

First Interlude

THE TEACHER'S TESTIMONIAL

'Two things emerged clearly even from Berg's earliest compositions, however awkward they may have been: first, that music was to him a language, and that he really expressed himself in that language; and secondly: overflowing warmth of feeling. He was eighteen at the time—that is a long while ago and I cannot say if I recognized originality even at that stage. It was a pleasure to teach him. He was industrious, eager, and did everything in the best possible way. And—like all those young people of that time—he was soaked in music, lived in music. He went to all operas and concerts and knew all the music; at home he played piano duets and was soon reading scores. He was enthusiastic and uncritical, receptive to the beautiful whether old or new, whether music, literature, painting, sculpture, theatre or opera.

'I could do countpoint with him in a manner rare amongst my pupils. And I would like to mention a five-part double fugue for string quintet that was overflowing with ingeniosities. But I could see already to what lengths he could be pushed: when the fugue was ready I told him to add a piano accompaniment in the manner of a continuo. Not only did he execute this with all excellence, he found ways of adding a further host of minor devilries.

'The instruction in composition that followed proceeded effortlessly and smoothly up to and including the Sonata. Then problems began to appear, the nature of which neither of us understood then. I know it today: obviously Alban, who had occupied himself extraordinarily intensively with contemporary

music, with Mahler, Strauss, perhaps even Debussy whose work I did not know, but certainly with my music—it is sure that Alban had a burning desire to express himself no longer in the classical forms, harmonies, and melodic forms and their proper schemata of accompaniment, but in a manner in accordance with the times, and with his own personality which had been developing in the meantime. A hitch was apparent in his creative activity.

‘I cannot remember what he worked on with me afterwards. Others can report more reliably on this point. One thing is sure: his String Quartet (Opus 3) surprised me in the most unbelievable way by the fullness and unconstraint of its musical language, the strength and sureness of its presentation, its careful working and significant originality.

‘That was the time when I moved to Berlin (1911) and he was left to his own devices. He has shown that he was equal to the task.

‘For some time we only saw each other relatively rarely, for at that time Berg had a horror of travelling. He only overcame this much later, but then completely.

‘Unshakable conscientiousness and reliability were very characteristic of Berg. Whatever he undertook he executed with painful exactitude—thought it through from the ground up and then corrected and proofed it carefully. From this one can easily estimate the value of his work for our “Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen” (Society for Private Performances).

‘And then he was the truest and most affectionate of friends. His power of invention was inexhaustible when it was a matter of preparing a pleasant surprise for someone; it was on the same plane as the intensity of his composing. And this bears out something which I said about myself and which applies perhaps to anyone who is really working at himself. I said: “Whether I am composing, painting, teaching, book-binding, rowing, swimming . . . it is all the same. I have to do all these things with the same amount of fervour! The same is

true of Berg and of Webern, and it is probably this that binds us together,—this is probably the reason we are so close to one another.”

‘I wish I had the time to speak exhaustively of his work as well. Most of it I know only from the scores. In recent years I have heard (besides the first works) *Wozzeck*, the Lyric Suite, the Chamber Concerto, and—on a very imperfect gramophone record—the Violin Concerto. Of this last I would just like to say that it is reminiscent of his anxious facial expression when something had aroused his friendly sympathy. What an easy thing it was to call forth this sympathy! I always had the impression that he had experienced beforehand what people close to him were going through, as though he had already suffered with them when they were suffering, so that when they came to tell him of it it did not catch him unawares but rather on the contrary reopened old wounds. Wounds that he had already inflicted on himself by his powerful sympathy. “Dem Andenken eines Engels gewidmet”; dedicated to the memory of an angel. That child was an angel for him before she was an angel for others. For this angel was in him.’

ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG (1936)