
Die Jakobsleiter [The Jacob's Ladder]



Title	Die Jakobsleiter [The Jacob's Ladder]. Oratorio for Soli, Mixed Chorus and Orchestra
Time of origin	1915–1922
Premiere	16 June 1961, Wien, Konzerthaus
Duration	ca. 45 min.

"I must acknowledge the possibility that I may no longer be able to compose 'Jacob's Ladder' to its completion." As Arnold Schönberg, in a letter written to his former student Karl Rankl just a few weeks before his death (Friday, July 13, 1951), spoke resignedly of giving up his compositional plans for "Jacob's Ladder," he marked the conclusion of a body of work reflective of his complex development, the beginning of which lay, at this point, four decades back. The genesis of "Jacob's Ladder," which is the central composition of Schönberg's "Weltanschauung" [worldview] music between 1908 (String Quartet No. 2, Op. 10, with the settings of the poems "Litanei" [Litany] and "Entrückung" [Rapture] by Stefan George) and 1923 (Serenade, Op. 24, with the sonnet from Petrarca's Canzoniere) as an aesthetic of the basic questions of human existence and art-religion, can be traced almost completely with the help of autograph draft materials from the composer's estate, as well as extensive correspondence within Schönberg's Viennese circle of students and friends: the oratorio was preceded by plans for a symphony on a large scale for vocal soloists, choir and orchestra, with "Jacob's Ladder" as the last movement – a conceptual link to Mahler's 8th Symphony, with the implications of a musical discourse freed from the shackles of tonality. The symphony itself grew out of a plan for a setting of Honoré de Balzac's novel *Seraphita* (at any rate, its last chapter, "Seraphita's Ascension"), the German adaptation of which he had originally delegated to the Viennese doctor Marie Pappenheim, the librettist of his monodrama, "Erwartung" [Expectation], Op. 17 (1909) ("I'd much rather compose *Seraphita*, which Pappenheim is currently working on for me," letter to Alexander Zemlinsky of November 21, 1913). Neither this nor a collaboration, initiated during the year before, with Richard Dehmel on an oratorio, were to be realized, and Schönberg ended up writing the text himself.

The first extant document having to do with the material of "Jacob's Ladder" is a letter Schönberg wrote to his student Alban Berg in early 1911, a letter in which he talked of his plan to set to music "Jakob ringt" [Jacob Wrestling] from August Strindberg's "Legenden" [Legends]. In Berlin, Schönberg's original idea for an oratorio began to crystallize into a concept for a monumental dramatic work for the stage. At the same time, Schönberg was busy with "Die glückliche Hand," Op. 18, a "drama with music," which represents the attempt to translate physical experiences into a visual, scenic and musical Gesamtkunstwerk. The correspondence with Richard Dehmel, which was the upshot of Schönberg and the poet having become personally acquainted in Hamburg in the autumn

of 1912, bears eloquent witness to Schönberg's preoccupation with the oratorio, and his desire to bring Dehmel on board as its librettist. Dehmel, however, did not think himself capable of fulfilling Schönberg's wish for a new libretto; as an alternative, he offered him a text that he had written earlier, entitled "Schöpfungsfeier. Oratorium natale" [Celebration of Creation]. Due to the orchestration of "Glückliche Hand," as well as the composition of the Four Songs for Orchestra, Op. 22 (including "Seraphita," after Ernest Dowson/Stefan George), the outline of the oratorio had to be set aside until the end of 1914, at which time Schönberg once again went to work on the project, with a new concept for its form: a (programmatic) symphony, which would consist of the movements "Lebenswende" [Turning Point in Life], "Lebenslust" [Lust for Life], "Schöpfungsfeier" (Richard Dehmel) followed by an interlude and a psalm in the first part, and the movements "Totentanz der Prinzipien" [Death Dance of the Principles] and "Glauben des Desillusionierten" [Faith of the Disillusioned One] (with bible quotations) in the second. In an unpublished article found in Schönberg's estate, Schönberg provides us with the following information: "I had made plans for a great symphony of [which] the Jakobsleiter should be the last movement. I have sketched many themes, among them one for a scherzo which consisted of all the twelve tones."

Immediately after having completed the poem "Totentanz der Prinzipien" on January 15, 1915, Schönberg started on the text of "Jacob's Ladder" which, on "18/1. 1915", at an early stage of its genesis, he described as "the union of a sober, skeptical awareness of reality with faith." The musical sketches, begun on May 4, 1915, indicate that Schönberg had at that point in time already thought of a separation of the material into an instrumental symphony and a vocal work based on the "Jacob's Ladder" text. In the fall of 1915, Schönberg returned to Vienna and in December he was dispatched to the imperial regiment "Hoch- und Deutschmeister" No. 4. After his discharge from military service, and renewed work on the Op. 22 orchestral songs, he once again turned, in early 1917, to the "Jacob's Ladder" text, the first fair copy of which is dated May 26, 1917. Anton Webern, finally, wrote the following to his teacher: "I am very much looking forward to 'Jacob's Ladder.' How quickly you have completed this poem. [...] I know that those parts that I will be able to understand will show me everything in the world in a new light" (letter of July 13, 1917).

After further musical sketches in early July 1917, Schönberg made corrections to the poem, and on July 19 he continued working on the short score of the composition, which had now been disjoined from the fragmentary symphony. At this point, he was already considering a stage production, for which he wanted to have Adolf Loos as the stage designer. By September 1917 (apart from other sketches also dated 19 September, the entry "reported for military duty" is written above Gabriel's text "So ist dein Ich gelöscht" [thus is your Self extinguished]), a large part of the fragment (measures 1–601) had been drafted in short score: "[Erwin] Stein wrote me that you're working a lot. So that Jacob's Ladder will be done by judgment day. It seems a miracle to me. All these worries, and you're capable of that!" (Webern to Schönberg, September 12, 1917). In the fall, Universal Edition published the text of Jacob's Ladder in two editions (one using normal paper and the other handmade vat paper). Anton Webern wrote on October 5: "After the terrible

occurrences of the last few weeks, these words are my salvation! [...] Your work has made it crystal clear just what the fate of man is." Schönberg's brother-in-law Alexander Zemlinsky also waxed ecstatic on his former pupil's new work: "The two great speeches of Gabriel are, at first reading, the most beautiful! What also amazes me: the formal structure: unheard-of brevity of expression, and then once again the beauty of language." (October 1917) Musical sketches from early December 1917, contain handwritten mention of Schönberg's renewed release from military service, granted due to his poor physical constitution. On December 20, he wrote Zemlinsky about his difficulties in coming back to the composition where he had left off: "Such an interruption is so unnatural that I find it difficult to get back on track." Further sketches came to be in January 1918 before "Jacob's Ladder" had to be set aside for a long period of time due to Schönberg's teaching obligations at the "Schwarzwald'schen Schulanstalten" [Schwarzwald School].

After a reading of the "Jacob's Ladder" text by Wilhelm Klitsch at the "Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen," Schönberg at the end of June 1921 returned to work on his creation with sketches of the second part. More intensive work took place in early 1922, when he worked on the closing chorale and on the choral and orchestral scoring. At the same time he was developing new formal principles that culminated in his "Method of Composition with twelve tones relating only to one another," which ushered in a new epoch in the history of 20th century music. To what extent the interruption in Schönberg's work on the "Jacob's Ladder" oratorio (further sketches are dated April as well as July 1922) was connected to the "Mattsee Ereignis" the year before (an anti-Semitic pogrom during Salzburg's summer vacation season that resulted in the expulsion of Jewish guests, including Schönberg, from Mattsee), must remain a matter of speculation. What is known is that the strident thematization of his Jewish identity, brought about by the social and historical context, brought to an end his period of theosophical and esoteric reflection on an aesthetic level, which would only later, after his emigration from Austria, experience a new artistic sublimation in his magnum opus "Moses und Aron" [Moses and Aaron], as well as in the Zionist drama "Der biblische Weg" [The Biblical Way]. Schönberg did acknowledge his view that the material of "Jacob's Ladder" was an allegory for modern man's struggle with faith and, as such, emblematic of the current crisis: "Perhaps the worst thing was the toppling of all that one had believed earlier. [...] What I mean could best be explained to you by my poem 'Jacob's Ladder' (an oratorio): I mean religion – even without all its organizational shackles. During these years, it was my only support – let that be said here for the first time" (letter to Wassily Kandinsky of July 20, 1922). When Alexander Zemlinsky invited Schönberg to a reading of the libretto at Prague's "Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen," Schönberg declined, the reason being that he did not want to risk any more interruptions of his work since, for him, "getting off track can be perilous (see Jacob's Ladder)."

Schönberg, who lived in American exile after 1933, made a penultimate attempt in January of 1945, when he applied to the Guggenheim Foundation for a grant to complete "Jacob's Ladder," "Moses and Aron" and textbooks – he estimated he would need one and a half to two years to finish the oratorio. The application, however, was rejected. Later, as

Hermann Scherchen who, in addition to being a conductor, presided over the publishing house Ars Viva in Zürich that he had founded, came to Schönberg in search of new compositions, the latter planned to transcribe at least part of the short score of "Jacob's Ladder" into a full score, which, due to an advanced eye condition, was a task of no small difficulty. Only after the composer's death did his former pupil Winfried Zillig, at the request of Schönberg's widow Gertrud, make a full score from the autograph sources. The concertante premiere of the "Jacob's Ladder" fragment took place on June 16, 1961, under Rafael Kubelik at the Vienna Konzerthaus, and the staged premiere occurred on August 14, 1968, in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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