

Demystifying Schoenberg's Conducting

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[Video](#): Silent, black and white footage of Schönberg conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic in a rehearsal of *Verklärte Nacht*, Op. 4 in March 1935.

[Audio ex. 1](#): Schoenberg conducting *Pierrot lunaire*, 'Eine blasse Wäscherin', Los Angeles, CA, 24 September 1940.

[Audio ex. 2](#): Schoenberg conducting *Verklärte Nacht* Op. 4, Berlin, 1928.

[Audio ex. 3](#): Schoenberg conducting *Verklärte Nacht* Op. 4, Berlin, 1928.

In 1975 Charles Rosen wrote: 'From time to time appear malicious stories of eminent conductors who have not realized that, in a piece of ... Schoenberg, the clarinetist, for example, picked up an A instead of a B-flat clarinet and played his part a semitone off'.¹ This widespread anecdote is often told about Schoenberg as a conductor. There are also music critics who wrote negatively and quite decisively about Schoenberg's conducting. For example, Theo van der Bijl wrote in *De Tijd* on 7 January 1921 about a concert in Amsterdam: 'An entire Schoenberg evening under the direction of the composer, who unfortunately is not a conductor!' Even in the scholarly literature one finds declarations from time to time that Schoenberg was an unaccomplished conductor.² All of this might have contributed to the fact that very few people now bother taking Schoenberg's conducting seriously.³

I will challenge this prevailing negative notion by arguing that behind some of the criticism of Schoenberg's conducting are motives, which relate to more than mere technical issues. Relevant factors include the way his music was received in general, his association with Mahler, possibly anti-Semitism, occasionally negative behaviour of performers, and his complex relationship with certain people. The aim is not to show that Schoenberg was a great conductor like, for example, Mahler. Demystifying Schoenberg's conducting may however pave the way to a re-evaluation of his approach to music in general. Performance evidence, traditionally disregarded in analysis, may serve as a source of authority on the same level as his written scores.⁴

It would be useful to start with a review of Schoenberg's activities as a performer in general and as a conductor in particular. Schoenberg had an early background playing the violin, viola and cello. He had violin and viola lessons from the physician Oskar

¹ Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg* (New York: Viking, 1975), 49.

² Hans Stuckenschmidt, for example, argued several times that Schoenberg was not a good conductor. See, for example, Hans Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg: His life, World, and Work*, trans. Humphrey Searle (New York: Schirmer, 1978), 42. See also Leonard Stein in Arnold Schoenberg, 'Der kleine Muck. The Concertgebouw Revisited', *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, 2/2 (1977/1978), 101.

³ I would like to thank the University of London Central Research Fund for a grant towards a research trip to the Arnold Schönberg Center in Vienna where I conducted some of this study. All sound examples, figures and video were reproduced here with the kind permission of Belmont Music Publishers.

⁴ For more about this approach see Joel Lester, 'Performance and Analysis: Interaction and Interpretation', in John Rink (ed.), *The Practice of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 197-216. In this article I do not analyse recordings with Schoenberg. One can find such analyses at Avior Byron, 'The Test Pressings of Schoenberg Conducting *Pierrot lunaire*: *Sprechstimme* Reconsidered' *Music Theory Online* 12/1 (February 2006), <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.06.12.1/toc.12.1.html> ; and Avior Byron, 'Pierrot lunaire in studio and in broadcast: *Sprechstimme*, tempo and character', *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland* (2006), forthcoming.

Adler, who was an excellent violinist.⁵ Schoenberg's sister reported that these lessons started at the age of eight, and that she 'can still remember the zeal with which he practiced from the beginning and the rapid progress which he made'.⁶ As a cellist Schoenberg was an autodidact. Together with Zemlinsky and other young musicians they founded the 'Polyhymnia' society where they performed their compositions. They did not have a cello, so they fitted zither strings to a large viola. Schoenberg used the violin fingerings that he knew. Some time later he bought a second-hand cello at the Tandelmarkt, and Friedrich Buxbaum, who was the cellist of the Vienna Philharmonic, showed him cello fingering. Zemlinsky reported: 'We were all young and hungry for music and made music as well as we could every week... At the only cello desk sat a young man who handled his instrument both fierily and wrongly (in any case the instrument deserved nothing better...) and this cello player was Arnold Schoenberg'.⁷ For years Schoenberg performed regularly with excellent musicians such as the famous violin players Kreisler and Kolisch. Schoenberg's sister said that just after leaving his job as a bank clerk, he had quartet evenings at home every week. Later, he continued this chamber music tradition every Sunday in sessions at his home that lasted from noon until 2 or 3 o'clock a.m.⁸ Around 1898 he played string quartets a few times a week, for five to seven hours on each occasion. He also played quartets in Traunkirchen, where he spent his summer vacations from 1921 to 1923.⁹ A special historical occasion when Schoenberg performed as a chamber musician was on 27 May 1921 when a concert of waltzes was organized by the Society for Private Musical Performances in Vienna. He played first violin side by side with Kolisch, while Rankl played second violin, Steinbauer viola, Webern cello, Steuermann piano, and Berg harmonium. They performed four waltzes by Johann Strauss orchestrated by Webern, Berg and Schoenberg. During the time when Schoenberg lived in Mödling (1918-25), music was an important part of his family's life. It was a highly musical family, to be sure: his second wife, Gertrud, was a good pianist; and George, his son from his first marriage, played the horn. Schoenberg's friends and students played string quartets in Mödling with Schoenberg playing the cello.¹⁰

Schoenberg's experience as a conductor started at the age of 21. In 1895 he left his job as a bank clerk, and with the help of his close friend David Josef Bach, found a job as a choral conductor. Schoenberg's first activity as a conductor was to conduct several workers' choruses established by the Social Democratic Party.¹¹ Zemlinsky, who at various stages conducted at the Carltheater in Vienna, the Vienna Volksoper, the Vienna

⁵ See Joan Allen Smith, *Schoenberg and His Circle* (New York, London: Schirmer Books, 1986), 269.

⁶ Quoted from Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg*, 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-33.

⁸ Smith, *Schoenberg and His Circle*, 113.

⁹ Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg*, 34, 275, 411

¹⁰ Schoenberg wrote music for these private occasions (such as *Weihnachtsmusik* from 1921 for two violins, violoncello, harmonium and piano) and built music stands for playing quartets. Schoenberg's working room in the apartment on the upper floor of Bernhardgasse 6 contained a piano, a harmonium, two violins, a viola and a cello. His string instruments were used for concerts in his house in Mödling for friends and close students on Sundays and for other occasion such as the Waltz-Evening mentioned above. His Hinkel-Harmonium was used mainly by the Society for Private Musical Performances. Schoenberg used an Ibach piano from 1913. These instruments and the music stands can be seen today in the Schönberg-Haus in Mödling (where this information has been taken from).

¹¹ It is certain that he conducted such choruses in Mödling and Meidling. Schoenberg's name appears for the first time as a conductor in a local paper, the *Mödlinger Bezirks-Bote* of 29 November 1896, about an occasion when he conducted before an audience of over three hundred and fifty people. There are records of him conducting different groups in 1897, 1898 and 1899. John Specht, 'Schoenberg Among the Workers: Choral Conducting in Pre-1900 Vienna', *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, 10/2 (1987), 31-32.

Opera, the Berlin Kroll Opera and the Prague German Opera, coached Schoenberg and helped him to acquire conducting technique. Schoenberg's activity as a choral conductor ended around 1900. The next phase of Schoenberg's conducting was in the Überbrettli cabaret theatre in Berlin.¹² Baron Ernst von Wolzogen managed the theatre. Schoenberg signed a contract to work as a conductor from 16 December 1901 to 31 July 1902. He continued to work for the theatre probably during 1903.¹³

As a conductor Schoenberg primarily performed his own works. He conducted the premières of *Pelleas und Melisande*, Op. 5; *Kammersymphonie*, Op. 9b; *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21; *Lied der Walddtaube* from *Gurrelieder*; and *Serenade*, Op. 24.¹⁴ The first time Schoenberg conducted his own music was on 26 January 1905 in Vienna with the Konzertverein Orchestra performing the première of *Pelleas und Melisande*, Op. 5. Schoenberg most frequently conducted *Pierrot lunaire*, Op. 21, *Pelleas und Melisande*, Op. 5 and *Verklärte Nacht*, Op. 4.

In 1918, Erwin Ratz, Schoenberg's student, organized ten open rehearsals where Schoenberg conducted *Kammersymphonie*, Op. 9. It was hoped that if a listener came to know the work with the help of repeated listening, then the reaction of the audience in Vienna would be more favourable than usual. This project had further educational aims. It was assumed that musicians attending the whole process of rehearsing this work under Schoenberg's conducting would see for themselves a living example of how such music should be prepared. The press was not allowed to observe the rehearsals, except for some of the later ones. In the early 1970s Erwin Ratz commented on the project as follows:

It [the open rehearsals] was really a one-time experience ... The *Kammersymphonie* is not such an impossible work, and that was just what was wonderful – that Schoenberg could ... always be able to say something new about the work, about how it sounded as a whole. Then single voices were rehearsed, [and] then a couple taken together, until finally everyone played together, and in that you first heard each voice singly, you acquired a totally different understanding of the whole sound. First the single voices, then the phrasing and ... in the last rehearsals, the entire work was played through twice.¹⁵

He also reported that Schoenberg did not offer analytical comments during the rehearsals and that tempo was always an important issue in those sessions.¹⁶ The *Kammersymphonie* project became a model for rehearsing and performing modern music in the famous Society for Private Musical Performances. Kolisch noted that Schoenberg prepared 'many of the works himself and thereby set an example for us... And this set a canon, a *standard* for performance, which is, of course, still valid today. And I must say that the radiation of this enterprise is still felt today'.¹⁷

Schoenberg went on four conducting tours, three of which featured *Pierrot lunaire*. The first tour took place in 1912 in Germany, Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia. The second tour occurred in 1922 in Switzerland and Holland, while the third one was to Italy in 1924. The fourth tour, in 1930, was of *Von Heute auf Morgen*, Op. 32, in London, Frankfurt and Berlin. Although not on a regular basis, Schoenberg

¹² See Schoenberg's letter dated 16 September 1943 to the Current Biographical Reference Service Monthly Supplement, The A. N. Marquis Company Publishers of *Who's Who in America*.

¹³ Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg*, 54-56.

¹⁴ For a list of Schoenberg's conducting activities see <http://aviorbyron.bravehost.com/schoenberg.html>

¹⁵ Smith, *Schoenberg and His Circle*, 75.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁷ Richard Hoffmann, 'Reminiscences: A Schoenberg Centennial Symposium at Oberlin Collage', *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, 8/1 (1984), 69.

occasionally conducted works of other composers, for example, Beethoven's Violin Concerto, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Mahler's revision, Brahms's Third Symphony, Mahler's Second Symphony and his orchestration of the following: Strauss's *Emperor Waltz* orchestrated in 1925, Bach's Prelude and Fugue in E-flat for Organ (BWV 552) orchestrated in 1928, and Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* orchestrated in 1920. The countries in which he conducted were mostly Austria, Germany, Holland and the U.S.A. The reason he conducted relatively often in Holland had to do with his connections with Mengelberg and the interest he had aroused there. The large number of concerts conducted in Italy was the result of a tour organized by Alfredo Casella, one of the leading Italian composers.

After Schoenberg became a teacher in the *Akademie* in Berlin (1926), his conducting activities decreased - perhaps because he was too busy in his prestigious new post. The emigration to America kept Schoenberg's activities as a conductor on an even lower plane. This might reflect the general neglect that he felt from the American musical establishments and especially from their leading conductors.¹⁸

The Perception of Schoenberg's Conducting

Since Schoenberg conducted mainly his own music it would be reasonable to assume that the reception of him as a conductor was influenced at least partly by the reception of his music. Egon Wellesz, a student of Schoenberg, reported witnessing the 'tragedy of persistent attack on every new work that appeared... it met with ill-considered and malicious rejection'.¹⁹ The scandals created by the early performances of Schoenberg's music are notorious. The performances of the First String Quartet in D minor, Op. 7, and the (first) *Kammersymphonie*, Op. 9, in 1907 and the Second String Quartet in F sharp minor, Op. 10, in 1908 provoked intense outrage and protest among critics.²⁰ Words such as 'Katzenmusik' were used.²¹ The rage intensified in 1910 when the Second String Quartet in F sharp minor, Op. 10, *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11, and *15 Gedichte aus 'Das Buch der Hängenden Gärten'*, Op. 15, were performed, and it reached a climax on 31 March 1913 when Schoenberg conducted a concert with works of his own and by Zemlinsky, Mahler, Berg and Webern. In a special issue from 1924 for Schoenberg's fiftieth birthday, a Viennese paper *Musik-blätter des Anbruch*, reported:

After the second orchestral piece a storm of laughter went through the hall, which was overpowered by the admirers of this nerve-racking and provocative music with thunderous applause... After Schoenberg's Op. 9, his *Kammersymphonie* ... one could hear the shrill sound of door keys among the violent clapping and in the second gallery the first fight of the evening began... when Schoenberg knocked on the desk in the middle of the song and shouted to the public that anyone disturbing the peace would be

¹⁸ See his letter from 23 August 1949 to Olin Downes in Arnold Schoenberg, *Arnold Schoenberg Correspondence: A Collection of Translated and Annotated Letters Exchanged with Guido Adler, Pablo Casals, Emanuel Feuermann and Olin Downes*, ed. Egbert M. Ennulat (Metuchen, N. J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1991), 260. Another manuscript from 4 June 1939 with Schoenberg's claim that critics and conductors were creating a conspiracy against him can be found in T24.10 in the Arnold Schönberg Center in Vienna.

¹⁹ Egon Wellesz, *Arnold Schönberg*, trans. H. Kerridge (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1925; reprint ed., New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 6-7.

²⁰ See Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Faber and Faber: London, 1975), 185-206 for Schoenberg's writings on critics.

²¹ See Leon Botstein, 'Music and Its Public: Habits of Listening and the Crisis of Musical Modernism in Vienna, 1970-1914' (PhD dissertation, Harvard, 1985), 1208; and Willi Reich, *Schoenberg - A Critical Biography*, trans. Leo Black (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), 20-37.

removed by the police, insults, fisticuffs and challenges broke out again. Herr von Webern shouted from his box that the whole lot should be pushed out, and the public answered immediately that the admirers of this misguided kind of music should be sent off to Steinhof [the local lunatic asylum]. It was not an unusual occurrence when one of the public with breathless haste and with ape-like agility climbed over several rows of seats in order to box the object of his anger on the ears ... Finally the president of the Academic Society went onto the conductor's stand and asked the Mahler's memory should be honoured and his 'Kindertotenlieder' listened to. This request only led to a general series of insults, which the President again replied to with ear-boxing. All the public now stormed on to the platform, in front of the musicians, who were pale with fear and trembling, determined to clear the platform and end the concert.²²

Another scandal occurred during the performance of *Pierrot lunaire* on 24 February 1914 at the Rudolphinumsaal Prague. The audience hissed and disrupted the performance. Stuckenschmidt reported that 'Schoenberg went pale and immediately rapped on the stand. One could see that he was in a trembling state of excitement. There was a painful pause, during which even the hissers were quiet. Then Schoenberg had the whole poem repeated; however, this did not prevent some particularly tasteful wits from interrupting again'.²³ Marcel Dick, who participated as a violinist in many of Schoenberg's first performances in Vienna, reported that on those occasions there were 'very large, vociferous, and rather violent disturbances ... shouting and so on'. He even mentions an incident of knifing in a performance of Berg's *Sieben frühe Lieder*.²⁴ Alma Mahler wrote the following in her diary on 27 January 1905: 'Concert yesterday: Zemlinsky-Schoenberg [*Pelleas und Melisande*, Op. 5 was played] ... The audience kept leaving in droves and slamming the doors behind them while the music was being played. There were whistles and cat-calls as well'.²⁵

There might have been deeper aesthetical and philosophical issues that encouraged some of the negative attitudes towards Schoenberg. After the invention of the twelve-tone method Schoenberg's opponents attacked it for being a mathematical game and not music. Schenker, Tovey and many others regarded tonality as the essence of the great Western musical tradition. Schoenberg disagreed with this view since he saw organicism and not tonality as the heart of this tradition. Schoenberg saw the twelve-tone method as a tool that helped the composer create organic unity for small- and especially large-scale works, in the absence of tonality. His declarations claiming that the twelve-tone method was the true continuation of this tradition proved to be threatening to many.²⁶ Arguing that Schoenberg was a constructor and not a musician, particularly not a performer, helped to undermine his ideology and protect their own.²⁷

Apart from dislike of Schoenberg's music and his theoretical/ideological claims, it is possible that anti-Semitism also affected the perception of him as a conductor.²⁸ Leon Botstein points out that by the mid-1920s it was widely argued in Vienna that

²² Translation from Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg*, 184-187.

²³ A concert report by Felix Adler in 'Bohemia'. Translation from Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg*, 209.

²⁴ Smith, *Schoenberg and His Circle*, 70.

²⁵ Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler* (London: John Murray, 1946), 77.

²⁶ See Josef Kerman, 'How we got into Analysis, and how to get out', in *Write all These Down: Essays on Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), 16 [originally published in *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980)].

²⁷ Bruno Walter, for example, raises a general objection to Schoenberg's atonal and twelve-tone music on the ground of the absence of tonality in an interview that can be found in *Bruno Walter: In Rehearsal*, DVD, conducting Johannes Brahms, Symphony No. 2, Vancouver International Orchestra, a CBC Vancouver production, recorded at the Vancouver International Festival, 1958, interview with Albert Goldberg, Mono, TDK (2002).

Schoenberg's music was little more than the product of a Jewish conspiracy, further proof of Wagner's claim concerning Jews and their inability to be truly creative. Most pre-war critics in Vienna were of Jewish origin, yet usually no longer living Jewish traditional life according to the Jewish religious law. Botstein argues that this conflict between Schoenberg and some of these critics was part of a debate on political security, cultural identity and assimilation. Since a large proportion of the audience was Jewish, he claims that Schoenberg's music may have been seen as a direct challenge to other Jews concerning the security afforded through assimilation; music can be seen in this context as an instrument of assimilation. The 'unease' identified by critics reflected their insecurity about being part of the European society. The music of Schoenberg seemed to challenge the audience's fragile 'sense of place'.²⁹

Anti-Semitic responses did not come only from critics of Jewish origin. On 19 January 1913 James Huneker confessed in *The New York Times*: 'I fear and dislike the music of Arnold Schoenberg'.³⁰ Later in the article, while referring to a performance he had heard of *Pierrot lunaire*, Huneker added: 'perhaps the Hebraic strain in the composer's blood has endowed him with the gift of expressing sorrow and desolation and the abomination of living'.³¹ Whether this is an expression of anti-Semitism or the critic's attempt merely to be poetic is not clear. It has been long recognized in the literature that Vienna at that time was by no means free from anti-Semitism. Severine Neff has shown that Viennese critics such as Stauber, Liebstockl and Karpath probably created riots in some of Schoenberg's concerts in Vienna due to his affiliation to Mahler. Indeed, quite apart from hatred of Mahler, Neff suggests that anti-Semitism might have had a role in the attacks on Schoenberg. Liebstockl, for example, was known in Nazi circles. An anti-Semitic text from 1933 mentions his practice of mocking Jewish accents:

The Jews jüdeln [speak with a Jewish accent] even when they do not mauscheln [talk like Jews], and this Jewing is virtually impossible for an Aryan to copy in either its intonation or in its logic.

The critic Julius Korngold once praised the Aryan journalist Hans Liebstockl, who could Jew extraordinary well, by saying that one could hardly note any difference between him and a Jew. Thereupon Hans Liebstockl replied, using his Jew accent: 'There is a difference: I can mauscheln; you've got to'.³²

Anti-Semitic expressions become more arcane than this when they refer to Schoenberg's conducting. K. M. Knittel has demonstrated that the reception of Mahler as a dynamic and energetic conductor was highly affected by anti-Semitism. In the nineteenth-century European context 'nervousness had been widely accepted as a sign of modern life'.³³ It was believed that Jews are highly at risk of catching neurasthenia, which was 'a sign of

²⁸ For a general anti-Semitic review of Schoenberg see Otto Schumann, *Geschichte der Deutschen Musik* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1940), 389-390; see also his *Meyers Konzertführer: Orchestermusik und Instrumentalkonzerte* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1936), 470.

²⁹ Leon Botstein, 'Schoenberg and the Audience: Modernism, Music, and Politics in the Twentieth Century', in ed. Walter Frisch, *Schoenberg and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 39, 40, 44.

³⁰ François Lesure, *Dossier de Presse de Pierrot-lunaire d'Arnold Schönberg: Anthology of Musical Criticism*, (Genève: Editions Minkoff, 1985), 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³² See Otto Hauser, *Die Juden und Halbjuden in der Deutschen Literatur* (Danzig, Leipzig 1933), 13-14; quoted in translation in Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 2-3. Neff's reference to this is in 'Scandal and Painting', *Journal of the Arnold Schönberg Center*, 6 (2004), 66 and 72.

³³ K. M. Knittel, "'Ein Hypermoderner Dirigent": Mahler and anti-Semitism in *Fin-de-siècle* Vienna', *19th Century Music*, 18/3 (1995), 265.

degeneracy and inferiority'.³⁴ Descriptions of excessive conducting gestures, as well as the use of words such as 'demonic', seem less to reflect Mahler's conducting than the problematic world-view of the people who described it. The following two quotations on Schoenberg make an explicit reference to nervousness. Busoni commented on a concert which took place on 4 February 1912 in Berlin in the Harmoniumsaal where Schoenberg conducted an arrangement for piano four-hands of his *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, Op. 16: 'At the keyboard sat four youngsters... In the background of the little stage *two eyes were gleaming in an unquiet manner, and a baton was moving with short, nervous gestures*. – One can only see Schoenberg's head and hand'.³⁵ Is this a case of a hidden anti-Semitic reference or is it just a coincidence? After all, Busoni was one of the people that helped Schoenberg in Berlin. The following is perhaps a more likely candidate for hidden expression of anti-Semitism. On 21 December 1912 Schoenberg conducted *Pelleas und Melisande*, Op. 5 in St. Petersburg. The critic Vyatcheslav Gavrilovitch Karatygin wrote: 'There was a remarkable event on podium; a little man with a bald head and *a burning, restless look, nervous gestures and demonic passion even in calmer moments, appeared. He is as lively as quicksilver*'.³⁶ The combination of 'demonic passion', 'nervous gestures' as well as the cultural context of wide-spread anti-Semitism in Russia (compared to other places in Europe) suggest that this might be more than a mere description of Schoenberg's conducting technique. There is need for more work to be done before any definite conclusions can be made. The cultural context described by Knittel, Botstein and Neff is perhaps different from that of the figures described above. Nevertheless, the following contradictory reviews, which describe Schoenberg's conducting as calm and relaxed, imply that the previous reports might be tainted with anti-Semitism. The composer and music critic Matthijs Vermeulen wrote in *De Tijd* on 2 December 1912 concerning the concert on 28 November 1912: 'Schoenberg's conducting is large in line, broad and constantly melodic'. The reaction of the audience was positive, reported the critic Zijnen on 29 November 1912 in *Algemeen Handelsblad*: 'Arnold Schoenberg ... was greeted with a calm round of applause when he appeared on the platform, and a calm round of applause was sent after him when he disappeared. The performance of his symphonic poem, *Pelleas und Melisande*, under his simple direction – characterized by *nothing eccentric* – lasted nearly an hour'.³⁷ Note that this is the very same piece where the critic Karatygin criticised Schoenberg's conducting as having 'nervous gestures and demonic passion even in calmer moments'. Olin Downes, a critic from *The New York Times*, wrote the following in a review about Schoenberg's conducting of *Pierrot lunaire* on 18 November 1940: 'He has no poses... He is concerned solely with his task, and he is technically able to project his precise intention by means of simple, economical, unmistakable movements'.³⁸

Another issue that affected the perception of Schoenberg's conducting is that in some cases he faced difficulties with uncooperative performers. In March 1935 the performers in rehearsals of Brahms's Third Symphony with Schoenberg conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic deliberately sabotaged the music by playing wrong notes and

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Quoted in Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg*, 159, emphasis added.

³⁶ Ibid. 181. Emphasis added.

³⁷ Paul Op de Coul and Rutger Schoute, 'Schoenberg in the Netherlands', *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, 6/2 (November 1982), 144, emphasis added.

³⁸ For more information on this concert which was broadcasted see Avior Byron, 'Pierrot lunaire in studio and in broadcast: *Sprechstimme*, tempo and character', *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland* (2006), forthcoming.

'horsing around'.³⁹ The singer and composer Herman Mulder wrote about his memories of the rehearsals of the *Gurrelieder*:

Schoenberg was very nervous at the first ensemble rehearsals and the choir behaved like a gang of naughty children. Schoenberg himself was least of all virtuoso on the conducting platform and perhaps even less of a seasonal choral coach. I still hear him beginning with the last words of the Sprecher: 'Erwacht, erwacht, ihr Blumen zur Wonne, eins, zwei, eins, zwei ...' and no one entered. He had, namely, not previously said that he was going to rehearse the final chorus... the first rehearsal was very heavy: he sighed, in any case, at the end: 'Ich bin müde' (I am tired).

The more we got to know each other the more sure became his grasp on the choir, and we felt that a great man stood there before us... Schoenberg now had the complicated ensemble in his hands – only it was strange that he conducted very much 'with his nose in the score'. The work made a deep impression on the listeners and performers.⁴⁰

Schoenberg commented on this experience in a text manuscript entitled 'Der Kleine Muck' of 1932,⁴¹ where he wrote an attack on the conductor Carl Muck. Schoenberg felt that he had been tricked by Muck, who he believed had convinced a performer to play his part in a wrong transposition. Schoenberg did not notice the mistake and this, he testified, 'was a great disgrace for me and lowered my reputation amongst musicians and laymen to an irreparable degree'.⁴² In 1928 and 1932 he attempted to write about it, and it seems that he was still bothered by the event thirty years after it happened (two months before his death).⁴³ A similarly unpleasant incident was documented in his *Berlin Diary* on 23 October 1912:

In Hamburg, on October 19 after the performance of *Pierrot lunaire*, Essberger, the clarinetist involved, admitted to me (he said: confess!) that he played *Mondfleck* once in a rehearsal on the A clarinet instead of the B-flat, and I hadn't noticed it. Possible, but it's not proved that I didn't indeed notice it (here and there) and just hadn't the courage to expose such a thing, for one just doesn't think of the possibility that someone is playing a whole piece a half-step lower but assumes one is mishearing. But interesting for me, because it makes me recall how it came about that I, such a trusting person, became so mistrustful! These pranks!!⁴⁴

It is perfectly reasonable to accept one of Schoenberg's claims concerning the incident in Holland – namely, that at times a conductor is concentrating on certain aspects of the music while neglecting others.⁴⁵ This is especially true in music, which is new and thus early in its performance history. Indeed, Marcel Dick blamed it on Schoenberg's method of rehearsing: 'In rehearsal', Dick claimed, 'Schoenberg concentrated more often than not on one single feature: a few notes, or one single instrument. He criticized, suggested, and polished until that phrase was to his satisfaction. So it could happen, as stories tell, that

³⁹ Peter Yates, *Evenings on the Roof, 1939-1954*, interview by Adelaide Tusler, Jan. 1967 (Los Angeles: University of California, 1972), 66.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 158-166.

⁴¹ Schoenberg, 'Der kleine Muck', 99-106.

⁴² Ibid., 105.

⁴³ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁴ Arnold Schönberg, *Berliner Tagebuch*, ed. Josef Rufer (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1974), 34. Passage translated by Jonathan M. Dunsby in Schoenberg, 'Der kleine Muck', 106.

⁴⁵ I would like to thank Ethan Haimo for this remark. For another view see Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg* (New York: Viking, 1975), 49-50.

while he was concentrating on some minute aspect, a mistake in another part might escape him because his concentration was elsewhere'.⁴⁶

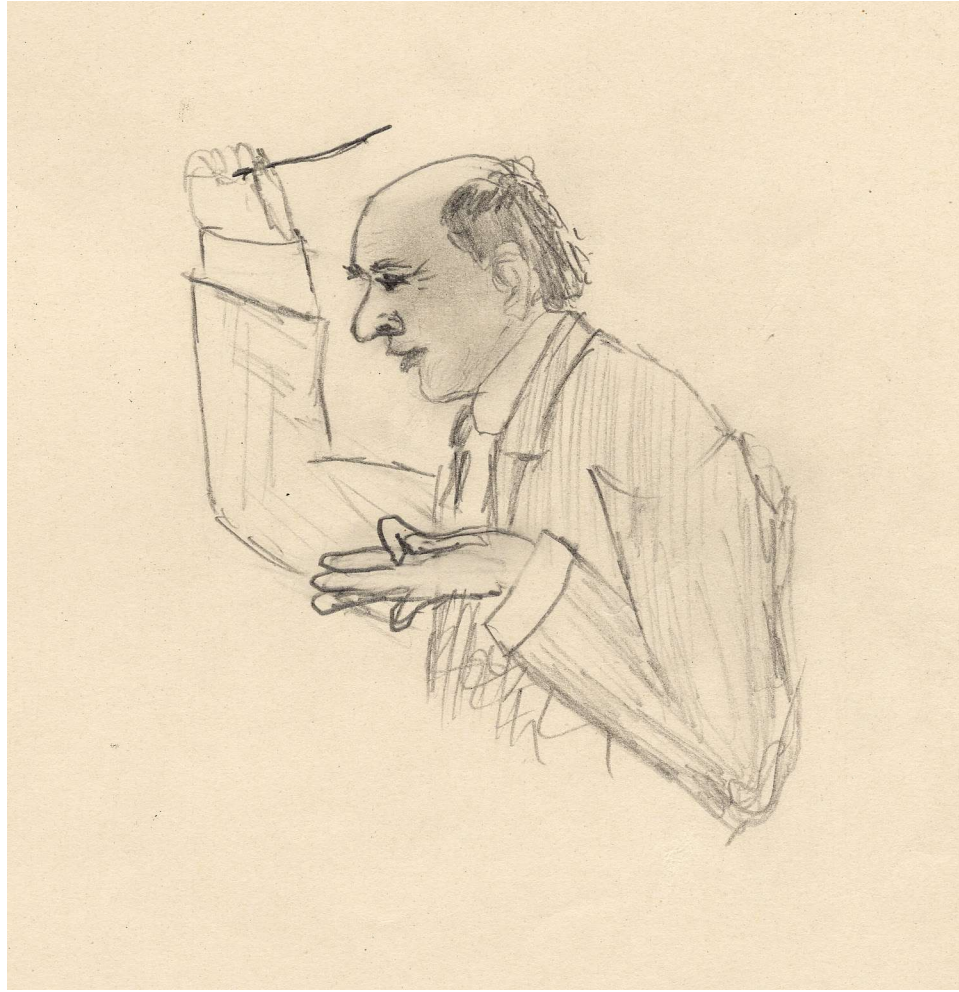


Fig. 1.1: A caricature of Schoenberg conducting found in the Violin Part VI of *Kammersymphonie*, Op. 9

The legacy of one performer's misbehaviour can be found in different parts of the *Kammersymphonie*, Op. 9, which contains caricatures of Schoenberg, Marya Freund, Anton Webern and Richard Mandl. In the caricature shown in Fig. 1.1, Schoenberg's little finger is twisted in an abnormal manner. Is this evidence of a lack of talent in drawing, or was the performer fantasizing about Schoenberg being in such a painful situation? Probably both are true. If this caricature was a private joke among the performers the following had wider and more direct influence. In a broadcast from 8 February 1933 in Queen's Hall, London, Schoenberg conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra playing his *Variationen für Orchester*, Op. 31. The caricature in Fig. 1.2 was part of the programme of this concert. Schoenberg is presented holding the baton in a strange manner and his eyes, face and body seem very heavy and tired. To make sure that the audience understood that this is a joke, the title says: 'ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG a caricature by Kapp'. Unlike the previous caricature, this one was done by a professional artist who was probably hired in advance. It is not hard to imagine the audience being affected by this and, as a result, seeing Schoenberg's conducting as grotesque. If this did not sabotage the performance then the following surely did. This concert was the first public British

⁴⁶ Marcel Dick with Anne Trenkam 'Reminiscences of Schoenberg as Conductor', *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, 2/2 (1978), 109-110.

performance and broadcast of the piece, and it was introduced with a broadcast talk given by Ernest Newman, who warned that the performance 'will last for twenty minutes and you may feel that you might be better employed elsewhere'.



ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG

A caricature by Kapp

Fig. 1.2: Caricature of Schoenberg conducting published in the programme of a 8 February 1933 BBC concert in Queen's Hall, London.

Schoenberg had many enemies. His student Egon Wellesz, for example, turned from being a friend to a foe as a result of Schoenberg's criticism. The following description of Schoenberg's conducting was probably influenced by personal antagonism. In an interview from 12, 24 and 28 November 1970 with George Perle, Felix Greissle, Schoenberg's son-in-law, said:

Schoenberg, who had no coordination of movements, at least tried. I remember, when I had finished my course of studies and was living in the same house, Schoenberg was invited to conduct his chamber symphony in Hamburg. And he prepared it. When I was walking by one day the door was open and I saw him making movements with a very serious face with eyebrows drawn together. So I started smiling, and I said, 'what is it?' –

'This is darn catchy, it is very difficult, how can I do it!? It is 2/2 and then comes a 3/4 after that. How do I do it?' So I said, 'What do you mean?'

I proceeded to sing and conduct it without difficulty and asked, 'You mean this? The motions are very easy'. He looked at me – tried it too and couldn't get it. He was very angry. He tried it again and practiced and practiced days, and the day before he left he

still couldn't do it. When he came back I asked him, 'Well, how did it go?' He said, 'Oh, it was a marvellous performance!'

'Now, how was the Scherzo?'

'Wonderful!' You know, during the rehearsal again I was nervous and I couldn't do it. All of the sudden at the performance it went wonderful'.

At that moment I knew what had happened. The concertmaster had said to the players, 'When it comes to the Scherzo don't watch him, just play what I do'. And then it happened that it worked.

Perle: 'Did he ever improve as a conductor?'

No, he did not improve.

When we played chamber music he scratched on the viola for instance. When he took the theme as badly as he scratched I thought, 'Oh my God, that's the way it goes!' It was a revelation. Then we knew how to play it. It was simply magnificent. His conducting was just a lack of coordination, it had nothing to do with his musicality. He just couldn't coordinate his movements.⁴⁷

The authenticity of this report should be questioned for several reasons. Schoenberg declared in his last will that his second wife would receive his legacy. Greissle, who was married to Gertrude, Schoenberg's daughter from his first marriage, also wanted part of the legacy. The fact that he did not obtain what he wanted is possibly one reason behind the troubled relationship between the Greissles and Schoenbergs after Schoenberg's death.⁴⁸ This might have influenced Greissle's report on Schoenberg's conducting and may also explain why Schoenberg drew a caricature of Greissle (see Fig. 1.3). Moreover, by the time this interview was made in 1970, Greissle's memory was more than fifty years old. It is hard to believe that he exactly remembered the events, and it would not be surprising if he invented some of this extremely unenthusiastic description on the spot. Note how decisive he is about what the concertmaster supposedly said to the players, while he had no way of knowing this for sure. Although there are a few unconstructive reports of Schoenberg's conducting, the details of Greissle's description are extremely negative and are not confirmed by any other source.

⁴⁷ Greissle on Schoenberg, *Interview with George Perle*, 15-16, cassette I/side A, Arnold Schoenberg Center (11 December 1970).

⁴⁸ I would like to thank the Arnold Schönberg Center archivist, Therese Muxeneder, for this information.

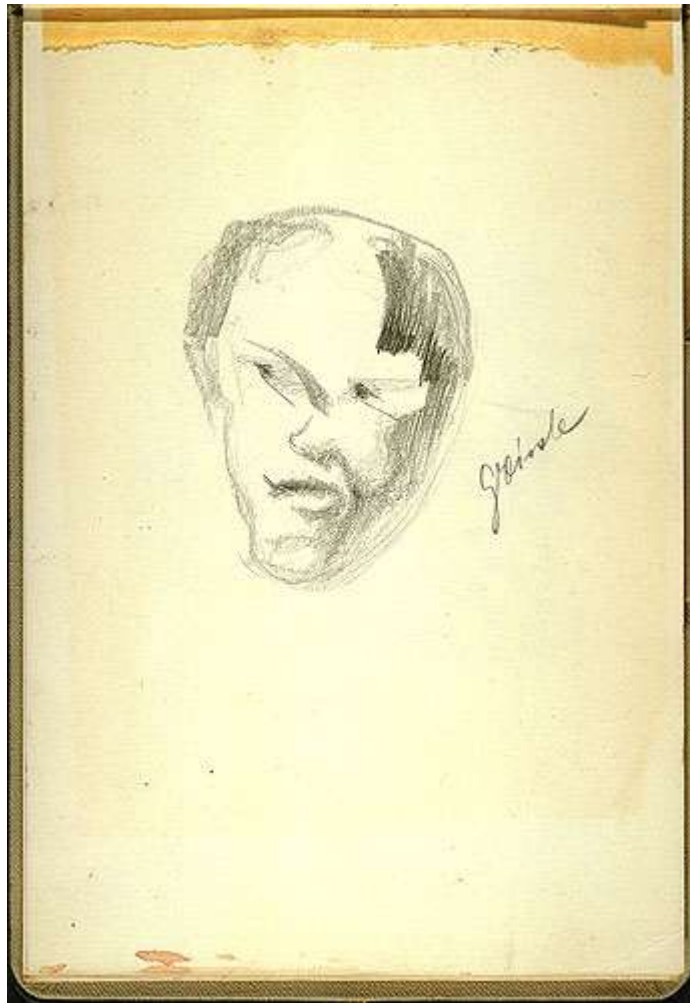


Fig. 1.3: Caricature of Felix Greissle done by Schoenberg

These negative views of Schoenberg's conducting are contradicted by the following positive ones. Mengelberg invited Schoenberg to Amsterdam to conduct his music. The kind manner in which Schoenberg was received in Holland affected him and is apparent in his letters. In a letter to Berg from 3 October 1912 Schoenberg wrote: 'It seems that my intention to conduct more frequently is to become a reality. I hope so! But don't spread it around!!'⁴⁹ The première of *Pierrot lunaire* in Berlin on 16 October 1912 (with Schoenberg conducting much of it)⁵⁰ and other performances of this work in eleven cities in Germany received generally favourable reactions from the public.⁵¹ In the summer of 1913 the famous conductor, pianist and composer Ferruccio Busoni wrote to his student Egon Petri about hearing 'a complete and well-nigh perfect performance' of *Pierrot lunaire* conducted by Schoenberg in his house on 17 June.⁵² Schoenberg received a warm reception in Holland. Zijner wrote in the *Handelsblad* of 13 March 1914 that there was no protest by the audience which filled the hall; indeed, many people applauded

⁴⁹ Arnold Schoenberg, *A Schoenberg Reader: Documents of a Life*, ed. Joseph Auner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 116-117. In the same year Schoenberg conducted *Pelleas und Melisande*, Op. 5 in Prague, Amsterdam, Hague, and St. Petersburg and in 1914 the *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, Op. 16 in London.

⁵⁰ For a list of concerts where Schoenberg conducted *Pierrot lunaire*, see <http://aviorbyron.bravehost.com/schoenberg.html>

⁵¹ Smith, *Schoenberg and His Circle*, 68, 72.

⁵² Ferruccio Busoni, *Selected Letters*, trans. and ed. Antony Beaumont (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987), 169.

the performance of the *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, Op. 16.⁵³ On 13 March 1914 Berg wrote to Josef Polnauer: 'The performance [under Schoenberg's conducting] was fabulous. The works are too beautiful for words'.⁵⁴ The critic Rutters wrote in the *Algemeen Handelsblad* on 22 October 1920: 'Vienna still cannot follow what Arnold Schoenberg is doing any further than his *Gurrelieder* ... Amsterdam is more up to date – here one listens to the *Fünf Orchesterstücke* without disturbance'.⁵⁵ Apart from the ambition to seem 'more up to date' and progressive, Schoenberg's positive reception in Holland may be due to the fact that the cultural atmosphere in Vienna's musical life was different from that in Holland.⁵⁶ Mahler, another Jew who converted to Christianity, suffered from similarly negative responses from the Viennese audience and critics, while in Holland he was received warmly. From 1920 Schoenberg started to conduct more extensively outside Germany. In March that year he conducted the first orchestral arrangement of *Verklärte Nacht*, Op. 4 and two movements out of the *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, Op. 16 in Amsterdam. Two months later he participated in the Mahler Festival there, as a result of which he was elected President of the International Mahler League. He was also invited to go to Holland in Autumn 1920 and the winter of 1921, and among other things to spend a considerable time there conducting. Mengelberg reported that many of Schoenberg's compositions became familiar to people in Amsterdam through performances that were prepared over weeks of rehearsal. In an article from April 1921 entitled 'Schönberg in Amsterdam', Mengelberg argued that Schoenberg had great success in Amsterdam as a conductor.⁵⁷ Schoenberg claimed that he conducted ten concerts in 1921 in Holland and that Mengelberg planned to engage him as his deputy for the part of the season when he was in New York. According to Schoenberg the plan was never carried out since 'it had only awakened the envy of all my enemies, who finally succeeded in thwarting it insidiously'.⁵⁸ In January 1924, Schoenberg conducted in a benefit concert for the so-called 'Germans in distress', at the request of the Mödling municipality. The programme included parts of *Gurrelieder*, the orchestral version of *Verklärte Nacht*, Op. 4, and Beethoven's Violin Concerto. A critic in the *Mödlinger Nachrichten* of 26 January 1924 wrote: 'Arnold Schoenberg was the guiding light of the evening as well as of the people, who follow his divine talent in musical humility'.⁵⁹ Because of its success the concert was repeated. The clarinet player Kalman Bloch reported that Schoenberg was a 'fairly efficient conductor' in the 1940 broadcast of *Pierrot lunaire*. He added that 'No one could better impart the significance of all the musical details'.⁶⁰ It is very possible that some of these 'positive' writers could have had viewpoints as tendentious as that of the aforementioned one by Greissle, for example. I bring them here not to show an objective

⁵³ Op de Coul, 'Schoenberg in the Netherlands', 148.

⁵⁴ Quoted from *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁵⁶ The review from Amsterdam about Schoenberg's conducting quoted at the start of this article is one of the few negative reviews coming from Holland.

⁵⁷ Curt Rudolf Mengelberg, 'Schönberg in Amsterdam', *Musikblätter des Anbruch*, 7 (1 April 1921), 129-130.

⁵⁸ Quoted from Stein's introduction in Schoenberg, 'Der kleine Muck', 104.

⁵⁹ The municipal archive in Mödling told the Arnold Schönberg Center's archivist Therese Muxeneder that the review was published anonymously, which was quite common at that time. Muxeneder informed me this in an email dated 22 April 2006.

⁶⁰ Kalman Bloch, 'Some Reflections on the First Recording of *Pierrot lunaire*' in *From Pierrot to Marteau* (Los Angeles and California: University of Southern California, Arnold Schoenberg Institute, 1987), 49. For a discussion on this recording see Avior Byron, 'The Test Pressings of Schoenberg Conducting *Pierrot lunaire*: *Sprechstimme* Reconsidered', *Music Theory Online*, 12/1 (February 2006), <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.06.12.1/toc.12.1.html>

truth (which is probably lost forever), but in order to reveal an alternative and unknown perspective of Schoenberg's conducting.

It happened more than once that Schoenberg was invited by the most famous musicians and conductors to conduct. I mentioned above the invitations from Mengelberg. On 29 February 1912 Schoenberg conducted Mahler's orchestration of one of Bach's orchestral suites and his *Pelleas und Melisande*, Op. 5 in the Prague Opera. Zemlinsky invited him to conduct the first half of the concert. Hertzka and Guttmann from Universal Edition were impressed by Schoenberg's conducting at that concert.⁶¹ Schoenberg was invited by Alexander Solti, a conductor and piano pupil of Liszt, to conduct on two occasions in 1912 and 1914. On January 1919 he learned from Erwin Stein that Wilhelm Furtwängler, the first conductor in Mannheim, had invited Schoenberg to conduct *Pelleas und Melisande*, Op. 5 or another of his works. The performance took place on 3 March 1920. In March 1935 in America, Otto Klemperer invited Schoenberg to give a guest programme in Los Angeles with the Philharmonic. Schoenberg conducted *Verklärte Nacht*, Op. 4, his Bach transcriptions and Brahms's Third Symphony. Schoenberg conducted some of the best orchestras and performers of his time, for example, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Berlin Radio orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Prague Opera, Queen's Hall Orchestra, St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Vienna Philharmonic.

The positive views of Schoenberg's conducting and the other evidence that I presented above suggest that Schoenberg's reception as a conductor was often influenced by various extra-musical issues which had nothing to do with his conducting. The contradictory views of Schoenberg's conducting abilities point to a web of cultural meanings which challenge any decisive conclusion. However, the fact that he was invited again and again to conduct by important conductors, suggests that his conducting technique was at least sufficient, if not polished. Downes, in the same critique quoted above from 18 November 1940, wrote: 'Mr. Schoenberg proved an absolute master conductor of his own music... he is technically able to project his precise intention... The sheer precision and power of his thought governed the interpreting artists'. Leonard Stein, who was Schoenberg's pupil and friend, argued that the latter's baton technique was skilled and that he was what Stein called a 'methodical conductor'.⁶² When I recently asked Dika Newlin, a student of Schoenberg who saw him conduct the 1940 recording of *Pierrot lunaire*, what his conducting was like, she answered: 'Not the virtuoso type of conductor, not the show off type of conductor as Bernstein, for instance, or Toscanini, or somebody like that. I think he was successful in putting across his own ideas of his music. I saw him conduct a number of times... So he was effective, I think, in putting it across, his ideas... For the needs of what he was doing with conducting his own music, certainly he was the right man in the right place at the right time'.⁶³ For those interested in research on recordings with Schoenberg conducting, it is perhaps not that important whether he was a 'great' conductor or not; what is significant is that his technique was at least good enough to convey his intentions and interpretations. The fact that many of his annotations in his conducting scores were later implemented in published editions shows how seriously the composer himself took his own performances. There is much to learn from Schoenberg's recordings and conducting scores, and these have a potential to serve as

⁶¹ Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg*, 163.

⁶² Crawford, 'Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles', *The Musical Quarterly*, 86/1 (Spring 2002), 35, footnote 13.

⁶³ See appendix 4 in Avior Byron, 'Schoenberg as Performer: An Aesthetics in Practice' (PhD dissertation, University of London, 2006). The video of this interview is 2005 copyrighted material owned by Michael D. Moore T/A MDM Productions, P.O. Box 5703, Richmond, Virginia 23220-0703 USA.

authoritative sources no less than his printed scores. However, in order to make optimal use of this evidence, the preconceptions and prejudices reviewed in this article need first to be confronted and then to be overcome.

[Video](#): Silent, black and white footage of Schönberg conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic in a rehearsal of *Verklärte Nacht*, Op. 4 in March 1935.

[Audio ex. 1](#): Schoenberg conducting *Pierrot lunaire*, 'Eine blasse Wäscherin', Los Angeles, CA, 24 September 1940.

[Audio ex. 2](#): Schoenberg conducting *Verklärte Nacht* Op. 4, Berlin, 1928.

[Audio ex. 3](#): Schoenberg conducting *Verklärte Nacht* Op. 4, Berlin, 1928.

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