

A New Trakl Fragment by Webern: Some Notes on "Klage"

The poetry of Georg Trakl exerted a strong attraction for Webern; between 1915 and 1921 he completed seven Trakl songs (Op. 13, No. 4, and the *Sechs Lieder*, Op. 14) and what were thought to be eight Trakl fragments. A further identification can now be made. Among Webern's sketches for "Nächtliches Bild" in the Paul Sacher Foundation is a sheet beginning with the text "Schlaf und Tod, die düstern Adler"; this is a sketch for a setting of Georg Trakl's "Klage"¹). The sketch itself is undated, but the date 1918 in Webern's hand is found on the verso. This discovery brings the number of Trakl poems that Webern attempted to sixteen: seven completed works and nine fragments²).

The ten-measure sketch of "Klage", brief though it is, provides a useful point of entry into different aspects of Webern's composition of *Lieder* during these years. In addition to the significance of the Trakl text, the manuscript context reveals links with Webern's other poetic preoccupations during these years: Hans Bethge's adaptations from the Chinese, poems by Karl Kraus, and folk-like religious poetry. Moreover, the fragment's musical organization shares much with the other middle-period songs, while displaying a level of experimentation not common to many. Finally, the poem "Klage" can be seen as part of a group of poems Webern set between 1915 and 1919 in reaction to the war.

Context. The manuscript of "Klage" is one of several loose sheets which form a complex of vocal fragments of varying lengths on different texts, some still unidentified. "Klage" is found on the verso of the second page of the longest of these incomplete drafts, a setting of "Nächtliches Bild" (from *Chinesische Flöte*, trans. Hans Bethge), dated "Mödling Herbst 1918". Crowded onto two closely-written pages, "Nächtliches Bild" at approximately 34 measures is one of the longest of Webern's vocal fragments; it is correspondingly scored for quite a large ensemble (for Webern) of twelve instruments plus percussion.

Two other vocal sketches, which can be only tentatively identified, are also associated with "Klage". One is found on the verso of the first page of the "Nächtliches Bild" draft; from its layout clearly a vocal sketch but with only one word of text visible ("der"). Because of the insufficient text, this fragment is difficult to identify with certainty. The rhythm of the vocal line fits quite closely, however, with part of "Flieder", by Karl Kraus, a poem which Webern later sketched extensively, but also did not complete³). On the same page as "Klage" is found a brief vocal passage with the text: "der du bist drei in Einigkeit".

ryhm

Handwritten musical notation on a staff. The notation includes notes, rests, and accidentals. Annotations include the number '5' above a note, 'tu' above a note, '3' above a note, '2/4' below a note, 'Pos.' below a note, and 'kt' below a note. There are also some scribbles and other markings.

Handwritten musical notation on a staff, showing notes and accidentals.

Handwritten musical notation with lyrics. The lyrics are: "der die liff", "Jen in unglück", and "m". The notation includes notes, rests, and accidentals. There are also some scribbles and other markings.

Handwritten musical score on a page with ten staves. The top staff contains lyrics: "mit Lust im die - nen ge - he". Below the lyrics are several staves of handwritten musical notation, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and various rhythmic values. Specific annotations include "scand" (scando) and "C. B. an Hey" written above the notes. The score is partially completed, with some notes and rests visible on the first few staves.

Though still unidentified, this text is clearly on a religious theme, like many others Webern set during these years, including “Der Tag ist vergangen”, Op. 12, No. 1 (1915) and “Fahr hin, o Seel”, Op. 15, No. 5 (1917) (both by P. Rosegger), and the later settings of religious poems in *Fünf geistliche Lieder*, Op. 15 and *Fünf Canons*, Op. 16. Therefore Webern did not sketch Trakl’s “Klage” in isolation, but among – and perhaps simultaneously with – a whole complex of other sketches on various poems, many of which, like “Klage”, remained incomplete.

The fragment itself. Webern’s “Klage” sketch extends over the first two lines of the twelve-line poem: “Schlaf und Tod, die düstern Adler/Umrauschen nachklang dieses Haupt”. As in dozens of other sketches from these years, the beginning is for instruments alone. The fragment includes indications for a wide variety of instruments: flute, bass clarinet, contrabassoon, trombone, violin, cello, contrabass, and harp. This unusual ensemble was almost certainly not intended to be the whole; Webern customarily sketched in short score, indicating instruments only as he needed them. Yet even considering this incomplete ensemble, the predominance of bass instruments in this fragment is extraordinary. The opening gesture begins with a figure with no instrumental indication, but which is written on two bass staves; the following measures call for cello and trombone. The dark color created by the low-register instruments and voice certainly reflects the poem’s first verse; the choice of timbre illustrates on one level the specific darkness implied by the adjective “düster”; and on another, the generally pessimistic sense of the line as a whole. Text illustration to such a degree is unusual among Webern’s completed works, but is however quite common in many of the sketches and fragments⁴). The obviousness of the text painting in Webern’s sketch for “Klage” indicates that this fragment represents a first stage of composition, perhaps even his first attempt with this text.

The poem and its significance. Trakl’s “Klage” was first published in 1915, in the Trakl memorial issue of *Der Brenner*; this was almost certainly Webern’s source for the poem⁵). Webern selected several other Trakl poems from this issue as well, being characteristically drawn to those poems with prominent nature images, such as “Nachtergebung” and “Die Heimkehr”⁶). In this context “Klage” stands out by virtue of its apocalyptic tone and subject. Along with its companion piece “Grodek”, “Klage” endures as a classic poem about the First World War. Both works were written at the front⁷). During the first weeks of the war, Trakl had a shattering wartime experience, which shortly afterwards led to a complete breakdown and ultimately to suicide.

Unlike “Grodek”, which contains specific images of battle (such as “tödlichen Waffen”, line 2, and “sterbende Krieger”, line 5), “Klage”

describes the horrors of war more obliquely and metaphorically. The first lines, “Schlaf und Tod, die düstern Adler/Umrauschen nachklang dieses Haupt” could be read as the poet’s personal experience; that is, sleep and death, two manifestations of the same state, describing the poet’s anticipated suicide. On another level, the verses could describe instead the end of a people, a nation, or an empire. This is implied by the following lines, “Des Menschen goldnes Bildnis/Verschlänge die eisige Woge/Der Ewigkeit”. The “golden image” shattered by the icy waves brings to mind a statue or icon representing a people, not a single person. Furthermore, “die Adler” (eagles) evoke a potent symbol of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the “Doppeladler”, or two-headed eagle.

What does it mean that Webern set this poem? In the first year of the war at least, Webern was caught up in the initial enthusiasm⁸). Yet during the war years, his attitude inevitably changed; his choice of poems – and even their musical settings – reflects this. Even the seemingly innocent “Der Tag ist vergangen”, Op. 12, No. 1 (composed in 1915), gains a threatening undertone through Webern’s declamation of the vocal line, as Rudolf Stephan has pointed out⁹). During his own military service in 1916, Webern began a setting of Karl Kraus’s “Wiese im Park”, whose nostalgic depictions of an idyllic, timeless past are juxtaposed with the grim realities of the present. Webern’s most ambitious war piece was realized in his setting of Trakl’s “Abendland”, the three-part work that became Op. 14, Nos. 2, 3 and 4¹⁰). In “Klage”, sketched in the middle of the composition of “Abendland”, Webern continued to work out the same theme. To Webern’s experience of the war can now be added another small piece: his dark reading of one of Trakl’s last poems.

1) The sketch is written in very light pencil (PSS, Anton Webern Collection, microfilm 103:0798). “Klage” is briefly discussed in my dissertation: *Webern’s Trakl Settings*, Ph.D. diss., Harvard University 1989, p. 80 and 82.

2) The nine Trakl fragments are listed in: *Anton Webern: Musikmanuskripte*, Winterthur 1988, p. 18 (*Inventare der Paul Sacher Stiftung* 4). Hans Moldenhauer (in: *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of His Life and Work*, New York 1979) lists the eight previously known.

3) Because of the poem’s metrical regularity, the sketch could fit with the last two lines of any of the three stanzas. Webern’s other “Flieder” sketches are dated 1920.

4) This fragment is particularly reminiscent of the earliest stages of Webern’s work on another Trakl poem, “Gesang einer gefangenen Amsel”, whose nine attempts present a progression from near-literal depiction to more abstract representation. See Shreffler, *op. cit.*, p. 187–206.

- 5) *Der Brenner*, ed. Ludwig von Ficker, 5 (1915 p. 13 (Reprint of vols. 1–5: Nendeln 1969). “Klage” is now most easily found in the critical edition of Trakl’s works: Georg Trakl, *Dichtungen und Briefe*, eds. Walther Killy and Hans Szklenar, Salzburg 1969, vol. 1, p. 166.
- 6) *Der Brenner* 5 (1915).
- 7) According to what Trakl told his friend Ludwig von Ficker, in: *Erinnerung an Georg Trakl: Zeugnisse und Briefe*, Salzburg 1959, p. 190.
- 8) “Ich kann meine Einberufung nicht erwarten. Mich verfolgt Tag und Nacht der Wunsch: kämpfen zu können für diese große, hehre Sache. Nicht wahr, dieser ungeheure Krieg hat doch keine politischen Ursachen? Es ist der Kampf der Engeln mit den Teufeln.” Hans und Rosaleen Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern: Chronik seines Lebens und Werkes*, trans. Ken W. Bartlett, Zürich, Freiburg i.Br. 1980, p. 189–190.
- 9) Rudolf Stephan, “Zu einigen Liedern Anton Weberns”, in: *Webern-Kongreß*, hrsg. von der Österreichischen Musikgesellschaft, Kassel etc. 1973, p. 141 (*Beiträge der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Musik* 1972/73).
- 10) “Abendland III” (Op. 14, No. 4) was completed on 23 June 1917; “Abendland II” (Op. 14, No. 3) on 7 July 1919; and “Abendland I” on 28 July the same year. See Anne C. Shreffler, “Webern, Trakl, and the Decline of the West”, in: *Houston German Studies*, ed. Claus Reschke, München, forthcoming.