

## Analysis of Schoenberg's "A Survivor From Warsaw"

Arnold Schoenberg was a modern and extremely innovative Austrian composer who led the Second Viennese School and helped pioneer the Expressionist movement with his radical developments including serialism, the twelve-tone row, and free atonality. Born in Vienna, Schoenberg was largely self-taught compositionally, but eventually became a renowned teacher later in life, as well as a painter and music theorist. In the final period of his creative output, Schoenberg composed "A Survivor From Warsaw", Op. 46, in 1947.

"A Survivor From Warsaw" is a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, written within two years after the Nazi regime's downfall. It is striking in its originality for several reasons, firstly being its orchestration. It is scored for narrator, men's chorus and orchestra. The narrator plays a huge role in the piece, triggering orchestral responses to his vivid and visceral recited poetry. He does not sing but speaks with dynamics and varying levels of emotional intensity. A far cry from even the seemingly passé Sprechstimme style only recently developed in the twentieth century, the narrator's spoken dialogue adds an emphasis to the complete importance of the text. The lack of musical content to as it were "soften" the blow of the text's horrors creates a level of discomfort and rapt attention in the listener in ways never experienced before Schoenberg's time.

The work lasts slightly over six minutes on average and makes use of a twelve-tone row. The first four notes of the twelve-tone row can be seen in the opening fanfare-like motive in the trumpets marked fortissimo (F#-G-C-A flat). The violins play E and E-flat on beat two of measure one, one beat after the trumpets, thus adding two more notes

to the row, creating the row's first six notes, or first hexachord. The trumpets then play F-A between beats two and three. Lastly, the contrabass enter on beat three with the notes C# and D, completing the twelve-tone aggregate row and creating an extremely rich and dissonant sonority of all twelve notes of the row in different registers sounding at the same time (excluding of course the two triplets in the trumpets). Thus, the end of the very first measure completes the row. The first four notes (F#-G-C-A flat-E-E flat), are sounded by the trumpets in a fast triplet and in dotted half notes in the violins.

Interestingly, the next half or six notes of the row, in a symmetrical fashion, occur as an exact inversion of the first six notes or hexachord, transposed to start on B, or P11. Thus, F#-G-C-A flat-E-E flat becomes B-B flat-F-A-D flat-D (because E to E flat inverted to start on B becomes B to B-flat, etc.) The repeated triplet fanfare motive followed by a half note, repeated in inverted form, adds a level of symmetry and well-conceived shape to the completion of the row.

The text contains three different languages: English, German, and Hebrew. Further, three different perspectives of character are utilized: the perspective of the survivor and his commentary, the perspective of the German soldier who shouts in German and portrays the punishment inflicted upon the prisoners, and lastly the perspective of the prisoners, mostly at the end when they sing the prayer of Shema Yisroel (foreshadowed in the third sentence of the text: "I remember only the grandiose moment when they all started to sing, as if prearranged, the old prayer they had neglected for so many years – the forgotten creed!" (measures 14-21). Structurally, the piece is also in three parts: the first in English, the second in German, and the last in Hebrew. The use of the twelve tone row affirms this tripartite structure with its lack of complete

presentation until the last section in Hebrew, in which the prayer of the victims' transcendence of pain is sung. Thus, the row receives its full statement and completion when the victims themselves transcend their pain and a sense of resolution occurs. Beyond the roughly language-divided sections, a three-section divider can be drawn between the orchestral introduction (measures 1-11), the bulk of the narration (encompassing English and German to be fair) (measures 12-70) and lastly the chorus section (measures 80-99).

In the broadest terms, the sections are responsible for containing three central ideas: 1. The introduction and presentation of recollections of the psychological turmoil and conflicts the narrator will retell, 2. The turmoil and punishment felt most viscerally via the sergeant's German shouting and the moaning and suffering of the prisoners, and 3. The ultimate prayer, transcendence and resolution accomplished by the prisoners. Musically, Schoenberg affirms this roughly three part outline with increased instrumental dissonance, emotional intensity, volume, vocal technique and chaos of the narrator as the descriptions of the horrors to prisoners are articulated, and lastly by the slow but sure reduction of dissonance in the orchestra for the third section. The extremely disjointed and almost pointillistic textural quality, with its fast, short, pattern-lacking drum fills and instrumental outbursts, are resolved towards the last section of the piece with increased continuity of lines (for example, the unbroken, rhythmically unified line in the oboes, flutes and clarinets in measures 93-95 and the rhythmically unified line in the violins and violas in measure 96). This is, of course, reinforced, by the comparatively simple and cohesive prayer sung by the choir portraying the Hebrew chant, with a rhythmic consistency previously unheard throughout the piece. In addition, for the first time, the

trumpets are in exact unison with the chorus (doubled by a trombone) during the last half of the final section.

Thus, in “A Survivor From Warsaw,” Schoenberg manages to conceive and render the text as a three-part whole in minute detail, fully realized through the use of three languages, perspectives and orchestral choices, nevertheless managing to utilize twelve-tone technique to complement, conform to and shape his overarching three-part design.