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*Inside Pierrot lunaire : Performing the Sprechstimme in
Schoenberg's Masterpiece* (review)

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examples. The book identifies these examples within the text using two distinct numbering systems: with music example numbers corresponding to the chapter in which they appear, and with figure numbers that appear to be in no discernible order (twenty-two of the thirty-nine examples listed in the “List of Musical Examples” [p. xiii] feature these figure numbers, which range between 1.15 to 118; some numbers are subdivided; some do not appear at all). The text refers to some specific musical passages by example number and others by figure number, which seem to refer to resemble rehearsal numbers within the examples, though this is not made clear. This makes the process of locating the referenced music examples unnecessarily difficult, provided that they can be found at all. Readers will find themselves frustrated while flipping through multiple chapters searching for numbers, hoping to stumble upon the correct example. It appears as though last-minute decisions to omit examples were made without the necessary changes in the text, leaving the reader on a kind of musical snipe hunt. Furthermore, although the examples (when they can be located) greatly demonstrate issues brought up in the text, they appear to have been something of an afterthought. The type setting for them is sloppy (those on pp. 15, 46, 60, 78, and 142 look particularly slipshod), which detracts from the overall authority of the book. Note stems and slurs obscure articulation markings, stems point in the wrong direction, words in the lyrics do not have proper spacing, etc. Had these been rare oversights, they would have been easy to ignore, but their relative frequency, combined with the challenge one faces trying to find the examples in the first place, make it difficult to focus on the excellent writing. While it is doubtful that Johnson completed this aspect of the work himself, it does raise the question of why this carelessness was not observed and corrected during the editing process.

Julian Johnson’s *Mahler’s Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies* blazes innovative trails for scholars in several areas. For those who study narrative theory, Johnson offers a valuable template for full-length monographs discussing the work of a single composer. Mahler scholars can appreciate the continuous threads that

Johnson uses to draw connections between works from throughout Mahler’s entire composing career. Johnson finds the perfect balance between specificity and generality, making this book useful to anyone interested in learning more about Mahler, musical narrative, or both.

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Inside *Pierrot lunaire*: Performing the Sprechstimme in Schoenberg’s Masterpiece. By Phyllis Bryn-Julson and Paul Mathews. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009. [xvii, 235 p. ISBN 9780810862050. \$50.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, index.

The issue of how to handle the Sprechstimme in *Pierrot lunaire* is primary for any performer of this masterpiece, myself included. The number of variables present, from striking a balance of vocal color somewhere between speech and song, deciding how specific to be with pitch, expressing something immediate to an audience, not to mention finding a place of comfort in Schoenberg’s sound world can overwhelm even the most adventurous performer. The widely divergent approaches taken in the distinguished discography of this masterpiece hardly make the decisions any easier. And why should the decisions be easy? Schoenberg himself vacillated wildly throughout his life in what he wanted in the Sprechstimme and in his opinions of performances of the work. The curious and dedicated performer must explore as many resources as possible regarding text, musical style, history, theory, and technique in order to make her own decisions. *Inside Pierrot Lunaire: Performing the Sprechstimme in Schoenberg’s Masterpiece* by Phyllis Bryn-Julson and Paul Mathews presents the perspectives of both a performer and a theorist and makes some enlightening conclusions based on both new and old information.

At this point it is appropriate to define the term “Sprechstimme,” as the authors do in the introduction. In the score of *Pierrot*, Schoenberg named the part of the reciter a Sprechstimme, or speech part, as one would refer to the part played by a flutist as a Flötenstimme, or flute part. It refers to the voice in terms of its role in the

instrumentation, rather than as a vocal technique. From the introduction:

Among English writers, *Sprechstimme* is commonly used to mean a technique of vocal production. German and French authors tend to preserve the original meaning of *Sprechstimme*—a part in the texture—and use *Sprechgesang* or *Sprechmelodie* for the sound and technique. . . . We have elected to sidestep this quandary by using *Sprechstimme* to mean only the part of the texture: *the* Sprechstimme. We believe it is best not to generalize the technique of vocal production, because the technique for *Pierrot* is quite distinct from the technique for later works by Schoenberg. (pp. xvi–xvii)

Chapter 1, “Schoenberg and the Development of the Sprechstimme Concept,” is a summary of possible influences and precursors to Schoenberg’s concept for the Sprechstimme in *Pierrot* and its notation. The precursors range from a brief mention of Wagner’s Sprechgesang, to a very detailed discussion of Engelbert Humperdinck’s music for the play *Die KönigsKinder*, to Schoenberg’s own *Gurrelieder*. Tracing the evolution of notation to the current use of an x on the stem is especially interesting. The discussion of *Gurrelieder* leads to a discussion of the possible influence of Parisian and German cabaret and the declamation of contemporary theater and poetry readings that is also quite useful in informing performance.

One of the true highlights of this book occurs in chapter 2, “The Paths to *Pierrot*,” with its discussion of the role of Albertine Zehme in the creation of the work. While it is impossible to detail every aspect of her relevance, this book goes further than most any other; typically the discussion of her role is limited to little more than a reference to her status as the actor and singer who commissioned the work and performed it in a *Pierrot* costume. Here, the reader can see just how influential she really was. Zehme performed as an actor and singer throughout her career and, at the time Schoenberg was transforming his harmonic language, she was struggling to establish her own unique form of expression by merging the speaking voice with the singing voice. Her desire to explore the use of the human voice and the sound of the

text in music provided Schoenberg with a most compatible and receptive vehicle for his own sound explorations.

Discussion of Zehme continues in the third chapter, “The Sprechstimme in *Pierrot Lunaire*.” While discussing in greater detail the circumstances of the *Pierrot* commission, the authors do an excellent job of parsing letters from both Schoenberg and Zehme and drawing logical conclusions that help illuminate the commission’s evolution. Originally, *Pierrot* was to be a series of melodramas for Zehme to recite. Through a series of communications, she convinced Schoenberg that he could integrate her part as fully into the music as he would like, that her skills were adequate to fulfill his needs, and that she longed for the chance to explore something new. As Schoenberg finished each number, he sent it to Edward Steuermann, the pianist of the ensemble that would premiere *Pierrot*, who was also coaching Zehme on her part. His was not an easy job, as the part was very difficult for her. Among the difficulties Zehme had were learning the intricate rhythms and handling the high range—not the kinds of issues faced by the modern performer. In general, *Pierrot* is not performed by actors who sing, as Zehme was, but by singers who act. If range is a problem at all for today’s reciter, it is for soprano performers in the low range. In fact, the type of performer typically inclined to attempt the work is likely to be a highly trained musician who has been training her voice to master the kind of wide range required by *Pierrot* and many subsequent vocal chamber pieces. Perhaps it is this new, different breed of singer who would fall short of Schoenberg’s expressive demands?

Chapter 4, “An Overview of Compositional Materials,” begins: “The present authors are committed to a performance of the *Pierrot lunaire* Sprechstimme that is faithful to the notated pitches” (p. 81). In the interest of full disclosure, so is this reviewer. The authors continue with an excellent description of the vocal techniques and timbres required to achieve the appropriate sound of heightened, pitched speech. Embracing these concepts would result in a sound that is substantially different from normal speech, which does not occur in *Pierrot*, and normal sung tone, which Schoenberg does occasionally specify

in the score. Schoenberg's published preface to *Pierrot*, which gives instructions on how to achieve the desired sound, is actually his third attempt at a preface and the most specific of them. This raises the question: Why was it so difficult for him to specify what he wanted? Perhaps it's because the nature of the vocal sound desired is more easily defined by what it shouldn't be, rather than by what it should be. It should not be sung, nor should it be devoid of any vocal color. It should not be so rigidly attached to notated pitches that it lacks flexibility and motion, nor should it abandon them in its attempt to go somewhere. Expression should not rely too heavily on the literal meaning of the words, nor should it reduce vowels and consonants to mere vehicles of tone or percussive sounds. One can see how difficult it is to pinpoint exactly what is needed.

Part 2 of the book takes a closer look at each of the twenty-one numbers in *Pierrot*. Each of the discussions consists of the German text and an original English translation, annotations on the text and Hartleben's translation from Giraud's original French, information pertaining to the composition of the piece, and a musical analysis. The translations are organized in line-by-line manner, with German on the left and English on the right. However, the German word order is mostly preserved in the English translation, essentially resulting in a word-for-word translation. This is great for accuracy but creates awkward word order for English sentences. That being said, the translations use modern language that is simple, direct, yet artistically poetic. The annotations are very interesting and highly useful in understanding how the work came together as a whole; they also provide a subtext. For example, discovering that Hartleben's German translation of "Nacht" actually minimized the dark, graphic nature of Giraud's original French piques a performer's imagination. "Giraud's third stanza describes the butterflies as monsters with sticky suckers seeking blood (*Des monstres aux gluants suçoirs / Recherchent du sang pour le boire*) and feeding on our despair" (p. 139).

The analyses, as described at the end of chapter 4, use the model of the motivic analysis that Schoenberg used to analyze his own *Four Orchestral Songs*, op. 22, com-

posed in 1915. Schoenberg described a motive as "a combination of intervals that had been prioritized by standard developmental procedures" (p. 98). Schoenberg's text describes the intervallic structure of a motive and traces it through repetitions and permutations, following it in the orchestra and the voice. He avoids discussion of harmonic language because "he felt that the new harmonic resources had not been sufficiently explored and that practice had far outstripped theory" (p. 99). Here, the authors apply this motivic analysis primarily to the Sprechstimme in relation to the other five voices. This approach is very appropriate and the results mostly serve their purpose. They are usually accessible to non-theorists, written without a lot of jargon, and do a good job of defending the authors' position that the pitches of the Sprechstimme are important and should be honored. Indeed, the motivic analysis often includes interpretive and vocal suggestions for the Sprechstimme, making the pitches in that part not only relevant to the other parts, but to interpretation and expression as a whole. However, there is something awkward in the execution. The music examples are not always clear, in part due to the lack of labels explaining the many lines, boxes, and circles. This is especially true if there is no textual reference (e.g., ex. 5-3 on p. 107) or the reference is on a different page (e.g., ex. 6-18 and 6-19 on p. 166). Even so, the analyses are useful to the performer, if a bit clumsy.

Schoenberg's attempt to specify the sound he had in mind for the Sprechstimme in *Pierrot* is not unlike Bryn-Julson and Mathews' desire to demystify it in this book. Each has, as the authors say so aptly in the afterword, "tried to eff the ineffable" (p. 217). However, one does not achieve success in this endeavor with some fairy-tale ending where everything magically falls into place with clarity and precision. Instead, one achieves success in the process of exploration, where information old and new is sought out, compiled, examined, and presented as thoughtfully as possible. Here, the authors achieve success and give performers an opportunity for an even deeper understanding of Schoenberg's masterpiece.

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