

Webern, Schoenberg, and the Original Version of “Himmelfahrt”

by Matthew R. Shaftel

The five Dehmel Lieder (1906–1908) act as a bridge in Anton Webern’s musical development. These, along with the earliest of the fourteen George Lieder, represent a foray into the new musical style, while still maintaining substantive ties with the Romantic Lied of Webern’s predecessors. In addition, these are the last songs written by Webern under the direct tutelage of Arnold Schoenberg. Thus, they constitute a musical essay on the fundamental and gradual shift in style of the Second Viennese School, an essay whose historical value is not reflected by the relatively few appearances of the songs in the musicological literature since their discovery in 1961. One obstacle for early Webern scholars is the lack of critical editions for any of Webern’s twenty-five complete or nearly complete early songs (1899–1908).¹ In fact, the only reliable source are Webern’s own autographs.² The manuscripts for the Dehmel Lieder have much to say about Webern’s compositional choices, with many corrections and pencil additions, but the original fair copy of “Himmelfahrt,” song three of the printed collection, provides possible insight into Schoenberg’s role in Webern’s stylistic shift.

“Himmelfahrt” was written in 1908, at the culmination of three momentous years for Schoenberg and Webern.³ In “Composition with Twelve Tones,” Schoenberg writes about a new “style” of music that treats dissonances as stable entities and renounces a tonal center: “The first compositions in this new style were written by me around 1908 and, soon afterwards, by my pupils, Anton von Webern and Alban Berg.”⁴ In *The Path to the New Music*, Webern describes how the development of the “pantonal” or “atonal” style was neither sudden nor obvious.⁵ Instead, several interim and hardly distinguishable stages appeared, as described by René Leibowitz: “Just as the first tonal music is very similar to the last modal music, even so the first works in which Schoenberg abandons tonality are hardly different from those in which he still maintained it.”⁶

An interim state of “suspended tonality,” wherein a tonal center is avoided throughout a work, but appears in the introduction and cadence, appears in

many of the Second Viennese works of this period, including Webern's "Himmelfahrt."⁷ The song's opening E_b-major triad must have posed a compositional problem for Webern: how to move quickly away from the tonic to a state of "suspended tonality" while retaining continuity. Berg approached the same difficulty at approximately the same time in the composition of his Piano Sonata, op. 1. It would seem that both composers turned to Schoenberg for a solution: the "vagierende Akkord" or "vagrant chord."

In his *Harmonielehre*, written within the two years after the composition of "Himmelfahrt," Schoenberg describes several "vagrant chords," including the diminished seventh chord, created from a completely symmetrical stack of minor thirds, but the chord most utilized in "Himmelfahrt" was the product of a symmetrical stack of major thirds: the augmented triad.

The augmented triad is by virtue of its constitution, as indicated by its belonging to three keys, a vagrant chord like the diminished seventh. Although it does not have as many resolutions as the diminished seventh chord, it is nevertheless like that chord in that it can be introduced, because of its ambiguity, after almost any chord.⁸

Webern's opening E_b-major triad thus sees an immediate voice-leading transmogrification. The right hand starts an arpeggiation of the opening triad, but lands on the B₄, instead of the original B₃. This opening melodic shift, B₃ to G₄ to B₄, becomes motivic and appears throughout the work. By raising the fifth of the chord, B₃, to B₄, Webern transforms the stable opening sonority into a "vagrant" chord, with the potential to move to "almost any chord." The chord Webern chooses is yet another augmented triad, B₃-D₄-F₄[♯], an alteration of the dominant. After this, however, a tonal reading is nearly hopeless until the final cadence, where an E_b-augmented triad "resolves" to a major triad over an E_b pedal.

The remainder of Webern's final manuscript shows an exploration of the augmented triad and its constituent elements, the major third and its inverse, the minor sixth. The B section of the ternary design is developmental and closes with a Schoenbergian "liquidation" of the motivic material. The recapitulation of the A section opens with imitative treatment of the head motive between the voice and left hand of the piano, but without the unaltered E_b-major chord. An examination of Webern's original version, however, presents a different strategy for ending the B section.

This original version, which is preserved in a complete fair copy, contains a number of pencil additions, including an entire staff devoted to a recomposition of the B section's left hand in triplets, instead of the original eighth-notes. The most substantial differences from the final manuscript appear at the end of the B section (mm. 14–34 in the original, mm. 14–31 in the final version) into the first measure of the recapitulation. Here, instead of the development and liquidation, Webern ends the B section with an altered version of the head motive (B₃ to G₃ to B₃, mm. 30–31, cf. m. 29 of the final version) over a full-measure tonic triad (unaltered), which is held in the right hand and arpeg-

Handwritten musical score for Anton Webern's "Himmelfahrt" (M. 131) from *Five Songs After Poems by Richard Dehmel* for voice and piano (1906–1908). The score is written in ink on a five-line staff system, with revisions made in pencil. It features a vocal line at the top and a piano accompaniment below. The lyrics are in German, including "Sahn - fahrt - für - re - fall", "flucht im Traum nur über dem", "Mit - her ne - ler an - ghe - ren ab - fe -", and "leg - the Mo - dem - ge - he - ren flucht - mit - flucht sind will für". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "cresc." and "accell.". The key signature is B-flat major, and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into several systems, with some sections enclosed in boxes or brackets.

Anton Webern, "Himmelfahrt" (M. 131) from *Five Songs After Poems by Richard Dehmel* for voice and piano (1906–1908), fair copy in ink (= original version) with revisions in pencil, p. 2 (Anton Webern Collection), mm. 20–35.

giated in the left. This chord is followed by an unaltered dominant chord in the right hand, accompanied by a brief rest in the left. Although the manuscript is written in ink with pencil additions, the tonic chord has been circled with red pencil, a significant editorial statement. In addition, the entrance of the recapitulation (m. 35) is marked with a large red X.

Although no definitive statement can be made as to who made the markings in red, it seems clear that Webern's first draft was written with the intention of showing it to someone for corrections. Another red circle appears in "Kunfttag I," from the four posthumously published *George Lieder*, also from this period, but no red markings appear in any of the songs written before Webern's studies with Schoenberg. In addition, similar markings appear in a passage from the contemporaneous *Gurrelieder* found in the Berg-Schoenberg correspondence.⁹ It is not unreasonable to speculate that it was Schoenberg who made the markings in Webern's score, in order to call his attention to these measures and perhaps as a suggestion that Webern remove the clear tonal reference, while leaving the "required" tonic chords at the opening and closing, as Schoenberg had done in his own *Gurrelieder*. Whoever the corrector, the result is clear from the final manuscript: a radically revised and destabilized middle section.

There are several possible reasons for this revision. The most obvious possibility, that the clear tonic followed by its dominant seemed out of context in this highly chromatic work, may have played a role. There is also another, perhaps more compelling reason: in the revision, the modified head motive is also removed, indicating that the corrector wished to clarify the formal structure of the song. Perhaps he deemed that the modified head motive accompanied by the opening tonic created a false sense of return, reducing the impact of the actual recapitulation that appeared four measures later. This would explain the second marking at the point of recapitulation.¹⁰ In this way, the modification actually increases the song's comprehensibility, in the Schoenbergian sense of the term, while "suspending" the E_b-major tonality. In addition, Schoenberg would have seen the liquidation in the revision as a more appropriate way to introduce a recapitulation.¹¹

Schoenberg's "vagrant chords" played an important role in other works composed shortly before and shortly after the writing of his *Harmonielehre*.¹² Berg's Piano Sonata makes significant use of the augmented triad. Webern's own "Kunfttag I" ends with a progression that is startlingly similar to those in "Himmelfahrt," moving from a sonority that is bounded by B_b and F_{##} to an E_b augmented triad with a superimposed E_b. This chord, too, received a red circle, and a double bar and fermata are moved to the previous chord. Perhaps Schoenberg thought this song too far advanced to end with a tonally suggestive cadence. The original version of a later work, Webern's op. 7, also ends with an E_b augmented triad, but is changed to a major chord in the final version.¹³

Webern's Dehmel Lieder have much to tell us about their composer. They mark the end of an important stage in Webern's career, lending insight as to

how Webern coped with the transition to the later style for which he is well known. In addition, these songs represent a unique record of Webern's studies with Schoenberg, demonstrating how Schoenberg's interests in specific harmonic issues were reflected in Webern's own highly contrapuntal style. Perhaps Webern felt that these songs relied too much on Schoenberg's ideas and this is why he never published the songs, even though he had clearly considered them complete, going so far as to create a title page. Because Webern never prepared the songs themselves for publication, they did not receive the significant revision that the op. 3 and 4 *George Lieder* did for Universal's 1921 edition and thus remain an unadulterated testament to Webern's development.

- 1 See Hans Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of his Life and Work*, London 1978, pp. 700–701. The 14 *George Lieder* do appear in critical editions edited by Peter Westergaard (1966).
- 2 Reinhard Gerlach described this situation in *Musik und Jugendstil der Wiener Schule 1900–1908*, Laaber 1985, p. 176: “Denn solange keine Ausgabe der Dehmel-Lieder publiziert ist, die an Autorität einem von Webern überwachten Druck ebenbürtig wäre, sind die Autographen Weberns die einzigen verlässlichen Quellen für diese höchst eigentümlichen Kompositionen.”
- 3 Both the first version and the final manuscript of “Himmelfahrt” bear Webern's own date, 1908. In addition, a title page for the *Dehmel Lieder* compiled by Webern several years later lists “Himmelfahrt” as one of the “4 *Lieder* 1908.” The original version is held by the Paul Sacher Stiftung, while the final manuscript is at the Library of Congress.
- 4 Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, ed. by Leonard Stein, Berkeley 1975, p. 217.
- 5 Anton Webern, *The Path to the New Music*, trans. by Leo Black, London 1963, p. 48.
- 6 *Schoenberg and His School: The Contemporary Stage of the Language of Music*, trans. by Dika Newlin, New York 1949, pp. 74–75.
- 7 Webern himself describes the state of “suspended tonality” in *The Path to the New Music*, p. 48.
- 8 Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, trans. by Roy Carter, Berkeley 1978, p. 243.
- 9 *The Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*, ed. by Juliane Brand, Christopher Hailey, and Donald Harris, New York 1987, p. 197.
- 10 Another possible reason for the X under the first complete measure of the recapitulation (m. 35, cf. m. 32 in the final version) is an apparent “mistake” in Webern's invertible counterpoint, wherein a change is made to accommodate the unmodified return of the head motive.
- 11 See Arnold Schoenberg on liquidation in “Connection of Musical Ideas,” in *Style and Idea*, p. 288.
- 12 Paper studies demonstrate connections between all of the works discussed in this paper, but cannot be discussed here due to space limitations.
- 13 See Felix Meyer and Anne Shreffler, “Performance and Revision: The Early History of Webern's Four Pieces for Violin and Piano, Op. 7,” in *Webern Studies*, ed. by Kathryn Bailey, Cambridge 1996, p. 152.