

Title	Kol Nidre, op. 39
Time of origin	1938
Premiere	4 October 1938, Los Angeles
Duration	ca. 12 min.

Letter from Arnold Schönberg to Paul Dessau, 22 November 1941

Dear Mr. Dessau:

I wrote "Kol Nidre" for Rabbi Dr. Jacob Sonderling [...] He will certainly also be able to tell you about it.

At my request the text of the "traditional" Kol Nidre was altered, but the introduction was an idea of Dr. Sonderling's.

When I first saw the traditional text I was horrified by the "traditional" view that all the obligations that have been assumed during the year are supposed to be cancelled on the Day of Atonement. Since this view is truly immoral, I consider it false. It is diametrically opposed to the lofty morality of all the Jewish commandments.

From the very first moment I was convinced (as later proved correct, when I read that the Kol Nidre originated in Spain) that it merely meant that all who had either voluntarily or under pressure made believe to accept the Christian faith (and who were therefore to be excluded from the Jewish community) might, on this Day of Atonement, be reconciled with their God, and that all oaths (vows) were to be cancelled.

So this does not refer to business men's sharp practice.

The difficulty of using the traditional melody has two causes:

1. There actually isn't such a melody, only a number of flourishes resembling each other to a certain degree, yet without being identical and also without always appearing in the same order.
2. This melody is monodic, that is, is not based on harmony in our sense, and perhaps not even on polyphony.

I chose the phrases that a number of versions had in common and put them into a reasonable order. One of my main tasks was vitriolizing out the cello-sentimentality of the Bruch, etc. and giving the DECREE the dignity of a law, of an "edict." I believe I succeeded in doing so. Those bars 58 to 63 are at least no sentimental minor-key stuff.

I am very glad you like the piece. I am sure, too, that you see much of what I did for the main effect by means of laying a basis with the motives. It is such a pity that people like Saminski decline to adopt the piece for use in the synagogue, on ritual and musical grounds. I believe it must be tremendously effective both in the synagogue and in the concert-hall.

[...]

With kind regards, yours,
Arnold Schönberg