

Program note on *Pierrot Lunaire* (for Nonesuch LP H71251)

The art of every age contains a few works that we all must confront. Some are seminal, some culminating, and some — like *Pierrot Lunaire* — demand our response because of their inner strength, as well as the historical moment that they reflect. Although Schoenberg himself, after he had developed the twelve-tone system, was to give up the contextual atonality of *Pierrot* and his other compositions from the same period, they must all be considered crucial as specific steps toward the generality of the twelve-tone system.

Not only must every literate listener know *Pierrot Lunaire* and come to terms with it; every composer must deal with it. Indeed, since it was written no composer has escaped its reckoning. Stravinsky recalled hearing an early performance and called it "the most prescient confrontation in my life"; many others might echo his response.

How best should a listener today approach *Pierrot*? One way is internally — that is, by dealing with the work's moment-by-moment continuity, the shifting complex of pitch and rhythmic relations, the play of instrumental sonorities, and the progress of the text. Another is externally — the over-all shape of the piece, the balance of its three parts, the permutation of the instrumental combinations throughout it, and the form of the text itself.

In considering *Pierrot* from the inside, we are met with many obstacles. For it sums up, indeed exhausts, Schoenberg's attempts to replace the pitch-organizing system of tonality with a contextual approach — that is, each work built from its own unique autonomous structural principle. For this reason, the way the notes move from moment to moment is sometimes hard to follow. This is only natural, because at the time of its composition Schoenberg himself was searching, and hence many of the local decisions in *Pierrot* were obviously made intuitively, *ad hoc*. Thus it is impossible for the mind to draw from the work's unfolding a sense of general law or pattern being observed, as one can when listening to tonal or twelve-tone music. Even though the phrase-shapes and other gestural entities in the work help to draw notes together, one can never know what will happen next—there is no principle by which the ear can predict. This is what still makes *Pierrot*, after sixty years, new, abrasive, exciting, and even frightening. Yet, though unpredictable, it never seems arbitrary. In reality, Schoenberg's seemingly intuitive pitch choices are actually the result of a process of numerous elisions of the more slowly-paced relations expressed in previous music, here compressed to enormous density. However, this elliptical process is too intense and strenuous to be used in the creation of the whole music of a composer's life, for as a device or technique it is not capable of relaxation—the same rapid rate of unfolding persists throughout. Indeed, if the work's thirty-five minutes were not divided among so many separate numbers, this harmonic density might become problematic. But its time is broken up, thus relieving by external means the intense internal compression.

Considering *Pierrot* externally --which is by no means to suggest superficially—we must realize of its most important aspects is in its unique marriage of text and tone, its dependence on word in a way unprecedented in tonal music. This relation manifests itself in many ways, but most striking is the very means by which the text is projected — Schoenberg's famous "invention," *Sprechstimme* (a pitched declamation, of an intensity almost verging on song). I suspect that beyond any practical concern (including the relatively greater ease of speaking as opposed to singing, and the potentially swifter

delivery of the text), beyond any desire (never very strong in Schoenberg anyway) to be "modern," lay a notion of a new means of fusing words and music, of bringing speech and song into closer harmony, by creating a vocal projection half spoken and half sung. His success in this direction can be seen in the fact that *Pierrot*, although not Schoenberg's last work before the years-long silence in which he conceived the twelve-tone system, may be called the most complete. It is that because its form — directly dependent on the shape of the text— is so clear in the large.

The succession of *Pierrot's* twenty-one numbers and their ordering in three parts are discussed in my translating colleague's notes, and I will not rehearse them here. What was specifically important to Schoenberg was the decision to create a work of so many short numbers: his musical speech at the time would have rendered virtually impossible the creation of a large, continuous form. At this compositional stage, the use of a repetitive poetic form (the rondeau) multiplied over and over clearly provided him with a sense of stability and security, despite the variety of ways in which he treated the individual rondeaux, for his mind could thus grasp entire the unfolding of each short movement. And as these short movements served to clarify the problems of composing for him, so do they serve the same function for us in listening; they can be grasped in their entirety, remembered, and retained in the hearer's mind to form building-blocks of the larger continuity that is the work as a whole.

I have not tried to describe the complex compositional devices used in *Pierrot*, although a deeper understanding of the work does require at least an awareness of its various contrapuntal operations. For present purposes, I have felt it more important to attempt to establish a basic approach to the work, for its abruptness still make it difficult; even at this late date, listening to it occasionally reminds one of attempts to befriend a porcupine. It is also true, of course, that much of the sonic surface of the piece nowadays provides the listener with a rather conventional impression, and it is easy to see in *Pierrot* Wagnerian, not to mention Mahlerian, gestures and phrase-shapes. Moreover, after the twelve-tone system had become established in Schoenberg's mind, the expressionistic rhetoric of the earlier compositions, including *Pierrot*, tended to remain in the surface of his music, although his success in mastering basic structural questions now enabled him to conceive and execute large continuous forms.

—CHARLES WUORINEN, 1971