

*Arnold Schoenberg's Dodecaphonic Method  
as a Representation of an Artistic Utopia*

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Every great idea is a tyrant when it first appears;  
hence the advantages which it produces  
change all too quickly into disadvantages.  
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

## Defining an Artistic Utopia: Music and Progress

The purpose of this chapter is to propose closer approach to certain aspects of Arnold Schoenberg's life and work as situated in the context of utopian thinking. I seek to establish a link between the composer's religious and political beliefs, his interest in philosophy and mysticism, and his musical output, focusing mainly on the dodecaphonic method invented by the artist. The primary intention is to prove that the above-mentioned aspects of Schoenberg's personality and work reveal a life lasting and somehow naïve wish to create and believe in the utopian world. Finally, the opposite, dystopic face of the utopian thinking is examined using the example of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, where the invention of dodecaphony is attributed to devil himself.

In order to establish a foundation for this research it is crucial to explain shortly the parallelism occurring between musical art and the general concept of progress in art with an emphasis on the beginning of the twentieth century. The idea of utopia,

as described by Thomas More, has been transferred from political and social areas to art, receiving great attention particularly in the twentieth century in the thought of Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, among others. Since utopia means “no place” and “ideal place” (Rinehart 2014: 26) at the same time, it is as such an intentional object, like a musical work, according to Roman Ingarden’s concept (Ingarden 1966: 169-307). The essence of a political or social utopia is a state that decides what humanity is and how to realize it (Kiereś 2010: 49): Thus, some utopias contain already the premises of dystopia that unveil fully when the insubordination appears. A centrally controlling organism (whatever we call it a state, an idea, or a work of art) assumes unquestionable happiness and obedience to its laws (understood as “natural”). In this aspect, an object acquires the status of a subject; the human ruler fulfils only mechanical actions in order to keep the whole machine running. For the purpose of this chapter the notion of utopianism defined by Ruth Levitas in terms of a “wide range of forms, functions and contents” (Levitas 2010: 207) all based on “the desire for a different, better way of being” (Levitas 2010: 209), may serve as a point of departure.

Richard Rinehart states specifically that “utopia thrived under Modernism” since a condition for it is “creating a break with past civilization” (Rinehart 2014: 2). Breaking with the representation and aiming towards an ideal, a “non-existing” world is also characteristic for modernism. One more important feature of modern utopias is that they were “totalizing” as “all-or-nothing propositions” (Rinehart 2014: 10). In the words of Theodor W. Adorno, “each artwork is utopia insofar as through its form it anticipates what would finally be itself, and this converges with the demand for the abrogation of the spell of self-identity cast by the subject. No artwork cedes to another” (Adorno 2002: 135). Adorno points at art’s general, repeating necessity and longing to be new; at the same time that utopian longing can never be fulfilled since it “would be art’s temporal end” (Adorno 2002: 32).

Ernst Bloch’s view proves to be similar; he sees music as the prediction and symbol of a utopia (Fubini 1997: 465), emphasizing at the same time that “music as the inwardly utopian art lies completely beyond anything empirically demonstrable” (Bloch 2000: 162). Bloch’s *The Spirit of Utopia* was written in 1915-16 and published just after the First World War, i.e. exactly between Arnold Schoenberg’s atonal and dodecaphonic periods. Bloch’s thought mirrors the dialectical tension between form and expression in music, echoed especially in Schoenberg’s dodecaphonic opera *Moses und Aron* from 1932. In the book *Schoenberg and the New Music* Carl Dahlhaus writes:

The concept of the »new«, which Ernst Bloch has said is in a bad way, taken as a historical category, as unavoidable as it is precarious. It is unavoidable in the trivial sense that the matter of history is that which changes, and not that which is static or that which repeats itself in the same form. It is precarious because the principle which states that history is to be understood as continuity urges the historian to trace the new, if at all possible, back to the old. [...] The new is not significant in itself, but solely in relations to its antithesis, as the irreducible and unresolved remainder. Thus the new can be seen, paradoxically, as being at one and the same time the actual subject-matter and the blind spot of history (Dahlhaus 1989: 2).

Dahlhaus sees the modern version of progress in Bloch's idea of utopia "as a matter of hope, which was developed in the context of a philosophy of music" (Dahlhaus 1989: 14). It should be specified that Bloch understands hope as the opposite to security: "[...] hope is critical and can be disappointed" (Bloch 1988: 16-17). It is interesting to note that for Bloch too many rules or too much mathematics in music distance it from its proper utopian function (Korstvedt 2003: 56). This would partly explain why for Schoenberg's utopian thinking the musical idea was given priority in a work of art and the "mathematic rules", which he was often wrongly accused to over-use, play minor role and are submitted to musical expression.

Already *Jugendstil* and expressionism were regarded as utopian, but the real revolution in this aspect was just about to come. Dahlhaus comments harshly on Schoenberg's atonal "turn":

[...] it is, strictly speaking, impossible to give a reason for Schoenberg's decision of 1907. Those who speak of historical necessity, of the dictates of the historical moment which Schoenberg obeyed, make the event appear more harmless than it actually was. The suspension of the existing order, the proclamation of the musical state of emergency, was an act of violence (Dahlhaus 1989: 88).

Robert Nisbet draws attention to the persistence of the idea of progress through ages. A combination of this idea with utopian thinking promises an optimistic outcome (Nisbet 2009: 311). Golan Gur, a Schoenbergian scholar, points at the importance of ideology of progress in composer's theoretical writings. Schoenberg clearly saw the breakdown of the tonal system as an inevitable progress (understood in terms of an evolution) and as a historical achievement of Western music, including his own person as a part of it. This kind of progress was also related to other aspects than music, mainly moral and ethical values. For Schoenberg the artistic principles were not universally valid but rather historically conditioned. Collapse of tonality and the necessity of inventing the twelve-tone method was supposed to insure, in composer's view, the supremacy of German music over the next hundred years. There is an echo of absolutism in a wish expressed so clearly. Schoenberg cared much about being

important in the history of music, comparing himself with Brahms, among others. In his article *Brahms the Progressive* (1947) the composer praises avoiding unnecessary passages and undeveloped repetition as Brahms' ideal (Gur 2012: 8). Schoenberg claimed the same ideal in his own compositions. It is not without importance that Modernism rejected representational art. Tonality could be seen, indeed, as a quintessence of representation (understood as *mimesis*) with the vast repertoire of means: rhetoric (the doctrine of the affections), topics, gestures, symbols. Dodecaphony was supposed to grant music autonomy not only inside the field of art, as an opposition absolute *versus* programme music but also in the relationship between music and society. At the same time Schoenberg's strong belief in progress smoothened the accusation of the intention to shock the audience. Intelligent, educated but also snobbish audience was needed for comprehension of new music. Starting a revolution Schoenberg wanted nevertheless to retain a Romantic status of an artist in the society combined with a Classical concept of genius. As Gur observes, no other composer supported his idea of progress with such rational arguments (Gur 2012: 11).

## Religion and Politics

In order to fully understand Schoenberg's personality, his *Weltanschauung*, as well as the inner need to change the musical reality, one needs to take a closer look at his religious, philosophical, social, and political environment. Although Schoenberg was born in a Jewish family, his way to Judaism was long and complex. The works such as *Moses und Aron*, *Die Jakobsleiter* and *A Survivor from Warsaw* were a kind of settlement, not only with religious issues but also with the very recent past. Schoenberg's relation to his religious belief led him toward radical political beliefs. In 1898 the composer was baptized into the Austrian Lutheran Church and on July 24, 1933, just before leaving for the United States, he re-entered the Jewish community by making a formal declaration in Paris (DeVoto 1989). Already in 1925, when Schoenberg moved to Berlin, the political situation started to be difficult for him to cope with. In 1932 he wrote to his pupil and friend, Alban Berg:

I've had it hammered into me so loudly and so long that only by being deaf to begin with could I have failed to understand it. And it's a long time now since it wrung any regrets from me. Today I'm proud to call myself a Jew" (Schoenberg 1965: 167).

Being still in Europe Schoenberg had in mind a daring project and created a plan with the intention:

[...] to engage in large scale propaganda among all of Jewry in the United States and also later to other countries, designed first of all to get them to produce the financial means sufficient to pay for the gradual emigration of the Jews from Germany. I propose to move the Jewish community to its very depths by a graphic description of what lies in store for the German Jews, unless they receive help within the next two or three months (Ringer 1990: 135).

What is astonishing in all these words is Schoenberg's incredible sharpness of view on the political matters and his concerns for the future of European Jews. At the same time it reveals a kind of an utopian hope that good will and work may change things, no matter how bad they look.

In the United States Schoenberg tried to create some awareness about the dramatic situations of the European Jews, however without much success due to "a general indifference in America to the tenebrous developments in Germany" (Strasser 1995: 8). In 1934 Schoenberg even wrote to Rabbi Stephen Wise of the American Jewish Congress. But any radical steps against the Nazis in the 1930s could not be possibly promoted by a "rabbi who represented assimilationist Jews" (Feisst 2011: 87). In December 1938 the composer created himself *A Four-Point Program for Jewry*, on which he has worked for several years. Schoenberg warned that "millions of European Jews were in danger" and concluded: "the time of words is over and if action does not start at once, it may be too late" (Feisst 2011: 87). He was, however, unable to publish this text, despite many efforts made in that direction. During the Second World War Schoenberg could not proceed with any other action of that kind. His only dream that came true was the creation of the State of Israel. He consecrated to this occasion an unfinished work to his own text *Israel exists again* (1949) and also commented on that fact in 1951: "For more than four decades it has been a most cherished wish of mine to see erected an independent Israeli state. And more than that: to become a citizen residing in this state" (Feisst 2011: 84). That wish was never to happen; the same year Schoenberg died in Los Angeles.

## Philosophy and Mysticism

In this section I focus on another aspect of Schoenberg's life that is crucial for understanding his relation to idealism and utopian thinking. I suggest that certain philosophical concepts as well as the works by Emanuel Swedenborg had great influence on composer's view on art and creative process in general. Schoenberg fought all his life to balance the two aspects: heart and brain, thus proving that his works are based on their cooperation and complementing. The mystical philosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg should be mentioned here as a main source of inspiration. The composer knew Swedenborg's theories chiefly from the novel *Séraphîta* by Honoré Balzac, from 1834. Swedenborg's influence spread widely over the centuries and can be traced in the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Immanuel Kant, and Arthur Schopenhauer. In Balzac's novel an androgynous protagonist embodies a perfect match of masculine and feminine, materiality and spirituality, feeling and mind. Moreover, the interpretation of an artist as a Creator is essential for Schoenberg's thought. One way to emphasize this conviction is the prime mover feature of a musical motive which corresponds with the concept of a musical idea as an incarnation of Kantian noumenon, as well as Schopenhauerian will in music (Covach 1995). Being led by a musical idea, a composer gains an access to will (Trottier 2005) Motive is not anymore a purely technical means of formal structure; caused by an impulse it becomes a direct expression of will, a creative act comparable with a divine creation. Such understanding of an artist-demiurge dates back to philosophy of Plato, and then Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

## Schoenberg's Dodecaphonic Method

In this part I argue that both atonal and dodecaphonic techniques used by Schoenberg may be regarded as products of utopian thinking, followed by a bitter disappointment. Dodecaphonic method was invented by Schoenberg in 1923 after about 10 years of thinking of and working on it. Unlike the appearance of atonality around 1908, which was a clear sign of modernistic turn, dodecaphony was rather a step towards a new understanding of *avant-garde*, being, in certain terms, somehow "post-modernistic". Still, it proves to be utopian since Bloch claims that "[...] the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present" (Bloch 1989: 12). According to Luigi Rognoni, the gap between an artist and the society at the beginning of the twentieth

century urged a constructive formulation of moral and ethical mission of music (Rognoni 1978). Schoenberg wrote himself: "The method of composing with twelve tones grew out of a necessity" (Schoenberg 1984: 216). The composer called dodecaphony a "Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Which are Related Only with One Another" (Schoenberg 1984: 89), renouncing the notions of system or theory, suggesting more abstract attitude and proposing his pupils to "use the same kind of form or expression, the same themes, melodies, sounds, rhythms as you used before" (Schoenberg 1984: 213).

Schoenberg's method was based on the equality of all the twelve tones of the chromatic scale, meaning that they should appear approximately the same number of times during the musical piece, without privileging any. Since the tones were related only with one another, there was no tonality involved. Therefore, the most difficult thing for the listeners of the dodecaphonic music was not the number of dissonances, but the lack of harmonic gravity. The basic set or series, although composed in the first place, could appear at any place of the piece, not necessarily at the very beginning. It gave an impression of a possibility of unlimited expansion, since there were no tonal boundaries, and "unlimited" combinations of tone-rows' forms. Rognoni, among other scholars, points at the similarities of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (being created since 1913) and dodecaphony. *Epoché*, a suspension of judgment or bracketing, led to the reduction of the tone field. It could be compared with a passage from the "inner consciousness" to the "intentional consciousness"; to the pure, primeval sound. Each note was viewed in its "essence". A tone-row served as an "intentional act", already present in the imagined object (Rognoni 1978: 101). Schoenberg was conscious of the high requirements of his method:

The restrictions imposed on a composer by the obligation to use only one set in a composition are so severe that they can only be overcome by an imagination which has survived a tremendous number of adventures. Nothing is given by this method; but much is taken away (Schoenberg 1984: 223).

On the other hand, the composer stated that: "One has to follow the basic set; but, nevertheless, one composes as freely as before" (Schoenberg 1984: 223). As freely as before in terms of musical expression, but the order was soon "inevitably tempered by practical considerations: they worked on the basis of an interaction between ordered and unordered pitch collections" (Whitall 2008: 24).

Wilhelm Worringer views an abstraction in art as "the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the external world" (Korstvedt 2010: 64). Schoenberg

wrote: "Music is not merely another kind of amusement, but a musical poet's, a musical thinker's representation of musical ideas; these musical ideas must correspond to the laws of human logic; they are a part of what man can apperceive, reason and express" (Schoenberg 1984: 220). The composer was known for saying that there is no way in between when it comes to art. On the other hand, he never made his revolutionary step fully, as Anton Webern did, for example. Breaking with the tonal system, Schoenberg did not retract at the same time from the traditional form, counterpoint, instrumentation, texture, and, most importantly, expression. The same, known material received a new organization. Paradoxically, it was an utopian idea because of its smooth treatment of the rules. Being proud of his method, Schoenberg wanted to connect it backwards not only to his own music, but, in general, to the whole musical German tradition (Covach 2000). A disappointment came, once the "updated" harmonic layer was not able to carry alone the burden of consequences. Schoenberg has finally retracted from the strict dodecaphony and moved toward a more "eclectic" style, combining tonality, atonality and dodecaphony. As Adorno says: "the fulfilment of the wishes takes something away from the substance of the wishes [...]" (Bloch 1989: 1). Still, the utopia island arises not only "if we travel there, but *in that* we travel there" (Bloch, 1989:1). Schoenberg's commented in the following way:

Whether one calls oneself conservative or revolutionary, whether one composes in a conventional or progressive manner [...], whether one is a good composer or not—one must be convinced of the infallibility of one's own fantasy and one must believe in one's own inspiration. Nevertheless, the desire for a conscious control of the new means and forms will arise in every artist's mind; and he will wish to know *consciously* the laws and rules which govern the forms which he has conceived »as in a dream« (Schoenberg 1984: 218).

### Towards a Dystopic Face of Dodecaphony: *Doctor Faustus*

This part illustrates how an utopian idea may be turned into a dystopian one simply by wrong positioning of ideas such as humanism, tradition, and national supremacy. Collaboration of Thomas Mann and Theodor W. Adorno on *Doctor Faustus* brought consequences that were fatal for the composer in this aspect. Schoenberg wrote to Thomas Mann for the first time on 1 November 1930, not knowing him personally yet. He was asking for signing a request for a foundation of Adolf Loos (gravely ill at that time) school (Schoenberg 1965). When Mann's *Doctor Faustus* was published (in



the autumn of 1947), the two artists already knew each other personally. Schoenberg did not get the rumours that the book was connected with himself until 1948. It was Alma Mahler-Werfel who suggested that Schoenberg should take a position against *Doctor Faustus*. Schoenberg confessed in a letter to Josef Rufer:

I didn't read *Doctor Faustus* myself, owing to my nervous eye affliction. But from my wife and also from other quarters I heard that he had attributed my twelve-note method to his hero, without mentioning my name. I drew his attention to the fact that historians might make use of this in order to do me an injustice. After prolonged reluctance he declared himself prepared to insert, in all subsequent copies in all languages, a statement concerning my being the originator of this method. Whether this has been done I don't know (Schoenberg 1984: 255).

Mann has finally written a dedication in the book: "To Arnold Schoenberg, the real owner" (Stuckenschmidt 1977: 494). He also suggested that the protagonist was closer to Nietzsche than Schoenberg. In 1949 a regular article battle was taking place in the newspapers. Finally, in 1950 the quarrel was finished by a reconciling letter by Schoenberg. Not only the invention of dodecaphony by a pact with the devil and mental illness caused Schoenberg's anger, but also the figure of Mann's adviser in musical matter, Adorno, whom the composer knew since the twenties and who was also living in Los Angeles. Their relations were never friendly, rather cold, including battles of words at meetings in houses of common friends (Stuckenschmidt 1977: 495). In *Doctor Faustus* the twelve-tone technique appears as a prediction of totalitarianism. It is not only relating Schoenberg's method to nihilism, but also to retraction from love, emotions and a collapse of German culture, as well as politics. As Leverkühn's, Schoenberg's fate was paralleled by politics, but he found a way to win over it, as he found a way out of his utopian method. In addition, as Malcolm MacDonald notes: "Quite apart from feeling that Mann had encroached on his »intellectual property«, Schoenberg feared an even wider dissemination of the superficial ideas about his music which he had always fought, and one which by its literary context could be used as a weapon against him" (MacDonald 2008: 85).

## Conclusion

Adorno states that: "The older Schoenberg is reliably reported to have said that for the moment there was no discussing harmony. Clearly this was not a prophecy that someday one would again be able to compose with triads, which he by the expansion

of the material had relegated to exhausted special circumstances” (Adorno 2002: 36). Schoenberg’s late words (dating from 1948) reveal a clear denial:

[...] a longing to return to the older style was always vigorous in me; and from time to time I had to yield to that urge. This is how and why I sometimes write tonal music. To me stylistic difference of this nature are not of special importance. I do not know which of my compositions are better; I like them all, because I liked them when I wrote them (Schoenberg 1984: 109).

Adorno predicted that longing, warning that “[...] one need only imagine how easily the equally well-founded longing for the reconstruction of monodic lines could be transformed into the false resurrection of what the enemies of new music miss so painfully as melody” (Adorno 2002: 37). But the real reason for renouncing the strict twelve-tone method was the impossibility to create works distinctive enough (expression-wise), while obeying the rules. Dodecaphony as a technique developed to serialism that went two different ways: making possible the emergence of composers such as Luigi Nono, Olivier Messiaen, Luciano Berio, or Mauricio Kagel and at the same time producing the whole group of purely technical exercises, devoid of humanism.

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