

Verklärte Nacht **Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)**

Clearly, the events that unfolded between 1874 and 1951 changed the face of the planet. It is not surprising that the seventy-six years of Schoenberg's life would produce a composer who was pivotal in the history of composition and the "Second Viennese School" - an era of modern music that would have lasting force to the present day.

In 1912 at the London presentation of his Five Orchestral Pieces the critics were very generous in comparison to some others. The London Globe printed "The music of Schoenberg...resembled the wailings of a tortured soul, and suggested nothing so much as the disordered fancies of delirium or the fearsome, imaginary terrors of a highly nervous infant." The Daily News from the same date wrote, "...we must be content with the composer's own assertion that he has depicted his own experiences, for which he has our heartfelt sympathy." Schoenberg's music continued to receive horrific press for almost all of his life, unlike his contemporary Stravinsky, who admirably broke through into the mainstream of concert performances. It was going to get even tougher with the introduction of the famous twelve tone mathematically based system, on which Berg and Webern would build and Boulez and Stockhausen would expand. However, tonight's piece is entirely different. Its first performance in Vienna on March 28, 1902 was quite different from those experiences recorded a decade later.

It was not until he was twenty-five years old that *Verklärte Nacht*, his first work appeared. Written as a string sextet in 1899, it is in many ways, literally and symbolically a part of that century and not the one to come. The score is very reminiscent of Wagner, with occasional "throw-backs" to Brahms. His only musical training came from his friend Zemlinsky in the latter years of the 19th century and it was he who introduced Schoenberg to the music of Wagner. In 1901 he married Zemlinsky's sister and in that year obtained the Liszt Scholarship, with the help of Richard Strauss. The stylistic roots of this music are undoubtedly influenced by these figures. It is also interesting that Schoenberg revisits this tonally robust and comparatively stable work in 1917 at the height of the First World War (when it is re-arranged for String orchestra) and again in 1943 at the height of the Second World War (adding the warmth of double basses). The composer who brought us the consummate breakdown of tonality seems to have sheltered in its warmth during times of chaos and reverted to it in his latter days.

To help the imagination in this 'Wagnerian world of wonder', here is a translation of part of the poem on which *Verklärte Nacht* is based.

'Two mortals walk through a cold, barren grove. The moon sails with them. A woman speaks. She confesses a sin to the man at her side: she is with child, and he is not its father. Having lost belief in happiness, and longing for life's fullness and for motherhood, she had surrendered herself, shuddering, to a stranger's embraces. How life had avenged itself upon her, by giving her the love of the man she addresses. She staggers onward. A man speaks. Let her not burden her soul with thoughts of guilt. See, the moon's sheen enwraps all. "You will bear the child to me - from me." Their breaths kiss in the air. Two mortals wander through the wondrous moonlight."