

# 'Keine Rührung – Erkenntnis!'

## The Aesthetics of *Espressivo* in the 'Performance Theories' of Arnold Schoenberg and Rudolf Kolisch

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### Schoenberg's 'musical idea' and expression in instrumental music

In 1918, at a time when modern music still caused scandals and when new styles of composition that moved too far from the 'common practice' of tonal music were met with ignorance and even hostility from performers, listeners, and critics, Arnold Schoenberg's 'Society for Private Musical Performances' was founded. To promote his ideas of a new, progressive concert culture, Schoenberg invited a group of young, enthusiastic musicians to perform contemporary music for a select audience. The listeners were supposed to adhere to a set of very special conditions for concert recitals of all kinds of modern music: from Mahler and Reger to Debussy and, not least, the works of the Viennese modernists (Metzger/Riehn 1984).

The performer's (in-)capability of 'adequately reading' the musical score – the composer's 'notated script', as Schoenberg once called it – has been the central issue in the so-called 'performance theories' of the Schoenberg school. Their style, later assigned the catchy label 'Wiener *espressivo*' (Kapp 1990 p. 103ff), developed in Vienna during the years following World War I, from where its historical origins may be traced. 'New music' meant more than composing 'atonal' works; for Schoenberg it represented the quest for a new musical culture, a struggle against the threats of 'comfort' and 'ornament' in human thought and language. Schoenberg's notoriously 'difficult' music, along with his uncompromising advocacy of 'truth' and 'essence' in music, have often been understood as a break with the tradition of tonal music.

Yet, Schoenberg's polemics were not directed primarily against the compositional tradition. Instead, his musical opposition was aimed at the contemporary, bourgeois concert culture, an escapist culture that misunderstood and abused the traditions, especially the great German tradition of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms (Botstein 1997 p. 3ff). To Schoenberg, the tragedy of contemporary concert culture was rooted in the incapacity of the audience to grasp what he called the 'musical idea' of the work: the thoughts the composer had invested in making musical form an unrepeatable expressive act, a unique response to other, previous composers' musical ideas, and, essentially, in advancing human thought and nature. Schoenberg wrote his music for 'adults', who

should not need repetitions to understand what his music was about, namely an exploration of what he called the unhindered flow of musical gestalts, represented in a new kind of structure he named 'developing variation', and a new, free syntax, named 'musical prose'. To Schoenberg, there was a decisive difference between the aesthetic concept of the musical 'thought' (*musikalischer Gedanke*) and the compositional display of musical ideas (*musikalische Ideen*). Schoenberg's concept of musical thought cannot be limited to musical ideas, presented as compositional problems to be resolved in the course of the unfolding musical process in the work (Schoenberg 2006). Accordingly, Schoenberg's concept of 'progression' does not aim at the innovation of compositional technique. Rather, his further exploration of the 'emancipated dissonances', which led him to his new style of atonal composition, has its origin in the same source that led his predecessors to push the limits of compositional technique: the quest for a more direct expression of 'truth', understood as a subjective, particular experience of human nature as a dynamic process of becoming.

The aim Schoenberg shares with all the great composers before him (to whom he refers in his essays and compositions) is to develop a sensuous, musical language, which is the only language capable of capturing the emergent properties of human cognition and imagination. Accordingly, Rudolf Kolisch, the violinist chosen by Schoenberg himself to disseminate his music, modelled his own performance theory on Schoenberg's concept of the musical idea. To Kolisch, too, the performer's task was to present the work's musical idea. Nothing more, nothing less. Kolisch had a pragmatic take on the issue of interpretation; the performer's business had nothing to do with 'metaphysics'. The responsibility of the performer was to develop a practice that could bring the performer closer to an intuitive understanding of the musical idea and its logic. Schoenberg's works resist the kind of interpretation that relies all too much on learned skills, naturalised performance habits, and any kind of conventional stylistic knowledge. The musical idea in Schoenberg's thematic works, however, does not unfold without resistance: the gesture of his melodies or themes presents something particular, different from any similar music, even though it might resemble that of Brahms, Beethoven or Bach. It is the particularity of Schoenberg's musical gestures, which Kolisch experienced first-hand when intensively rehearsing the new works with Schoenberg (and sometimes with Webern and Berg) for the recitals of the 'Society'. It was also during this early, formative stage of his career and development as a performer that Kolisch established the aesthetic and ethical foundation for his rehearsal methods and violin techniques. Kolisch himself introduced the term 'Wiener espressivo' to describe the specific traits of this style of composition and interpretation (Kapp 1990 p. 106). The attribute 'Wiener' refers not so much to the local idiomatic dialect, the 'ländler' rhythms and 'waltz' characters that the 'wienerisch' com-

ments in Mahler's or Berg's scores may allude to. Instead, to Kolisch, 'Viennese' is more than a local stylistic topos; it refers to the particular kind of musical modernism that Schoenberg represented, a modernist pursuit of the ideas of the great Austrian-German tradition of 'espressivo' instrumental music. Thus, Wiener espressivo is confined to a specific tradition of instrumental music, a tradition correlating with the emergence of the musical work understood as the composer's aesthetic expression of subjectivity (Kapp 1987).

The belief that C.P.E. Bach's keyboard fantasias were an expression of the composer's 'feelings' (*Empfindungen*) signalled the emergence of this new concept of musical expression, which culminated in the thematic drama of Beethoven's musical 'characters'. As Dahlhaus argues, musical 'character' became a central category in the tradition of expressive, thematic instrumental music since Beethoven (Dahlhaus 1991 p. 121ff). The term 'character' alludes to the properties of individuality and particularity that resist being subsumed by taxonomies. It is quite different from the notion of musical characters as rhetorical topoi, as applied to instrumental music before the modern 'age of subjectivity', that emerged in wake of Kant at the end of the eighteenth century (Bowie 2003). Hence, the performer's task is to render the characteristics of a musical passage by making resembling musical moments sound new in the emphatic sense of the word. This ambition marks the difference between rhetorical topos and expressive character: expressing subjectivity means emphasising difference within the similar. The challenge is to maintain a sense of familiarity, while at once revealing the resistance of the music against easy recognition and consumption. Adorno, in his own performance theory, elaborated on this kind of mimesis, understood as an interpretive act, which succeeds in enacting the tension between the gestural and the idiomatic aspects of a musical sign, be it an idiomatic figuration, a motive or a theme (Adorno 2006). To Kolisch, it implied turning the notion of 'playing against the grain' into the motto for his performance theory.

I will now turn to Schoenberg's principles of musical expression and how his concept of the musical idea informs both his and Rudolf Kolisch's performance theories, as he oscillates between the composer's and the performer's perspectives upon the very 'object' of the musical work, the notated text.

### **'Keine Rührung – Erkenntnis!' Rudolph Kolisch's manifesto as a continuation of Schoenberg's performance ideals**

Rudolf Kolisch's article in the *Musikblätter des Anbruch* from 1924 rephrases the principles of his mentor Schoenberg's performance theory (Kolisch 1995). Written in the aftermath of World War I, when early twentieth-century musical modernism increasingly held 'objectivism' and 'Sachlichkeit' as the guiding principles of composition and performance, composers such as Stravinsky and Hindemith had become protagonists of

the new, anti-subjectivist movement. Schoenberg's polemics addressing the 'new classicists' is well known, and his literary output and musical production in the 1920s, such as his *Drei Satiren für gemischten Chor*, Opus 28, ought to be understood in this context. Schoenberg felt that his music had been misunderstood: for the modernists his style was too Romantic, while the conservative audience deplored it as too 'intellectual' and 'difficult'. On these grounds, one may well read Kolisch's essay as a manifesto by a performer committed to a tradition of aesthetic thought that, rather than seeing fidelity to the text and the subjectivity of 'self-expression' as a dichotomy, viewed them as premises for expressive performance. *Anbruch*, edited by Universal-Edition in Vienna, was at this time considered the most prestigious publication dedicated to issues of musical performance practice. The article, simply called 'Schoenberg as Performing Artist' (*Schoenberg als nach-schaffender Künstler*), is the only contribution from Kolisch's hand to this journal:

Schoenberg's manner of performing [reproduzieren] has a special character. It is guided by the mind and not by sentimentality; it is full of ideas and not of feelings. The work of art is represented in performance in accordance with its construction; the relation of its parts to each other is revealed from the contemplation of the whole. For Schoenberg, it is not a mood that ought to be brought to expression, but rather a musical idea. It is not the feeling of the performer [Aufführender] that ought to be shown, but rather a theme, which perhaps contains this feeling. The musical shape [Gestalt] is reconstructed, not some sort of sound-painting. All technical means of performance [Vortrag] are put at the service of the musical idea without drawing upon associations from the realm of the emotions. One of Schoenberg's technical instructions often says more about the essence of performance [Vortrag] than volumes of aesthetics. (Kolisch 1995 p. 33-4.)

In his article, Kolisch lists all the relevant keywords denoting the core of Schoenberg's concepts of the musical work and interpretation: 'construction', 'coherence', 'musical idea', objective 'representation', 'musical prose', 'character', 'economy', etc. Hence, it is tempting to suggest that Kolisch's text can be read as a synopsis of all the discussions he probably had with Schoenberg on the relationship between performer, composer and 'text'. Kolisch presents himself as a spokesman for textual fidelity, demanding the performer to render the 'meticulously notated' works with 'uncompromising diligence'. However, fidelity to the text is only a first step towards an interpretation of the work guided by 'spiritual insight'. Only the performer who is capable of imagining the constellation of tones, motives, elements and parts of the particular work might be able to cross the threshold to the realm of the musical idea. By considering the 'function' of any detail within the whole, the performer approaches the 'objective truth' of the work, presented as a dynamic, cognitive network where tones are related to other tones in dynamic structures on micro and macro levels of form.

## Wiener espressivo: aesthetics and technique

According to Kolisch, one of the most significant means of musical expression is the so-called 'punctuation' (*Interpunktion*) (Kolisch 1983 p. 86). To create an expressive articulation of a melodic line, its 'syntax' should be made comprehensible through the connection of tones notated as melodic gestalts: a melody should be divided into smaller units and proportions, understood as fulfilling different functions within the larger 'phrases' (*Sätze*). Kolisch stresses the familiar analogy of music to language, describing the formation of musical meaning in melodies as similar to the contextual function of grammatical units in phrases. This might be a relatively easy task in the music of Haydn or Mozart, where the functions, parts and disposition of a phrase follow – or oppose – a rather predictable pattern. In the case of Schoenberg's free syntax, however, where his 'musical prose' avoids symmetric proportions, sequences and repetitions, the performer is faced with a more complex challenge (Dahlhaus 1989 p. 105ff). Nevertheless, Schoenberg's musical prose demands a kind of comprehensible interconnection and grouping of phrases to melodic gestalts – to him a logical continuation of the expressive, prosodic melos that had become the hallmark of classical style since Haydn and Mozart.

Such gestalts could be intersected in an expressive manner, by means of emphasising their function as 'questions', 'statements', 'suggestions' or 'retorts', marked by musical question marks, expression marks, colons, semi-colons, periods or commas. For Kolisch, a meticulous analysis of phrase structure was inevitable if he were to render the melodic lines expressively as an articulated flow of comprehensible, interconnected gestalts. The performer's practical means of releasing the expressive character of musical phrase openings and endings included tempo modification, accentuation, dynamics and melodic intonation. However, 'analysis' does not necessarily entail the mechanical dissection of an organic whole into a system of syntactical units. It takes a good portion of 'fantasy' and sensitivity to decide how phrases should be prepared, closed, or continued, within the changing contexts of 'paragraphs' and 'chapters'. In any case, the 'analysis' should never be isolated from practice: only when the performer continuously moves between analysis and performance of the text in the course of repeated rehearsals and concerts of a certain work, can cognitive knowledge be enacted spontaneously and merge with practical experience. Only in this way can the espressivo performance achieve an intensity that neither a perfect rendition of a structural or syntactical analysis nor a quasi-spontaneous, 'romantic-intuitive' interpretation could achieve.

Kolisch regarded this amalgamation of cognitive and imaginative capacities of the performer attempting a spiritual 're-creation' of the musical idea as the core of the Schoenberg school's performance style. Kolisch's concept of the 'spiritual', derived from Schoenberg's concept of the 'musical idea', can be traced back to one particular source,

located at the centre of nineteenth-century Viennese aesthetic thought: Eduard Hanslick (Janik and Toulmin 1996 p. 108ff). In many ways, Schoenberg and Kolisch reinstate the concept of musical expression discarded by Hanslick as 'a rotten aesthetics of feeling' by resolving the dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity with the notion of 'objective expression' (Schmidt 2004 p. 10ff). To a certain extent, Schoenberg and Kolisch posit themselves in the Viennese tradition of aesthetic thought, a tradition that proposes reconciliation between formalism and referentialism. One has to recall the interest of artists in theories of subjectivity in early twentieth-century Vienna to understand the contemporary context that influenced Schoenberg's views on aesthetics: besides Karl Krauss, it was, perhaps surprisingly, the Viennese scientist Ernst Mach who would promote new concepts of subjectivity with his book *The Analysis of Sensations*, published in 1886. Mach's theories were soon to gain popularity among Viennese intellectuals, artists and writers, such as Robert Musil, Hugo von Hofmansthal, and Hermann Bahr (Janik and Toulmin 1996 p. 133ff). Inspired by Mach, Bahr published an essay with the infamous title *The Unsaveable I (Das unrettbare Ich)* in 1904. According to Mach, understanding the notion of 'self' as a consistent entity is an illusion. 'Identity' and 'unity' of the self depend on a constellation in constant change, made up of smaller elements that Mach calls 'sensations' (Mach 1959). The slow pace of these changes makes us experience the self as an autonomous entity, relying on a conscious thinking that controls the complexity and contingency of the underlying 'world of sensations'. A passage in a letter to Busoni from 1909 more than indicates Schoenberg's expressionist turn to Mach's sensualistic, 'psycho-physical' theory of the self:

My music must be [...] not built, but 'expressed'!!

And the results I wish for:

no stylized and sterile protracted emotion.

People are not like that:

it is *impossible* for a person to have only *one* sensation at a time.

One has *thousands* simultaneously. [...] And this variegation, this multifariousness, this *illogicality* which our senses demonstrate [...] this I should like to have in my music. (Busoni 1987 p. 389.)

Hence, Schoenberg's musical ideas cannot be distinguished from musical character, as musical construction cannot be separated from musical expression. The cognitive aspects (*Gedanken*) and the intuitive realms (*Gefühle*) of human consciousness cannot be divided into separated spheres of thought. Instead, they are composed of 'elements' and 'sensations' – those ephemeral and sensual impulses that memory tries to sort out and organise into more stable images that are in some cases called 'emotions', and in other cases 'ideas'. In his letter to Busoni of 1909, Schoenberg dismisses the metaphor of music as a 'language of emotions', obviously influenced by Mach's ideas. What Schoenberg

wanted to capture in his music were not emotions, but the permanent reconfiguration of the world of sensations, a 'multifarious' world much more complex and multi-shaded than the reductive level of metaphors and concepts. Accordingly, the opposition of objective, musical structure, and subjective, musical expression collapsed, giving rise to a sensualistic approach that Schoenberg tried to capture with his 'musical idea'. Accordingly, emotional 'content' had to become part of the object's 'form'.

### Notation at issue: the score as scripture

Schoenberg's response to the historical situation influenced his ideas on performance, interpretation, and, not least, notation. He refused to choose between the 'sentimental', Romantic performance style and the 'geometric' style of the New objectivists, which dominated contemporary musical culture (Fink 1999). To release the expressive potential of Schoenberg's music, a performer is required who is sensitive to the tension between gesture and structure, constructive 'Apollonian' and expressive 'Dionysian' aspects of musical structure; a performer who does not mistake work fidelity, *Werktreue*, for a limitation of musical expression. As mentioned earlier, Kolisch's essay in *Anbruch* of 1924 may be read as a note of support for Schoenberg at a time when the Viennese strand of modernism had become an established, yet still controversial, part of progressive musical culture. In the 1920s, Schoenberg eventually advanced to the position of professor at the famous Berlin Academy of Music, but still felt misunderstood, even by his progressive peers. Schoenberg had to defend his position against pressure from competing strands of modernism, the anti-romantic and anti-expressionist modernist movements of New objectivism, at the same time that he was discontented by the persisting 'romantic' performance practice that celebrated virtuosity and euphony.

Comparing Kolisch's essay with Schoenberg's fragmentary notes on performance and interpretation, the convergence of their theoretical positions becomes evident. Schoenberg's essay 'For a Treatise on Performance', written in 1923-24, proclaimed that the performer's foremost task is to render the instructions given by the composer's text with a clear musical diction, paying great attention to the details and nuances of notation:

The highest principle for all reproduction of music would have to be that what the composer has written is made to sound in such a way that every note is really heard, and that all the sounds, whether successive or simultaneous, are in such relationship to each other that no part at any moment obscures another, but, on the contrary, makes its contribution towards ensuring that they all stand out clearly from one another. [...]

It should not be denied that in making the author's ideas and their flow comprehensible, a good deal can be done through a certain liveliness in rhythm and tempo, a certain emphasis in the delivery of phrases, in contrasting, opposing and juxtaposing them, a certain build-up in tempo and dynamics, a purposeful distribution of *espressivo* and its opposite. Indeed it seems

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as if the naive, less cultivated listener can more easily be convinced by its obtrusive and gesticulating type of performance than by reproducing the relationships of the ideas in a subtle, carefully considered manner. (Schoenberg 1975 p. 319.)

Some years later, during his tenure in American exile, Schoenberg developed an even more profound discontent with the 'superficiality' of contemporary music culture, struggling to find American musicians or conductors familiar with the subtleties of the *espressivo* style that he sought to bring out in his music. Schoenberg's music simply did not work in the hands of those 'overrated performers' seeking to impress the audience with 'beautiful tone' and breath-taking musical effects. In this case, he wrote in another note on performance issues from the late 1940s, it might be better not to have the music performed at all: 'Is performance necessary? Not the author, but the audience needs it.' Yet, more important to Schoenberg than this kind of polemic was the 'inadequacy' or 'imperfection' of notation. The farther he moved away from the Viennese, *espressivo*-style musical culture of his roots, the more explicit he had to be about explaining to the performer how to read and perform his scores. Schoenberg constantly tried to improve the level of precision in his notation. He included instructions detailing articulation (adding 'explanatory notes' to his American works), he highlighted principle parts and subordinated parts, and wrote detailed tempo gradations, dynamic markings, accentuations and additional expressive markings. Intermittently, he apparently relaxed his notational efforts, acknowledging the impossibility of a system that communicates the author's intentions unambiguously, independent of the fluctuations of interpretive contexts and historical conditions. In notes, such as the one below, Schoenberg recognises the irony of his quest for precise notation, and questions his own attempts to control the contingent meaning of musical signs and symbols:

Musical notation is as multiple meaning as are rebuses [sic].

[...]

How fast is a Menuetto, a Scherzo, a Landler, a Walzer?

What is Andante alla Breve?

What is Presto?

What is *espressivo*: what should be expressed? Mourning, gaiety, maliciousness, hatred?

[...]

What is:

Fließend? Pesante? Rallentando?

Vibrato? Portamento? Schleifen-Schmierer?

How far goes Rit, Accelerando, and how does it develop: Gradually? or how?

(Schoenberg, 'Theory of Performance', undated typescript. Quoted by permission of Belmont Music Publishers.)

And yet, as insufficient and imperfect the means of notation might seem, they still represent the only way of capturing what Schoenberg considered the artist's creative fantasy. Concurrently, on a lower, technical level of presentation, notation is the only means of transmitting the musical idea in a comprehensible form:

Performance, in music, the rendering into actual sounds of musical ideas hitherto only written in musical notation. As notation (scription), according to Ferruccio Busoni ['Versuch einer neuen musikalischen Ästhetik'], is only transcription.

In this undated note from his unpublished 'Theory of Performance', Schoenberg borrows Busoni's concept of 'transcription' in order to garner support for his view on the function of a musical score. Schoenberg wanted the score to be understood as just that: a transcription of musical ideas. As explained earlier, these 'musical ideas' are allowed to emerge from the notated signs on the strict condition that the performer is able to imagine musical structure as a dynamic gesture. Far from being a straightforward and precise rendition of notated signs, such an imaginative 're-productive' performance was intended to release the text's *espressivo* potential. This approach demands analytical, cognitive insight and spontaneous, imaginative responses to the sensuousness of the sounds. The mere rendition of the composition's immanent structure, the statement of a compositional problem and its suggested resolution is not sufficient. The creation of the *espressivo* character of musical ideas demands a multivalent structural presentation and gestural characterisation, which neither 'heart' nor 'brain' can provide in isolation.

### **'To be progressive': the task of the performer**

How then, we might ask, could Schoenberg's concept of the musical idea – its transcription, presentation and performance – contribute to present-day performance practice? Performers of today have the advantage of being highly proficient in reading complex scores, and also exhibit a technical level that is more than sufficient to render the passages that were considered 'unplayable' in Schoenberg's time. Concert performances (not to speak of recordings) could be said to have reached the level of precision Schoenberg might have dreamed of in the 1920s, -30s and -40s. Nevertheless, to what extent does technical perfection facilitate the aesthetic actualisation of what Schoenberg called the musical idea of his works? This is a convoluted question: Schoenberg's works undoubtedly profit from the increased technical level of performers in general, not least because of the performers' increasing familiarity with complex styles of notation, extended instrumental techniques and 'post-tonal' styles of composition. However, progress in technical skills might also lead to a loss of the *espressivo* character needed in order to articulate the musical idea in Schoenberg's works. Both for Schoenberg and Kolisch, '*espressivo*' was always closely tied with 'progression'. To be progressive and to be expressive were

two sides of the same coin. However, to be progressive should never be reduced to technical progress. To Schoenberg, the point of progression was to think new thoughts, create new ideas, and push the limits of the imagination; in short, to be a creative artist in the most profound sense (Cahn 1996).

Accordingly, an expressive performance is distinguished by its commitment to the quest for the new, and is analogous with the contingent, vital forces behind the advancement of history and nature (Hinrichsen 2007). A musical work should not be understood as a closed structure, but as part of an endless chain of variations, challenging established thought and convention. Wiener *espressivo* is therefore neither a historical performance style nor an attempt to provide a 'major theory' of modern(-ist) performance practice. Accordingly, any attempt to reconstruct Wiener *espressivo* in present-day performance practice has to be attentive to the 'ideas behind the style': to present musical works as new variations of already known musical ideas. To risk discomfort in the interpretation of the work is what Schoenberg demanded from re-creative performers – in other words, to be committed to the 'character' of a piece or a passage, even if it is 'painful' to perform. In this way, we might look for Wiener *espressivo* in contemporary performance practice, not as an attempt at reconstructing the 'performance style of the Schoenberg school', but as a 'progressive' musical practice that constantly challenges the comfort zone of naturalised performance habits, and hence succeeds in keeping musical thought in motion.

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## Abstract

**'Keine Rührung – Erkenntnis!' The Aesthetics of Espressivo in the 'Performance Theories' of Arnold Schoenberg and Rudolf Kolisch**

Schoenberg's concept of the work as the presentation (*Darstellung*) of the 'musical idea' (*Gedanke*) entails that the work is considered a vehicle by means of which the composer shares musical ideas with the performer and the listener in one particular aesthetic event. This requires a performer who understands how to make the 'musical idea' comprehensible for the audience. One of the few to gain Schoenberg's respect as a 'good' performer was the violinist Rudolf Kolisch. He belonged to the enthusiastic group of young Viennese musicians who joined Schoenberg's 'Society for Private Musical Performances' following World War I. This article examines central categories in Schoenberg's aesthetic thought in their historical context, categories such as 'musical idea', 'expression' and 'progression'. The objective of this article is to shed light on how Schoenberg's aesthetic concepts guide the principles of Kolisch's 'performance theory', moving beyond the dichotomy between fidelity to the text and expressive freedom. The discussion of the Schoenberg school's performance style leads to the question of whether Kolisch's 'Wiener espressivo' is still relevant for today's performers, in a time when technically perfect renditions of scores are considered a matter of course.

## Keywords

Schoenberg school, performance theory, musical idea, Wiener espressivo.

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