

Der Kranke Mond - *Pierrot Lunaire* Schoenberg

Background Information and Performance Circumstances

The Romantic style of the 19th Century had always been about the heightened expression of emotions.

In the early 20th Century, Austrian composers like Arnold Schoenberg and his follower Anton Berg sought to take this a stage further by describing extreme, often nightmarish feelings. At the climax of Berg's opera *Wozzeck* the hero wades into what he thinks is a lake of blood and drowns himself, accompanied of course by appropriately tortured sounding music.

This so called **Expressionist style** was partly influenced by the work of the Austrian psychoanalyst Freud and his Swiss counterpart Jung, and their interpretation of dreams. The style wasn't confined to music. It was also found in literature and painting. One of the most famous pictures of the period was *The Scream* painted by the Norwegian artist Munch: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scream

Schoenberg was also an artist. You can see some of his self-portraits at this site: <http://www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/schoenberg/painting/selfportrait.htm>

The essential characteristics of Expressionist musical style were (see later sections of these notes for a fuller description):

- Chromatic melody and harmony
- Dissonant harmony
- A move away from any traditional sense of tonality into *atonality*
- Unusual vocal techniques, typified by the use of *Sprechgesang* in this piece
- Wide range and large melodic leaps
- Extreme dynamics

In fact, every aspect of this piece is typical of *Expressionism*.

Pierrot Lunaire

Pierrot Lunaire is a *melodrama* by Schoenberg, written in 1912. This was a time between the late Romantic style of his earlier works and his later full-blown serial style. It sets 21 poems in a German translation of an original French text by Albert Giraud. The first performance took place at the *Choraliansaal* in Berlin in October 1912, after no fewer than 40 rehearsals. Apart from a few hostile reactions, the performance was generally well received.

The poems probe deeply into the human mind, exploring mental states verging on insanity, with frequently nightmarish imagery. At a climactic point, *Pierrot* is decapitated by the moon. The name *Pierrot* is that of a traditional pantomime figure, whose origins date back to at least the 17th Century.

A *melodrama* is a dramatic work featuring exaggerated characters and emotions. At the time in Vienna, this often meant poetry readings with musical accompaniment in a kind of cabaret environment. Schoenberg described the individual items in *Pierrot* as

melodramas rather than songs. *Der kranke Mond* (the sick moon) is the 7th piece in the work. A translation of the words can be found on page 540 of the anthology.

Performing Forces and their Handling

Vocalist

- The Viennese actress Albertine Zehme, had already been performing spoken recitations of some of the poems in earlier stage productions. She commissioned Schoenberg to produce this set of pieces in which the main performer is half way between actress and singer. In the anthology score the indication is ‘reciter’ rather than ‘alto’ or ‘voice’.
- The style of vocal performance is known as *Sprechstimme* (spoken voice) or *Sprechgesang* (spoken song). The rhythms are expected to be performed accurately, but the pitches are open to a wide variety of possible interpretation. The standard way of producing the technique is to sing the pitch at the beginning of the note, but then move quickly away to a more spoken sound. Some recordings, though, seem almost to be sung in a traditional manner, whereas others seem much closer to speech.
- The pitch **range** is large, as much as two octaves, ranging from E, a 10th above middle C (bar 8) down to E below middle C (bar 15).
- As well as some **conjunct** (stepwise) music in the first vocal phrase, there are some **wide, angular leaps**, like the **diminished 8^{ve}** between the last two notes or the **augmented 9th** in bar 13.
- In the last two bars the vocalist is required to perform a series of grotesque **mordents** (an ornament involving the main note, a note a 2nd above, then returning to the main note).
- The music is **fragmented** by rests here.
- Much of the music is required to be sung **quietly** or very quietly (*ppp* from bar 14), and there are sudden **dynamic contrasts** like the *subito pp* after a *crescendo* in bar 7.
- The German performing directions from bar 24 are:
 - *im Ton etc.* (exactly the same tone of voice as in the previous bar)
 - *dieser Takt etc.* (this bar different, but definitely not tragic!!).
- The very last words, incidentally mean ‘end of Part 1’.

Flute

- Overall, the work requires **five instrumentalists**, though eight instruments are involved - in other movements the flautist plays piccolo.
- Much of the flute writing has a **low tessitura** (low pitch range), especially the first four and last three bars.
- There are occasional passages of **high notes**, rising to top E sharp in bar 8, though that is well below the top of the flute’s range.
- There is a **trill** in bar 5, but no other ornaments.

Text Setting

- The text is set **syllabically**, with only very occasional use of two notes to a syllable (e.g. first two notes of bar 6).
- Word painting devices are used to emphasise particular words, including:
 - Rests before them, e.g. *dort* ('there') in bar 3.
 - Sudden change of pitch, same example.
 - Discord - diminished 8^{ve} interval with flute, same example.
 - Syncopation - the emphasis of the off-beat in the same example.
 - Sudden change of dynamics, e.g. *fiebernd* ('feverish') bar 6.
 - Large leaps, e.g. *Blut* ('blood'), diminished 8^{ve} bar 24.

Texture

- There are occasional passages of **monophonic** writing, for flute, especially the *fremde Melodie* (strange melody) section from bars 8 to 11.
- Most of the music consists of **two part** writing (e.g. 1st 7 bars) in **free counterpoint** - there is no obvious relationship between the parts (no passages of imitation, 3rds, etc.).
- The **thin texture** enables the words of the vocalist to be clearly heard, as well as the very quiet bottom notes of the flute register.

Structure

- There are **three verses** in the poem which begins and ends with the same lines.
- The music is **through-composed** with no repetition of sections (though there is small scale melodic repetition). Even the repeat of the first line of text at the end does not produce a musical repeat of the first phrase.
- Two solo flute sections separate the three verses (bars 8-11 and 19-20).
- **Phrase lengths** are very **varied**.

Tonality

- The music is **atonal**; in other words, it isn't written in any key. At this stage, Schoenberg hadn't yet developed his 12 note serial style.
- The use of **all twelve notes of the octave** in the first three bars - the reciter has eleven of them - quickly dispels any sense of traditional tonality.

Harmony

- With only two melodic lines available, no proper chords are possible, only two note intervals.
- Many of the intervals are **discordant**, e.g. diminished 8^{ve} on *dort* (bar 3).
- Almost every possible interval is found, often within a short space. The first six bars contain all intervals from a minor 2nd to an octave.

Melody

- **Large, angular intervals** are common - generally awkward leaps of augmented or diminished intervals, like the vocal diminished 8^{ve} at the end. The same interval is found at the end of the 2nd verse (bar 18).

- There are even larger intervals occasionally, like the augmented 11th in the flute part at the end of bar 9.
- **Repeated notes** are an occasional, distinctive feature, e.g. the very low repeated C sharps in the flute part, bars 15-16.
- There is a **repeated vocal phrase** at the end, though the repeat uses **augmentation** (see below).
- There is some use of **sequence**, e.g. **descending sequence**, bars 22-23 in the flute part.

Rhythm and Metre

- The compound duple notation of $\frac{6}{4}$ is scarcely discernible because of the extremely slow dotted minim beat.
- This lessens the effect of **syncopation**, which is nevertheless present e.g. the example mentioned earlier (*dort* - bar 3, emphasising the off-beat 2nd crotchet of the bar).
- **Rests** are sometimes used to fragment the rhythm, especially in the penultimate vocal bar.
- **Precise performance directions** affect the way rhythm is used. Thus the combination of *tenuto* and *staccato* markings in the same penultimate bar indicate lengthened, separate notes.
- There are occasional **triplets**, e.g. bar 14 in the flute part.
- There is **augmentation** at the end, where the final phrase for the reciter has notes, including rests, which add up to double the length of the notes in the previous phrase.