
Pierrot lunaire, op. 21



Title	Three Times Seven Poems from Albert Giraud's "Pierrot lunaire," op. 21
Time of origin	1912
Premiere	16 October 1912, Berlin, Choralion-Saal
Duration	ca. 34 min.

Part I

1. Mondestrunken (Moonstruck)
2. Colombine (Columbine)
3. Der Dandy (The Dandy)
4. Eine blasse Wäscherin (A Pallid Washerwoman)
5. Valse de Chopin
6. Madonna
7. Der kranke Mond (The Sick Moon)

Part II

8. Nacht (Passacaglia) (Night)
9. Gebet an Pierrot (Prayer to Pierrot)
10. Raub (Theft)
11. Rote Messe (Red Mass)
12. Galgenlied (Gallows Song)
13. Enthauptung (Beheading)
14. Die Kreuze (The Crosses)

Part III

15. Heimweh (Homesickness)
16. Gemeinheit (Cruel Pierrot)
17. Parodie (Parody)
18. Der Mondfleck (The Moon Spot)
19. Serenade
20. Heimfahrt (Barcarole) (Journey Home)
21. O alter Duft (O Ancient Fragrance)

The disruptive scenes instigated by fanatic supporters and detractors of his art during performances of "Pierrot lunaire" in Vienna require Mr. Arnold Schönberg to attach to his participation the condition that he be guaranteed absolute silence for the duration of the performance and that the audience refrain from disturbing the ambience during the pauses. (Commercial Association of Regensburg, 1914)

Arnold Schönberg (1874, Vienna – 1951, Los Angeles) → Composer, author, painter, teacher, theoretician, inventor, leading figure of the Viennese School, pioneer of the twelve-tone method, fundamental part of recent music history

Pierrot (17th Century, Bergamo) → Stage character from the Commedia dell'arte; intercultural multimedia star in visual arts, literature, music, and film; achieved peak popularity in the 19th century; eccentric, melancholiac with a penchant for moonlight, symbolic character for all forms of exaltation

Pierrot lunaire op. 21 (1912, Berlin) → Melodrama/song cycle in three parts (each with seven poems) for speaking voice, piano, flute (also piccolo), clarinet (also bass clarinet), violin (also viola), and violoncello; performance length with two breaks between the parts: ca. 45 minutes; founding document of musical modernism; also known as the "solar plexus of early 20th century music" (Igor Stravinsky)

Arnold Schönberg's "Pierrot lunaire," op. 21, a key work of musical modernism, was written in 1912 in Berlin for the elocutionist Albertine Zehme. Zehme, a singer, professional reciter of texts, and voice coach (as well as a former student of Cosima Wagner), followed a highly idiosyncratic aesthetic in her recitation, with which she wanted to "reclaim the ear's place in life": "I demand not freedom of thought, but rather freedom of sound! [...] In order to bring our poets and our composers to expression, we need both the sound of song and the sound of speech. The unceasing work of seeking the ultimate means of expression for 'artistic sound experiences' has taught me this necessity." (Program booklet of a recitation evening with the "Pierrot lunaire" poems in 1911). This quest for a boundless "freedom of sound" led her, consequently, to a kindred spirit also fighting for a similar freedom: "I have to work neither with a fundamental tone nor any other tone; I can use any of the 12 tones, I don't have to constrain myself to the Procrustean bed of motivic work, and I do not need to incorporate conventional formal sections or phrase structures." (Schönberg's note on the page margin of a copy of Ferruccio Busoni's "Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music," 1916)

The free rendering of the French poetry collection "Pierrot lunaire. Rondels bergamasques" by Albert Giraud, published in 1884, by the German poet Otto Erich Hartleben can be considered to be an independent poetic work. Hartleben's translation appeared in several editions after its first publication in 1892 and had been set to music a number of times before Schönberg occupied himself with the subject of the old Commedia dell'arte figure. The structuring of the texts arranged into a narrative, and the realization of a "specific musically generated form-conception," focuses on an "allegorical parable about artists and their calling." Schönberg's fascination with the poems, which he converted into a "colorful intermediate realm between singing and speaking" (Reinhold Brinkman) with a small ensemble, set free a tremendous creative impulse in him. The dramatic arrangement is based on the numerical order 3x7 ("three times seven poems ..."), which he later included in the title; it has its numerological equivalent in the opus number of the work. Also significant in this respect is the inspiration Schönberg found in Robert Schumann's cycle "Carnaval" op. 9, which is made up of 21 piano

miniatures and includes character pieces named "Pierrot," "Arlequin," "Chopin," and Columbine.

In Part I of Schönberg's opus 21, the dominant theme is that of the artist, whose world of thought and creative impulse is symbolized by the moon. Part II descends, after a "deathly ill" clouding of the moonlight, deeper and deeper into the shadow-world of death, and the "sun's glow" is blotted out by giant black moths, the emissaries of the night. The "Rote Messe" (no. 11) can be understood as a peripeteia within the song cycle. "Pierrot's Heimfahrt to Bergamo" concludes Part III, which is rich with elements of parody.

"Although they are all grotesque, the three parts (in congruence to some predominant nuances) still can be designated as lyric, tragic, and humorous." (Ferruccio Busoni to Egon Petri, 19 June 1913).

At the time of its composition, "Pierrot lunaire" created a unique genre that brought together the characteristics of its ensemble. A speaking voice and five performers were used in changing instrumentation, that is, in varying combinations: the flautist also plays piccolo, the clarinetist also bass clarinet, and the violinist also viola; additionally, there is a pianist and a cellist. In solos, duos, trios, quartets, and quintets of varying constellations, the composer created a cosmos of colorful shades of tone that surrounds the speaking voice. The specific instrumentation of the texts and their poetic realms follows traditional models. The flute, for instance, is associated with the moon, while the piccolo accentuates Pierrot's buffoonery and portrays light and brilliance with its bright tone color. The sonorous cello operates in a hemisphere between earnestness and sentimentality, while violin and viola are assigned a romanticizing idiom. Regarding the interpretation of the vocal part, a few statements by the composer have survived which, like a historical recording under his direction, mediate between the score and the performer: "One thing I must say immediately and with all decisiveness: 'Pierrot lunaire' is not to be sung! Vocal melodies must be balanced and shaped in a completely different way than spoken melodies. You would completely disfigure the work if you were to sing it, and everyone would be right who says: one does not write like that for singing!" (Schönberg to his student Alexander Jemnitz, 15 April 1931).

The constantly changing instrumentation, colors, construction, forms and genres, symbolism and semantics in these melodramas suggest that Schönberg was exploring and affirming his own compositional mastery through the 21 highly stylized masterpieces. Each individual melodrama has its own principle with which he "approaches a new expressivity" (Berlin Diary, March 13, 1912). Freeing himself from traditional cadential harmony enabled him to utilize "all 12 tones" unrestricted by conventional hierarchies: "The only method here is unalloyed idea" (note in the margins of Ferruccio Busoni's "New Esthetic of Music").

At the time of the work's creation, the degree of complexity of the score was just as extraordinary as the musical language of the cycle. The performers of the world premiere, after countless hours of individual study of their parts, completed no less than 25 ensemble rehearsals before Schönberg brought invited guests to hear the piece one week before its official premiere (on 16 October 1912) in the Choralionsaal in Berlin. In an interview, the pianist and Schönberg student Eduard Steuermann reported about the

world premiere: "Mrs. Zehme insisted on performing in a Pierrot costume and standing alone on the stage. The musicians, and their conductor Schönberg, were situated behind a rather complicated screen – complicated because on the small stage it was not easy to construct something that allowed for eye contact between the vocalist and the ensemble while also hiding the latter from the view of the audience. [...] And the result? Of course there was a 'scandal' [...], but there were also spirited ovations."

While Schönberg was a musical pioneer that influenced subsequent generations of composers with the establishment of a newly formulated tonal language, in his compositions he himself always employed elements that reflected upon his own (German) musical heritage and understood himself as belonging to this line of development. Schönberg's recourse to older forms and compositional models in opus 21 (including passacaglia, fugue, canon, polka, waltz, and barcarole) reflects a "historical representation of the problems facing artists in modernity" (Reinhold Brinkmann). Schönberg furnished the inventory of his textual interpretation motivically, rhetorically, and compositionally with numerous allusions to works of his predecessors, which can be heard in veiled quotations from works of past and recent masters. Among these are Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier" (in "Madonna," no. 6) as well as Wagner's "Parsifal" (in "Gebet an Pierrot," no. 9) and "Ein Heldenleben" by Richard Strauss (in "Der Dandy," no. 3). A specifically Viennese – and for Schönberg, innate – note can be found in the allusion to waltz "Künstlerleben" by Johann Strauß in "Der Dandy", as research has demonstrated. The composer infused the "driving power" of his tones (Schönberg, "Theory of Harmony") with an "ancient fragrance from far-off days" (a reference to the title of the final song in the cycle), a recollection of his artistic home, the history of German music since Bach. The interpretation of the unreal figure of "Pierrot" eludes common understanding and remains largely a task for our imagination. In the program book for the premiere, Schönberg prefaced the poems with a (slightly modified) text from a "Fragment" by the German poet Novalis: "One can imagine stories without conventional coherence, but with associations as in a dream – poems that are merely euphonious or filled with beautiful words, but without sense and context, perhaps containing a few comprehensible stanzas, like fragments of the most diverse objects. This true poetry can, by and large, have at most an allegorical significance, and an indirect effect."

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