

‘... my duty to defend the truth’: Erich Schmid in Schoenberg’s Berlin Composition Class

The student of Swiss music history cannot but notice certain parallels in the lives of that country’s finest composers – parallels that seem, at first glance, to explain why the student of Swiss music history is such a rare creature. Theodor Fröhlich (1803–1836) left Switzerland to study with Zelter in Berlin. Instead of staying to seek fame and fortune in the Prussian metropolis thereafter, he returned to his native Aarau, where he was forced to earn his keep by conducting assorted amateur choirs and ensembles. Johann Carl Eschmann (1826–1882) studied with Mendelssohn in Leipzig, began a promising career by experimenting with modernistic cyclic structures, but then relegated himself to conducting amateur choirs in darkest Canton Schaffhausen. Othmar Schoeck (1886–1957) studied in Leipzig with Reger, but he too soon returned home to tread in his forebears’ footsteps. Numerous others followed the same path. It is as if the culprit were a common genetic trait, some strand of DNA that led generations of Swiss composers briefly to the Teutonic north before compelling them to plunge back into Helvetic obscurity. Or perhaps the yearning to hear cowbells tinkle and see the twinkle of brightly polished doorknobs on distant Alpine chalets is so overwhelming as to propel home-wards any Swiss musician sojourning abroad for more than a few months. The cynic may scoff; but the present writer, in voluntary exile from his erstwhile Helvetic homeland, can vouch for the attraction of both.

The career of Erich Schmid (1907–2000) might seem to conform to the example described above. He was born in Balsthal in Canton Soleure, the son of a protestant, music-loving vicar. He learnt both piano and organ, and in his teens studied music theory with one Max Kaempfert from Berlin, of whom he always spoke highly. Schmid moved to Frankfurt in 1927 to study composition with Bernhard Sekles at the Hoch Conservatory, and once there rapidly abandoned tonality. In 1929, a jury comprising Joseph Haas, Emil von Reznicek and Hermann Scherchen awarded him the coveted Mozart Prize of the City of Frankfurt. Six years previously,

Schmid had experienced an epiphany upon hearing Schoenberg’s *Friede auf Erden*. When the master himself visited Frankfurt in 1930, Schmid seized the opportunity to play him his Sonata op.1 for violin and piano. Shortly thereafter, he was accepted into Schoenberg’s composition class at the Academy of the Arts, and accordingly spent the next academic year in Berlin. His success there was not inconsiderable. However, within three years, he had followed the example of Fröhlich, Eschmann and Schoeck – or so it seemed – by returning to his homeland as director of amateur choirs and instrumental groups in the Alpine hinterland of Canton Glarus. Ten years later, he had all but abandoned composition. However, the case of Erich Schmid is nowhere near as depressingly clear-cut as his potted biography suggests. His oeuvre may be small, but those acquainted with his music have found its quality inversely proportional to its quantity. Both Schmid’s career and the manner in which the course of it was determined thus merit closer inspection. An obvious starting point is the year that he spent with Schoenberg, an experience best described in Schmid’s own words:¹

‘In October 1930, I moved to Berlin. Schoenberg was not yet there, so the beginning of our tuition was postponed again and again. The first class (not counting a ‘get-together’ before it) must have taken place on the morning of 13 November.² The venue was Schoenberg’s flat at Nürnberger Platz No. 3. I described my first impression of the Master at length in a letter to my parents of 14 November 1930:

¹ The following is an abridged translation by the present writer of Schmid’s reminiscences as published in the July/August number of *Melos* in 1974, pp. 190–203, and as contained in his unpublished memoirs. Occasional discrepancies between the two are noted below. Thanks are due to the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* for permission to quote from *Melos*, and to Martha and Martin Schmid for permission to quote from that source and for providing a copy of the appropriate chapter from Schmid’s memoirs. Schmid’s archives are held today by the Zentralbibliothek Zürich.

² In his memoirs, Schmid writes that the first lesson took place in ‘mid-October’.

Schoenberg received us in a very kindly fashion and chatted for two hours in the most lively manner. Barely a word about music – no, about architecture, painting and sculpture. With him, everything somehow connects with his art. Then he also spoke about his own work. He stressed that he sees his oeuvre as developing from tradition. He pays much respect to the great masters! Brahms and Beethoven are his examples in formal matters, while Wagner was his starting point harmonically ... In appearance, he is rather small, with sharply defined, very mobile facial features. He walks up and down while conversing. He has a good sense of humour and can at times be highly sarcastic. He takes a keen interest in the well being of his students ...

‘The tuition did not keep to any particular plan. The prerequisite for taking part in the classes was that we had all mastered the usual compositional techniques. The classes themselves were rather a kind of forum for discussion, or seminars. The subjects that we discussed would arise from a composition written by one of the students or from questions that were thrown up in one connection or another. Sometimes we dealt with a problem that Schoenberg was grappling with himself and about which he then spoke with us ...

‘It was typical of Schoenberg’s tuition that it was based in the strictest sense on the great examples of the Classical and Romantic masters. It seldom happened that he played anything from his own works. When he did, he always stressed how his own style had developed from existing tradition. I remember our looking at his first Chamber Symphony, in which he especially pointed out the logical musical development of themes from a kind of basic shape [*Grundgestalt*].³ Another time, we examined the Wind Quintet op.26. Schoenberg used this complicated work to show how he integrated classical formal principles in his own style. There is variety through constant variation and unity through variation of the *thematic* material [Schmid’s italics]. It is very interesting that he never spoke about twelve-tone technique – this was also typical of our classes with him ...

‘The extent to which Schoenberg saw himself rooted in tradition – as did the whole Second Viennese School, most probably – also became obvious in the fact that he somehow heard music in a tonal-harmonic fashion. Even in the case of advanced works that used the twelve-note technique (such as the Third String Quartet), he spoke of tonic and dominant effects. Later, I also noticed the same fact with Webern

when he explained his Variations op.30 to me and began to speak of cadence-like functions in both melody and harmony.⁴ Incidentally, Schoenberg assured us back then that he would one day write tonal music again, and that the outside world would realize that his compositional technique nevertheless remained basically the same.⁵ He did indeed compose these works, as for example the Suite for String Orchestra (1934) and the Theme and Variations op.43 (1942) [*recte*: 1943]. I find the latter work in particular a compendium of Schoenberg’s twelve-tone compositional techniques, but demonstrated in a tonal style⁶ ...

‘There was really only an exceptionally small number of people who were truly convinced of the greatness of Arnold Schoenberg. Thus the principal concern for him and his circle was that they should defend themselves against misunderstandings, lies and stupidity. The result was the constant, at times excessive compulsion to emphasize not the new in his own work, but that which bound it together with tradition. We find this defensive position in Schoenberg just as we do in Berg and Webern. Schoenberg’s tuition was, in one sense, a great exercise in how to defend oneself. Thus we had to prove that we truly had mastered traditional compositional techniques. It could happen that Schoenberg would instruct us to write him a piece of strict counterpoint (such as a motet movement) with the dissonance treated exactly as prescribed by Bellermann.⁷ Schoenberg did not show us the works of past masters just in order to make positive comparisons, but also to criticize. Thus, he once took out Reger’s Violin Concerto, a work that he very much liked (something we found astonishing). He particularly liked the main theme of the second movement, not least on account of its harmonic treatment. But then he began to speak about Reger’s orchestration, which is really quite opposed to the instrumentation of either Mahler or Schoenberg himself. Here,

⁴ Schmid met Webern in Winterthur in 1940, when the composer attended a performance of his Passacaglia op.1 given by the Winterthur City Orchestra under Schmid’s baton.

⁵ Schoenberg was indeed sketching tonal works at this time. A fragment exists of a piece for violin and piano in D major from 1930. For further information on Schoenberg’s late tonal works, see e.g. the chapter by Jan Maegaard in Walter B. Bailey, ed., *The Arnold Schoenberg Companion* (Greenwood Press, Westport, 1998).

⁶ The Theme and Variations in G minor exist in a version each for wind band (op. 43a) and for orchestra (op. 43b). The work is not dodecaphonic.

⁷ Schmid refers to the evergreen *Der Contrapunt* by Johann Bellermann (1832-1903), who was a sort of Ebenezer Proutcum-R.O. Morris of the German academic scene.

³ Schoenberg discusses this in his ‘Composition with Twelve Tones’, in Leonard Stein (ed.), *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (London, Faber, 1975), pp. 222-3.

Schoenberg had reservations on account of the peculiar ‘veiling’ technique that one finds in Reger’s orchestral scores. He criticized the treatment of instrumental voices, as the true course of the voice becomes unclear on account of its being made to branch off into countless directions. Schoenberg found this vague orchestral sound questionable, since it prevented the musical diction from being presented with clarity. What he himself understood in the way of orchestration he demonstrated to us by using his own orchestral arrangement of Bach’s Prelude and Fugue in E flat major.⁸

‘Schoenberg rarely spoke of contemporary composers in class . . . during the whole of my year with him, I hardly heard a word of criticism of them pass his lips ... with regard to Stravinsky, I learnt only that they had met once at the seaside, where the two of them had stood face to face more or less naked, as Schoenberg recalled with a smile.

‘During my year with Schoenberg, I wrote a string quartet [Schmid’s op.4]. I brought a clean copy of the first movement to class. Of course, this had to be played as a piano duet [as was the custom], which wasn’t very easy. The movement is based on a twelve-note row, but formally, it is in strict sonata form. Schoenberg devoted his full attention to it. And then I really learnt what he demanded of us. He did not want to grind us down with negative criticism. No; he immediately got inside the work and showed us how thematic

⁸ Bach’s Prelude and Fugue in E Flat Major, BWV 552, arranged by Schoenberg for orchestra in 1928.

development should really proceed. There was a certain rigidity in the piece that he thereby immediately dispelled. Schoenberg’s remarks were made without mercy, but without injury, so that they in fact inspired me . . . There was a particular thematic development [in the first movement] that he did not like. He made a suggestion that meant using a different sequence of notes. I mentioned shyly that my composition was written using the twelve-tone system. Schoenberg’s reaction was: ‘Well then, try a similar development using your note-rows’. That ended the matter⁹ ... I still possess all my sketches and revisions as well as the markings and suggestions in Schoenberg’s hand.¹⁰ They provide the most beautiful proof possible of what Schoenberg wanted. For example, he did not think much of precise repetitions. Repetitions had to be variants of the musical events. Schoenberg was also touchy when it came to metrical matters. Rigidity had to be avoided at all costs! Thus there are metrical variants in my quartet movements that were a result of his suggestions. Despite the unity required of the basic ideas, everything had to develop and expand with the greatest possible variety.’

Schmid’s year as Schoenberg’s pupil concluded with a student concert in the Academy of the Arts on 2 June 1931, in which he participated as

⁹ In conversation with the present writer, Schmid quoted Schoenberg thus: ‘Well, then you’ll have to change the row, won’t you.’

¹⁰ Held today by the Zentralbibliothek Zürich.

Part of the manuscript of Schmid’s String Quartet, op.4, with annotation by Schoenberg in the bottom stave (courtesy of Zentralbibliothek Zürich).





Erich Schmid conducting c.1980 (courtesy Zentralbibliothek Zürich).

both composer and conductor. His String Quartet received its world première, while he directed Norbert von Hannenheim's Concerto for Piano and Seven Woodwind Instruments and Nikos Skalkottas's Octet for Four Woodwinds and String Quartet (the instrumentalists included Willi Reich on the oboe). Schoenberg was unable to attend, but the programme sent to him by his students was carefully filed away, and accompanied him on his subsequent exodus to the United States.

In order to improve their future employment prospects, Schoenberg had suggested to Schmid and his fellow students that they should gain a recognized diploma. Schmid thus returned to the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt to sit the exams necessary for acquiring this piece of paper. Afterwards, he remained in that city, working as a rehearsal pianist and doing freelance work for the radio. Schoenberg wrote to him on 8 June 1932 to ask if he would like to return to Berlin and resume his tuition. But Schmid needed to earn a living, and Frankfurt seemed to offer the best employment possibilities. Perhaps, too, Schmid feared for his musical independence in the face of Schoenberg's overwhelming personality (a fear that Schmid had previously expressed to his parents).

Hitler's accession to power on 30 January 1933 had drastic repercussions not just for Schoenberg, but also for Schmid. A concert that Theodor Adorno had organized for that same day was to have included the world premières of Schmid's Clarinet Trio op.5 and his Piano Pieces op.6. However, for safety's sake, and to Adorno's chagrin, the participants jointly decided to cancel the event. A few weeks later, Schmid saw Schoenberg for the last time when the latter came to the Frankfurt Radio to give his now famous lecture on Brahms. 'So you've joined the cultural Bolsheviks too now, have you?' he mocked. It was at this time that the removal was announced of 'Jewish elements' from the Berlin Academy of the Arts. By the summer of 1933, Schmid too had realized that it had become neither practical nor advisable to remain in Germany. Returning to Switzerland was his only option. He wrote to Schoenberg on 20 July 1933 to express his solidarity, assuring him of his loyalty to the common cause: 'More than ever is it my duty and joyful task, as your former pupil, to defend the truth about your personality against the fairy tales that are told about you by those envious incompetents. To have a part in this task will be an honour to me'. There was, however, little further contact between the two

men until the Second World War. Schoenberg’s son Georg had remained in Vienna; as residents of opposing powers, they were unable to communicate, but as a citizen of neutral Switzerland, Schmid was able to correspond with both father and son. At Schoenberg’s request, he therefore acted as a go-between in order to reassure each of the other’s continued well being. After the war, however, Schmid and Schoenberg lost contact for good.

His Swiss citizenship had allowed Schmid to find a safe refuge during the 1930s and ’40s. However, German fascism had still succeeded in dealing his composing career what was in effect a fatal blow. As music director in Glarus from early 1934 onwards, Schmid enjoyed regular and challenging employment. By all accounts, he achieved remarkable artistic successes with the assorted (largely amateur) choirs and instrumental groups at his disposal.¹¹ But Switzerland had little to offer any progressive composer, let alone its first and hitherto only exponent of the twelve-tone system. When Schmid’s *Sonatina* op.1 had been performed at the prestigious Swiss Musicians’ Festival in May 1931, the audience had laughed out loud. The later 1930s saw little change in the aesthetic climate. As his conducting career blossomed, with increasing engagements in the major towns and cities, so Schmid’s compositional output dwindled. His *Five Bagatelles* op. 14 for piano of 1943 were followed twelve years later by a little trio for flute, violin and cello, written for his children to perform. This was his last work.

From 1949 to 1972, as principal conductor first of the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra, then of the Zurich Radio Orchestra, Schmid played a crucial role in introducing the music of the Second Viennese School to the post-war Swiss public. Ever a champion of the new, he gave the world premières of works by Othmar Schoeck, Rolf Liebermann, Wladimir Vogel, Karl Amadeus Hartmann, Klaus Huber and others. Schmid even conducted the London Symphony Orchestra in the British première of Schoenberg’s *Jakobsleiter*

in 1965. A confirmed Anglophile, he developed a close working relationship with the BBC, and from 1978 to 1982 he was Principal Guest Conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.¹² Schmid made but a few commercial LPs. Most of these have long since been deleted, though many radio recordings survive that testify to his conducting gifts (not for nothing did his admirers include Anton Webern).¹³ In his later years, Schmid also became popular as a conducting teacher. One of his last pupils was the Englishman Howard Griffiths, today a highly successful director of the Zurich Chamber Orchestra.

Schmid never attempted to propagate his own music. In fact, his works remained unperformed for over fifty years, when at last his tiny oeuvre was discovered by a younger generation and given the performances it deserved. Schmid’s delight was exceeded only by the surprise of his compatriots that such a voice should have developed in their midst, fallen silent, and remained subsequently unheard. Schmid’s idiom is unmistakably Schoenbergian, as a glance at any of his scores will prove, though he possessed a distinctively individual voice, as can be heard on the currently available CD of his music (on the Grammont label). His String Quartet – one of his finest works, in the estimation of the present writer – is to be released on the Guild Music label in 2002. Further positive news is the recent signing of a contract between Schmid’s heirs and Bote und Bock for the forthcoming publication of several of his works.

The promise that Schmid made to defend the person and music of his former teacher was never forgotten. He did so in print, in lectures and, above all, on the conducting podium. But he learnt his lessons in loyalty better than he did those in self-defence. The energies that Schmid devoted to furthering the music of Schoenberg and his school he was unwilling or unable to place in the service of his own music. It is a pity that Schmid did not have a similar champion of his own; his music deserves it.

¹¹ Kurt von Fischer quotes various reviews of Schmid’s conducting exploits in his short biography *Erich Schmid* (Hug, Zurich, 1992), pp. 20–22.

¹² One of Schmid’s last performances in England was with the University of Cambridge First Orchestra in 1984, when the present writer narrowly missed playing under his baton – a matter of regret to him ever since.

¹³ See von Fischer, *Erich Schmid*, p. 22.