

Constructive Dissonance: Arnold Schoenberg and Transformations of 20th-Century Culture: Vienna, Berlin, Los Angeles (Arnold Schoenberg Institute, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 15-17 November 1991)

Adorno, Babbitt, Boulez, Keller: each has crafted an influential image of Arnold Schoenberg. Those wary of possible distortion in these sources can of course seek counsel directly from the copious writings of the Master. Even so, the varied impressions of radical, moralist and prophet which are transmitted may still seem at an emblematic remove from both the man and his work. Furthermore, the sense of refractory hermeticism which then prevails carries potentially serious consequences for the survival of a corpus, never in fashion and now old-fashioned (the sentiments are Babbitt's), whose existence depends so heavily on the continued patronage of enthusiastic initiates.

Anniversaries at least provide an occasion for renewed reflection in such matters. Therefore while Schoenberg's customary reputation may have been sufficient to spare him from the commemorative musical excesses of 1991, the fortieth anniversary of his death also presented a suitable opportunity to reassess his role as a maker of modernist history. In planning their conference,* the co-directors, Leonard Stein and Christopher Hailey, had sought to register the diversity of the composer's creative existence as scrutinized and celebrated under the aegis of the Schoenberg Institute since its foundation in 1974. The programme took its initial cue from Schoenberg's 1949 dictum that 'the second half of the century will spoil by overestimation whatever the first half's underestimation left unspoilt'. However, in his opening speech, Stein drew attention to the pictorial and documentary exhibition lining the walls of the lecture room and in particular to the relativized perceptions of the composer for which these various representations gave evidence. The scope of the event was correspondingly eclectic; in sum it attempted to view Schoenbergian scholarship through the contemporary critical prisms of race, class and gender. Contextual papers on the avant-garde

and modernism (John Willett), ethnicity (Peg Weiss), Judaism (Alexander Ringer), psychoanalysis (Peter Ostwald) and gender (Bryan Simms) thus complemented technical explorations of atonality (Ethan Haimo), compositional process (Joseph Auner), fragmentary works (Jan Maegaard) and the *Gedanke* manuscripts (Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff), as well as reception studies of music theory (Jonathan Dunsby), philosophy (Robert Hullot-Kentor), literature (Russell Berman) and the 20th-century *Zeitgeist* (Reinhold Brinkmann). Such pluralism appeared to defy the possibility of useful synthesis. Yet by drawing on his experience as a Schoenberg pupil, Stein was able to return and weave a narrative thread through the composer's life for his closing summary.

If, finally, the speakers concurred against the delusion of a definitive Schoenberg, they nevertheless made collective progress towards revealing his position within contemporary culture. In this respect, not the least advance was a willingness to state openly observations about the composer and his times – for example the biographical events of 1908; the effects of anti-semitism – which in the past have sometimes been expressed only obliquely. However sensitive such issues may prove, they undoubtedly provide a crucial perspective on Schoenberg's course through the present century. Indeed, enforced migration, from Vienna to Berlin and finally Los Angeles, obliged him to accept, as early as 1933, a political truth which would later become plain to the world: the fragility of the European legacy. By reading these professional stations of a single existence as metaphors for the transformations of 20th-century civilization, the conference thus made perhaps the most telling evaluation of his allegorical fate. As with all exceptional figures, however, conclusions of this sort raise as many questions as they resolve. Nonetheless, through its pervasive open-mindedness, the 'Constructive Dissonance' forum succeeded, to adapt Adorno's phrase, in outlining some new paradigms of a possible understanding.¹

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¹ The proceedings of the conference are to be published in a forthcoming volume, dedicated to Leonard Stein, from the University of California Press.