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Arnold Schönberg, “My Public” (1930)

In the following 1930 text, Austrian composer Arnold Schönberg, the inventor of twelve-tone technique, subtly exaggerates his outsider status. At the same time, he downplays the difficulties the larger public may have faced in comprehending his atonal works, and he fails to address the not unimportant basic question of tonality versus atonality. That Schönberg was in fact very mindful of “his” public is evidenced by the fact that this text was repeatedly published in various outlets: in the *Newsletter of the State Opera* (Berlin), in the magazine *Querschnitt* as well as the *Eisenacher Zeitung*.

My Public

Called upon to say something about my public, I have to confess: I do not believe I have one.

At the start of my career, when to the annoyance of my opponents a noticeable part of the audience did not hiss but applauded, and when the hissers did not succeed in carrying the day against the majority, although hisses sound more striking than applause, then these opponents of mine alleged that those bestowing their approval were my friends and had only applauded out of friendship and not because they liked the piece. My poor friends: as true as few. They were indeed thought depraved enough to be my friends and yet not so depraved as to enjoy my music.

Whether I then had a public—that I cannot judge.

But after the upheaval, there were in every major city those certain few hundred young people with just no idea what to do with themselves. They therefore tried hard to put it on record that they had a philosophy—by supporting all lost causes. About then, when that great variable, their philosophy, included even me—blameless party that I was—optimists asserted that I now had a public. I challenged this; I did not see how people could suddenly have come to understand me overnight. (My works had not, after all, become any more stupid or shallow overnight.) The rapid decline of the radicals—still not knowing what to do with themselves but finding other things to meddle with—justified my view: I had not written anything shallow.

There are many reasons why the great public makes little contact with me. Above all, the generals, who today still occupy the music directorates, are mostly moving along lines that my line does not fit, or else they are afraid to put before the public something they do not

themselves understand. Some of them (even though when they admit it they politely look regretful) really regard not understanding me as a virtue. Granted even that is their greatest virtue, I still had to feel surprised the first time a Viennese conductor made it known to me that he could not perform my *Kammersymphonie* because he did not understand it. I was amused, though; why did he have to pick on me in this sudden burst of wanting to understand and not on the classical works he blithely conducted year in, year out? But seriously, I must say that it is, after all, no honor for a musician not to understand a score, but a matter for shame—many even of my opponents will admit this today, as regards my *Kammersymphonie*.

Apart from these conductors, those who get between me and the public are the many musicians who do not conduct but know other ways to mislead. I have seen countless times that, as regards the main point, it was not the public who hissed: it was a small but active “expert” minority. The public’s behavior is either friendly or indifferent, unless they are intimidated because their spiritual leaders are protesting. As a whole they are always rather inclined to enjoy something they have devoted time and money to. They come less to judge than to enjoy, and can to some extent sense whether the person appearing before them is entitled to do so. What they are not interested in doing is using their more or less correct judgment in order to display themselves in a better light. This is partly because no single member stands to gain or lose anything (he will either be outnumbered or be swallowed up in the majority); and partly because among the public there are after all people who count for something, even without first having to shine by their artistic judgments, and who, without losing prestige, may keep their impressions to themselves, unassessed. One may keep anything to oneself, except expert judgment—for what is expert judgment unless one shows it off? For this reason, I also take it to have been the expert judges, not the art lovers, who received my *Pierrot Lunaire* with such hostility when I performed it in Italy. I was indeed honored that Puccini, not an expert judge but a practical expert, already ill, made a six-hour journey to get to know my work, and afterwards said some very friendly things to me; that was good, strange though my music may have remained to him. Nevertheless it was characteristic that the loudest disturber of the concert was identified as the director of a conservatoire. It was also he who proved unable at the end to bridle his truly Mediterranean temperament—who could not refrain from exclaiming: “If there had been just one single honest triad in the whole piece!” Obviously his teaching activities gave him too little opportunity to hear such honest triads, and he had come hoping to find them in my *Pierrot*. Am I to blame for his disappointment?

I have to think it possible that the Italian public did not know what to make of my music. But the image of a concert where there was hissing—in twenty-five years I have seen it so often that I may be believed—was always as follows: in the front third of the hall, roughly, there was little applause and little hissing; most people sat unconcerned, many stood looking around in amazement or amusement toward the parts of the hall farther back where things were livelier. There the applauders were in the majority—there were fewer unconcerned, and a few hissers. But the most noise, both applause and hisses, always came from the standing space at the back and from the galleries. It was there that the people instructed or influenced by the expert judges went into battle against those who were impressed.

And yet I never had the impression that the number of people hissing was particularly great. It never sounded full, like a chord of solid applause entering with precision, but more like an ad hoc group of ill-assorted soloists, the extent of whose ensemble was limited to the fact that their noises told one the direction they were approaching from.

That was how I saw the public and in no other way except when, as today with my older works, they applauded. But besides a number of very pleasant letters I receive now and then, I also know the public from another side. Perhaps I may end by relating a few pleasing little experiences. When just drafted to a reserve company during the war, I, the conscript who had had many a bad time, once found myself treated with striking mildness by a newly arrived sergeant. When he addressed me after we had drilled, I hoped I was going to be praised for my progress in all things military. There followed a blow to my soldierly keenness; surprisingly, the tribute was to my music. The sergeant, a tailor's assistant in civil life, had recognized me, knew my career and many of my works, and so gave me still more pleasure than by praising my drill (even though I was not a little proud of that!). There were two other such meetings in Vienna: once when I had missed a train and had to spend the night in a hotel, and again when a taxi was taking me to a hotel. I was recognized the first time by the *night porter*, the other time by the *taxi driver*, from the name on the label of my luggage. Both assured me enthusiastically that they had heard *Gurrelieder*. Another time in a hotel in Amsterdam, a hired man addressed me, saying that he was a long-standing admirer of my art; he had sung in the choir in *Gurrelieder* when I conducted them in Leipzig. But the prettiest story last: a short while back, again in a hotel, the elevator attendant asked me whether it was I who had written *Pierrot*. He said that he had first heard it when it debuted before the war (about 1912!) and that the sound was still in his head; especially the piece about red stones – “Red princely rubies.” And he had heard back then that the musicians had no idea what to do with the piece, and today [he said] something like that is so easy to understand!

It occurred to me: that I didn't have to give up my faith in the half-wits, in the expert judges; that I could continue thinking that they had no clue about anything whatsoever.

But whether the public really dislikes me as much as the expert judges always say, and whether my music really scares the public so much, seems rather doubtful to me at times.

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