Miller Theatre Program Notes

Opening Night: The Blue Rider *In Performance*

Wednesday, September 23 and Friday, September 25, 2009, 8:00PM

"For a long time a form had been in my mind which I believed to be the only one in which a musician might express himself in the theater. I called it, in my own private language, *making music with the media of the stage*..."

—Arnold Schoenberg (1848-1921)

"*Making music with the media of the stage*," (the italics are Schoenberg's), is the best description of what we do tonight. The art, music, and ideas of the group centered in Munich and known as *The Blue Rider* easily lends itself to such a project, as these visual artists and composers turned to art forms beyond their own in their search for new creative paths. In the explosively productive years preceding World War I, *The Blue Rider* brought together the inventors of abstract painting and non-tonal music, new languages of artistic expression that would define 20th-century modernism. Led by the expatriate Russian painter Vasily Kandinsky at the time of his friendship with Arnold Schoenberg, these artists sought to break down barriers between the arts and intensify the artistic experience. "Sound, color, words!...In the last essentials, these means are wholly alike," wrote Kandinsky, "the final goal extinguishes the external dissimilarities and reveals the inner identity."

On January 2, 1911, Kandinsky, along with his painter friends Franz Marc and Gabriele Munter, attended the first concert in Munich devoted to the music of Arnold Schoenberg. The concert immediately inspired two quick sketches from Kandinsky, and the remarkable, bold painting, *Impression III (Concert)*. The painting hovers on the edge of total abstraction, anchored only by a central floating black form that we identify as the piano and figures that can be distinguished as audience members and musicians. The exhilarating effect of the dominant yellow splashed on the canvas, seemingly engulfing the listeners, contrasts with the intense reds and blues and blacks, and communicates viscerally the electrifying effect this musical encounter had on the painter.

Kandinsky, without introduction, wrote to the Viennese composer, "In your works, you have realized what I...have so greatly longed for in music. The independent progress through their own destinies, the independent life of the individual voices in your compositions, is exactly what I am trying to find in my paintings." He predicted that, "today's dissonance in painting and music is merely the consonance of tomorrow" and signed the letter, "With feelings of real affinity..."

The Blue Rider emerged in the coming year, as Kandinsky and Marc embarked on the project of *The Blue Rider Almanac* and organized the group's first exhibition for December 1911. *The Almanac*, an ambitious international compilation of modern painting, articles on music, musical compositions, Bavarian and Russian "folk" art, children's art, and "primitive" art, sought to be a "synthetic" work which would "show that the distinction between 'official' and 'ethnographic' art was groundless." Schoenberg participated as composer, writer and painter—for he painted prolifically during this period, and Kandinsky convinced him to overcome his doubts as an "outsider" and to exhibit "in the company of professional painters" at the first Blue Rider exhibition.

The correspondence between Kandinsky and Schoenberg chronicles this pivotal period, as they explore the parallel paths of abstraction in painting and atonality (a term Schoenberg himself never used or accepted) in music. Both men enjoyed words and theories, but what united them most deeply was an uncompromising commitment to art created out of "inner necessity;" and a belief in the "illogical," intuitive approach to making art. "The world revolves within," wrote Schoenberg. "What bursts out is merely the echo—the work of art."

The Schoenberg pieces that we perform tonight are chosen from the program that Kandinsky heard at that first concert in Munich.

The early song, ***Erwartung*** ("Expectation") (not to be confused with the later monodrama of the same title), was composed in the same year as the celebrated String Sextet, *Verklarte Nacht*, (1899). It is similarly based on a text by Richard Dehmel and composed in an exquisite tension-filled Wagnerian harmonic language that embodies the poetry. At the time of composition, Schoenberg had

just met Mathilde von Zemlinsky, the sister of his composition teacher Alexander Zemlinsky, and two years later she would become his wife.

The ***Drei Klavierstücke*** (Three Piano Pieces) of 1909 were the most advanced works that Kandinsky heard at the Munich concert. Here Schoenberg has left behind tonality and ventured fully into the intuitive, expressionistic writing that defines the music of his "second period." The expressive gestures of these piano pieces evolve out of the last *Klavierstücke* of Brahms that Schoenberg loved so much, but the new musical language pushes toward new extremes: whispered *pianissimos*, booming bass notes, jagged syncopations, ringing harmonics, abrupt shifts in mood and tempo. Schoenberg evokes in music the dark palette of his own paintings, the haunting "Visions."

After hearing Schoenberg's music, Kandinsky's friend and co-editor of *The Blue Rider Almanac*, Franz Marc, wrote to the painter Auguste Macke, "Can you imagine a music in which tonality (that is, the adherence to any key) is completely suspended? I was constantly reminded of Kandinsky's large *Composition*, which also permits no trace of tonality...and of Kandinsky's 'jumping spots' in hearing this music, which allows each tone sounded to stand on its own (a kind of *white canvas* between the spots of color!)..."

Before his encounter with Arnold Schoenberg, Kandinsky's closest composer friend was the young Thomas de Hartmann (1885-1956), with whom he collaborated on the experimental stage work, *The Yellow Sound*. The scenario for *The Yellow Sound*, written in 1909, was published for the first time in *The Blue Rider Almanac*, which also included de Hartmann's article, "On Anarchy in Music."

Now an obscure figure, Thomas de Hartmann studied in St. Petersburg with Anton Arensky and Sergei Taneyev (whose students included Scriabin, Rachmaninoff and Glière), and his ballet *La fleurette Rouge* was premiered in 1906 with the dancers Nijinsky, Pavlova and Fokine (!). Arriving in Munich in 1908, de Hartmann saw an exhibition of works by three unknown painters—Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Kandinsky. "German music was at an impasse," he wrote later, but he found the "new forms and techniques" that he needed to compose "through the art of painting." A meeting with Kandinsky led quickly to friendship and legendary late-night sessions, with de Hartmann improvising at the piano, Kandinsky calling out scenarios, and the young Russian experimental dancer Alexander Sakharov "enacting" the music.

A shared commitment to "the spiritual in art" (the title of Kandinsky's book of 1911) was an underlying tie between de Hartmann and Kandinsky, and de Hartmann's spiritual quest came to dominate his life when he became the devoted secretary and disciple of the mystic Gurdjieff. The ***Three Songs on Anna Akhmatova***, however, are in sharp contrast to both the expressionism of Schoenberg and de Hartmann's future mysticism. The simple language with shifting meter is informed by the Russian folk music and art that also influenced Kandinsky, while pointing towards an early minimalism. Only in the climax of the third song, *The Grey-Eyed King* (also set by the young Prokofiev a few years later) does de Hartmann give in to unrestrained Russian romanticism.

While living abroad, Kandinsky relied on friends back home to keep him apprised of cultural developments in Russia. When Schoenberg set off for St. Petersburg in 1912, Kandinsky arranged for his friend, Nikolai Kulbin to meet him at the train station. "Kulbin knows everything, that is, he knows all the artists of importance," Kandinsky wrote in a letter to Schoenberg.

Kulbin wrote an article for *The Blue Rider Almanac* entitled "Free Music," in which he advocates, amazingly for the time, quarter and eighth-tone music. He most likely was thinking of the precociously iconoclastic Russian composer **Arthur Lourié**, whose String Quartet of 1910, which has been lost, was one of the earliest microtonal compositions. Part of the bohemian Stray Dog Café circle in St. Petersburg to which Anna Akhmatova also belonged, Lourié composed in a free musical language linked to Scriabin but lighter in spirit. He was briefly Commissar of Music following the revolution, before emigrating to Paris and then the United States, where he became a professor at Princeton. The piano pieces *Spleen* and *Autoportrait* reflect a school of experimental harmony that was evolving in Russia under the influence of Scriabin, leading towards a different atonality and completely independent of the explorations of Arnold Schoenberg.

In addition to articles about music by Schoenberg ("The Relationship to the Text"), de Hartmann, Kulbin, and the Russian musicologist Leonid Sabanayev, *The Blue Rider Almanac*

published three new musical compositions: Alban Berg's song, *Warm die Lüfte*; Anton Webern's *Ihr tratet zu dem Herde*; and a manuscript reproduction of Schoenberg's *Herzgewächse*.

Anton Webern became a student of Schoenberg's in 1904, and his *Songs, Op. 4* of 1908-1909 set the poetry of Stefan George, whose texts had also inspired Schoenberg's breakthrough song cycle of the same year, *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*. George's poetry, with its symbolism, latent sensuality, and dream-like imagery, provided not only inspiration from its mood, but also offered a structure to these Viennese avant-gardists, as the words became the tangible foundation on which a new, uncharted expressive musical language could stand.

Alban Berg's first song from the early Opus 2, the haunting *Sleep, sleep*, is in a Mahlerian D minor, but with the final song, the dramatic *Warm die Lüfte*, we move into experimental territory in which Berg finds a more personal compositional voice. The rich harmonies underlying the final lines—"The one dies while the other lives: that makes the world so deeply beautiful"—are built on the interval of fourths, bringing us closer to the harmonic world of Scriabin than we might expect.

Kandinsky was fascinated by **Alexander Scriabin**, whose reported experiments with "corresponding sounds and colors" and exalted sense of spiritual mystery would have intrigued the painter. Kandinsky went to great efforts to have Leonid Sabanayev's article on Scriabin's "symphony of colors,' *Prometheus*, translated from Russian to German for *The Blue Rider Almanac*. His entreaties to Schoenberg for help with the editing and comments on the Russian experimentalist seem to go unanswered.

Scriabin's experiments with colored lighting had to be extremely primitive, given the technical limitations of the time. "Strange, caressing, and at the same time deeply mystical harmonies emerged from these colors," writes Sabanayev. The late works of Scriabin, which encompass both the Prometheus Symphony and the piano work, *Vers la flamme*, seem to create aural colors by the resonance of their harmonies, built primarily on the interval of the fourth—perfect, augmented and diminished. The resultant chords create new "consonances" that are not made of tonal triads, and as Sabanayev notes, even in a single harmony "we find a strange 'mystical' atmosphere...that reminds one of a deep-sounding enormous bell...It shines, radiates, irritates, elevates, agitates..." Scriabin died prematurely in 1915 at the age of 43.

Arnold Schoenberg's musical contribution to *The Blue Rider Almanac*, ***Herzgewächse***, Op. 20, sets a German adaptation of a poem by the Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck. Scored for soprano, celeste, harp, and harmonium, and known for its demanding vocal part, the esoteric yet magical three-minute work is rarely performed; the resources required simply outweigh the work's brevity.

Schoenberg's **String Quartet No. 2 in F-sharp minor**, Op. 10, is a seminal work, finding the composer on the cusp of a complete break from tonality. The quartet marked for the composer "the transition into my second period...[in which] I renounced a tonal center—a procedure incorrectly called 'atonality.'" In this transitional work of 1908-1909, Schoenberg's mixed musical language corresponds to Kandinsky's landscapes of the same period, such as *Blue Mountain* of 1908. The identifiable forms of mountains and trees are still present, but our eye is drawn more strongly to the bold geometric shapes and the colors—the abstract shapes start to dominate the composition and what they are meant to represent recedes. Eventually, in his abstract paintings, Kandinsky does away with the representational references completely. Similarly, in the *Second Quartet*, Schoenberg continued to resolve his complex harmonies to tonal centers, but increasingly found that his harmonies had moved so far from conventional tonality that the resolutions were no longer meaningful. In the works of the subsequent "second period," Schoenberg let his intuitions rule and abandoned tonality.

The *Second String Quartet* was composed in a period of personal crisis. In 1908, Schoenberg had begun to paint seriously, and he took lessons from a new friend, the expressionist artist Richard Gerstl. By the summer, Schoenberg's wife Mathilde had left him and their two children to live with the painter. When she decided to return to Schoenberg, Gerstl committed suicide, after destroying most of his work.

The quartet, dedicated expressly to Mathilde, traces Schoenberg's emotional journey. Unlike the extended one-movement form of the First Quartet, it follows the traditional four-movement form. The brooding, passionate first movement gives way to a ghostly scherzo. The incongruous appearance of a folk tune in this second movement bears evidence of Schoenberg's ties to Gustav Mahler, a composer

whose personal sufferings also found outlet in his music. The folk tune, “du lieber Augustin” is familiar to Germans, and the song translates as “O, my dear Augustin/money is lost, wife is lost/ All is lost....”

With the unusual appearance of the soprano in the last two movements, Mahler’s influence is again felt. Stefan George’s *Litanei* provides the text for this heart-wrenching slow movement, in which the singer pleads for release from worldly desire. The extreme vocal leaps in register demanded of the singer added to the scandal at the work’s premiere; but we hear now the expressive intent that motivated the composer to push these boundaries. Schoenberg’s instrumental variations on earlier themes—the opening viola solo is an introspective version of the first movement theme—further mirrors the reflective, soul-searching mood.

The last movement’s nervous opening comes to a moment of absolute timeless suspension with the soprano’s famous entrance: “I feel air from other planets.” The “Rapture” or “Ecstasy” of the movement’s title seems to refer both to Schoenberg’s personal rebirth and, perhaps even more, his creative breakthrough. Although this last movement resolves in its final measures to the tonic key—and the minor third is raised to a triumphant F-sharp major—Schoenberg was clearly finding the confidence to move towards a style of composition that would more authentically reflect the inner world he wished to express. By the end of 1909, with the completion of *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*, the *Five Orchestral Pieces*, and the *Three Piano Pieces* heard earlier tonight, he was there.

—Notes by Sarah Rothenberg © 2009