

Helmut Loos Гельмут Лоос

Professor emeritus, Dr., Dr. honoris causa, Institut für
Musikwissenschaft, Universität Leipzigпочесний професор, доктор наук, почесний доктор
Інституту музикознавства Лейпцизького університетуe-mail: helmut.loos@t-online.de | orcid.org/0000-0002-4742-3639

The Art-Religious ideas of Mahler and Schönberg

Мистецько-релігійні ідеї Малера і Шенберга

Abstract. There is no doubt in research about the exemplary role Richard Wagner played for Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schönberg. His personality was simply too dominant in musical life and in the broader intellectual history of the time to not have a considerable influence on the two composers in their formative years. The suffering idea was the art-religious rank of music, as it had been widespread since Arthur Schopenhauer, especially in artistic circles. In contrast to Wagner's decided atheism, which invoked Ludwig Feuerbach, Mahler and Schönberg can be diagnosed with a tendency towards modern irrationalism, as found at the time in Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Philosophy of life and esotericism formed a favourable breeding ground for the most diverse varieties of art religion, among which emphatic art music was probably the most successful with regard to establishing itself in society. Syncretism was widespread and allowed the inclusion of heterogeneous elements, including, for example, traditional Christian religions.

Keywords: Richard Wagner, Arthur Schopenhauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, irrationalism, theosophy, anthroposophy, esotericism

There is no doubt in research about the exemplary role Richard Wagner played for Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schönberg. His personality was simply too dominant in musical life and in the broader intellectual history of the time to not have a considerable influence on the two composers in their formative years. His works were a fixture on German-speaking stages and beyond. Having already become a member of the “Wiener akademischer Wagner-Verein” [Vienna Academic Wagner Society] in 1877, which was founded by Guido Adler, Mahler was committed as a conductor to Wagner. The first work that he conducted as Kapellmeister at the Vienna Court Opera in 1897 was “Lohengrin”, and he continually made efforts to deliver unabridged, authentic performances of Wagner's works [10]. If Mahler's concrete compositional connections to Wagner have not yet been explored in detail [48, pp. 134–152], the relationship is discussed in fundamental studies of Mahler's spiritual world [13]. In the case of Arnold Schönberg, the state of research is more comprehensive, especially since the extensive studies of Constantin Grun [18]. Here, the scope and intensity of Schönberg's Wagner reception in both compositions and writings are impressively documented.

Richard Wagner was the first composer of the 19th century whose understanding of music as an art religion was widely discussed, long before music historians fully recognised the significance of this quintessence of the Romantic view

of music for the entire field of serious music since Robert Schumann [35] and the Leipzig-Berlin Beethoven reception [31]. The link was first made in examinations of “Parsifal”, the “Bühnenweihfestspiel” [38]. Carl Dahlhaus pointed this out at a very early stage [6] and Constantin Floros put “Wagner's idea of art religion” at the beginning of his investigation of “music as a message” in 1989 [14]. Since the 1990s, the number of treatises on music and religion — with an emphasis on Wagner, of course [26] — and on art religion in particular, has grown significantly. Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy plays a central role in these works because of its significance for Wagner and for musical life in general [27]. Especially with regard to music, the connection between the paradigm of absolute music and ideas of art religion became increasingly clear [43]. Nevertheless, the emphasis of recent research on modern music has shifted to the concept of “Weltanschauungsmusik”, in which the religious aspect is only one among many, such as community, education, heroism, love and the totality of nature. Danuser did indeed develop “religion” into a distinct embodiment of “Weltanschauungsmusik”, at the same time admitting that “art religion”, detached from the concept of the aesthetics of autonomy, was absolutely “one of the foundations of this Weltanschauungsmusik” [11]. It seems necessary to me, however, to clearly identify the fundamental and dominant position the principle of art religion has held, especially with

regard to the music-historical epoch in question. The origin of the idea of art religion in early Romantic literature has been sufficiently researched [15]. It is remarkable that these origins coincided with the height of the aesthetics of genius, which celebrated the “glorification of the ‘original genius’ as the archetype of the higher man and artist” in “Sturm und Drang”, according to the well-known definition of Gero von Wilpert [51]. Here, art and morality meet in the exceptional personality of the artist, a mixture of different trends in the 18th century that came out of the Enlightenment with its fables and doctrinal poems claiming morality (Christian Fürchtegott Gellert), which were used by heterodox preachers against the churches. The cult of genius had already celebrated its joyous beginnings with Johann Jakob Breitinger and Johann Jakob Bodmer [20]. The connection between art, sensation and education was then programmatically developed into a programme for the betterment of mankind by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Moses Mendelssohn and Johann Georg Sulzer, right up to Friedrich Schiller, who wanted to use art to bring people to their senses and foster reason. Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock once formulated the apparently inextricable link between art and morality (according to ancient Kalokagathia) as follows: “The advantage of the arts over the sciences is that they are more suitable for making people moral: they humble themselves and are no longer beautiful if they lack moral beauty” [quoted in: 3, p. 267]¹.

This was the formulation of principles which became binding for the emerging civil society. Leipzig and its university were a stronghold of the movement; it was here that music (Beethoven!) in particular was discovered as the bearer of bourgeois ideals and propagated with great success by musicians and publishers; it was here that Robert Schumann and Richard Wagner were socialised in the late 1820s. For Wagner, Shakespeare and Beethoven were models of original genius. How suggestively and successfully he was able to shape these foundations in music and writing, using them to rise to a dominant position in the art world, needs no further explanation [25]. What is more interesting is the development of his many different views on the subject, which underwent many twists and turns and, as is well known, by no means constitute a homogeneous picture, as his statements are inhomogeneous and often contradict each other. Particularly noteworthy is the so-called “Founders’ Quarrel” of 1873, which turned the left-wing Hegelian revolutionary of the 1840s into a — albeit recalcitrant — representative of the ruling classes: emperors, German princes, high aristocracy, bank

representatives, educated citizens and artistic elites; he was able to transfer with little effort the earlier aversion, even enmity toward his hated figures — Jews, Jesuits, journalists — to the enemies of the empire — Judaism, Catholicism, Freisinn (liberals) and social democracy [21, p. 627f]. The Wagner-image that Mahler and Schönberg were confronted with in their youth was that of the late Wagner, increasingly developed by Bayreuth and his mistress Cosima Wagner. The religious dimension of the cult there becomes dramatically apparent when considering that Cosima was greeted by orthodox Wagnerians by kneeling down before her and kissing her hand. The Bayreuth Festspielhaus gained its distinguished reputation during this period through the performances of “Parsifal”, whose exclusivity only heightened the myth. In a newspaper article of February 1912, Arnold Schönberg lamented the “Bayreuth performance monopoly”, although he acknowledged Siegfried Wagner’s piety in defending the privilege, pointing to (as he called it) “the artistic-moral subject matter of the Consecration Festival”. While he believed it was necessary to defend “artistic-moral” issues, which he mentioned several times in one breath, against the “financial-legal” interests of the art dealers, Schönberg ultimately turned against the exclusivity of “Parsifal” in Bayreuth, since Wagner’s idea, “as beautiful and moral as it originally was”, had been taken ad absurdum. “Their intention to give each year a few hours of consecration to the most sophisticated people does not come true today, because, for the most part, it is not this highly regarded audience that comes to Bayreuth, but almost only the art snobs of all nations and the old Wagnerians, who are lagging behind in their development and are at odds with their time.” Here, essential elements of the bourgeois art religion are present in nuce, the firm connection between art and morality as well as the hierarchical division of society into those with superior and those with backward mindsets, which manifests itself in correct and incorrect participation in art. Schönberg particularly regretted that the most important group, artists, had been given too little opportunity to receive “Parsifal”, that there were musicians who were not familiar with the work. “Wagner could not possibly have wanted this!” In view of the paramount importance of Parsifal, Schönberg pleaded that every second performance be reserved for (the highest echelons of) young artists, free of charge. The privilege of performance had, according to Schönberg, also reserved “Parsifal” for the most important conductors; it “led, for example, to the fact that the greatest musician of our time, Gustav Mahler, who gave Wagner performances of unprecedented beauty in Vienna, who understood how to subordinate everything that musicians and singers can do today to the unique, pure spiritual purpose, in such a way that one could forget the existence of the material and the matter, that this musician did not come to perform Parsifal, could not possibly have been wanted by Wagner either”. The monopoly on performance prevents the “influence of the living”, so no “style” can develop. “The Bayreuth monopoly is hardly suited to creating a style, because it guards tradition. And tradition is the opposite of style, although the two are often confused with each other” [42]. The turn against “tradition” is also

¹ Even for Wagner, the absence of the moral was a major reason for the rejection of “absolute” music: “Absolute music, however, finds its very specific characteristics in such an object; it can, without the most arbitrary assumptions, now and never again bring the sensually and morally determined human being to a precisely perceptible, clearly distinguishable representation; it is, in its most infinite increase, but always only feeling; it occurs in the accompaniment of the moral fact, but not as a fact itself; it can place feelings and moods next to each other, but cannot develop one mood from the other after necessity; — it lacks the moral will.” [47, p. 93].

familiar from Mahler's famous saying: "What you theatre people call your 'tradition' is nothing but comfort and sloppiness" [9]. The ideas of Mahler and Schönberg thus tie in with those of the revolutionary Wagner, as he expressed them for example in 1849¹. In contrast to Wagner's decided atheism, which invoked Ludwig Feuerbach, Mahler [49, p. 81] and Schönberg [24] can be diagnosed with a tendency towards modern irrationalism, as found at the time in Theosophy and Anthroposophy [12]. Philosophy of life and esotericism formed a favourable breeding ground for the most diverse varieties of art religion, among which emphatic art music was probably the most successful with regard to establishing itself in society. Syncretism was widespread and allowed the inclusion of heterogeneous elements, including, for example, traditional Christian religions [28]. This applies most of all to Mahler, whose spiritual world Constantin Floros systematically portrayed without unduly resolving the contradictions precisely of his religious convictions [13]. Time and again the question has been raised as to whether the combination of early Christian hymn and Goethe text in Mahler's Eighth, the "Symphony of a Thousand", constitutes blasphemy, regardless of the perspective. It is worth recalling Hans Mayer's harsh criticism of the "theologically and poetically almost absurd idea", which was countered by Dieter Borchmeyer with reference to Goethe's enthusiasm for the Pentecostal hymn [Quoted in: 11, p. 365]. Mahler described his work as a "mass", i.e., as the highest genre of music in the old sense. With regard to its claims of reconciliation, Mahler's art religion should be understood as all-encompassing, just as supposedly "all the mysteries of the world are solved" as long as his music is played. Any attempt to explain this would mean revealing a secret that is essential to any kind of religion. The myth, by which the renewal of religion has been understood since Romanticism, requires the inexplicable, which invites to ever new reflection and speculation, to infinite interpretation, in order to fulfil its task of emotionally stimulating/animating the intellectually "superior". Many comments on compositions since Schumann at the latest can be understood in this way. Mahler converted to Catholicism in 1897 and Schönberg to Protestantism in 1898. If Mahler's step is generally understood as credible and in keeping with his inner conviction, despite the external reason of his appointment as Kapellmeister of the Vienna Court Opera, Schönberg's reasons are not so easy to explain. On the basis of Romantic art religion [7, p. 13], Schönberg studied a wide variety of esoteric schools of thought, from the Christian Theosophy of Emanuel

Swedenborg to Richard Dehmel's Symbolism and Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, which was taught to him by Wassily Kandinsky. For his great oratorical work of the time, the "Gurrelieder", however, he chose a blasphemous text by the Danish poet Jens Peter Jacobsen, a staunch Darwin supporter and atheist. Schönberg's further religious development, which is documented in two unfinished works, "Die Jakobsleiter" (1917–1922) [52] and "Moses und Aron" (1930–1932), seems all the more incomprehensible. In 1933 Schönberg returned to Judaism. The widespread view that Schönberg had returned to the Jewish community "out of religious-political and national conviction — as a protest against the anti-Semitic Nazi terror and not out of criticism of Protestant principles" [36, p. 167], is contradicted by a note from the estate, which deals precisely with this assumption: "It should be known that this well-known composer is only able to change religion on the basis of religious and national conviction, but not to express anything else in doing so. I can assure you that so far, when I have expressed my indignation, I have not chosen an indirect form for it."² However, the passage is crossed out cleanly. It is difficult to find an inner connection between the religious turns of phrase, unless art religion is considered as a superior category, the artist as an exceptional personality, who in difficult times knows how to give the divine prophet the appropriate rules of conduct for the requirements of the time. A constitutive element of musical art religion, and a connection across all individual variants, is the image of the artist that was shaped by the reception of Beethoven. Arnold Schmitz already analysed four basic ideas of the romantic image of Beethoven: the ingenious child of nature, revolutionary, magician and priest [41]. But this image was increasingly expanding to include Beethoven as the god of the bourgeois age, as depicted by Max Klinger in his Beethoven monument [34; 30]. Richard Strauss universalised this image of the artist in his tone poems (symphonic poems) and symphonies, presenting it quite clearly [32], Richard Wagner had already embodied it and publicly demonstrated it. Without going into the details of his biography, which are sufficiently well known, it is worth mentioning Wagner's artist opera "Die Meistersinger", in which the composer identifies with the historical figure of Hans Sachs, putting a warning prophecy in his mouth that refers back to Wagner himself as an artist of the present and redeemer of the Germans. "Honour your German masters! Then you will conjure up good spirits", the reward is "holy German art" as a guarantor of national unity. Here, art religion enters into an alliance with the ideal of the cultural nation, which (in 1868) was a reaction to the current political situation [8]. In connection with Wagner's idea of redemption, which runs through his oeuvre from the "Flying Dutchman" to "Parsifal",

¹ "Do you believe that with the demise of our present conditions and with the beginning of the new, communist world order, history, the historical life of human beings, would cease? Precisely the opposite, because then real, clear historical life will only begin when the previous so-called historical consequence, which in truth and at its core is based on fable, tradition, myth and religion, on origins and institutions, entitlements and assumptions, which in their extreme points are by no means based on historical consciousness, but on (mostly arbitrary) mythical, fantastic inventions, such as the monarchy and hereditary possessions, ceases to exist" [47, p. 252f].

² "Es sollte bekannt sein, dass dieser / bekannte Komponist einen Reli / Religionswechsel nur aus religiöser / und nationaler Ueberzeugung / zu vollziehen imstande <ist>, nicht / aber, um irgend etwas anderes / damit auszudrücken. // Ich kann versichern, dass <ich bisher>, wenn / ich meiner Entrüstung Ausdruck / gegeben habe, xx ich dazu nicht / keine indirekte Form gewählt / habe" [43].

the artist presents himself here as the saviour of society by resolving emerging conflicts, and as the saviour of the fragmented nation by using festivals to bring about and strengthen solidarity [4]. “The life of a musician offers nothing in the way of external events. — He lives inwardly” [quoted in: 9, p. 54]. Mahler is the author of this phrase, which he expressed in a letter to Max Marschalk in 1896. He did not even remotely think of Wagner, but meant himself, of course. Mahler fully shared the “Schopenhauer-Wagner idea of a metaphysics of musical art” [9, p. 77] and saw it as an obligation to design a whole world for himself and to make the “universe”, the “planets and suns that circle”, sound [13, p. 152]. The connection with him as a person was indissoluble: “only when I experience, do I ‘poetize in sound’, only when I poetize in sound, do I experience!” He claimed to have “never written a single note that was not absolutely true” [13, p. 137]. Mahler was never lacking in conviction when it came to his own importance. In 1894 he wrote to Richard Strauss: “People like us should never make concessions!” [19, p. 31] And he ruthlessly put this self-confidence to practice in the theatre. But he did not associate it with exhibitionist selfportrayal. Occasionally, like Wagner, he put inspirational myths into the world that corresponded to the romantic view of music. The example of the Second Symphony is well known: Mahler heard the text for the finale, Klopstock’s song “Die Auferstehung”, on 29 March 1894, at the funeral service for Hans von Bülow in Hamburg’s Michaeliskirche: “This hit me like lightning and everything stood very clearly and distinctly before my soul!” [9, p. 52] More often than not, Mahler presented himself in a similar way as a medium of the infinite, but he never emphasised the importance of his own person. Nor did he need to, for he was at the centre of musical life and, at least as a star conductor, enjoyed the recognition as an exceptional personality that musicians of his time were met with, quite naturally. Schönberg, like Wagner, had to fight much longer for his recognition than Mahler, more or less his entire life. But posthumous fame is certainly part of the romantic concept of the unjustly misjudged artist, as is suffering like Old Testament prophets. Schönberg possessed a corresponding sense of mission. The draft of the letter of April 1924 to Prince Max Egon zu Fürstenberg in response to an invitation to Donaueschingen is well known. Here, Schönberg thanks the prince for protecting art from the rabble and allowing the artist to participate “in the special position given by a higher power, this distinction from all those who are merely educated and worked their way up”. He attaches importance to the difference between “those who have become and those who have been born”, sees himself strengthened in his aversion to “democracy and the like”. An elitist feeling of superiority is expressed in a note from 1923, in which Schönberg discusses the concept of the necessity of suffering, familiar from the romantic view of music and Beethoven reception: “The highest, the best,

the noblest will realise that, since there are higher and lower, revolutions must recur within certain periods of time. ... the cause of such upheavals lies in an inappropriate distribution of suffering. The lowly, the inferior, the base, the ignoble, must not suffer, for otherwise they will be morally corrupted. All suffering must be voluntarily accepted by the high, for this does not make them immoral but even nobler” [1]. Schönberg’s brief altercation with the president of the IGNM at the 1925 Venice is legendary: Asked whether he believed he was the only composer at the festival after mercilessly overrunning the rehearsal time for his Serenade, he answered seriously with “yes”. The formation of a school around the “master”, the contempt for all colleagues who composed differently, the belief in one’s own superiority combined with a distrust of possible competitors, even of his faithful pupil Webern (he would still use “the chance of the Aryan against the Jew”): These and many other incidents demonstrate Schönberg’s consciousness of occupying a special place in society as an original genius [17, p. 231ff.]. The development of the twelvetone technique, whose primacy he so furiously defended against Hauer, can indeed be regarded as an exemplary fulfilment of Kant’s definition of genius, which set its own rules. But Schönberg went far beyond claiming to play the leading role in his own profession. On the basis of his own gifts, he also claimed as a painter, philosopher of religion or politician to make “valid”, i.e., true and binding statements. The extent to which he remained stuck to the common clichés of the time is revealed particularly tragically by his idea of a Jewish state, which he designed exactly according to the pattern of the totalitarian movements that were common in Europe at the time: from the party over the parties, through absolute obedience and willingness to sacrifice in the violent enforcement of a blood and soil ideology [22], all the way to the Führerprinzip, which he intended to fill out himself [50, p. 132]. Not even Wagner had gone that far when he interfered in Bavarian politics. Art and morality, this is the connection on which art religion is based, from which its claim to a determining and superior status in society is derived. Open to any kind of syncretism, it has easily adapted to different times and personalities. With the idea of genius, as it was expressed in German literature, philosophy and politics from 1750 to 1945, it has created [40], especially in music, the unique image of the composer as the god of modern society. On the other hand, a broad social resistance movement has developed behind the accusation of megalomania, which for a long time could be fended off with the argument of a lack of intellectual understanding. The notion of the lawful, teleological progress of society, into which the “higher standing” had insight which the lower humans could not follow, was so socially binding that opposition to it was damaging to one’s reputation and career. The task of science is to analyse such mechanisms and causal relationships, not to affirm them².

¹ “... a people truly possesses a land only if it pays for it with its blood, if it has fertilised the soil with its blood”, Schönberg (1933).

² However, this does not mean that they have become ineffective, see [16].

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Лоос Г.

Мистецько-релігійні ідеї Малера і Шенберга

Анотація. Безперечно, Ріхард Вагнер відіграв виняткову роль для Густава Малера та Арнольда Шенберга, для яких був зразком. Особистість Вагнера настільки домінувала у музичному житті та ширшій інтелектуальній історії того часу, що вона не могла не справити значного впливу на двох зазначених композиторів у роки формування їхніх особистостей. Ідея страждання була мистецько-релігійною категорією музики, що набула поширення (особливо в мистецьких колах) з часів Артура Шопенгауера. На відміну від безперечного атеїзму Вагнера, на якого вплинув Людвіг Феєрбах, Малер та Шенберг виявляють тенденцію до модерної ірраціональності, в тому вигляді, в якому вона втілювалася в часи теософії та антропософії. Філософія життя та езотерика були родючим ґрунтом для постання найрізномітніших видів сполучення мистецтва і релігії, серед яких емпатична академічна музика була, мабуть, найуспішнішою у сенсі утвердження себе в суспільстві. Поширеним був і синкретизм, який дозволяв включати гетерогенні елементи, наприклад, традиційних християнських конфесій.

Ключові слова: Ріхард Вагнер, Артур Шопенгауер, Людвіг Феєрбах, ірраціоналізм, теософія, антропософія, езотерика.

Лоос Х.

Художественно-религиозные идеи Малера и Шёнберга

Аннотация. Влияние Рихарда Вагнера на Густава Малера и Арнольда Шёнберга, для которых он был примером, является безусловным фактом. Личность Вагнера настолько доминировала в музыкальной жизни и в более широкой интеллектуальной истории того времени, что просто не могла значительным образом не повлиять на двух указанных композиторов в годы формирования их личности. Идея страдания была художественно-религиозной категорией музыки, распространенной (особенно в артистических кругах) со времен Артура Шопенгауера. В отличие от безусловного атеизма Вагнера, на которого повлиял Людвиг Феєрбах, у Малера и Шёнберга заметна тенденция к современному иррационализму, в том виде, в котором он существовал во времена теософии и антропософии. Философия жизни и езотерика сформировали благодатную почву для разнообразных сочетаний искусства и религии, среди которых эмпатическая академическая музыка была, возможно, наиболее успешной с точки зрения утверждения себя в обществе. Распространенным был и синкретизм, позволяющий включение гетерогенных элементов, например, из традиционных христианских конфессий.

Ключевые слова: Рихард Вагнер, Артур Шопенгауэр, Людвиг Феєрбах, иррационализм, теософия, антропософия, езотерика.

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