

CLARITY AND PRECISION

Arnold Schoenberg's concept of presenting new music to an audience

Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen (Society for Private Musical Performances)

In 1918 Arnold Schoenberg founded the *Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen* (Society for Private Musical Performances) in Vienna.

At the age of forty-four, Schoenberg was widely considered one of the most important and influential composers of his time. After his experiences in the conservative Viennese music life, culminating in the horrors of the infamous Scandal-concert of March 31, 1913, Schoenberg must have felt that the time had come to introduce a different way of presenting new music to an interested audience.

With Schoenberg as president and with a board of nineteen friends and students an interesting format was developed: weekly concerts which would only be open to members of the *Verein*, critics were not allowed and audible approval or disapproval was not permitted.

The programs would remain secret until the evening of the concert.

Compositions would be presented at the highest level of performance standards. They would be repeated preferably two to four times during the season, sometimes even twice during the same concert, in order to understand the music better.

Radio broadcasting was not introduced until 1923 and as gramophone records with this repertoire were not available, the repetition was very valuable; even in today's music life it can be helpful.

The *Verein's* main goal was "to provide artists and art lovers with a real and precise knowledge of modern music". It was also stated that this was a society "not for the composers, but for the audience". In sharp contrast to the common rehearsal practice in Vienna during those days, the concerts of the *Verein* would be prepared aiming for the highest standards 'with care and thoroughly'. Schoenberg and his *Vortragsmeister* (literally 'performance-masters', functioning as 'rehearsal-directors') Alban Berg, Anton Webern, Erwin Stein, Eduard Steuermann and Benno Sachs) were securing that the specific work could be properly presented in a performance. The performing musicians were carefully selected and only those who were sincerely interested in the music were accepted. Any display of virtuosity for its own sake was not tolerated.

The *Verein* was active in Vienna from 29 December 1918 until 5 December 1921, when the economic crisis in Austria made further activities impossible. The repertoire performed in these three years contained songs, piano pieces, chamber music (violin sonatas, cello sonatas, piano trios, string quartets et cetera), smaller choral works, and orchestral compositions by mainly contemporary composers of different styles, from Mahler and Richard Strauss to the most recent music. The repertoire also included many composers whose works do not belong to the Central European tradition. The orchestral works would be presented in arrangements for piano solo, piano four hands or two piano's (six hands or eight hands), again with 'the highest standards of concert performance'.

The *Verein* was not intended as a vehicle for for a specific type of music or for Schoenberg himself. Max Reger (of whom 23 compositions were performed) and

Claude Debussy (16 compositions performed) were the composers most presented and it was not until the third season of the *Verein* that Schoenberg introduced some of his own music. After the *Verein* in Vienna had been disbanded, another three seasons in Prague were presented with a total of twenty concerts, under presidency of Alexander Zemlinsky, from May 25, 1922, until May 31, 1924. As had been the case in Vienna, Reger and Debussy were performed most often, now followed by Schoenberg, whose compositions were programmed by Alexander Zemlinsky. Numerous first performances as well as several world premieres were presented by the *Verein*. When looking at the two most popular composers of the *Verein*, Max Reger and Claude Debussy, who not only were the most performed but who also were celebrated at concerts that were exclusively devoted to their music, it is remarkable that the *Verein* acknowledged certain qualities in both Debussy and Reger and that our time only appreciates Debussy and seems to have forgotten about Reger. Can it be that our present music life does not do justice to the music of Reger, who was considered a genius by Schoenberg?

Since the days of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven the use of piano reductions of orchestral music or even of string quartets had been a customary way of getting acquainted with new music. One could play the music at home, and repeat it as much as desired. Before technical progress made sound reproduction possible this was not only the general way to become familiar with certain compositions. It also allowed presenting them in concert in this format, when the available funds would not allow the engaging of an orchestra. ~~Even Bruckner's Seventh Symphony (which in 1921 would also be arranged for the *Verein*) was initially presented in 1884 in a performance for two piano's, before its first performance by an orchestra.~~ In Schoenberg's view one would always be able to understand the real content of the music in these piano arrangements, sometimes even better, as there would be no distraction by an orchestration that might impress on its own. In the brochure of the *Verein* it reads: 'In this manner it is namely possible to hear and judge modern orchestral works stripped of all sound effects that only an orchestra produces and of all of its sensory aids. Thereby invalidating the common reproach that this music owes its effect solely to its more or less rich and striking instrumentation and does not possess all of the features which formerly were characteristic of good music: melodies, richness of harmony, polyphony, perfect form, architecture, etc.'

For the second season of the *Verein* ambitious plans were made to arrange orchestral compositions for large chamber ensembles, still using the piano but including strings and winds, in order to preserve more of the original orchestral colours. The combination of several string and wind instruments with piano so far only existed in a few relatively insignificant works in the repertoire until Arnold Schoenberg in 1912 composed his *Pierrot lunaire*, Op. 21 for *Sprechstimme* and the unprecedented combination of flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass-clarinet, violin/viola, violoncello and piano.

Schoenberg started the use of a new and richer type of arrangement for the *Verein* with his own 1920 arrangement of Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* for what would soon become the standard ensemble: flute, clarinet, five string instruments (string quartet and double bass), piano and harmonium, in this case with the exceptional addition of percussion.

The main principle of Schoenberg's model of arranging was to leave from the original

orchestration not only the string parts but also two or more of the wind parts as much as possible untouched. The remaining woodwind parts and additional string parts were given to the harmonium and the piano was pre-dominantly used for brass, harp and percussion parts.

Schoenberg's method of arranging also served as a model for all other later *Verein* ensemble arrangements by his students Erwin Stein, Karl Rankl, Hanns Eisler, Benno Sachs and Rudolf Kolisch. The arranging probably took place under Schoenberg's guidance. The *Verein* ensemble performed only six of the total of seventeen orchestral compositions that were arranged : Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* , Mahler's Fourth Symphony, Reger's *Romantische Suite* op.125 , Schoenberg's Five Orchestra Pieces op.16 , Webern's Five Orchestra Pieces op.10 and Webern's Six Orchestra Pieces op.6 . The other eleven arrangements remained unperformed until the revival of this particular *Verein* enterprise much later at the end of the 20th century.

Projects of the *Verein* as announced in the last season included the performances of chamber ensemble versions of all of Beethoven's concertos for piano and his Violin Concerto, Reger's Violin Concerto and Piano Concerto, Mozart's Piano Concerto in c-minor KV 491, Brahms's Violin Concerto and Second Piano Concerto, plus Bruckner's Seventh Symphony. Concerning Bruckner's symphony the prospectus mentions that it would be artistically necessary to remove the usual cuts. Of all these mentioned works only the Reger violin concerto and Bruckner's Seventh Symphony were arranged, but not performed.

The concept of arranging or even rewriting music for other, usually smaller ensembles has a long history and it still exists today in many forms. Composers often arrange their own music or that of others, ranging from very literal transcriptions to very free versions. Of course these arrangements often had (and still have) to do with a lack of funding, as was the case in Vienna around 1920. This situation led Schoenberg to use the *Verein* chamber ensemble, with its new format in between the original orchestra version and the piano reduction.

Such a reduction obviously means that one loses the potential massive sound of the orchestra, and also the many colors of the full orchestration, but on the other hand one gains the individual expression of the solo strings and the different energy of a chamber ensemble.

Post-*Verein*

Since 1918 the *Verein* has had a lasting influence on the presentation of new music and it became the source of inspiration for many organizations for new music from the early 1920s until our present times; it has served as model for many concert societies and festivals after the Second World War and it still is influencing serious music presenters all over the world.

The renewed interest in the arrangements of the *Verein* started in the late 1970s. Most of the rediscovering and presenting of the arrangements of the *Verein* can be attributed to the Schoenberg Ensemble. The Schoenberg Ensemble, founded by the present writer in 1974, emerged from an ensemble of students at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, The Netherlands. I was the ensemble's violist and artistic

leader, and as such responsible until 1988 for the development of the repertoire. When I visited for the first time in 1978 the newly build Arnold Schoenberg Institute in Los Angeles as part of my research regarding performance practice questions and the studying of the manuscripts of Arnold Schoenberg, I found in the archives besides some interesting Schoenberg manuscripts of early compositions also many *Verein* arrangements.

The Schoenberg Ensemble started performing and recording most of these arrangements and we probably gave the first performance, or at least the second performance after the Viennese *Verein*, of many of the *Verein* arrangements between the years 1978 and 1990. Already in the early 1980s the Schoenberg Ensemble decided to continue the *Verein* tradition by commissioning composers/arrangers to build additional repertoire while using the *Verein* model of arranging. The value of performing these *Verein* and post- *Verein* arrangements in today's music life still lays in presenting underexposed repertoire, with obvious exceptions of composers such as Debussy, Wagner, Bruckner and Mahler.

In the past thirty years many ensembles world-wide have performed and recorded *Verein* arrangements, often to great acclaim. Our initiative to create new *Verein* arrangements has also been followed by many others, ensembles and composers/arrangers, in an increasing way.

In the past twenty years I have conducted most of the *Verein* arrangements, remaining basically true to the original arrangement while comparing it with the original orchestral score and correcting obvious mistakes.

Until 2011, when I started revising many of the arrangements, I had restricted myself to minor changes in instrumentation, but closer inspection of the arrangements in comparison with the original instrumentation led me to the conviction that it would be in the spirit of the *Verein* to improve the instrumentation choices during rehearsal, thus keeping it a lively art. This I did often in co-operation with the musicians. It felt even more justified because many of the pieces were not performed during the days of the *Verein*, and actually never even rehearsed. This has led me in certain cases to add instruments, and exchange voices, particularly in the keyboards.

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