

1 Arnold Schoenberg

The Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) was among the most influential figures in twentieth-century music. These excerpts are from letters written to Ferruccio Busoni in 1909, after Busoni, a renowned composer, pianist, and conductor, had sent his younger colleague a transcription of one of Schoenberg's piano pieces, Op. 11, No. 2, intended to render the composition more "pianistic." Schoenberg not only rejects Busoni's notion of pianism as inappropriate to his own work but offers an impassioned statement describing the highly intuitive approach to artistic creation that he favored at the time. This compositional esthetic, a holdover from the nineteenth century, reached its most extreme formulation just as these letters were written—at the moment Schoenberg was breaking away from the tonally centric and harmonically triadic basis of traditional Western music.

Two Letters to Ferruccio Busoni

(1909)

Steinakirchen am Forst [August 1909]

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I am writing in such detail because I want to declare my intentions (encouraged by your comment: my music affects you because you envisage something of the kind as the goal of our immediate developments).

I strive for: complete liberation from all forms
from all symbols
of cohesion and
of logic.

Thus:

away with "motivic working out."
Away with harmony as
cement or bricks of a building.

Harmony is *expression*
and nothing else.

Then:

Away with Pathos!
Away with protracted ten-ton scores, from erected or constructed
towers, rocks, and other massive claptrap.
My music must be
brief.

TEXT: *Ferruccio Busoni. Selected Letters*, ed. and trans. by Antony Beaumont (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), pp. 389, 392–97.

Concise! In two notes: not built, but "*expressed*"!

And the results I wish for:

no stylized and sterile protracted emotion.

People are not like that:

it is *impossible* for a person to have only *one* sensation at a time.

One has *thousands* simultaneously. And these thousands can no more readily be added together than an apple and a pear. They to their own ways.

And this variegation, this multifariousness, this *illogicality* which our senses demonstrate, the illogicality presented by their interactions, set forth by some mounting rush of blood, by some reaction of the senses or the nerves, this I should like to have in my music.

It should be an expression of feeling,¹ as our feelings, which bring us in contact with our subconscious, really are, and no false child of feelings and "conscious logic."

Now I have made my confession and they can burn me. You will not number amongst those who burn me: that I know.

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Steinakirchen am Forst, August 24, 1909

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You must consider the following: it is impossible for me to publish my piece together with a transcription which shows how I could have done it *better*. Which thus indicates that my piece is *imperfect*. And it is impossible to try to make the public believe that my piece is *good*, if I simultaneously indicate that it is *not good*.

I could not do this—out of my instinct for self-preservation—even if I believed it. In this case I would either have to destroy my piece or *rework* it *myself*.

But now—please forgive my unrestrained frankness, just as I do not take yours amiss—I *simply don't believe it*. I firmly believe you are making the same mistake as every *imaginative* critic: you do not wish to put yourself in the writer's place but seek rather, in the work of another, yourself, *only yourself*. And that just isn't possible. An art which is at one and the same time its creator's and its appraiser's cannot exist. One of these has to give way, and I believe his must be the appraiser.

And your reasoning seems to me quite unsound, when you say that I shall become different but no richer by pointlessly doing without what is already established.

I do not believe in putting *new wine* into old bottles. In the history of art I have made the following antipodal observations:

1. Orig. "Sie soll Ausdruck der Empfindung sein." Allusion to Beethoven's comment about his "Pastoral" Symphony, "Mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Malerei" = more an expression of feeling than painting. [Tr.]

Bach's contrapuntal art vanishes when Beethoven's melodic homophony begins.

Beethoven's formal art is abandoned when Wagner introduces his expressive art.

Unity of design, richness of coloring, working out of minutest details, painstaking formation, priming and varnishing, use of perspective and all the other constituents of older painting simply die out when the Impressionists begin to paint things as they *appear* and not as they *are*.

Yes indeed, when a new art seeks and finds new means of expression, almost all earlier techniques go hang: seemingly, at any rate; for actually they are retained; but in a different way. (To discuss this would lead me too far.)

And now: I must say that I actually dispensed with more than just piano sound when I began to follow my instincts and compose *such* music. I find that, when renouncing an *art of form*, the architecture of the leading voice, the polyphonic art that Brahms, Wagner, and others brought to a high degree of perfection in the past decades—the little bit of piano sound seems a mere trifle. And I maintain: one must have grasped, admired, and marveled at the mysterious wonders of our tonal harmony, the unbelievably delicate balance of its architectural values and its cabalistic mathematics as I have, in order to feel, when one no longer has need of them, that one requires new means. Questions of sonority, whose attraction ranks scarcely so high amongst the eternal values, are by comparison trivial.

Nevertheless, I take a standpoint in this question from which it is absolutely unnecessary to consider me a renouncer, a loser. Were you to see my new orchestral pieces, you would be able to observe how clearly I turn away from the full "God and Superman" sound of the Wagner orchestra. How everything becomes sweeter, finer. How refracted shades of color replace the former brilliant hues. How my entire orchestral technique takes a path which seems to be leading in quite the opposite direction to anything previously taken. I find this to be the natural reaction. We have had enough of Wagner's full, lush sonorities, to the point of satiation: "Nun laßt uns andere Töne anstimmen . . ."²

And now I must add that I feel myself justified in believing (I must repeat this) that my piano writing is *novel*. Not only do my feelings tell me so. Friends and pupils express the opinion that the sonorities of my piano writing are completely novel.

For me the matter is as follows:

I do not consider my piano texture the result of any sort of *incompetence*, but rather the expression of *firm resolve, distinct preferences and palpably clear feelings*.

What it *does not* do is not what it *cannot*, rather what it *will not*.

2. Intended as a quotation from Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. The actual words are: "O Freunde, nicht diese Töne! Sondern laßt uns angenehmere anstimmen . . ." ["O friends, not these sounds! Instead let us strike up more pleasing ones . . ."]. Schoenberg's words mean: now let us strike up other sounds. [Tr.]

What it does is not something which could have turned out differently, rather what it *had* to do.

Therefore it is distinctive, stylish, and organic.

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I fear that a transcription, on the other hand, would either *introduce* what I avoid, either fundamentally or according to my preferences; *add* what I myself—within the limits of my personality—would never have devised, thus what is foreign or unattainable to me; *omit* what I would find necessary, or *improve* where I am, and must remain, imperfect.

Thus a transcription would be bound to do me violence: whether it helps or hinders my work.

In your pamphlet, which gives me uncommon pleasure and truly proves how the same thoughts can occur to different people at once, you write about transcription. I particularly agree with your thesis that all notation is transcription.³ I argued similarly some years ago when Mahler was publicly attacked for changing Beethoven's orchestration. But again: whether one improves upon Beethoven's undoubtedly *old-fashioned* treatment of instruments and orchestration on account of undoubtedly superior *newer* instrumental techniques, or whether one improves upon my piano style with older techniques or, at any rate, techniques whose greater appropriateness has today not yet been established, there is no doubt at all that these are two different matters.

I can at present say this without your having to take it as any harsh criticism, because I have not yet seen your transcription. After all, your arrangement could always prove that I am mistaken. But also, apart from that, I am sure you will not take my vehemence amiss, I am certain, because your opinion of my work was otherwise neither harsh nor unfavorable.

Another point occurs to me which seems a suitable argument against you.

Do you really set such infinite store by perfection? Do you really consider it attainable? Do you really think that works of art are, or should be, perfect?

I do not think so. I find even God's works of art, those of nature, highly imperfect.

But I find perfection only in the work of carpenters, gardeners, pastry-cooks, and hairdressers. Only they produce that smoothness and symmetry which I have so often wished to the Devil. Only they fulfill every requirement one can expect of them, but otherwise nothing human or godlike in the world.

And if

Notation = Transcription = Imperfection

then also

3. Schoenberg's reference is apparently to the following statement from Busoni's *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music*, trans. Theodore Baker (New York, 1911), as reprinted in *Three Classics in the Aesthetics of Music* (New York: Dover), p. 84: "Notation, the writing down of musical compositions, is above all an ingenious aid for pinning down an improvisation so that it can be brought to life again."

Transcription = Notation = Imperfection.

For if $a = b$ and $b = c$, then also

$$a = c.$$

Why then replace one imperfection with another?

Why eliminate that which perhaps contributes to the appeal of a work and substitute something added by a foreign hand?

Don't the characteristics of a man's personality also include his defects? Do these not have an effect, even if unbeautiful, then at least as contrast, like the basic color upon which the other shades are superimposed?

I have often thought that one should give Schumann's symphonies (which I believe you have greatly underestimated⁴ and which I rate *far above* those of Brahms) a helping hand by improving the orchestration. The theoretical aspects were quite clear to me. This summer I spent a little time on this and—lost courage. For I can see exactly that wherever things misfire, something highly original was intended, and I lack the courage to replace an *interesting idea*, which has not been quite successfully carried out, with a "reliable" sonority. And with a true work of art, the imagination of an outsider can achieve no more than this! —

From a purely technical angle, I would like to ask you if you have perhaps taken too slow a tempo. That could make a great difference. Or too *little* rubato. I never stay in time! Never in tempo! —

Your "Outline for a New Esthetic of Music" gave me uncommon pleasure, above all on account of its audacity. Particularly at the beginning, there are a few powerful sentences, of compulsive logic and superlative acuteness of observation. I have also thought a lot about your idea of thirds of tones, though in a different way. But I had been thinking of quarter tones, am however now of the opinion that it will depend less on the construction than on other things. Moreover, one of my pupils⁵ calculated, at my suggestion, that the next division of the octave with similar properties to our twelve semitone division would have to introduce 53 notes. If you adopt 18 thirds of tones, that would be approximately equal, for $3 \times 18 = 54$. But then the semitones would disappear completely.

Earlier I thought out the following method of notating quarter tones:



< and > are
mathematical symbols.

4. In the *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music* Busoni writes: "In general, composers have drawn nearest the true nature of music in preparatory and intermediary passages . . ." The passage is included in the Busoni excerpt found on p. 53.

5. This was the philosopher Dr. Robert Neumann, who studied with Schoenberg from 1907 to 1909. [Tr.]

However, I scarcely think that such attempts at notation will catch on; for I confidently hope that the notation of the future will be—how can I say: “wireless.”⁶

I also think differently about tonality—my music shows that. I believe: everything one can do with 113 keys⁷ can also be done with 2 or 3 or 4: major-minor, whole-tone, and chromatic. Anyway, I have long been occupied with the removal of all shackles of tonality. And my harmony allows no chords or melodies with tonal implications any more.

Now to your questions.

To what extent I realize my intentions? Not as far as I would like to. Not one piece has yet satisfied me entirely. I would like to achieve even greater variegation of motifs and figures without melodic character; I would like to be freer and less constrained in rhythm and time signature; freer from repetition of motifs and spinning out of thoughts in the manner of a melody. This is my vision: this is how I imagine music before I notate = transcribe it. And I am unable to force this upon myself; I must wait until a piece comes out of its own accord in the way I have envisaged.

And thus I come to answer your other question: how much is intentional and how much instinctive.

My only intention is

to have *no* intentions!

No formal, architectural, or other artistic intentions (except perhaps of capturing the mood of a poem), no esthetic intentions—none of any kind; at most this:

to place nothing inhibiting in the stream of my unconscious sensations. But to allow anything to infiltrate which may be invoked either by intelligence or consciousness.

If you knew how I have developed, you would have no doubts. But I have prepared myself for this question and am thus able to answer it. I knew one would question the naturalness of my intentions, precisely because they are natural. That one would find them formalized for the very reason that I avoid anything formal.

But when one sees how I have developed in stages, how I was long ago approaching a form of expression to which I now adhere freely and unreservedly, one would understand that nothing unorganic, no “cheap aestheticism,”⁸ is involved, but that *compulsion* has produced these results.

As I am now fairly clear about the theoretical side, only those can scoff who

6. Orig. “drahtloser.” Schoenberg presumably means that the communication should be more like a “wireless”—that is, as immediate and instantaneous as possible, and thus independent of any material connection (i.e., the “wire”).

7. In the *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music* Busoni writes: “I have made an attempt to find all the possibilities of arranging the seven-tone scale and have succeeded, by lowering and raising the intervals, in producing 113 different scales.” See p. 56.

8. Orig. “nichts ‘Verschmoeckt-Aesthetisches.’” [Tr.]

imagine the unconsciously creating artist to be a sort of half-cretin; and who cannot grasp that after unconscious creativity follows a period of *quiet clear-sightedness*, in which one renders account of one’s situation.

As for the third piece,⁹ which you do not care for at present, as can be inferred from your caustic criticism, I find it goes a considerable way beyond what was successful in the other two. At any rate, as far as the above-mentioned variegation is concerned. But also in the “harmony”—if one can speak so architecturally here—there seems to be something novel in it. In particular: something more slender, more linear.¹⁰ But I also consider it unjust to expect that one can revolutionize music in three *different* ways in three little piano pieces. Does it not seem permissible, having departed so far from convention, to pause for a moment’s breath, to gather new strength, before one rushes on? And is it not unjust to describe laconicism as a mannerism? Is formalism just as much a manner as pointillism or impressionism? Must one build? Is music then a savings bank? Does one get more when it is longer?

If I was wrong *there* to be brief, I have *amply* compensated for it in this *letter!* But there were indeed several things I wanted to say—that I could not express them more concisely can be blamed upon my technical shortcomings.

And finally: I hope my frankness does not annoy you, and that you maintain your interest in me.

Maybe you will find a formula, an explanation, through which I shall be able to publish my piece in your series.

Or perhaps you could publish all three and your paraphrase, with an explanation some other time??

In any case, I hope not to lose your good will if I now ask you to tell me whether you wish to play the pieces. For, clearly this would mean an enormous amount to me.

One other curious thing, to close: before composing these piano pieces, I had wanted to contact you—knowing of your predilection for transcriptions—to ask if you would take one of my chamber or orchestral works into your repertoire, transcribed for piano solo.

Curious: now we come into contact again through a transcription! Was I misunderstanding a message from my subconscious, which made me think of you in the context of a transcription?

This has just occurred to me!

9. Schoenberg had completed only the first two of the Three Piano Pieces Op. 11 when he originally sent them to Busoni. The third was sent later, shortly before this letter was written.

10. Orig. “manches dünnere, zweistimmigere.” [Tr.]