
Das Buch der hängenden Gärten [The Book of the Hanging Gardens], op. 15



Title Fifteen Poems from “The Book of the Hanging Gardens” by Stefan George for Voice and Piano, op. 15

Time of origin 1908/09

Premiere 14 January 1910, Wien, Ehrbar-Saal

Duration ca. 25 min.

1. Unterm Schutz von dichten Blättergründen
2. Hain in diesen Paradiesen
3. Als Neuling trat ich ein in dein Gehege
4. Da meine Lippen reglos sind und brennen
5. Saget mir, auf welchem Pfade
6. Jedem Werke bin ich fürder tot
7. Angst und Hoffen wechselnd mich beklemmen
8. Wenn ich heut nicht deinen Leib berühre
9. Streng ist uns das Glück und spröde
10. Das schöne Beet betracht ich mir im Harren
11. Als wir hinter dem beblühten Tore
12. Wenn sich bei heilger Ruh in tiefen Matten
13. Du lehnest wider eine Silberweide
14. Sprich nicht immer von dem Laub
15. Wir bevölkerten die abend-düstern Lauben

Arnold Schönberg composed “The Book of the Hanging Gardens,” op. 15, between 1908 and 1909. The work was first performed by the Austrian vocalist Martha Winternitz-Dorda and the pianist Etta Werndorff in Vienna on January 14, 1910. A collection of fifteen pieces, these settings are selected from a larger collection by the German poet Stefan George (the work is often referred to as the “George Lieder”). The composition represents a break from traditional harmony and normative treatment of dissonance. Along with his Three Pieces for Piano, op. 11 (also from 1909), op. 15 demarcates the beginning of Schönberg’s “atonal” period.

George’s collection of poetry, “The Books of Eclogues and Eulogies, of Legends and Lays, and the Hanging Gardens,” first appeared in 1895. The volume is divided into three subsections, and Schönberg was particularly attracted to the third one, “The Book of the Hanging Gardens.” These thirty-one poems offer a torrid narrative of a young prince and his sexual awakening in a paradisiacal garden. The overall theme is one of transformation: a naïve youth quietly enters the garden, and later consummates his desire with his lover in a bed of flowers. As the awakened youth parts ways with her, the garden itself then

dies. Carl E. Schorske, in his book on fin-de-siècle Viennese culture, explains how these poems “chart the transformation not only of the lover, but also of the garden. The trajectory is from the autonomy of garden and lover, through their integration, to the disintegration of both.”

With his selection of just fifteen poems, Schönberg was apparently resisting the more consistent narrative thread of George’s larger cycle. Moreover, the composer’s affinity for concision is evident here, as more than half of the fifteen songs take less than two minutes to perform. Thus, in “The Book of the Hanging Gardens,” each of these self-contained songs may be heard as a singular distilled thought or mood, even a fleeting moment. This exemplifies one of Schönberg’s hallmark traits as a composer – his distinctive sensibility for aphoristic expression.

By Schönberg’s own account, “The Book of the Hanging Gardens” was especially groundbreaking. In this work, the composer brought to fruition a new expressive style that he had been pursuing for some time. Schönberg comments on this in his program notes for the work’s premiere, at the Verein für Kunst und Kultur concert in Vienna:

“With the George Lieder I have for the first time succeeded in approaching an ideal of expression and form which has been in my mind for years. Until now, I lacked the strength and confidence to make it a reality. But now that I have finally set out along this path, I am aware that I have broken through all barriers of a bygone aesthetic. [...] It is not a lack of invention or of technical ability, or of a knowledge of the other demands of the prevailing aesthetic that pushes me in this direction. [...] Rather, I am obeying an inner compulsion, which is stronger than any schooling: I am obeying the formative process which, being the one natural to me, is stronger than my artistic education.”

The term that Schönberg used, which became a measure of his own musical aesthetic, was “the emancipation of the dissonance.” This concept deems the comprehensibility of both dissonance and consonance as being equally important. In his 1949 article “My Evolution,” Schönberg maintains that “dissonances need not be a spicy addition to dull sounds. They are natural and logic substantiation of an organism.” Moreover, tones need not have functional purpose in the conventional sense, and resolution to a tonic is no longer necessary. As stated in his 1911 treatise, “Harmonielehre” (“Theory of Harmony”), the traditionally held notion that defines “non-harmonic tones” as extraneous to a prevailing harmony has become obsolete. The result of this shift is an unprecedented amount of freedom for the composer. Therefore, harmony needs not be functional, but may be used for its own coloristic capabilities. And an early free atonal work such as “The Book of the Hanging Gardens” serves as an example for this newfound realm of possibilities.

The first song, “Unterm Schutz von dichten Blättergründen,” already illustrates how Schönberg breaks with functional tonal language. The rather amorphous opening piano line adheres to no diatonic scale and is thus without a strong sense of direction. Ends of phrases lack the harmonic punctuation that cadences provide. Additionally, many of the chords are made of non-tertial harmonies. Schönberg uses them more like “sonorities” that avoid the goal-oriented tendencies of traditional tonality. For instance, with the harmony at measure 17, the piano and voice sound six of the seven tones of the C major

scale, resulting in an imaginatively colored cluster of tones. Also, devoid of any harmonic destination, Schönberg designs a network of motivic connections: in the last phrase of the piece, the main motive of the piece is heard slightly varied in the low register.

Since functional harmony is abandoned in these works, Schönberg had to turn to an alternative method to shape a piece. As in much of his work, he organizes musical structures by applying the technique of “developing variation” to motivic or thematic content. Such is the case with “The Book of the Hanging Gardens”; “Das schöne Beet” No. 10, is a representative example. In various exchanges between the voice and piano, nearly every musical statement is derived from a G sharp–A–D motive. Occurring in both horizontal and vertical forms in the first measure, this motive is then inverted, transposed, and reordered throughout the course of the piece. Here, Schönberg draws upon the compositional techniques of Johannes Brahms in how he shapes the restatement of material: exact repetition is abandoned in favor of motives and phrases that are continually nuanced.

While nearly all of the songs in the op. 15 are short, song No. 14, “Sprich nicht immer,” is by far the most aphoristic. George’s poem is comprised of fourteen fragmentary lines of text, each of which contains no more than three words. Schönberg’s setting, consisting of only eleven measures, complements the brevity of this poem. As Theodor W. Adorno mentions in his article, “Concerning the George Songs,” the economy of expression in No. 14 makes it stand out as being especially radical. “Sprich nicht immer” presages an inclination for brevity that would later distinguish Schönberg’s pupil Anton von Webern. With its free atonal style, elegant concision, and structuring through the use of developing variation, op. 15 is a landmark in Schönberg’s oeuvre – particularly because of the new world of freedom afforded by atonality. Indeed, the “emancipation of the dissonance” is a principle that not only influenced Schönberg’s evolution as a composer, but, as history has shown, led to one of the most significant advancements in Western music. The continuous development of atonal principles culminated around 1920 in the emergence of the twelve-tone method, which organized the newly discovered sounds in a new form – and allowed Schönberg to advance to new musical shores.

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