- MASTERPIECE

Sounds From the Future

Arnold Schoenberg's 'Pierrot Lunaire' ('Moonstruck Pierre') so defied the melodic conventions of classical music that it initially even perplexed Stravinsky.

PHOTO: DAVID GOTHARD

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The 1912 chamber piece "Pierrot Lunaire" ("Moonstruck Pierrot") is a musical treasure—fascinating, enchanting in its range of instrumental colors, and deeply influential to all who came after. Yet its composer, Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), was for many simply the man who took a wrecking ball to centuries of musical

tradition through his embrace of atonality. Much of his output engendered alarm and outright hostility. “Only a psychiatrist can help poor Schoenberg now,” wrote composer Richard Strauss to Alma Mahler in 1913. “He would do better to shovel snow instead of scribbling on music paper.”

Such reactions began even before the composer’s most radical departures from convention. Schoenberg’s string sextet “Transfigured Night” (1899), written when he was just 25 and now recognized as a Romantic cornerstone, was excoriated: “It sounds as if someone had smeared the score of [Wagner’s] ‘Tristan’ while it was still wet,” remarked a contemporary. A musical society in Vienna refused to allow the work to be performed because it contained one dissonant chord still unclassified at that time by any textbook (an inverted ninth, tame by today’s standards). Over the years, the complaints proliferated: At a 1913 concert conducted by Schoenberg in the Great Hall of Vienna’s Musikverein, the reaction to both the composer and his closest students, Alban Berg and Anton Webern, was even more violent than the one attending the infamous premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring” in Paris that same year.

Yet, Stravinsky, the composer most often regarded as Schoenberg’s rival for the affections of the cultivated music world, came to the late realization that Schoenberg had written “a body of works we now recognize as the epicenter of the development of our musical language.” Discussing Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire,” which had its premiere at the Berlin Choralion-Saal on Oct. 16, 1912, following 40 rehearsals, Stravinsky called it “the solar plexus as well as the mind of early 20th-century music.” The music, he admitted, 50 years after the work’s debut, initially had been “beyond me, as it was beyond all of us at that time.” At one performance “Pierrot” prompted an audience member to point at the composer and yell, “Shoot him! Shoot him!”

It was written long before the composer created a formal “method of composing with 12 tones related only to each other,” which erased entirely the distinction between consonance and dissonance, but it was a step along the way. Tonality, the

traditional Western compositional system in which one tone leads inexorably toward another through a kind of natural gravitation—imbuing the music with emotional push and pull through cycles of tension and release, and yielding a natural sense of respiration—had governed the choices made by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and others of the classical era.

But over the centuries, as composers pursued increasingly expressive techniques, they found ways to forestall the usual patterns, delaying a sense of resolution, and thereby extending the quality of endless yearning at the heart of the Romantic aesthetic. Finally, the old musical structures no longer seemed to have discernible anchors—something especially true, said Schoenberg, in the works of Richard Wagner, who had promoted "a change in the logic and constructive power of harmony."

Schoenberg's idea of replacing the tonal process with one based on a "tone row"—a predetermined note order that served, arbitrarily, as the new anchor—abandoned the very effects that for most listeners made sounds recognizably musical. "Pierrot" sprouted from artistic intuition rather than a strictly numerical design, yet the piece's nontonal patina left many listeners disoriented.

The score of "Pierrot," for a singer and small instrumental ensemble, sets three groups of seven poems by Belgian writer Albert Giraud, translated into German by Otto Erich Hartleben. The text runs over with surreal, provocative images, as in the first entry, "Drunk With Moonlight"—"Lusts, thrilling and sweet / Float numberless through the waters! / The wine that one drinks with one's eyes / Is poured down in waves by the moon at night." Topics range from love, sex and religion to violence, crime and blasphemy.

The composer requires the singer to employ *sprechstimme*—a kind of speech-song used by cabaret performers (think of Marlene Dietrich singing "Falling in Love Again," with her imprecise pitch exaggerated). According to Schoenberg, the job of the singer in this style is to hit the pitch and then immediately abandon it by falling or rising—an unusual effect in art music, but perfectly suited to the piece's dream

world. (During 1901-02 Schoenberg had been composer, orchestrator and music director for a Berlin cabaret, called Überbrettle, inspired by Parisian models like Le Chat Noir.)
The reception at the premiere was mixed, but the work's kaleidoscopic mashup of instrumental sonorities and textures, its scampering flurries of notes and asymmetrical rhythms, alternately rushing and halting, and even the specific instrumentation of its ensemble—flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano—all became models for later groups, like the Fires of London, and Eighth Blackbird. Numerous composers, including Milton Babbitt, David Lang and Steve Reich, later employed the same instrumental arrangement.

And Schoenberg found kindred spirits in other quarters, like pioneering abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). "The independent life of the individual voices in your compositions is exactly what I am trying to find in my paintings," he wrote to the composer. It was a concept exulting in pure, abstract expressionism.

—Mr. Isacoff's latest book is "When the World Stopped to Listen: Van Cliburn's Cold War Triumph and Its Aftermath" (Knopf).

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