

Dr. Anton Webern

To be an original requires no special gift – just be what you are.

This common-sense dictum may well come handy when one wants to talk about Anton Webern.

Some called him crazy; others placed him at the head of *the modernist trend*; still others, condescending from their royal-like attitudes, conferred on him the status of their own *predecessor*. Everyone was blinded by the novelty and innovation. Except for the New Vienna School, hardly anyone was aware that true innovators grow out of conservatives.

Many musicians who sincerely revered Webern have not become composers of any note, since they focused on his style inseparable from his personality, rather than on his method. Schoenberg, for one, created no clones, and he certainly taught no one to imitate any style at all. His skill was to bring his students back to their own selves, and he cultivated in them something very important, something essential, something that modern music is either lacking or has none of at all.

Schoenberg taught music as an art, and his art grew out of craft at its highest level. Teaching harmony, he made his students appreciate the logic and unity of style and unraveled before them the importance of the tonal system whose wealth would create a prototype of what his students would produce within the new atonal harmony. Teaching analysis and theory of form, his aim was to create in his student the quality of *a thinker* in the field of musical form.

To me this became clear the first hour of my studies with Phillip Herschkowitz. His recollections of Berg and Webern (Herschkowitz was taught by both of them) were anything but memoirs – a genre he disliked. Being a sensitive man, he avoided sentimentality whenever he could. In my recollection, he made several statements and quotations from Berg and Webern, always with specific purpose in mind.

– *The musical idea should be expressed extremely clearly and simply. Except when the idea itself is complex ...* (Webern).

- *Webern's music is as beautiful, as Mozart's; Mozart isn't popular, either.* (A.Berg)

– *Berg and Webern are gulfs in a sea, whose name is Schoenberg.* (Herschkowitz).

– *I never had a lesson, when Webern would not mention Schoenberg's name.* (Herschkowitz)

To Webern, as I understood, an idea expressed by Schoenberg had always been a starting point which he took up as a basis for further reasoning.

– *Whatever he does, he does extremely seriously.* (Herschkowitz about Webern)

I heard a story when in Webern's presence someone said that 'the form of *period* consists of **three** units', a statement which left Webern speechless, so furious he was. In his mind there had never been any doubt that essentially the form of a period, its principle (Schoenberg would call it "the school form of a period") had **two** units, **two** cadences, i.e., *thesis* and *antithesis*. The period is a question; a statement about *what is what*. **Two** cadences present a choice: which one is the *tonic*, and which the *dominant*.

This is what Webern wrote in a letter which I happen to have:

Phillip Herschkowitz,

who has been my student of composition, deserves every commendation. It is clearly obvious that I think him, first and foremost, to be an outstanding talent as a composer, which deserves special appreciation.

I am convinced that of his abilities, – in any field of music – especially, in composition and theory (and also in the field of teaching and scientific research), one finds it is necessary to expect of him exceptionally important achievements.

I therefore wish that Phillip Herschkowitz be given all the possible assistance.

Dr. Anton Webern

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The letter was probably written on the day of their last meeting. For Herschkowitz it had been no longer possible to remain in Austria for a long time, but an opportunity to escape had not turned up until 1938. What could Webern feel then? He most certainly realized he could not help his student. His parting words were about what he had always lived by, which is music.

And so he writes this letter of recommendation. Who to? Where to? Who could have known him at that time in Romania or in the USSR? It would be ridiculous to think that at 55, as he was then, he could be popular or well known. What about his letter? Well, it is for everyone and nobody in particular. If this is so, does it matter what it says?

Not so with Webern. He is a different person and a different musician. He lives on in History and, consequently, he always remains true to himself (“whatever he does, he does extremely seriously”). He writes a brilliant and useless recommendation which Herschkowitz “can make use of” only after his death, when I included it in a posthumous book of his theoretical works.

In 1938, Herschkowitz was only 32, and nothing indicated that he would become what Webern wrote about. Even in 1990 no one would have subscribed to Webern’s praise. The book was the first ever publication of Herschkowitz’s works in Russia.

Yet, in 1938 this letter was signed by Webern himself! That it has become prophetic is hardly surprising.

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