

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1107

There are many stories about Schoenberg; this one seems particularly telling: Having emigrated to America and settled in Boston, he once asked a friend who knew Koussevitsky why the Boston Symphony Orchestra never played any of his music. The friend, embarrassed, hummed and hawed, finally saying his music was just too difficult. Schoenberg, amazed, replied: "I don't know what you mean, they play Brahms, don't they?"

During much of his life Arnold Schoenberg was treated like a dangerous, if clever, anarchist who had single-handedly assassinated tonality, and with it music; but he thought himself a traditional composer, a direct continuation of a line starting with Bach and reaching to Mahler. Schoenberg had a most detailed knowledge of the music of the past and his was the sort of mind that not only remembered everything he had ever heard, but also instantly understood music and everything about it; the music of the classical and romantic eras and their great composers were as familiar to him as close relations.

Everything about Schoenberg bristles with contradiction and paradox. This iconoclast and revolutionary said of himself, "I am just an ordinary composer." The creator of the fabulous *Guerrelieder* was also "the devil who invented 12-tone music". The composer who has written some of the most heartstoppingly beautiful music of the 20th century was not only an intuitive genius, but also a tremendous and outspoken intellect. And while the genius might eventually have been forgiven him, the intellect was not, for we prefer to think of artists as uncomplicated and inarticulate conduits of divine thought.

Additionally, we don't like them to change. But great talents must develop, their last works seldom resembling their first. It was inevitable that the extended chromaticism of the 1900s would eventually lead to the democratisation of the 12 chromatic steps in the octave that came to be called 12-tone composition. It would have been better for Schoenberg had he either not noticed or not mentioned this; the whole 12-tone chimera would then never have raised its head. Even so, it is a mystery why this became such an issue. Previously people were not interested in the purely technical and personal matter of how a composer translated his vision into reality, but in what that vision was.

With Schoenberg, paradoxically, the opposite reaction took place. Vast numbers of people had heard about 12-tone, atonality, musical constructivism and heaven knows what other irrelevancies, but who had heard the music? He was the most famous unknown composer of his time. I don't remember a time when I had not heard the name Schoenberg, but it was a long time before I heard any of his music in a concert. I shall never forget the occasion; it was *Pierot Lunaire*. I had never dreamed of such fantasy, daring, tension, drama and a kind of transcendental, shimmering poetry. To my mind he is the greatest composer of the 20th century, and all we, his public, have to do is to stop talking, stop asking questions, and listen and listen again.

The piano, the most popular instrument in the 19th century, became much less favoured by composers in the 20th; thus pianists are very lucky to have five works for solo piano and the concerto, all written in highly creative periods of Schoenberg's life - both Berg and Webern treated us much less generously. The

Three Piano Pieces Op.11, live miraculously and precariously on the edge between extended chromaticism and atonality without ever quite coming down on either side. This blessed situation cannot last, but while it does we are in musical wonderland in which everything is possible. There are still recognisable cadences, there are still sharp dissonances, the drama still unfolds in ways that we are familiar with, but everything is bathed in a strange new sound not heard before. Melodies are beautiful, but they are often in strange places, high up or low down; rhythm is free, imaginative and dramatic; Brahms pays a visit, so does Tristan; every moment is intricately composed, every note is in its exact place and the tension between the three pieces is wonderfully balanced.

Six Little Pieces Op.19 are extremely brief and quite perfect. A gentle songlike declamation, a little pizzicato night music, a Prelude à la Chopin (Schoenberg said), a swift Gavotte, a Waltz, and funeral bells, written after returning distraught from Mahler's funeral.

Five Pieces Op.23 are once more of a more usual length, comparable with a Brahms intermezzo, or Schoenberg's own Op.11. They are, however, much more complicated than Op.11. Schoenberg is getting nearer that form of perpetual motivic variation that eventually became serialism. Bureaucracy has it that the Waltz Op.25 No.5 is his first 12-tone composition; no-one could possibly discover this from just listening; it is utterly irrelevant, and, as it happens, the first four pieces of Op.23 are much more arresting, original and successful.

Suite for Piano Op.25 is a pastiche, a brilliant idiosyncratic recreation of the baroque dance suite using the most avant garde 20th century means. Formally there are intriguing omissions; there is no Allemande, but then not all Suites have one. There is also neither a Courante nor a Sarabande; but there is the addition of an Intermezzo, the last bar of which becomes the first bar of the following Minuet - a touching reminder of an earlier, less formal, more spontaneous Schoenberg.

Op.33 a and b are the least performed of his piano works, yet 33a is a masterpiece. The opening looks perfectly ordinary, 6 four part chords, 3 going up and 3 going down, but something in the intervals of the melody has the effect of "Sprechstimme", that haunting effect of a voice somewhere between speaking and singing, as in Pierrot Lunaire and in the second part of Gurrelieder. The piece continues with dazzling invention and variety; only a genius could create so much in not much more than 2 minutes. 33b has a simpler theme but very complex textures and counterpoint; it is the least pianistic of these works and perhaps the most difficult to take in at first hearing, but, like all Schoenberg, it richly rewards perseverance.

Katharina Wolpe has been associated with the music of the second Viennese school throughout her career. She played the Berg Sonata at her first recital in London when she was 16, and her début at the BBC Promenade Concerts was with the Schoenberg Piano Concerto. Since then she has performed the Schoenberg Solo Piano works in recitals throughout Europe and North America and has been soloist with all the great English and many of the European and American Orchestras.

She has toured widely, gaining great critical and public acclaim. Her apparently effortless understanding of twentieth century idiom has inspired many composers to write works especially for her. Two such works, Iain Hamilton's "Palinodes" and his "Jardin de Monet" are on Symposium CD 1121.

Other recordings by Katharina Wolpe for Symposium Records include works of Beethoven, Berg, Mozart and Schubert.

She is the daughter of the composer Stefan Wolpe and, like Schoenberg, was born in Vienna.

Piano by Steinway.

Recorded in the Purcell School.

Tracks 1 - 9 & 15 – 20 Universal Edition A.G., Wien

Tracks 10 – 14 J. and W Chester / Edition Wilhelm Hansen

Track 21 Belmont Music Publishers

This record with notes is copyright. It may not be publicly performed, hired out, copied, broadcast or stored in a retrieval system without permission.