 4<sup>th</sup> movement which accompanies the lyrics: *“Ich löse mich in tönen, kreisend, webend...”* (“I lose myself in tones, circling, weaving, With unfathomable thanks and unnamed love.”) The initial 4-bar vocal phrase (plus anacrusis) is followed by a 3-bar phrase which includes over-the-bar suspensions, echoed and dispersed by the strings. The voice then takes the violin triplet motive and makes a 2-bar phrase, followed by another sequence that is elongated by 3 extra notes within 2 bars, including an anacrusis. The final phrase of this line is 4 bars long, starting out much like the prior one but with augmented durations and finishes with a sub-phrase likened to that which the second finished with. All the while, we have a chromatically-moving bass line and a texture that starts homophonically and becomes increasingly syncopated and with suspensions throughout the strings. The polyphony reduces again for the last phrase, closing the fourth stanza with a natural arch shape. **See OHP of score.**

In his book “Fundamentals of Musical Composition” Schoenberg writes:

*“Form means that a piece is organized; i.e. that it consists of elements functioning like those of a living organism... The chief requirements for the creation of a comprehensible form are logic and coherence. The presentation, development and interconnection of ideas must be based on relationship. Ideas must be differentiated according to their importance and function.”*

(Schoenberg, 1967, p.1)

Increasingly, the concept of oppositions also takes on new proportions in works from the Second Quartet onward. In Schoenberg’s words:

*“Large forms develop through the generating power of contrasts”* and that these oppositions *“illuminate the main idea”* of the composition. (Schoenberg, 1967, p.178)

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