

“Programme Notes” Episode 1.

Schoenberg: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Introduction

Kia ora,

You're listening to “Programme Notes”, a podcast about classical music.

Each episode relates to the Chamber Music New Zealand tour, pulling on some tantalising thread the concert programme offers, but what unravels stands alone too.

From the central figures and ideas—the Montiverdi's, the “dun-dun-dun-daaa”s—to the universe of esoteric marginalia, this series is for the curious music lover.

I'm your host, Clarissa Dunn

Transfigured Night

[Actor reads poem, slowly/dramatically: German/English] “Two people are walking through the bare, cold woods.”

(the narrator continues but this ‘dips’ under Presenter's voice)

This poem, “Verklärte Nacht” (or “Transfigured Night”), a scandalous nocturnal confession, inspired one of the last musical masterpieces of 19th-century romantic decadence.

Inspired by Richard Dehmel's words, composer Arnold Schoenberg penned this piece when he was just 25 and deeply in love. With his heart set on Mathilde, the sister of his composition teacher Alexander Zemlinsky, Schoenberg's prodigious mind fixed on the creation of an expansive and sensuous string sextet.

The poem's setting—the nocturnal woods—had long been synonymous in art with secrecy, mystery, and the forbidden. And the woman in this poem goes on to reveal her secret to the man: she bears a child to a stranger, and is wracked with guilt and shame, fearing she has ruined any future with the man she walks alongside. Eventually and magnanimously, her lover assures her that through their love, the child will be born his own.

The poem's transgressive, controversial themes of premarital sex shocked readers of the day. Dehmel, who often explored sexual themes, was at one point prosecuted for obscenity! But people also objected to Schoenberg's glorious, lush depiction of the scandalous subject matter in music. Schoenberg embraces the idea of love as the agent of transfiguration, creating music of transformative power and beauty.

All this caused a riot at the sextet's 1902 premiere, with some in the audience expressing their disapproval with their fists. Critics thought it was a freak show, one compared the music to "a calf with six feet," the kind of stunt exploited for shock-value at a fair.

In an essay he wrote decades later, Schoenberg remembers a particularly avant-garde passage of music people took objection to ... this passage here, which borders on atonality:

[bb. 135–150]

Schoenberg also draws attention to less radical passages of music that no one could have taken offense to, including this one...

[bb. 230–235]

You'll hear several moments in "Transfigured Night" that typify the sensuous beauty of late nineteenth-century romanticism... like this shimmering, glittering, and ethereal depiction of moonlight:

[bb. 250–253]

"Transfigured Night" seems to embrace both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the one hand Schoenberg indulges in the magic, fantasy, and decadence of the nineteenth century, and on the other hand he heralds entry into the century of science, atonality, and intense probing of the psyche.

Writing this sextet in 1899, Schoenberg held a dual position of "looking-back-and-looking-forward." Let's look at this a little closer through the Brahms-Wagner debate, one of the defining musical debates of the late nineteenth century.

The Brahms–Wagner Debate

"Transfigured Night" is like a synthesis of the two opposing camps of the time. The more conservative approach is heard in the piece's traditional contrapuntal lines weaving through each other, as well as in the more traditional formal structures epitomised by the composer Johannes Brahms. On the other hand, the the searching, wandering harmonies, the freer use of harmony and texture to respond to emotive suggestions, and the narrativistic

or programmatic approach to the piece's musical progression suggest the influence of Richard Wagner.

Endowed with confidence and astounding intellectual energy, Schoenberg was well placed to synthesise these two camps. Despite his social and educational disadvantages, he was always motivated by independent discovery. He began his journey on a traditional musical path, walking in footsteps of Brahms. In 1893, Schoenberg met Alexander Zemlinsky, a lover of Brahms and Wagner's music, and the only regular teacher Schoenberg would have. Zemlinsky was responsible for introducing Schoenberg to his sister and to Wagner's music. Schoenberg turned out to be enthusiastic about both!

In *Verklärte Nacht*, Schoenberg builds his musical themes on Wagner's principle of "model and sequence", where a basic motif is repeated in ascending sequence, each time with more intensity above increasingly charged harmonies. You hear a lot of this in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. And here is an example of it in "Transfigured Night":

[bb. 274–277]

But Schoenberg also uses Brahms's technique of "developing variation", where musical motifs grow from each other in an organic, evolutionary way. For Schoenberg, like Brahms, uses small, concise motivic cells as the basis for continued thematic development. You'll hear this throughout Schoenberg's piece.

So let's walk through the piece, chronologically, paying attention to some of the highlights...

Walking through

Although Schoenberg wrote "Transfigured Night" as a single movement, it can be divided into five parts. These parts more or less equate to the five sections of the poem. The main musical theme presented at the beginning of the piece recurs in the middle section and again in the last section. And these opening, middle and ending sections of the poem consist of narration rather than dialogue. Importantly, on every reoccurrence, the main musical theme is "transfigured" through Brahms's (or Schoenberg's) technique of developing variation.

The opening line of Dehmel's poem sets the scene at night. The sparse musical texture of the opening bars plunges us into those "bare, cold woods". The four repetitions of a single note, played at a glacial pace, could signal a kind of death march. It's reinforced by the regularity of the phrase lengths—with everything in pairs of 2. Perhaps the woman fears her confession will result

in the death of their relationship. You can hear her despondency reflected in the melody: a heavy, repeating descending scale.

[bb. 1–10]

In these “bare, cold woods”, the pair are illuminated by the light of the moon, which “races along with them over tall oaks”. Here Schoenberg uses the most common of musical devices for depicting large open spaces: the first violin plays very high in its register, while the second cello remains very low:

[bb. 12–16]

From this point, the music becomes more and more chromatic. Nearly all of the instruments' lines become closer and closer, so that the smallest step possible in Western art music—the semitone, or half step—saturates the musical texture.

This gradual semitonal saturation is an example of that Brahmsian technique of “developing variation”, because all motifs are drawn and developed from the same basic material. Semitonal saturation is a tried-and-true way for a composer to depict anxiety. And at this point, the woman's anxiety has reached a tipping point:

[bb. 17–29]

Finally, the woman confesses her secret, and we enter Part 2 of the poem: “I am carrying a child, and not by you. I am walking here in sin beside you.” The music circles around as if in a state of desperation:

[bb. 29–36]

And that semitonal saturation is still everywhere. Here it is in a moment depicting the woman's plaintive exhaustion:

[bb. 41–45]

In a moment of emotional conflict, the woman confesses that she also longed for the sense of purpose and joy that comes with being a mother. And at this point the music changes direction.

The lilting rhythm bought on by the division of each beat into 3, rather than 2, creates a lullaby rhythm—like the hypnotic motion of rocking a baby to sleep. And the long, steady bass note provides a sense of stability:

[bb. 104–110]

The woman's emotional conflict reaches fever pitch with the words:

“and so shuddering, I yielded my womanhood to the embrace of a stranger, and even thought myself blessed. Now life has taken its revenge, and I have met you, oh you.”

This is the most menacing, grotesque music of the piece. Between violent outbursts, the music of the moonlight waxes and wanes into something creepy and ominous:

[bb. 131–146]

The man and woman continue walking through the woods, but the opening walking motif—that repeating descending scale—returns transformed into a walk of utter grief, physical and emotional exhaustion, reflecting the woman's state of mind as she awaits the man's response to her shocking confession.

[bb. 200–206]

Her despair is relieved with the man's consoling and embracing response:

“May the child you have conceived be no burden on your soul. Look, how brightly the universe shines! Splendour falls on everything around. You are floating with me on a cold sea, but a special warmth flickers from you in me, from me in you. That warmth will transfigure the stranger's child, and you will bear it for me, as if it were mine. You have filled me with splendour, you have made a child of me.”

Dramatically, the music turns to the major key, and we hear the most stable, controlled, almost chorale-like music of the piece:

[bb. 228–334]

And then the music turns into a tender love duet between two instruments.

[bb. 235–238]

After hearing the man's open-hearted response, we can appreciate the radiance of the moonlight music in another way. Listen to it this time thinking of his words from the poem: “a special warmth flickers from you in me, from me in you.” The pizzicatos in the lower strings, together with the flickering, kaleidoscopic writing in the violins, produces a sense of shimmering light:

[bb. 250–253]

Rapturous music follows, leading us to the climax of the piece. But listen to how this climactic music ends with the man's theme—that is, with the chorale-like music that first accompanied the man's response. He has the literal and musical last word. The 19th century was a man's world, after all.

[bb. 331–343]

In the final, 5th part of the poem, the music is transfigured even further. The themes we heard earlier on are all made ethereal and bright. So, the walking theme—that repeating descending scale—is now transformed into a serene melody.

And following, as the pair “walk on through the high, bright night”, we hear the most scintillating moonlight music of the piece—more pizzicatos, and the most kaleidoscopic writing of all in the second violin, beneath a soaring line in the first violin. As the stars twinkle, even the night sky is transformed:

[bb. 406–409]

Many things are transfigured through this music: the night, the woods, the woman, the man, the couple, and the unborn child. And love is the agent of all these changes.

Schoenberg celebrates this potential power of love in such rapturous and sensuous ways that there is no doubt it's related to his own experience of falling in love with Mathilde, his soon-to-be wife. This is some of the most inspired musical writing of the era.

Programmatic Music

“Transfigured Night” breaks new ground for another reason: it is essentially programme music for a chamber group.

Programme music is instrumental music with some extramusical element attached—a program note, poem, or other text—something that guides the narrative or progression of the piece. And while orchestral music already had a long history of being programmatic, the world of chamber music was very different.

“Transfigured Night” is only the second example of programmatic chamber music, following Smetana's String Quartet No. 1 of 20 years earlier. So here is yet another striking example of Schoenberg's synthesis of the Brahms and Wagner camps. Schoenberg infuses a Wagnerian programmatic approach to composition into one of Brahms's traditional chamber music genres—the string sextet.

It's also important to note that while Schoenberg enjoyed taking inspiration from poems or other extramusical guides, he always held a more traditional scepticism about the extent to which words could capture the essence of music.

In programmatic music such as “Transfigured Night”, he remained less interested in small programmatic details, and more interested in what he saw as deeper, underlying musical ideas.

The poet Dehmel had a similar response to Schoenberg's music. In a letter of 1912, he told Schoenberg about a performance of the piece he'd heard the previous evening: "I had intended to follow the motives of my text in your composition," he writes ... "but I soon forgot to do so, I was so enthralled by the music."

Coda

Schoenberg's "Transfigured Night" looks backwards and forwards. Back to the nineteenth century with its sumptuous melodies and textures, its interest in the fantastical, and its Brahmsian approach to thematic development.

And forwards to the twentieth century with the controversial themes of the subject matter, the avant-garde passages bordering on atonality, the Wagnerian endless melodies charged with chromaticism, and the grand transformation of chamber music into something programmatic.

Schoenberg, never one to shy away from his own importance, also saw himself as a major part of that grand tradition of composers—Beethoven, to Brahms, to Schoenberg.

He stood with a foot in both centuries—grounded in the tradition and technique of Brahms, but with a keen eye on the future. And it's "Transfigured Night" that sits at this border.

In retrospect, we might feel those ponderous steps through the dark woods as a sign that Schoenberg's twentieth century would hold significant upheavals and delights.

Outroduction

"Programme Notes" is produced by Elliot Vaughan for Chamber Music New Zealand.

This episode was written by Hamish Robb.

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