
Modern Psalm, op. 50C



Title	Modern Psalm for Speaker, four-part Mixed Chorus and Orchestra, op. 50C
Time of Origin	1950
Premiere	29 May 1956, Cologne
Duration	ca. 5 min.

In the summer of 1921, Arnold Schönberg was asked by the local authorities of Mattsee in Salzburg to leave the town because of his Jewish origins – an instance of racial resentment that led to a reassessment of his own national identity. Schönberg's reflections found expression in numerous letters and writings, but they influenced his compositions with even greater intensity. In 1933, Schönberg had to face personal consequences: in early March of that year, Max von Schillings, President of the Prussian Academy, declared during a meeting in which Schönberg was also present that Jewish influence in the Academy had to cease. Anticipating the official dismissal, Schönberg wrote a resignation letter on 20 March. In April, the "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service," specifically designed to target Jews, was passed in the Reichstag. After revealing the existential threat to German Jews posed by National Socialism in the essay "Einsteins falsche Politik" (Einstein's False Politics), Schönberg realized the precariousness of his position and left Germany together with his family on 17 May. On 23 May, 1933, Schönberg finally received his "leave of absence" from the Academy, which was changed to a dismissal in September. He first emigrated to Paris, where he produced a series of political writings on Judaism, founded a United Jewish Party, and converted to Judaism: "I have long been determined to be a Jew [...] Now, a week ago, I also officially returned to the Jewish religious community, although it is not religion that separates me from it [...] but rather my view of the necessity of adapting the church to the demands of modern life." (Letter to Anton Webern, 4 August, 1933) His reconversion took place on 24 July at the Union Libérale Israélite in the presence of Marc Chagall. On 25 October, Schönberg left France with his family, reaching New York on 31 October. After a series of further writings on "Jewish Affairs," Schönberg conceived the "Four-Point Program for Jewry" in 1938, in which he described ways of forming Jewish forces that could liberate and rescue the threatened Jewish population of Europe. With the exception of a few minor statements, this document effectively marked the end of Schönberg's involvement with the political dimension of the Jewish cause. But the search for his nationality continued, even if now the focus had shifted primarily to a very personal level. The preoccupation with the concept of God, which Schönberg had recognized as a central element of Jewish identity (and had elaborated in "Moses und Aron" and "Der biblische Weg") culminated in the composition of the "Modern Psalms." "Dreimal tausend Jahre," op. 50A, sets a short lyric poem from the "Jordan Lieder" by Dagobert Runes. Opus

50B uses the original Hebrew text of Psalm 130, "De Profundis," while Opus 50C is based on Schönberg's own text, the first in a series of sixteen short psalms written during the last ten months of his life. Between 29 September 1950 and 3 July 1951 Schönberg drafted the texts of the "Modern Psalms." These texts formulate his deeply religious thoughts in the form of a multi-faceted personal address to God in paraphrases of the Old Testament psalms. The composer had entitled each of the individual texts either "Psalm" or "Modern Psalm" and given them the collective title of "Modern Psalms," presumably with the intention of setting them to music; at the time of his death (on 13 July 1951), however, he had composed music only for the first text, now simply referred to as "Modern Psalm," op. 50C. Schönberg related the full title of his work-in-progress to Oskar Adler in a letter dated 23 April 1951: "Psalms, Prayers and other Discourses with and about God." The text for op. 50C ("O, you my God: all people praise you") encompasses both direct address to God as well as discourse about God, just as the title related to Adler describes. Schönberg's score comprises sixty eight measures, with the musical texture alternating between a Speaker (using "Sprechstimme" or "speaking voice") and a six-part chorus, accompanied by orchestra.

© Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien
www.schoenberg.at