

PROGRAM NOTES by Paul Schiavo

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG

Verklärte Nacht ("Transfigured Night"), Op. 4 (1943 revision)

BORN: September 13, 1874, in Vienna

DIED: July 13, 1951, in Los Angeles

WORK COMPOSED: 1899 (original version, for string sextet); transcribed for string orchestra in 1917, with minor revisions in 1942-43

WORLD PREMIERE: March 14, 1918, in Leipzig

As its title suggests, Arnold Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, or "Transfigured Night," tells of nearly miraculous transformation. Yet it is not truly the night that is altered but, rather, the emotional and spiritual state of a woman, which changes from despair to hope, from grief to joy, through an act of love.

Schoenberg is remembered in connection with some of the most radical and controversial musical developments of the 20th century. Yet his musical ethos was firmly rooted in the late-Romantic tradition of Wagner, Strauss and Mahler. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the composer's early tone poem *Verklärte Nacht*. This piece, Schoenberg's first important composition, is strongly indebted to Wagner, particularly that composer's *Tristan und Isolde*, in its use of searching harmonies and rising sequences of melodic phrases to convey the welling up of emotion. There are, however, some distinctly original elements, especially Schoenberg's thoroughly contrapuntal textures and, occasionally, the complete abandoning of traditional harmony that foreshadows the direction of his later music.

In its original conception, *Verklärte Nacht* also was notable as a piece of programmatic chamber music — that is, an instrumental composition with a narrative basis. Schoenberg composed the work in 1899 as a string sextet after a poem by the German writer Richard Dehmel. The composer transcribed the music for string orchestra in 1917 and revised this version slightly in 1942–43. Dehmel's verses, paraphrased below, relate an emotional story:

A couple walks through a cold, leafless grove. Above, the moon moves through the pointed branches. The sky is cloudless as the woman begins to speak. She had given up hope of true happiness, she confesses, and in an attempt to find some purpose in life sought the fulfillment of motherhood. She is with child by a man she never loved. Now life has taken its revenge, for she loves the man she walks with and is overwhelmed by guilt. As she proceeds unsteadily in the moonlight, her eyes dark with despair, her companion answers: "Don't let these thoughts oppress you. Look at this brilliant, moonlit world. It is like a cold ocean, but there is a flame within each of us that warms the other and which will transfigure the child and make it mine also. You have brought me life and made me like a child." He embraces her, and they kiss. Then together they walk on through the radiant night.

The music mirrors the spiritual metamorphosis implied by the text, beginning lugubriously and becoming by turns agitated, compassionate and ecstatic, the score's ripe harmonic idiom producing the intensely emotional tone Schoenberg desired.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: Over a slowly treading repeated note in the cellos Schoenberg presents a mournful first theme that begins as little more than a single reiterated phrase. Slowly, this idea

expands and the music eventually accelerates to a quicker tempo. It builds to an initial climax, followed by a succession of utterly surprising harmonies (not unlike those in the second movement of the Haydn symphony that opened our program, though far more searing). An important new theme now is sung by cellos and repeated by violins as the woman of Dehmel's poem begins her confession. Here and throughout the work Schoenberg maintains richly contrapuntal textures, with different groups of instruments continually in dialog with each other.

Passing through varying degrees of agitation and resignation, the music at last subsides to a spare passage using only solo violin and viola. We then hear a variant of the lamenting theme of the work's opening minutes, followed by a hymn-like figure as the woman's companion answers her with love and compassion. And in remarkably shimmering sonorities, Schoenberg conjures the moonlight through which the couple now passes. The music grows increasingly rapturous, eventually recalling the hymn-like harmonies heard earlier. A closing episode brings music of ineffable tenderness, with even the dirge-like theme of the opening minutes transfigured into something comforting.

Scored for string orchestra.

© 2016 Paul Schiavo