

Los Angeles fires destroy the archive of 20th century composer Arnold Schoenberg

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More than 100,000 scores, in addition to the complete musical and personal archive of 20th century composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), have been lost in the Pacific Palisades wildfire.

The fire destroyed the home of Larry Schoenberg, the composer's 83-year-old son, as well as a separate building in which the Schoenberg archive was stored. Belmont Publishers is the publisher of the composer's works, and the losses in the fire include its entire inventory of scores and other works, as well as manuscripts, correspondence and other memorabilia.

Schoenberg, the composer of such late Romantic works as "Verklärte Nacht" (1899) and "Gurrelieder" (1900-03), and later the developer and proponent of the 12-tone system of composition, was born in Vienna in 1874. He came to the United States after the rise of Hitler to power, and settled in southern California, where he died.

Belmont Music Publishers, founded in 1965, issued a statement promising to create digital versions of all of the composer's work. In a press release, the company called the loss "not just a physical destruction of property but a profound cultural blow."

"While we have lost our full inventory of sales and rental materials, we are determined to continue our mission of bringing Schoenberg's music to the world," said the statement. "We hope to rebuild our catalog in a new, digital format that will ensure Schoenberg's music remains accessible for future generations. We will keep you posted on our progress through this website or you can reach out to us by email, and we will contact you with updates."

It added that its digitization plans would provide "access to scholars, performers, and music enthusiasts through online platforms. This shift toward digital distribution will not only help preserve the catalog for

future generations but also ensure that Schoenberg's groundbreaking music continues to inspire and challenge musicians worldwide."

The original scores are safe and remain at the Arnold Schoenberg Center in Vienna, having been transferred from the University of Southern California almost 30 years ago. Belmont's losses could lead to difficulties or delays for musical ensembles who have relied upon it to supply scores and other materials, however, and who have plans to perform the music of Schoenberg in the coming months. There is also the deeper impact of the loss of correspondence, manuscripts and other memorabilia, of use to scholars and members of the general public interested in Schoenberg's life and work.

As Leon Botstein, the well-known president of Bard College and also music director of the American Symphony Orchestra (ASO), told the *New York Times*, "It's a catastrophe. It was an indispensable resource." The ASO relied upon Belmont Publishers for the scores to Schoenberg's "Gurrelieder," which it performed at Carnegie Hall last year. "They were the lenders, they were the ones who helped you out," he added.

Schoenberg was a brilliant musician, a complex and contradictory figure who had wide-ranging interests and a very wide circle of pupils, friends and acquaintances. He devoted time to painting, for instance, and knew such artists as Oskar Kokoschka and Wassily Kandinsky, to whom he was particularly close for a period of time. At this time and later, Schoenberg engaged in lengthy and lively correspondence, and influenced many by the force of his ideas.

His rejection of musical tonality, beginning around 1908, reflected in part the growing social and political

tensions of the early 20th century that would erupt in the first world war just a few years later. Schoenberg's well-known works from this period include "Erwartung" (1909) and "Pierrot Lunaire" (1912).

In the aftermath of the war, Schoenberg developed the 12-tone method of composition, in which all 12 notes of the scale are given more or less equal importance. This method was one that was notoriously difficult for listeners, and has never found a wide audience. Schoenberg influenced many others, however, including his pupils Anton Webern and Alban Berg. Berg somewhat modified the system, and found a wider audience for such works as *Wozzeck* (1924), "Lyric Suite" (1924-26) and *Lulu* (1935).

In the Los Angeles area beginning in the 1930s, Schoenberg played a very active role as part of the émigré community that sought refuge from Nazism. He socialized with Erich Korngold, Bruno Walter, Alma Mahler and others. He befriended many, including American composer George Gershwin, who was a neighbor, and actor Charlie Chaplin. Among guests whom he welcomed to dinner were Harpo Marx and the actor Peter Lorre. Among his friends in these émigré circles at this time was also Hanns Eisler, another one of his pupils. Eisler, who had earlier turned demonstratively against Schoenberg's teachings, nevertheless acknowledged his debt to him as a teacher.

During this period he also softened somewhat as far as his earlier dogmatic insistence on 12-tone composition. He continued to compose as well as to teach, and among his works from this period were some that returned to tonality. His quite correct conceptions about the nature of the creative process are reflected in his well-known tribute to Gershwin, which he wrote after Gershwin's early death, in 1937, and which the WSWS referenced in the year marking the centenary of Gershwin's birth.

The destruction of Schoenberg's archive highlights the all-encompassing significance of the wildfires, the latest and biggest disaster produced by human-induced climate change. The contradictions of capitalism—the anarchy of production and the conflict between the global economy and the nation-state system—are endangering human culture as they threaten war and dictatorship.



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