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**OTHMAR SCHOECK'S CHORAL BALLAD *DER POSTILLON*,  
AND HOW NOT TO WRITE AN OPERA**

**Abstract:** Othmar Schoeck's choral ballad *Der Postillon* of 1909 was a compromise for a composer still ill-at-ease with large-scale forms. Its lyrical element allowed his song-writing gift to flourish, while its more dramatic moments acted as a testing-ground for his operatic ambitions.

**Keywords:** Othmar Schoeck (1886-1957); *Der Postillon*; ballad; Hermann Hesse; Nikolaus von Lenau; choral music

What I have in mind is no [serious] drama, but a fresh, cheerful, light opera, with which I would like to awaken joyful feelings in people's hearts, and this with quite subjective music in the sense of the brilliant older Italians ...<sup>1</sup>

Thus responded the young Swiss composer Othmar Schoeck (1886-1957) in late March 1908 to the poet Hans Reinhart in Winterthur, who had recently sent him his verse drama *Der Garten des Paradieses* in the hope that he might set it to music. Schoeck was at the end of a year's study with Max Reger at the Leipzig Conservatory, was about to return home to try and find employment as a conductor (which he did, with local male-voice choirs), and was obviously keen to spread his wings and embark upon bigger, more impressive compositional projects than hitherto. His year with Reger had started well, though the two men had fallen out over the ensuing months. We know from various sources that Reger demanded quantity as well as quality from his students – all kinds of the trickiest counterpoint exercises, for example – but nor was he an ideal model himself. He had hardly written anything for orchestra up to this point and never had, nor ever would, move into the world of music theatre.

Schoeck's only large-scale work up to this point had been his *Ratcliff Overture* for orchestra, written at the close of his studies with Reger. It is a quarter-hour-long piece that is perhaps a little impersonal, yet thoroughly successful in what it aims to achieve. But Schoeck also knew what was blindingly obvious to every German-speaking composer of his day: if you wanted to establish yourself as a composer and ensure yourself an adequate income, you had to compose an opera. The example of Richard Strauss was what dazzled, of course, for

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Sulzer, *Zehn Komponisten um Werner Reinhart*, Vol. 2, Winterthur, Stadtbibliothek Winterthur, 1980, p. 199.

the première of his *Salome* in late 1905 and its many subsequent productions across Germany had made him a rich man. Who would not want to try and emulate him?

When one considers that Hans Reinhart came from one of the richest families in Switzerland, it is perhaps surprising that a young, as yet unknown composer should turn down the opportunity to work with him. But there are mitigating circumstances: his *Garten des Paradieses* is simply awful, and full of undigested Wagnerisms. Over a decade later, Reinhart would offer it to Arnold Schoenberg too, who also turned it down, and with equal tact.<sup>2</sup> Schoeck's explanation to Reinhart was probably not just a convenient excuse, however, and would seem truly to have reflected his opinions at the time. He was soon embarking on bigger projects, to be sure: in 1909 he wrote his Violin Sonata op. 16, dedicated to Stefi Geyer, who was at the time the unapproachable object of his passion. It was followed a year later by a Violin Concerto that was twice as long again – and also dedicated to Stefi. For all their attractiveness, however, these two works display most of all Schoeck's uncertainty in dealing with large-scale forms. The Sonata is perhaps the more successful of the two (only because it is more succinct), and although the Violin Concerto (subtitled 'quasi una fantasia') has been recorded several times – its song-like melodies are captivating, and are what really carry it off – it is in fact diffuse, unconcentrated, and more or less abandons any attempt at motivic unity in favour of a meandering tunefulness. It is rather obviously modelled on the concerto by Brahms, of whom certain passages are embarrassingly reminiscent, though at least Schoeck's orchestration is no worse.

But Schoeck was still – ostensibly – looking for an opera libretto; and when he became friends with Hermann Hesse in early 1911, the first thing Hesse did was to propose an operatic collaboration. One suggestion was his own novella *Anton Schivelbeyn's ohn-freywillige Reise*. Another was his novella *Pater Matthias*, while a libretto from Hesse's pen even exists that was also intended for Schoeck at about this time: *Bianca*, an improbable tale of jealousy, sex and murder set in Florence in 1400. Hesse further suggested Eichendorff's novella *Das Schloss Dürande* as a possible opera topic. Schoeck rejected them all. Hesse was already a well-known figure on the literary scene, of course, though he had almost no experience as a librettist, nor would he seem to us, with the benefit of hindsight, ever a likely candidate to become one. The only opera ever written to one of his texts was *Die Flüchtlinge*, which his friend Alfred Schlenker (a dentist-cum-amateur composer) had begun sketching the year before, and which was finished only four years later.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, for Schoeck to have

<sup>2</sup> See Margrit Joelson-Strohbach, ed., *Briefe an Hans Reinhart*, Winterthur, W. Vogel, 1985, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> This opera was later revised by the Swiss composer Meinrad Schütter and given a private performance with piano some forty years after it was written. The manuscript is held today by the Zentralbibliothek Zürich.

rejected within three years both a rich would-be librettist and a famous one, suggests either that he had abnormally high expectations, or that the problem really lay with the composer himself. It has hitherto been argued plausibly that Schoeck simply found none of Hesse's proposed texts suitable – though in fact he would revisit the *Dürande* idea thirty years later, with another librettist (instead of being his first opera, it thus became his last). Schoeck was currently busy with his Violin Concerto, the most obviously 'dramatic' of instrumental forms, but was still struggling to give coherence to his ideas. How, then, could he have embarked upon a project on a far larger scale, in which a dramatic trajectory could not be avoided by simply adding the subtitle of 'quasi una fantasia'? Hesse was placated with a free ticket to the first performance of Schoeck's *Postillon* for tenor solo, chorus and small orchestra, a few days after they met. This is appropriate, for the *Postillon* was the closest Schoeck had yet come to any kind of musico-dramatic conception.

The *Postillon* was written in late 1909. It was Schoeck's first substantial work after his Violin Sonata, and his first to employ an orchestra since the *Ratcliff Overture* of early 1908. It is a setting of a poem by Nikolaus Lenau that depicts a ride by stagecoach across an early Romantic, nighttime landscape. The coachman halts outside a graveyard to blow his horn, and explains that it is to honour his bosom friend who is laid to rest there: 'Here I always have to halt, in order to play a brotherly greeting to him who lies there under the grass, his favourite tune'. And then the coach rides on.

Although he was only 23 at the time of writing the *Postillon*, Schoeck had already written almost a hundred songs for voice and piano. But the *Postillon* is his first setting of what we can truly regard as a 'ballad' – in other words, a narrative poem of the kind that had been so often favoured by Schubert, and occasionally by Wolf. Derrick Puffett has written of the *Postillon* as follows: '[the poem's] mixture of pastoral and morbid [recalls] ... Mahler's *Das klagende Lied*. The real model, however, was Wolf's choral ballad *Der Feuerreiter* ... passages like the "chorale" beginning at bar 139, or the coda, could have come straight from that work'.<sup>4</sup> Puffett also remarks upon how the work's opening harmony is reminiscent of Tchaikovsky. But if one listens attentively, one also notices that the brass writing sounds at times a little Wagnerian, the wind writing occasionally Brahmsian, and that the transitions are not always as smooth as they should be. Furthermore, Schoeck's choral writing is still very foursquare, with more than a touch of the stock, Swiss provincial composer about it. Nevertheless, there are also moments of real beauty – especially in the tenor solo – that foreshadow things to come. And if the tempi are judged properly (which is sadly rare), then

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<sup>4</sup> Derrick Puffett, *The Song Cycles of Othmar Schoeck*, Berne, Paul Haupt, 1982, p. 24.

the episodic nature of the work is not nearly as noticeable, and its early Romantic ambience can dispel one's reservations.<sup>5</sup>

These stylistic inconsistencies are in part a natural result of the composer's youth – for there are few composers of 23 whose style is settled, mature and individual; most are still groping their way forward and are prone to latch onto one model, then another. But it is notable that many of Schoeck's songs do not betray the same stylistic uncertainties. While it would be a few years before his early influences had dissolved altogether, there are nevertheless several songs from this year and before it that display complete maturity – such as his *Peregrina II*, op. 17 No. 4, written several months before the *Postillon*. The real reason for the inconsistencies in *Postillon* is probably twofold. It lies on the one hand in its genre – or rather, in what Schoeck perceived its genre to be, namely a 'ballad', and thus something to be treated differently from his other songs, even from those that already betray a narrative tendency (such as *Peregrina II* itself); and on the other hand, it lies in what it is not - an opera.

The poem of the *Postillon* is ideally suited to semi-dramatic treatment, and its setting with choir and solo voice probably suggested itself to Schoeck immediately. Ten four-line strophes for the chorus set the scene – a balmy May evening, the coach and its four horses drawing the narrator across meadows and hills, through valleys and forests, all to the sound of the coachman's horn echoing across the green expanses of the early-Romantic German landscape. The coachman stops at a churchyard; there follow three strophes in which he (the tenor solo) tells of his dead comrade who lies buried there; and then three strophes for the chorus round off the story as they travel onwards and the sound of the post horn echoes in the memory of the narrator. The past tense of the outer strophes moves to the present tense for the tenor's solo 'aria' in the middle, which in its implied dialogue with the narrator (who is thus also implicitly dragged into a 'present' tense) comes closer to being 'dramatic' in conception than anything Schoeck had hitherto written. It is 'dramatic' at one remove, of course, for the coachman's text at the same time only exists in the narrator's recollection.

In writing such a semi-dramatic work, Schoeck was hardly doing anything out of the ordinary, for the Romantic era was littered with choral ballads, oratorios and dramatic cantatas, ranging from Schumann's essays in such genres (which Schoeck most probably knew) to Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* (which Schoeck could not have known). But while it is unlikely that he could have expunged from his memory all the examples with which he was familiar, it seems more likely that Schoeck's desire to write an opera, and his fear of doing so, mostly determined *Der Postillon*, in style and form. The mountain that every German-

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<sup>5</sup> The tempi on the recent CD recording by the MDR Choir and Symphony Orchestra under Mario Venzago (on Claves 50-2701) are as close to perfect as one could hope for.

language composer either had to surmount or to circumnavigate, of course, was Wagner. He is mentioned little in the reports of the composer written by his friends in later life, for Schoeck only rarely referred to Wagner, except to quip that ‘the best Wagner music was written by Wolf and Bruckner’ or to complain that there was too much ‘Wille’ (‘will’, or ‘intent’) in Wagner’s music, and that where there was too much will, the music ‘smells of sweat’.<sup>6</sup> But we know from accounts of third parties that Schoeck was studying Wagner’s scores quite assiduously in the years after his return from Leipzig. One Karl Alfons Meyer wrote in 1939 how Schoeck had, almost three decades before, inadvertently been responsible for his conversion to Wagner’s music. For unbeknownst to Schoeck, the two men were living next door to each other on the Bergstrasse in about 1911, and Meyer wrote that ‘I shall never forget how he used to play from the *Ring*’.<sup>7</sup>

Puffett’s suggestion that the ‘stylistic inconsistenc[ies]’ of the *Postillon* are in fact really a result of ‘an imperfect assimilation of Wagner’ is probably right, but in more ways than one.<sup>8</sup> It was not just the Wagnerian harmonic inheritance that Schoeck had not yet come to terms with, but the whole question of ‘music drama’ itself. Schoeck’s nervousness at how to approach this inheritance was also, no doubt, behind his excuse to Hans Reinhart upon turning down his Wagnerian *Garten des Paradieses*, as quoted above: ‘What I have in mind is no [serious] drama, but a fresh, cheerful, light opera’. Schoeck was probably all too aware that he had not learnt from Reger the kind of skills in thematic working that he will have assumed any composer of music drama would need. And if one cannot manipulate one’s material in a symphonic manner, one cannot construct a web of leitmotifs such as any self-respecting composer of music drama was expected to do. But his lack of the experience he seems to have deemed necessary before embarking upon an opera was not just Reger’s fault (if any blame were indeed justified). For although Schoeck had pondered staying in Germany after his studies in Leipzig in order to find a job at a provincial theatre, he had returned instead to conduct male-voice choirs at home, and thus deprived himself of acquiring the first-hand knowledge of the stage – and thus also of what works on it and what does not – that became such second nature to Strauss, Pfitzner and others.

The only way out of the (post-)Wagnerian dilemma for Schoeck, of course, would be not to write a music drama at all, but ‘a cheerful, light [implicitly: number] opera’. Yet even this prospect seems to have unnerved him. And so, for the moment, as a kind of dry run *en*

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g., Hans Corrodi, ‘Othmar Schoeck und Hugo Wolf’, in: *Schweizerische Musikzeitung*, Vol. 96, No. 9, 1956, p. 347.

<sup>7</sup> Letter of 22/23 June 1939 from Karl Alfons Meyer to Werner Reinhart, quoted in: Sulzer, *Zehn Komponisten um Werner Reinhart*, Vol. 2, 1980, p. 372.

<sup>8</sup> Puffett, *The Song Cycles of Othmar Schoeck*, p. 25.

*miniature*, he wrote a choral ballad instead: a genre far enough removed from Wagner for him to evade any comparisons or awkward questions; close enough to his favoured field of song-writing for him to be able to construct his music using the same formal techniques as in his lieder (the tenor solo, for example, is dominated in the orchestra by a two-bar Wolfian ostinato such as Schoeck often employed in his songs with piano); and nevertheless still ‘operatic’ enough for him to indulge in some orchestral scene-painting, to gain experience writing an ‘aria’ with orchestral accompaniment, and to tell a narrative on a bigger scale than that to which he had hitherto been accustomed.

As we have seen, the *Postillon* was followed by a larger-scale work in which the ‘dramatic’ was internalised, namely the Violin Concerto. Not until after Schoeck had completed that work did he at last embark upon an opera. Even then, it was not really an opera at all, but a singspiel with dialogue in which there would be no leitmotifs, no reminiscence motives, and no symphonic development of any kind. And presumably in order to evade the demands and deadlines that librettists might be expected to make, he chose a singspiel text by an author who could make no demands at all, for the simple reason that he was dead: it was *Erwin und Elmire* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a banal, pastoral tale of love not even properly lost before it is found again, and all live happily ever after. Ironically, of the two works, Schoeck’s choral ballad *Der Postillon* is the more dramatic, and its anonymous tenor coachman more human and more sympathetic than any of the cardboard-cut-out figures that people the world of *Erwin*. The work that we presume was meant as an *Ersatz*, a substitute in preparation for the ‘real thing’, turned out in fact to be far more real.

## Summary

Upon his return from studying in Leipzig under Max Reger, the Swiss composer Othmar Schoeck (1886-1957) embarked upon a series of works that display not least his uncertainty in dealing with large-scale forms. His ambition was to write an opera, and he was at this time offered a number of potential libretti by Hermann Hesse and Hans Reinhart. But he turned them all down. His ballad *Der Postillon* of 1909, for tenor solo, male chorus and chamber orchestra, can be seen as a compromise work: one that allowed Schoeck to exploit his already well-developed song-writing gifts, while at the same time moving tentatively into the realm of the dramatic.