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Arnold Schoenberg's Opus 15

Das Buch der hängenden Gärten in Context:
The Singer's Perspective



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Introduction

The major part of this PhD research project consisted of four public recitals presented in Dundalk Institute of Technology from 2004 to 2007. The programmes selected for these recitals traced the developments in the late 19th century German *Lied* leading up to Schoenberg's Opus 15, and the post Schoenberg resonances in vocal writing from the early to late 20th century. These programmes and detailed programme notes are included in Appendix E.

This dissertation focuses on the singer's role in interpreting Opus 15 which featured as the main work in the final recital in May 2007. This work was selected because of its pivotal role as the culmination of the late 19th century *Lied*, and also as a harbinger for future developments in vocal writing, foreshadowing *Pierrot Lunaire* and the expansion of vocal technique, atonality and musico-dramatic expression during the 20th century.

Arnold Schoenberg was one of the most influential figures in the history of music. His eventual break with tonality ended a 400-year tradition and influenced generations of composers who followed. If we look briefly at the cultural and political influences surrounding Schoenberg's early compositional years, we see a world in transition – on the brink of explosive change. The Romantic age was gradually giving way to Expressionism, *Lieder* had become firmly established in the wider context of concert performance and experimentation in extended tonality abounded. Concepts of human identity, government, philosophy, nationalism, subconscious influences on human behaviour and man's understanding of the physical world were shattered and reconstructed within a 46-year period. The so-called 'Golden Age of Security',¹ reached after nearly one thousand years of the Habsburg monarchy, was challenged by poets, intellectuals and a small number of composers. In 1859, Darwin revealed his theory of evolution. In 1867 Karl Marx wrote *Das Kapital*. In 1883 Friedrich Nietzsche wrote *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. In 1896 Theodore Herzl published his book entitled *The Jewish State*, and with it the Zionist Movement was born, later leading to the establishment of Israel. In 1900 Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The study of quantum physics was initiated the same year by Max Planck. In 1905 Albert Einstein proclaimed his Theory of Relativity. The old world had fragmented.

The song cycle, *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* Opus 15, is a seminal work in the artistic canon of this period and specifically in vocal literature. The purpose of this research project is to conduct a comprehensive study of Opus 15 from the singer's perspective. The depth of perception in interpretation, the vocal technique and diction necessary to successfully master this work makes it of immeasurable value to the advanced singer. It is pivotal in interpreting the works of Berio, Crumb, Cage and the entire new music literature, all of which owe a debt to Schoenberg's break with tonality. It ranks with Schubert's *Winterreise* and Schumann's *Liederkreis* as one of the great song cycles of all time. The value of

1 Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday: An Autobiography* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1964) reproduced from first ed. (Viking Press, 1943), p. 1.

learning such a work is often disputed on the grounds that it is too much of a strain on the voice and that it is impossible without perfect pitch. However, as a work that I have studied and sung for twenty years, I consider it a masterpiece that fully repays the efforts of the singer who engages with and learns it.

In researching the historical context for the work I visited the Arnold Schoenberg Center in Vienna where I had access to the manuscripts of Opus 15 and to other important documentation. Having consulted the original letters from Winternitz-Dorda to Schoenberg in the Center, I both transcribed and translated them from old German script into Latin script and then from German into English. I also obtained copies of the original reviews of the first two public performances of Opus 15 in February and July 1912, which I subsequently translated into English. I read and copied Schoenberg's correspondence with Rose Bampton, the first singer to perform Opus 15 in public in the USA in December 1949, and compiled the original reviews of the performance. I listened to the existing recordings of Opus 15 in the Center and watched the tapes of TV documentaries, including interviews with Schoenberg. I subsequently translated the Stefan George texts used in Opus 15, and compared the letters from Winternitz-Dorda with the entries in Schoenberg's *Berliner Tagebuch* and his correspondence with Berg, to establish an understanding of Schoenberg's view of the singer.

The study consists of an Introduction, four chapters, a Conclusion and Appendices. In Chapter 1 the background to the development of *Lieder* in the Romantic era and the rise of Expressionism are explored, together with the genesis of Opus 15 and Schoenberg's choice of text. The original extant manuscripts of Opus 15 are examined with specific reference to Schoenberg's famous essay, *The Relationship to the Text*. Particular attention is directed to the drafts and sketches and the first fair copy housed in the Schoenberg Center in Vienna and the composer's interview with the psychoanalyst Julius Bahle.

In Chapter 2 vocal performance practice at the *fin de siècle* with regard to the specific genre of the *Lied* is appraised, leading to further insights regarding Schoenberg's own comments on contemporaneous vocal interpretation. Correspondence preserved in the Schoenberg Center from Winternitz-Dorda and Bampton to Schoenberg concerning Opus 15 is evaluated in light of Schoenberg's own writings, providing unique insight into the composer's views on vocal performance.

In Chapter 3 five selected CD recordings of the work, ranging from 1949 to 1992, are examined and compared. Here the difficulties inherent in Opus 15 are considered in a series of studio and live performances, with a detailed examination of Song VIII. The pedagogical study of Opus 15 in Chapter 4 first considers the wider structural elements and compositional organisation of the work. The technical and textual challenges explored in this chapter are based on my many years of experience and knowledge as a performer and teacher in Germany, the USA, China and Ireland. The songs are placed in a specific order in four pedagogical groups, to enable the singer to develop confidence and to master the complexities of the work.

In preparation for my own performance of Opus 15 on 28 May 2007 in Dundalk Institute of Technology, I kept a rehearsal diary documenting my re-learning of the work with two pianists, one in Germany, the other in Ireland. This is included in the Appendices, together with my translations of the 15 poems used in Opus 15, copies and my translations of the reviews of the first public performances in Berlin and Vienna in 1912, reviews of the first public performance in the USA, copies and my translations of the extant letters from Martha Winternitz-Dorda to Schoenberg from June 1912 to July 1914, the letters between Schoenberg and Rose Bampton written between 1949 and 1950, detailed programme notes of my doctoral recitals from 2004 to 2006 and of the final doctoral recital in May 2007, in which Opus 15 was the central work on the programme.