Demythologising Webern

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For over thirty years Dr Moldenhauer has worked tirelessly and relentlessly at his self-appointed task of collecting the composers' manuscripts, letters, diaries, sketchbooks, photographs, and numerous other documents and items that make up his Moldenhauer Archives in Seattle, Washington. He is an archivist with a true collector's zeal, and a scrupulous and highly developed sense of the overriding importance, for the historian and researcher, of first-hand evidence. His collection comprises many items from other composers (including some music of the tenth century), but it is Webern who occupies his chief attention.

This book is a factual account, in great detail, of Webern's life and work. Not for him the speculative theory, the subjective opinion, the unsupported rumour. He sets about his task of dispelling the myths that have grown up around Webern by shining on to them the searchlight of pure facts; and only those facts, moreover, for which he can provide documentary proof, or direct evidence whether written or oral. He has compiled a work-list of Webern's output, including arrangements and projects, of three hundred and forty-seven items, which are listed in chronological order. It is interesting that one hundred and twenty-six of these items precede the Passacaglia, Op 1 (1908). Indeed the indexing of the book is such that the easiest way of identifying a work, particularly if it is unpublished, is by the chronological number. So Moldenhauer has done for Webern what Köchel did for Mozart.

Over the years he has spoken to, and corresponded with, numerous people who knew Webern, and who had some unique piece of information to contribute, however trivial, in the piecing together of the composer's biography. In the interests of giving the whole truth, Moldenhauer has not witheld evidence, even when it appears to show Webern in an undesirable light; for example his attitude to the Nazis when they occupied Austria in 1938, and his patriotic expectation of German victory in the war.

Anton von Webern Photo: Archives

Every statement is documented, its source mentioned, making this a musicological work of exemplary scholarship. The story of Webern's life, much of which I was here reading for the first time, can hardly fail to grip the imagination: his unwavering spirit in the face of rejection, and his great tribulation leading to his tragic death; his character and personality, his likes and dislikes; his happy family life, contrasting so markedly with the frustrations he endured at the hands of Viennese officialdom; his love of mountaineering, his enjoyment of a good cigar; with such details, and many others, in front of us, we can practically see this man, at least outwardly. The works also are dealt with in the same spirit of clinical detail, the same objective detachment, appropriate to musicology. Moldenhauer avoids the deeper issues, the speculative concepts, the philosophy that underlay the work of the Viennese School. He makes no mention of the origins of the twelve-note technique; nor of Schoenberg's and Webern's conception of tonality; nor of the parallel links with the work of the Vienna Circle; nor yet of the wider links with other artistic and intellectual developments in the Vienna of the early 20th century.

He has written a ruthlessly honest exposé of Webern's career; so what more is there to be said? A very great deal! If Webern was an important composer, it does him less than justice to take that importance for granted. His 'greatness' is as much a myth as any other story about him; it needs to be substantiated, and we need to be shown the aesthetic, philosophical and historical grounds on which it rests. Moldenhauer's method is to let the facts speak for themselves; judgement may safely be left to posterity.

Unfortunately the facts of a composer's life do not speak for themselves; at least not fully. A composer is not 'great' merely because someone says he is. That *could* be propaganda. What matters is the music itself. Now it is very much easier to ferret out the facts of a man's life, even down to the smallest detail, than it is to investigate, and to identify with, the workings of a man's mind — particularly a withdrawn and radically creative mind. And it is even less easy to arrive at an aesthetic comprehension of the product of that mind. Facts can be weighed, whereas aesthetic judgement cannot, particularly in an Alexandrian age like ours, whose allegiance is retrospective, and which can show no generally accepted standard or criterion.

For the contemporary composer, we who are Webern's legatees, judgement can in no sense be left to posterity. Posterity is here and now. For those of us who think, with Stravinsky, that Webern is 'a perpetual Pentecost', such judgement must be an aesthetic one — that is to say it must be made on the basis of Webern's music itself, not the facts surrounding the music — and it must be personal. Occasionally Moldenhauer lets fall a phrase, or a word, which suggest a less than complete investigation of such matters; but by thus letting the cat out of the bag, he gives us the briefest glimpse of the all-important territory 'on the other side of the notes' (my italics): *The* tonal idiom' (page 498); 'Teaching was for Webern a means of clarifying his *aesthetic thinking*'. (page 539); 'When this kind of unity [sc 12-note technique] is the basis, even the most *fragmented sound* must have a completely coherent effect, and leave hardly anything to be desired as far as "*comprehensibility*" is concerned'. (page 551).

As for Webern's particular interpretation of his master's thought and technique, (his fragmentation of the material, for instance, into atomic particles, and his intellectual justification of this radical approach to composition), a great deal remains to be said, though it falls outside the scope of this book. One underlying theme must be mentioned however, as this is repeatedly stressed in the book, and is the anvil on which his style was forged: namely Webern's ardent

nationalism. He was a patriotic German through and through, and for him the truest and greatest music was that of the Austro-German tradition, culminating with Mahler. Schoenberg was 'the very exponent of Germanic music, deeply rooted in the ideologies of everything essentially German'. (page 392). Webern saw himself, Schoenberg and Berg, as the sole, true heirs of this great evolutionary, national stream of music; they were the only exponents of *the* musical language of the future. Though it was rejected by the generality of his contemporary Viennese, and banned under Hitler, Webern never wavered in his belief that 12-note music would become generally accepted in the future. Such conviction, such aesthetic imperialism, received a considerable boost, ironically enough, at the hands of the Nazi regime, when numerous musicians were forced to leave Germany, and were dispersed throughout many countries. Moldenhauer was one of those who emigrated to America. Thus, no doubt unwittingly, Hitler brought about the world-wide diffusion of the Second Viennese School; partly because these musicians were bound together by the closest of all ties, nationalism, which linked them in a subtle, insoluble freemasonry. But this strong motivating force, coupled with the adulation, amounting almost to idolatry, of Schoenberg, the acknowledged master and leader of the School, should not lead us to accept uncritically and automatically their radical tenets. It is first necessary to recall the origins of Schoenberg's technique, as well as the main characteristics of the Austro-German tradition (particularly the prominence given to harmony in the 19th century) before accepting *in toto* Webern's aesthetic apologia, which is summarised in his lectures *The path to the New Music.*

If Webern is a 'perpetual Pentecost' to us today, it is because he indicates one possible way (not the only way) of moving into an area of tonality beyond that simple area, used by classical composers, that was defined by keys and key-relationships. This is the direction in which some today can see music moving; not so much in the extravagant way claimed by the writers in *die Reihe* in the Fifties, who claimed to see in Webern the archetype of post-war avant-garde experiments in electronic music and other developments. Here is another myth, but one that Moldenhauer leaves well alone. Nevertheless such matters, though complex, are the necessary counterpart, the aesthetic consolidation, of his painstaking musicology. One should add that there are one or two important publications which explore these questions, and these are unfortunately excluded from the bibliography.

Moldenauer has not written a complete and balanced assessment of the importance of Webern's music; but he has provided much of the essential firsthand evidence on which such an assessment may be made.

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