
Erwartung [Expectation], op. 17



Title	Erwartung [Expectation], op. 17. Monodrama in one act
Time of origin	1909
Premiere	6 June 1924, Prag, Deutsches Landestheater
Duration	ca. 29 min.

“Do write an opera text for me, Fräulein!” – In August 1909, Arnold Schönberg and his family spent their vacation together with Alexander Zemlinsky, Alban Berg, Anton Webern and Max Oppenheimer in Steinakirchen near Amstetten. There, Zemlinsky and Karl Kraus introduced the incipient young Viennese physician Marie Pappenheim to the circle around Schönberg. During her medical studies at the University of Vienna, Pappenheim wrote poetry under the pseudonym Maria Heim, and it was in the Lower Austrian summer resort that Schönberg invited her to write a libretto. Pappenheim, whose poetry had been published by Kraus in 1906 in “Die Fackel” (“The Torch”), had obtained her degree in 1909 and thereafter set up a practice as dermatologist, as she “did not want to wander through life as a lyric poet.” Two days after Schönberg’s invitation, she travelled on to friends in Traunkirchen, where she composed the text to the monodrama “Erwartung” within three weeks. “I wrote lying in the grass, with pencil, on large sheets of paper, had no copy, scarcely read through what I had written.”

During the editing of the text manuscript, which Pappenheim submitted to him at his vacation domicile, Schönberg immediately began jotting down a number of musical ideas in various places and brought the first short score to paper in the short time between 27 August and 12 September 1909. (The hypothesis was subsequently voiced that the composer, with his ambitions towards numerical mysticism, chose the opus number 17 to reflect the compositional period of seventeen days when the work was published by Universal Edition.) The fair copy of the score is dated 4 October 1909. In an interview of 1949 Marie Pappenheim corrected the misconception among researchers that the basic idea for “Erwartung” stemmed from Schönberg: “I received neither a suggestion nor an indication concerning what I should write (and would not have accepted this).”

The establishment of the one-act work as autonomous generic form took as its point of departure the writings of August Strindberg, who was highly regarded by the Second Viennese School. Monodramatic elements include not only the abandonment of interaction between characters, but also the minimalization of plot devices – characteristics that in Pappenheim’s expressionistic drama are thought out to their furthestmost logical consequence. On this “empty” leaf, as it were, egocentricity assumes the most radical form: in expectation of her lover, the woman sets out in search and is led astray through stages of uncertainty – remembrance – hope – “illusional misunderstanding” (Erwin Ringel) – rationalization – jealousy – sorrow – and ultimately sublimation of the man who survives only as a dead object. The depth of the forest

scenario becomes the projection space for traumatic states – obscurity, danger, threat, fear, loneliness, horror, darkness – and naturalistically reinterprets the subjective ordeal of suffering that the woman has to endure during the four scenes.

Marie Pappenheim's syntax consists of a paratactic, disorganized series of sentence fragments that permit associations in the form of a lyric monologue to crystallize from the psyche of the woman: "I always wrote exaltedly, without direction, reflection, inner censorship, page after page, with other thoughts between the verses." The dissolution of syntax in the concentrated language of the monologue corresponds to a liberation of the functional structures of tonality. Small motivic cells are subjugated to permanent mutation and propelled by the inner impulse of the text (recitative-like motion without repetition or relaxation). Tempos change according to psychological impulses of fear, a "seismographic record of traumatic shock" (Theodor W. Adorno).

Decentralization of the consonant, abolition of tonal center and cadence – characteristics of free atonality – reflect the expressive freedom of the libretto. At the end of the fourth scene Pappenheim offers a topical parallel to John Henry Mackay's poem "Am Wegrund" ("By the Wayside"), which Schoenberg had set to music in his (still tonal) song op. 6 No. 6, and now quotes in the coda of "Erwartung" in a variational transformation of the song line "Sehnsucht erfüllt die Bezirke des Lebens" ("Longing fills the confines of life"). While composing the monodrama, Schönberg thought specifically of the voice of Maria Gutheil-Schoder, who had sung the vocal part in the Second String Quartet op. 10 at its premiere: "You will remember that I have repeatedly spoken to you of a dramatic work with a part for you. It is a monodrama, with only one part, a real part, conceived as a Gutheil part" (letter of 22 August 1913).

Schönberg began to negotiate with the conductor Arthur Bodanzky of the Mannheim National Theater concerning a possible performance of "Erwartung" as early as 1910. Planning was delayed until 1913 and ultimately abandoned because of the small size of the Mannheim orchestra. Discussions with the Viennese institutions Volksoper (1910) and Akademischer Verband (1913) also proved fruitless. The premiere finally took place on 6 June 1924 under the direction of by Alexander Zemlinsky at the Deutsche Landestheater in Prague as part of the music festival of the International Society for New Music. The work was lauded in the musical press as a "protest against operatic rubbish" ("Signale für die musikalische Welt") and as "an immensely dense focalization of a state of mind" ("Die Musik").

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