

Marion Lamberth, Lund: *Voicing what? – Some reflections on Arnold
Schoenberg's Second String Quartet*

Abstract

The Second String Quartet by Arnold Schoenberg, written in 1907 and 1908, is breaking musical traditions at least twice – (1) by leaving tonality, (2) by breaking the genre of string quartet, adding a voice who is interpreting two poems by the German symbolist Stefan George in its third and fourth movements. In this paper, I want to raise the question about the reasons why Schoenberg might have added the voice: were they merely aesthetic, aiming to renew musical traditions, or were they intrinsic and thus essential for the understanding of this quartet?

As a matter of fact, we have quite a few evidences for the latter, for instance in his note on the third movement of the quartet, *Litanei*: “Ich fürchtete, die grosse dramatische Gefühlsstärke des Gedichts könnte mich veranlassen, die Grenze dessen, was in der Kammermusik zulässig ist, zu überschreiten. Ich erwartete, dass die bei Variationen erforderliche Strenge mich davon abhalten würde, zu dramatisch zu werden.“ (Stil und Gedanke 1976, S. 419) This indicates that he never queried the aptness of the poem, but possibly the one of musical form! So if we can agree on the fact that the poems were intrinsic to his Second String Quartet we have all reasons to ask *why* and *in which way*.

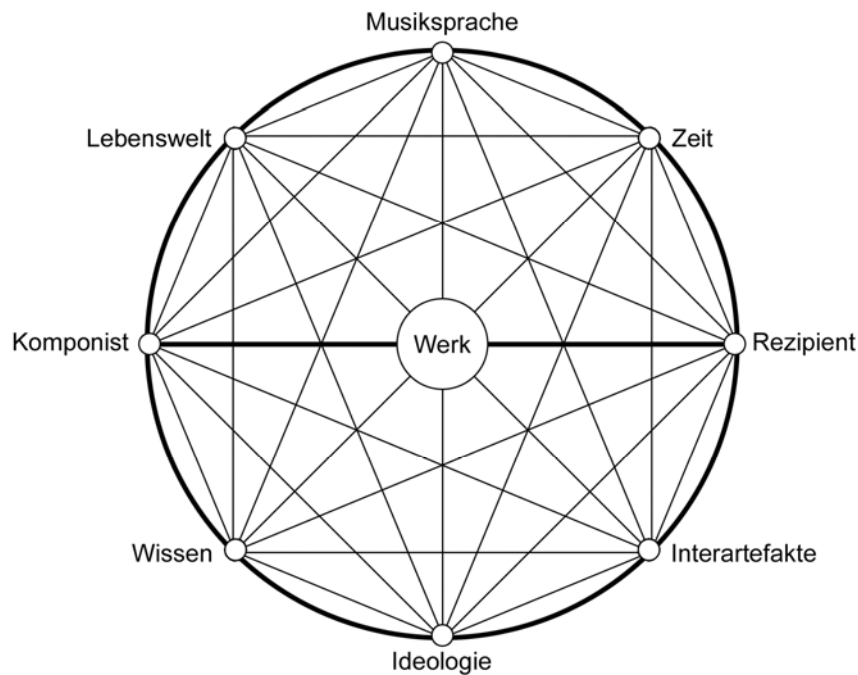
In my paper, I want to suggest that Schoenberg added the poems in order to clearly articulate features in his music that otherwise wouldn't have been evident. A closer look on other text references within the quartet and its neighbourhood direct our attention to features in Schoenberg's private life. Seen in a diachronic and interdisciplinary perspective, we realize that Schoenberg used his music, his writings and paintings as a means of voicing his own feelings and beliefs.

Paper

This paper is – as you already might have realized – about musical hermeneutics. I assume that everybody in this room is familiar with musical hermeneutics (or the art of interpretation) and that we all can agree on following statements made by Lawrence Kramer (Kramer 1990):

1. that works of music have discursive [=difficult to catch] meanings
2. that these meanings are definite enough to support critical interpretations comparable [...] to interpretations of literary texts and cultural practices
3. that these meanings are not “extramusical”, but [...] inextricably bound up with the formal processes and stylistic articulations of musical works
4. that these meanings are [...] part [...] of the continuous production and reproduction of culture

Even if we all can agree on Kramer's statements there remains always the problem of how to deal with musical hermeneutics [= the art of constructing meaning in music] in practice. Well! Let me acquaint you with a very useful hermeneutic toolbox, which I have borrowed from Swedish literary theorist Anders Palm (Palm 2002). He calls it *a model for the primary determinants of hermeneutics* and it looks – slightly changed to fit musical hermeneutics – like this:



The core of this model is the chain of communication with *transmitter* (composer), *media* (text, music, work, composition) and *receiver* or *recipient* (e.g. listener, scholar, musician). Each of these – *transmitter*, *work* and *recipient* – is determined by a number of features like *time* and *space*, (*musical*) *language*, *ideology*, *knowledge* (*education*) and *inter-artefacts*. Does it look enigmatic anyway? Well, let me try to exemplify the model with a concrete case – Arnold Schoenberg’s Second String Quartet and the question what Schoenberg might have had in mind when adding a voice to the traditional string quartet setting.

The voice is not only a *vocalise* [= song without words], but the singer is articulating the words of two poems by German symbolist Stefan George (1868-1933) in movement three and four. We are quite sure that the composer had not chosen them by random or recommendation – Schoenberg never did so –, but he had chosen the two poems fully intentionally and he seems to have been definitely addicted to them as we might read between the lines in the following quotation concerning the third movement: “... I was afraid the great dramatic emotionality of the poem might cause me to surpass the borderline of what should be admitted in chamber music.” (Arnold Schoenberg: “Notes on the Four String Quartets”, in: *Style and Idea*, 1975). This indicates, that the words of the poems were of considerable importance to him and, as it seems, prior to the composition of the music. In terms of our hermeneutic model from above, they must be seen as *inter-artefacts*.

Let’s now have a closer look at the poems:

Movement III: *Litanei* by Stefan George (from *Der siebente Ring*. Berlin 1908, S. 148)

Tief ist die trauer
die mich umdürstet,
Ein tret ich wieder,
Herr! in dein haus.

[prosaic paraphrase in English]

I am very sad
here I am, Master [=God]

Lang war die reise, matt sind die glieder, Leer sind die schreine, voll nur die qual.	I've been away for a long time I'm exhausted
Durstende zunge darbt nach dem weine. Hart war gestritten, starr ist mein arm.	I long for you [God] I am tired
Gönne die ruhe schwankenden schritten, Hungrigem gaume bröckle dein brot!	Take me to you Comfort me [God]
Schwach ist mein atem rufend dem traume, Hohl sind die hände, fiebernd der mund.	I am near the end
Leih mir die kühle, lösche die brände, Tilge das hoffen, sende das licht!	Take my desires
Gluten im herzen lodern noch offen, Innerst im grunde wacht noch ein schrei.	Take my passions
Töte das sehnen, schließe die wunde! Nimm mir die liebe, gieb mir dein glück!	Free me Heal me Take my love Give me your felicity!

[summary: *Litanei* – a prayer for the relief from passions and desires]

Movement IV: *Entrückung* by Stefan George (from *Der siebente Ring*. Berlin 1908, S. 122)

	[prosaic paraphrase in English]
Ich fühle luft von anderem planeten Mir blassen durch das dunkel die gesichter Die freundlich eben noch sich zu mir drehen.	I scent a new world I am departing All my beloved things are fading
Und bäum und wege die ich liebte fahlen Dass ich sie kaum mehr kenne und Du lichter Geliebter schatten – rufer meiner qualen Bist nun erloschen ganz in tiefern gluten Und nach dem taumel streitenden getobes Mit einem frommen schauer anzumuten.	you too, my dear, object for my desire are fading, finally.
Ich löse mich in tönen, kreisend, webend, Ungründigen danks und unbenannten lobes Dem grossen atem wunschlos mich ergebend.	I'm changing gratefully, full of praise Devoted [to God]

Mich überfährt ein ungestümes when
Im rausch der weihe wo inbrünstige schreie
In staub geworfener beterrinnen flehen.

Once again I'm struck by despair
during the consecration

Dann seh ich wie sich duftige nebel lüpfen
In einer sonnerfüllten klaren freie
Die nur umfängt auf fernsten bergesschlüpfen.

I approach paradise

Der boden schüttertt weiss und weich wie molke.
Ich steige über schluchten ungeheuer,
Ich fühle wie ich über letzter wolke

I arrive at paradise

In einem meer kristallnen glanzes schwimme –
Ich bin ein funke nur vom heiligen feuer
Ich bin ein dröhnen nur der heiligen stimme.

I merge into you, God

[summary: *Entrückung* – the vision of spiritual entrancement or ascension]

Next we have to ask whether there are poetic references in the first and second movement, too. The answer is yes, we have: in the second movement, which is a scherzo, Schoenberg quotes the melody of a wide-spread Austrian song: the song of Augustin, who is a kind of clown figure. We have to place Augustin's song originally in the time of carnival, when in catholic cultures a rather excessive life was tolerated. Augustin complains in his song about having lost everything – money and woman – ranking the loss of his woman highest.

O, du lieber Augustin,
S'Geld ist hin, s'Mensch ist hin,
O, du lieber Augustin, alles ist hin.
 Wollt noch vom Geld nix sag'n
 Hätt i nur s'Mensch am Krag'n
O, du lieber Augustin, alles ist hin.

O, my dear Augustin
money is gone, wife is gone,
All is gone.
 I wouldn't mind the money that much
 if I only had my wife back
O, my dear Augustin, all is gone

A trivial, ridiculous and tragicomic popular song side by side with George's highly equilibristic and enigmatic poems! Does this work in a piece of fine arts? – Why not? – We might easily agree on – as American scholar Ethan Haimo has pointed out – that the Augustin-song, appearing in the scherzo-movement, actually might be all right as a joke (Haimo 2004). [please consider the following photo]



Scherzphoto mit Louis Savant, Horn,
Fritz Kreisler, Violine, Arnold Schönberg,
Violoncello, Eduard Gärtner, Violine und
Karl Redlich, Flöte.
Wien 1890er Jahre.

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How about the first movement, then? Neither textual nor musical quotes can be traced, but the Schoenberg biographer Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt recalls that the first motif of the quartet was said to be derived from Wagner's *Tristan*, to be precise: it is a retrograde of the first motif of the second act of the opera *Tristan and Isolde*. Is this a hint to the substance of the movement? If yes – is there any substantial connection with the other text-references of the quartet?

Let's stop for a moment and consider the subject of Wagner's opera. *Tristan and Isolde* is, as we all know, the story of fatal love. In act two (which is the one Schoenberg is referring to), Isolde is waiting for Tristan to come. When they finally embrace each other, Tristan is hurt to death by a kinsman of king Marke, the one who is Isolde's legitimate fiancé! --- By using the opening motif of this act in retrograde, Schoenberg might have wanted to indicate something like the contrary of love-fulfilment, shall we call it love-disappointment, or simply: loss of love?

Let us at this point sum up our observations concerning the poetic inter-artefacts in Schoenberg's quartet:

Movement I	<i>Tristan</i> , act two, retrograde	loss of love (indirectly)
Movement II	<i>Augustin</i>	loss of love (comically)
Movement III	<i>Litanei</i>	mourning about the loss of love
Movement IV	<i>Entrückung</i>	spiritual entrancement or ascension

Three movements on the loss of love and one about spiritual entrancement ... How does this harmonize? Before we dare to come to a conclusion, we might take a look at the musical material of the quartet – very briefly:

As a matter of fact, the movements one to three are linked together by a high grade of related musical substance, whereas the fourth movement – which is, by the way, without concise tonality – is based on mostly new material. Without going into detail, this correspondence between the quartet's musical material and its poetic substance seems to confirm Kramer's statement – doesn't it?

Let's now go back to our hermeneutic model – what about biographic aspects like *time*, *space* and *ideology*?

Briefly, again: Schoenberg began sketching on the quartet in early summer 1907 and completed the composition at the end of August 1908. At that time he lived in Vienna as a respected teacher in composition and as a notorious composer whose music had already caused quite a few scandals in cultural life in Vienna. He was married to Mathilde, sister of Alexander Zemlinsky, and he had two children, six and two years old. At the end of August 1908 Mathilde Schoenberg (1877–1923) left her husband – an action which is generally interpreted as the climax of a marital crisis. Some scholars believe (e.g. Simms 2000 and 2003, Kronos 2005) – led by the Augustin-quote “wife has gone” – that Schoenberg had been aware of this crisis earlier, and that he had written the quartet in order to voice the loss of his wife. Others (e.g. Haimo 2004 and 2006, and Lamberth 2008) argue that Schoenberg had composed the quartet without suspecting any severe trouble in his marriage. In my opinion, we can be quite sure that the quartet actually was finished when his wife broke up! --- Since Schoenberg had suppressed all documentation of his marital crisis during his lifetime, and we haven't learnt about it before 1967 – which is 16 years after his death – we have to quest other material in order to come to a better understanding of Schoenberg's situation.

Let's begin with ideologies. In our specific case we are less interested in Schoenberg's religious or political beliefs but in his (and his wife's) attitude towards the ambiguous moral at the turn of the century in Vienna, including the matter of women's liberation. Referring to the investigations in my dissertation (Lamberth 2008), I can tell you that – even though Schoenberg and his circle were interested in the ideas of Nietzsche and others – they seem not to have practiced new moral in their daily lives. Especially Schoenberg – being the one whose ideas are documented best – seems to have had a distinctly conservative and bourgeois view of daily life, excluding every kind of indolence or women's liberation. Neither do we have the impression that his wife would have strived after new ideals.

Finally, let's go back to the texts Schoenberg used in his music, now in a diachronic view. A list of his musical works [see appendix] shows that the greater part of his production is bound to texts. A closer look at them – please see the detailed investigations in my thesis (Lamberth 2008) – shows that they generally pick up threads from his daily life – both private and official, which makes his texts to a *metatext* [= independent context of general significance in a specific case] for the interpretation of his life and work. To give you an overview: at the beginning of his career his texts – and his music, of course – deal with love in its different aspects. In the Second String Quartet we meet – in movement four – the subject of spirituality for the first time. Schoenberg's interest in spirituality would later on turn into a genuine interest for religious questions, but was interrupted between 1908 and 1911 by the subject of fidelity/infidelity which is obviously bound to his marital crisis in 1908.

So – let's return to the initial question of this paper: What was it that Schoenberg wanted to express in his Second String Quartet? --- We have seen that the quartet is neither about his marital crisis from 1908, nor about the loss of tonality, but atonality (as practised in movement four) seems to indicate freedom and liberation to Schoenberg. However, the Second String Quartet gives voice to Schoenberg's longing for spiritualism, which is the philosophical doctrine that nothing is real except soul and spirit; the spiritual nature being opposed – and supreme – to the physical, worldly and passionate nature.

PS: To those who might wonder: Mathilde Schoenberg returned to her husband after only two weeks. After that the couple lived as happy as they could until the rest of Mathildes life – which was the year 1923.

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Appendix

List of Schoenberg's musical works, arranged by textual criteria

Werktitel	direkt textbasiert	indirekt textbasiert	textlos
Op. 1 Zwei Gesänge	x		
Op. 2 Vier Lieder	x		
Op. 3 Sechs Lieder	x		
Op. 4 Verklärte Nacht		x	
Gurrelieder	x		
Op. 5 Pelleas und Melisande		x	
Op. 6 Acht Lieder	x		
Op. 7 Erstes Streichquartett		x	
Op. 8 Sechs Orchesterlieder	x		
Op. 9 Kammer-symphonie			x
Op. 10 Zweites Streichquartett	x		
Op. 11 Drei Klavierstücke			x
Op. 12 Zwei Balladen	x		
Op. 13 Friede auf Erden	x		
Op. 14 Zwei Lieder	x		
Op. 15 Das Buch der hängenden Gärten	x		
Op. 16 Fünf Orchesterstücke		x	
Op. 17 Die Erwartung	x		
Op. 18 Die Glückliche Hand	x		
Op. 19 Sechs kleine Klavierstücke			x
Op. 20 Herzgewächse	x		
Op. 21 Pierrot Lunaire	x		
Op. 22 Vier Orchesterlieder	x		
Die Jakobsleiter	x		
Op. 23 Fünf Klavierstücke			x
Op. 24 Serenade	x		
Op. 25 Suite für Klavier			x
Op. 26 Bläserquintett			x
Moses und Aron	x		
Op. 27 Vier Chorstücke	x		
Op. 28 Drei Satiren (Chor)	x		
Op. 29 Suite		x	
Op. 30 Drittes Streichquartett			x
Op. 31 Variationen für Orchester			x
Op. 32 Von heute auf morgen	x		
Op. 33 Zwei Klavierstücke			x
Op. 34 Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene		x	
Op. 35 Sechs Chorstücke	x		
Op. 36 Violinkonzert			x
Op. 37 Viertes Streichquartett			x
Op. 38 Zweite Kammer-symphonie		x	
Op. 39 Kol Nidri	x		
Op. 40 Variationen (Orgel)			x
Op. 41 Ode to Napoleon	x		
Op. 42 Klavierkonzert		x	
Op. 43 Thema und Variationen			x
Op. 44 Prelude		x	
Op. 45 Streichtrio		x	
Op. 46 A Survivor from Warsaw	x		
Op. 47 Phantasy for Violin			x
Op. 48 Drei Lieder	x		
Op. 49 Drei Volkslieder	x		
Op. 50a Dreimal tausend Jahre	x		
Op. 50b Psalm 130	x		
Op. 50c Moderner Psalm	x		