
Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte, op. 41



Title	Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte for String Quartet, Piano and Reciter, op. 41
Date	1942
First performance	10 July 1946, London, Goldsmith's Hall
Duration	ca. 15 min.

“Late Work” – a musical notion emphatically associated with the cult of genius rooted in the 19th century and generally with the name Beethoven. Late works are timeless and without epoch; Theodor W. Adorno’s dictum that they “lack all that harmony which the classicistic aesthetic of an artwork is used to demand” takes aim at that. From the cultural-anthropological viewpoint, the phenomenon’s dualistic element lies in the crossing of the greatest abstraction, yet justifying archaism which, as it were, anticipates future developments as an archetype.

The detachment of canonized parameters within a style continuum such as melody, form and composing technique by establishing new style-forming criteria allows the comparison with abstraction as dissociation of usual harmonies: in form as musical meta-level and its thematically dependent microstructure.

The potential of the late work lies founded in its utopian dimension, here a clear demarcation from the biographically determined later work of, say, Schönberg; his compositions after he emigrated to the USA can only be classified and/or periodized with difficulty, due to their stylistic and thematic inhomogeneity and their variety of genres. The only guideposts for speaking about “late works” in the traditional sense are the two framing dates 31 October 1931 (Schönberg’s arrival in New York) and 13 July 1951 (his death in Los Angeles).

After being expelled from the Prussian Academy of the Arts in Berlin, Schönberg left Nazi Germany in May 1933 and turned his back on Europe forever after several months in Arcachon and Paris (where he returned to Judaism); he arrived in New York with his wife Gertrud and their one-year-old daughter Nuria on 31 October 1931. After teaching activities at the Malkin Conservatory in Boston and in New York and lectures at the University of Chicago, the family moved to Los Angeles on the American West Coast in 1934, where Schönberg lectured at the University of Southern California before assuming a professorship at the University of California at Los Angeles. He retired in 1944, whereafter he taught privately, gave summer courses and devoted himself to music-pedagogical works, along with his compositional oeuvre.

Schönberg’s political engagement reached back above all to the penultimate emigration stage of his life – in France in 1933, when he comprehensively formulated his central ideas on Judaism and on founding a united Jewish party (systematically summarized in his 1938 Four-Point Program for Jewry). Triggered by the so-called “Mattsee Event,” an anti-Semitic pogrom in the summer of 1921 which had a lasting effect intensifying his

reflections on Jewish identity, he began to remark on the consequences of anti-Semitism in letters written in the early 1920s; he turned the problem of inner Jewish divisiveness and the striving for a politic of unification into an aesthetic for the first time in his oeuvre as the main theme of the plot development with his Zionist drama "Der biblische Weg" ["The Biblical Way"] (1926/1927).

Apart from his political writings, Schönberg composed two works, the Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte, op. 41 (1942) and the cantata A Survivor from Warsaw, op. 41 (1947), both confronting the global political situation of the 1940s. Whereas the Survivor centrally depicts a religious commitment to monotheism and Jewish identity, the Ode to Napoleon is a clear statement, i.e. the rejection of tyranny and declaration of belief in democracy, with the emblematic name "George Washington."

In an introduction in English titled "How I Came to Compose the Ode to Napoleon," Schönberg described both the creation of the work (commissioned by the League of Composers) and its orientation to Beethoven's Eroica and Wellington's Victory: "I know it was the moral duty of intelligencia [sic] to take a stand against tyranny. But this was only my secondary motive. I had long speculated about the more profound meaning of the [N]azi philosophy."

Schönberg's pupil Leonard Stein recalls that his teacher oriented his shaping of the declamation to the diction of Winston Churchill, whose voice he had heard on the radio, and made a connection between the conception of op. 41, the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and Roosevelt's declaration of war on Japan.

The title of the piece (composed between 12 March and 12 June 1942) refers to the historical figure Napoleon – not Adolf Hitler, who surely must have been meant at the time of composing the work. But Schönberg eventually rejected his original preference for the text, Lord Byron's The Isles of Greece, in favor of the ode which Byron wrote as an immediate reflex action to Napoleon's abdication in April 1814.

In the 1930s and 40s, Byron was acknowledged in American feuilletons as a Bohemian and adventurer and particularly as a freedom fighter. Schönberg was thoroughly committed to that popular image of the poet. However, behind Byron's scorn lies the ironically literarized disappointment at Napoleon's departure from the political stage – a reading of the text in contradiction to Schönberg's intentions, as Dirk Buhrmann has pointed out.

Contrary to Byron's text, Schönberg is also concerned with tyranny and the promise of democracy and human dignity in the past. In this political approach, tyranny and its overthrow form a "constant historical antithesis, the resolution of which can only occur through a reversion and therefore must be addressed as a utopia" (Beat Föllmi).

One finds in the Ode to Napoleon a changed conception of the "method of composing with twelve tones related only to one another;" Schönberg saw the intended purpose of a cohering effect as being no longer jeopardized by reminiscences of tonality. This political manifesto additionally uses a symbol-laden composing technique; when the reciter declaims the words "the earthquake voice of victory," motivic recalls of the Marseillaise and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony combine.

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