

"Unbelievable! Quite irresponsible!"

The world premiere of Arnold Schoenberg's orchestral variations under Wilhelm Furtwängler (1928)

They are among the most demanding pieces ever composed for a large symphony orchestra: Arnold Schönberg's Variations for Orchestra op. 31. However, the premiere by the orchestra in Berlin in December 1928 under Wilhelm Furtwängler turned into a fiasco.

Arnold Schönberg hated revolutions, even musical ones. He did not claim to have initiated a break in music history with his twelve-tone method, but saw himself as a continuator and perfecter of the classical tradition. This rather bold self-assessment developed into the credo of German musicology in the following decades. However, there were also oppositional voices that could not be dismissed as the statements of incorrigible reactionaries.



(Fotos: Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien; Archiv Berliner Philharmoniker und Wilhelm-Furtwängler-Gesellschaft)

The most prominent critic was Wilhelm Furtwängler. His authority was great even among Schönberg's supporters, because - despite aesthetic reservations - the Berliner had repeatedly performed the Viennese composer. He respected Schönberg, who had been teaching at the Prussian Academy of Arts since 1925, and supported him in many ways; Schönberg, for his part, revered Furtwängler throughout his life as the leading conductor of the century.

There were certainly similarities between these two very different brothers in spirit. Both Schoenberg and Furtwängler saw German music as the pinnacle of the Western tradition - and they believed in a productive continuation of this tradition that went back to Bach. Furtwängler therefore repeatedly devoted himself to composers as diverse as Hans Pfitzner, Max Trapp, Günter Raphael, Heinrich Kaminski, Ernst Pepping and Karl Höller; he even risked a scandal with the Nazis over Paul Hindemith in 1934 and resigned from all posts when his demands were not met. However, the chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic and the Leipzig Gewandhaus was also committed to numerous foreign contemporaries, including Stravinsky, Respighi, Bartók, Ravel and Honegger - and dared to put Chopin on a par with Bach.

In favour of German musical supremacy

Such views were far from Arnold Schönberg's mind. In a letter to Alma Mahler, written a few days after the outbreak of war in 1914, he confessed: "I could never do anything with all foreign music. It always struck me as stale, empty, disgustingly cloying, dishonest and unskilful. Without exception [...] This music had long been a declaration of war, an attack on Germany." Unexpectedly, world history now provided the new German composer with the means to thoroughly clean up his act: "But now comes the reckoning!" Schönberg rejoiced, "now we are throwing these mediocre kitschists back into slavery and they should learn to revere the German spirit and worship the German God."

He was not alone with such views - just think of Thomas Mann's *Gedanken im Kriege* and his *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*. As late as 1921, Schönberg told his pupil and later assistant Josef Rufer that the twelve-tone technique would "ensure the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years". As is well known, nothing came of this. Furtwängler was actually only fascinated by Schönberg's early works, above all *Verklärte Nacht* and *Pelleas und Melisande*, but he had already performed the atonal *Five Orchestral Pieces* op. 16 in Berlin in 1922.

Their collaboration culminated in the *Variations for Orchestra* op. 31, whose world premiere Furtwängler conducted on 2 December 1928 - despite some reservations about the twelve-tone technique consistently applied here.

In particular, he criticised the Schönberg circle's dogmatic view that dodecaphony was the logical end of tonal development - it was, according to Furtwängler, "the first completely unhistorical step, the first real break with history".

So why did he dedicate himself to this work? Because he felt obliged to put pieces up for discussion that ran counter to his aesthetic sensibilities and fundamental convictions? Perhaps it also played a role that he himself had initiated the completion of the orchestral variations. After all, Schönberg had been labouring over the work since 1926, had lost the thread - as far as the 5th variation was concerned - and tried several times to rediscover the original construction idea.

It was only Furtwängler's enquiry as to how far the new work had progressed that motivated him to continue working on it, and he replied to the conductor in May 1928 that the variations were three-quarters finished and "certainly needed no more than 14 days to complete". In fact, he was only able to complete the score in mid-September.

Konzert-Direktion Hermann Wolff und Jules Sachs, Berlin W9, Linkstrasse 42

Bernburger Str. 22 PHILHARMONIE Bernburger Str. 22

Montag, den 3. Dezember 1928, abends 7½ Uhr

4. Philharmonisches Konzert

Leitung: **Wilhelm Furtwängler**
Solist: **Friedrich Schorr**

I.
Variationen für Orchester **A. Schönberg**
(Uraufführung)

II.
Lethe **H. Pfitzner**
Arie des Lysiart aus „Euryanthe“ **C. M. v. Weber**

— P A U S E —

III.
Symphonie C-dur **F. Schubert**
Anlässlich des 100. Todestages von F. Schubert
Andante. Allegro ma non troppo
Andante con moto
Scherzo. Allegro vivace
Finale. Allegro vivace

Celesta: „Schiedmayer Pianoortelabrik“, Potsdamer Straße 27 b

PHILHARMONIE, Montag, den 17. Dezember 1928, abends 7½ Uhr

5. PHILHARMONISCHES KONZERT

Leitung: **Wilhelm Furtwängler**
Solist: **Artur Schnabel**

Debussy: La mer / Mozart: Klavierkonzert F-dur (zum ersten Mal
in diesen Konzerten)

Beethoven: VIII. Symphonie, F-dur

(Archiv Berliner Philharmoniker)

An almost unbelievable hullabaloo

And so began the catastrophe. Gregor Piatigorsky, first cellist of the Berliner Philharmoniker since 1924, recalled in his memoirs in 1965 an almost unbelievable hullabaloo during the rehearsals for the premiere of the incredibly demanding work: "There was far too little time, Furtwängler went through the score bar by bar, but nobody understood anything. Why didn't F sharp major sound like F sharp major? Why did the 16th notes look so strange?"

How do you play pizzicato and arco at the same time? The next day Furtwängler appeared with the bad news: "We only have one more rehearsal; and the composer will be present at the concert! But then, at noon, partial redemption. "Gentlemen," Furtwängler announced with relief, "I have just received the best news from Vienna: The composer is not coming." Huge cheers and bravos. The piece could not be saved, but self-respect could. In fact, one critic praised "Furtwängler and the Philharmoniker, who once again demonstrated their outstanding ability in overcoming the almost grotesque difficulties of this score." Anton Webern, who was present in the hall, heard it differently and wired his master in Vienna: "Unbelievable! Quite irresponsible!"

The press was unanimously negative about the work itself. "Soulless musical arithmetic", "grimacing constructs of atonalism", "incurable stubbornness" on the part of the composer - these were the tenor of the journalistic attacks. Most of the audience reacted with icy rejection, a minority hissed and whistled for all they were worth, an even smaller minority - Schoenberg's pupils - wanted to force success through frenetic applause.

Furtwängler capitulated unconditionally. He conducted Schoenberg only once more, in November 1929, at the premiere of his orchestral version of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in E flat major. But in 1933 he protested, unsuccessfully of course, against the withdrawal of his Berlin professorship and later did not let anything come of Schönberg. He saw the "burdened effort of Alban Berg, Schoenberg and others" as the antithesis of the "modern infantilism of Shostakovich" and always endeavoured to defend the inventor of twelve-tone music against his narrow-minded detractors.

Music historians have barely registered Furtwängler's commitment to Schoenberg and a number of other contemporary composers. It had other things to do; while Schönberg's nationalistic outbursts were hushed up or played down, Furtwängler had to allow himself to be defamed as the devil's general music director. And in his final years, he experienced that he, who had written the greatest German symphony of the entire century with his Second Symphony in E minor, was not taken seriously as a composer.

Volker Tarnow

Volker Tarnow wrote his text for the programme booklet of the Berliner Philharmoniker concerts under the baton of its chief conductor Kirill Petrenko on 25/ 26/ 27 January 2023. We would like to thank the author for permission to reprint it.