

Zeitschrift: Publikationen der Schweizerischen Musikforschenden Gesellschaft.
Serie 2 = Publications de la Société Suisse de Musicologie. Série 2

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Musikforschende Gesellschaft

Band: 32 (1982)

Artikel: The song cycles of Othmar Schoeck

Autor: Puffett, Derrick

Kapitel: Introduction

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858819>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

INTRODUCTION

James Joyce to Giorgio and Helen Joyce (15 January 1935):

Helen, please go out and buy Cassell's German-English, English-German Dictionary and sit down with Giorgio and study, first of all, the text of Gottfried Keller's poem sequence *Lebendig Begraben* which I forward under separate cover together with the piano score for bass voice by Othmar Schoeck, autographed by the composer. I heard this sung last night by the Bernese bass Fritz [sic] Loeffel (the leading bass in this country), bought the score just now and have rung up Prof. Fehr to ask O.S. to sign it for Giorgio. He is a youngish Zurich composer of about 42, principal works are lieder and two big operas *Penthesilea* (book by Kleist) *Don Ranudo* (comic). If I can judge by last night he stands head and shoulders over Stravinsky and Antheil as composer for orchestra and voice anyhow. I did not know Keller wrote this kind of gruesome-satiric semi-pious verse but the effect of it on any audience is tremendous. The singer got 8 or 10 calls. . . . Schoeck is a type rather like Beckett who gets up at 2.30 p.m. his wife says. But I hope to catch him before he falls asleep again. (1)

Joyce's musical tastes were eccentric, and some of the causes he championed are best forgotten. But he was not alone in admiring Schoeck. Musicians as important as Berg and Busoni have praised his music, and Furtwängler called him 'an artist of stature and integrity' [*ein grosser und charaktersvoller Künstler*].² Why then is he not better known?

In Switzerland, to be sure, his reputation has always been high. He was conductor of one of the country's major provincial orchestras, and also a respected recital accompanist. In the 1930s his works were described by one critic as the 'purest . . . expression of the Swiss character in music',³ and as a lieder composer

1) *The Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Stuart Gilbert (London, 1957), p. 356. On Schoeck's relations with Joyce see below, p. 235, and D pp. 249-52.

2) *Briefe*, ed. Frank Thiess (Wiesbaden, 1965), p. 205. Translations mine unless otherwise attributed.

3) Willi Schuh, in *Schweizer Musikbuch*, ed. Schuh (Zurich, 1939), p. 149.

he was ranked as a worthy successor to Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Wolf. Even during his lifetime, however, this recognition was accompanied by deeper neglect. The critical euphoria was not sustained, many of his works failed to catch the public interest, and he never gained the international acceptance necessary to the survival of any artist. On his death in 1957 Walter Abendroth, the Pfitzner biographer, wrote that Schoeck was already regarded as one whose work belonged to a world of the past.¹ Since then he has joined that host of shadowy figures whose music is mentioned with respect but seldom performed.

Certainly he is little known in England. In some of our standard musical histories and surveys the references to him have an abstract quality which hardly conveys a sense of deep familiarity with his works. William Austin, in his book in the Norton series, gives him two lines in a chapter entitled 'Composers Comparable to Prokofiev';² David Cox, writing in a 'history of song', seems to work from a handful of early volumes.³

Performances in England are rare; singers, if they bother to learn the music at all, tend to prefer the relatively conventional early songs to the later, more personal ones. Records quickly go out of circulation. In view of this widespread absence of information it is not surprising that the general impression of Schoeck should be of a derivative, rather uninteresting composer, whose former eminence reflects poorly on the state of Swiss music in the first half of this century.

In fact both the history of Switzerland and its geographical disposition impose special problems in the way of an accurate assessment of its artists. Divided by its languages into regions of French, German and Italian affiliation, and by its political system into twenty-two small cantons, Switzerland has paid the price for its famous '500 years of democracy and peace' with the lack of a coherent artistic tradition. It was not until the

1) 'In Memoriam Othmar Schoeck', Musica 11 (1957), p. 222.

2) Music in the Twentieth Century (London, 1966).

3) A History of Song, ed. Denis Stevens (London, 1960).

nineteenth century that nationalism became a significant cultural force, first in literature, with the novels of Gottfried Keller (1819-90), and then in painting. In music, however, no national school developed. Swiss composers have always been dependent on foreign traditions; in some cases they have actually gone to live abroad. Arthur Honegger (1892-1955) went to Paris and joined the Groupe des Six; Frank Martin (1892-1974) went to Holland; and Ernest Bloch (1880-1959) went to the U.S.A.

Schoeck of course lived in Zurich nearly all his life. The significance of that fact, as regards an assessment of his work, is twofold. To the uninformed outsider it makes him seem more 'provincial', and therefore less interesting, than a composer who lived abroad; to a Swiss it gives him a national, or even a nationalistic, importance which the other lacks. Both views are essentially misguided. That Schoeck remained in Switzerland does not mean he was oblivious to the musical activity going on in other countries; if he chose to ignore it, it must have been for other reasons. By the same token, the qualities that give his music whatever importance it has are not necessarily those that make it most 'Swiss'. During the 1930s and 1940s Schoeck had the pleasure, or the embarrassment, of reading articles about himself by Swiss writers which now seem almost ludicrous in their excessive praise. Time, then, to detach him from the local setting where he has hitherto enjoyed dominion and to let him take his more modest, but more meaningful, place in the context of European music as a whole.

But there is another reason why Schoeck's music has failed to gain ground, and one which suggests it will never be widely popular. This is its complete absence of surface glamour, or what some would consider its dullness. At first hearing it is apt to sound grey and undistinguished, except perhaps for a phrase or a chord; then, as one listens again, one is gradually drawn into the spirit of its lines and cadences until at last one grasps the entire song, which far from seeming merely 'odd' and 'monotonous' now exerts a binding fascination. Like Fauré's it is an art of subtlety and restraint, characteristics with which it combines that quality familiar from Schumann and referred to by Germans as Innigkeit. Schoeck himself recognised that this limited the

audience for his music. 'One cannot expect people to enjoy my songs in Texas,' he told his friend and chronicler Werner Vogel; 'the essence of our German-Swiss music is the Innige, the Seelische.' And on another occasion: 'For my works there is almost no proper performing-place. They belong neither in the concert hall nor in the church; sooner than anywhere else in people's heads, so that they possess the works whole, are fulfilled by them and forget everything else around them.'¹

These remarks suggest a third reason why Schoeck's music has not been widely accepted, and that is its intimate dependence on the German language. Not only is almost the whole of his output vocal - whether opera, choral music or solo song - but it arises out of its texts in the closest possible way. With true humility towards his poets Schoeck regarded his songs not as separate musical entities, with their own autonomous existence, but as realisations of qualities inherent in the verse. 'It is really a question of a metamorphosis of the poem. The song is the poem in another shape. The poem is as it were the chrysalis, in which the miracle of metamorphosis takes place and from which the butterfly, like the song, then escapes.'² (The metaphor is of course Schumann's.) Nothing was more distasteful to him than merely 'pouring music over' a poem, as he put it,³ and he would live with a text for years, sometimes for decades, before committing his 'metamorphosis' to paper. Since these texts were often from some of the very greatest German poets - Goethe, Mörike, Lenau, Eichendorff - some measure of literary discernment, as well as a willingness to enter into the spirit of German romanticism, is required in anyone who wishes to appreciate his music to the full.

A large bibliography accumulated during Schoeck's lifetime. Since his death the flow has inevitably declined, but recently some exceptionally good articles have appeared, notably those by Rolf Urs Ringger. The chief biographical source is a book by the late

1) G pp. 144, 152.

2) Ibid., p. 87.

3) Schuh, 'Rückblick auf Othmar Schoeck', SMZ 101 (1961), p. 219. See also Schoeck, 'Zwiegespräch mit Willi Schuh', Musik der Zeit X (1955), p. 5.

Hans Corrodi, Othmar Schoeck: Bild eines Schaffens (Frauenfeld, 1956). The product of forty years' devotion to Schoeck and his music - the first edition appeared in 1930 - it has all the conventional merits and weaknesses of a 'Life and Works'. It is detailed and evocative, and includes many quotations from contemporary letters and reviews. On the other hand, it is vague about dates and sources, its judgment is often at fault, and on critical matters it habitually raises more questions than it answers. Further biographical information is found in Vogel's recent documentary book, Othmar Schoeck: Leben und Schaffen im Spiegel von Selbstzeugnissen und Zeitgenossenberichten (Zurich, 1976). Vogel met Schoeck in 1942, when he served as accompanist to the latter's wife, a noted soprano. His diary of their meetings was published in 1965 under the title Othmar Schoeck im Gespräch (Zurich). The thematic catalogue compiled by Vogel for the occasion of Schoeck's seventieth birthday - Thematisches Verzeichnis der Werke von Othmar Schoeck (Zurich, 1956) - is the fullest source of information on the music. All these works are cited repeatedly in the course of this book; without them, indeed, it could hardly have been written.

Vogel's doctoral dissertation, published as Wesenszüge von Othmar Schoecks Liedkunst (Zurich, 1950), still remains the standard work on the songs. Of the numerous shorter studies the most useful are by the Strauss scholar Willi Schuh. Schuh has also written on Schoeck in his books Schweizer Musik der Gegenwart (Zurich, 1948), Von neuer Musik (Zurich & Freiburg, 1955) and Umgang mit Musik (Zurich, 1970). The remaining bibliography is a mass of memoirs, reminiscences and other writings by nearly a hundred different authors.

What lacks in all this documentation, despite the excellence of much of it, is an overall view. No one to my knowledge has attempted to trace Schoeck's development through his works and draw critical conclusions. Vogel refrained from such an undertaking while the composer was still alive, and in his dissertation limited himself to describing points of style.¹ Unfortunately most

1) See W p. 7.

of his examples are from the early songs, as are many of Schuh's. It is as if the period of keenest interest in Schoeck's music, when people were most concerned with looking at it in detail, came before he was ready. The works that can now be recognised as masterpieces have not on the whole been analysed so much (though there has been plenty of general discussion), and some of the later songs remain virtually unexplored. This imbalance has led to curious, and sometimes even contradictory, generalisations:

Viewed as a whole, Schoeck's art conforms much less to the law of a development [Entwicklung] than to that of an ever more cautious circling round and subtle opening up of what was in him from the start. (1)

He has a sure feeling for what is essential in the masters, but also for what is essential in himself. His style therefore develops [entwickelt sich] very steadily, . . . in a straight line . . . (2)

One of our tasks, clearly, is to decide whether or not a 'development' exists, and if so to describe its nature.

Another, equally clearly, is to try to assess the value of the late works. These were commonly supposed to take Schoeck's mature style onto a higher plane, until called into question by Ringger:

No discerning person will wish to deny the differences within Schoeck's oeuvre. Thus the once much played Violin Concerto has since shown itself to be a mere reflection of the Brahms. The Concerto for Cello and String Orchestra cannot simply be labelled as a purified work of old age, but lacks vigour and inspiration. The late song cycles are often no more than reminiscences of the early individual songs, and make one suspect that with them 'the last master of the lied' has outlived himself. (3)

This is bold, but without analytical support it is hardly more conclusive than the indiscriminating praise it sets out to deflate. If there is a decline - and I agree that there is - where does it begin, and how does it show itself? Are all the late cycles derivative? Or is the whole process more complex? Only

1) Schuh, 'Othmar Schoeck', SMZ 97 (1957), p. 126.

2) K.H. David, 'Schoecks Opern', SMZ 71 (1931), p. 50.

3) '"Lebendig begraben": Othmar Schoeck und seine Nachwelt', Die Weltwoche, 18 August 1967.

when these and similar questions have been answered will we arrive at a realistic assessment of Schoeck's achievement.

'But a view based on analysis!', it may be objected, 'how can this tell us anything that matters? Schoeck was nothing if not an instinctive artist, and any view that represents him as a technician, experimenting from work to work, is bound to distort.' The second part of the statement, at least, is not to be taken lightly. In music it is never easy to distinguish the empirical from the premeditated, and analysis will always be accompanied by suspicions of factitiousness. This is not important if a significant amount of the material convinces; what is being demonstrated, after all, is a composer's mastery of his craft, not a preoccupation with experiment per se, and mastery can best be shown in the progress from one work to the next. (Whether this progress constitutes a continuous development is another matter.)

And Schoeck was a highly skilled craftsman, in full command of the technical means of his age. It is true that he tended to select only those techniques which suited his particular expressive aims, and that as these aims clarified he drew less and less on external influences, so that his music often has a conventional appearance. Yet there is hardly a page in his mature work that is without usages, especially in the field of rhythmic variation, which could have been acquired at no other time. Usually these are clear for all to see; but sometimes they are so disguised by the romantic sensibility that they manifest themselves only obliquely, in what the literary critic Emil Staiger described as 'new, half involuntary forms . . . , relationships, structural features of a kind of their own, which are scarcely to be grasped in a literal way but do not escape the listener.'¹ How are such things to be brought to light except by analysis?

To be sure, the argument against it has the composer's authority. Again and again in conversation Schoeck derides the idea of Kunst-Verstehen, the idea that one can understand a work of art. 'There is no end to analysis! Discussing a work of

1) 'Othmar Schoeck', SMZ 97 (1957), p. 2.

art is like talking about love. One can as little demonstrate art as one can demonstrate love.' Another quotation explains this antipathy: Schoeck was not the only composer - Mahler was another - to resist the notion of people dissecting his music, an activity which seemed to strike at the very roots of his creativity. 'I always feel uneasy about analyses of my music by strangers. I prefer not to know anything about them; they paralyse my creative strength. All knowledge means the loss of paradise!'¹ Such attitudes, natural in the artist, are untenable in the critic. To dwell exclusively on the Ausdrucksmusiker in Schoeck may be to miss other, perhaps equally important, aspects. We do well to remember Mallarmé's dictum that poems are made with words, not with ideas. Only by getting inside the notes can we do justice to Schoeck the composer.

This book is a critical study: that is to say, it is concerned with evaluation. Our material is the song cycles: they are the most significant part of Schoeck's output, and in no other genre is his 'development' so clearly reflected. All the cycles are dealt with in order, and songs from each are discussed in detail; but there is no attempt at a comprehensive 'Works'. Within the chronological framework, rather, we follow the evolution of the cycle in Schoeck's hands and the development of certain technical ideas, drawing the threads together as we proceed but saving our larger conclusions until the end.

There are several advantages in choosing the song cycles as our field of study. Their significance and representative value will have to be taken on trust: without such assumptions the enterprise could hardly get off the ground, and giving them substance is part of its justification. But there are other reasons why the song cycles are peculiarly fitted to a discussion of the issues raised. First, they are all mature pieces. The earliest is the Elegie of 1921-3, written when Schoeck was in his late thirties. After this almost all his vocal music is cyclic, presenting an integrated body of works which gives unity to the

1) G pp. 43, 118.

second half of his career, Thus, by concentrating on the cycles, not only are we dealing with a self-sufficient genre but we can say something about those middle- and late-period works which have hitherto been neglected.

Indeed it is precisely on these mature pieces, as I hope to show, that a critical evaluation properly rests. The early songs (by which phrase I refer to all those preceding the Elegie) contain good things, but they are essentially derivative. Now and then a technical idea Schoeck is later to use peeps out, but little is done with it: all is embryonic, a slow groping towards a mature style. It is what happens after this, when the style is established and the technique in full control, that is really impressive. The ideas branch out, there is greater individuality and a fascinating pattern emerges. Questions of style, technique and development - these are surely the ones that matter where Schoeck is concerned, not questions of 'melody', 'harmony' or whatever, questions which imply an impossible separation of the elements and lead to no interesting conclusion.¹

The book is in three parts. Part I provides a background to the discussion of Schoeck's cycles, first through a study of his life, then through a study of works that influenced him. I avoid using the word 'biography' in the title of the former chapter because it is in no sense, and is not intended to be, a properly researched biography. It uses almost no material gathered at first

- 1) On Schoeck's use of melody see W p. 115ff.; Schuh, 'Marginalien zu Othmar Schoecks Penthesilea-Melodik', SMZ 108 (1968). On Schoeck's use of harmony see OS pp. 429-30; W pp. 60, 65, 73-4, 162-3; Willi Arnold, 'Die Harmonik in der Musik Othmar Schoecks' (Diss., Zurich, 1973); Richard Eidenbenz, 'Über Harmonik und tonale Einheit in Othmar Schoecks "Penthesilea"', Schweizerisches Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft IV (1929); Brigitte Rosenthal, 'Untersuchungen zum Klavierlied von Othmar Schoeck' (Diss., Cologne, 1969), p. 26ff.; Schuh, 'Zur Harmonik der neuesten Werke von Othmar Schoeck', SMZ 68 (1928); 'Gestaltungsprinzipien im Schoeckschen Lied', SMZ 71 (1931); 'Zwei Schoeck-Miszellen', in Festgabe der Freunde zum 50. Geburtstag Othmar Schoecks [hereinafter referred to as Festgabe], ed. Schuh (Zurich, 1936), p. 127ff.; Vogel, 'Othmar Schoeck: Vom Künstler, seinem Schöpfungstum und seinem Werk', SMZ 96 (1956).

hand, though facts have been cross-checked where possible. At the same time it includes material that is not factual but interpretative, since besides giving the facts about Schoeck's life it describes the musical influences to which he was exposed and some of the more important changes in his style. It is in fact a kind of operatic overture to the book, announcing the principal themes and providing chronological perspective for what follows. The companion chapter, less modestly entitled 'The Nineteenth-Century Song Cycle', outlines the history of the genre before considering works to which Schoeck was artistically indebted.

Part II of the book discusses his own cycles. Since there is no absolute distinction, on purely musical grounds, between the cycles as such and the more elaborate sets of individual songs, I draw the line at works actually designated as cycles (Liederfolge is the commonest term). Nevertheless I do not hesitate to amplify the discussion where necessary with references to works in other genres; and in one case I include a whole chapter on a topic outside the immediate scope of the book, namely the early songs, which though not as interesting as the later ones are too relevant to be ignored. Also included are the Zehn Lieder nach Gedichten von Hermann Hesse, for their importance in Schoeck's development. Some works are treated at considerable length, others more briefly; but the result is, I think, a fair reflection of merit.

The third and final part of the book, consisting of a single short chapter, attempts to place Schoeck in his tradition and in the context of early twentieth-century music as a whole.

In conclusion a further aim should be mentioned, one which it is difficult to make clear before the biographical chapter has been read. It is, put simply, to show the inseparability of Schoeck's life and art. At several points in the book his works are described as 'autobiographical', meaning that they arose out of events in his life, events which determined his choice of texts and which the works themselves were intended to celebrate or resolve. Though knowledge of these events should not affect our judgment of the works, it certainly aids an understanding of them; and for Schoeck himself this autobiographical connection was crucial. This connection is in fact the chief justification for the biographical

chapter. As a mere history of factual events Schoeck's life is indeed of little interest. As a background to the works, however, it becomes absorbing in the fullest possible way. This book, then, is not only a study of the cycles; it is a study of the relation between life and work, a 'portrait of the artist' as comprehensive as space allows. One hopes that Joyce would have approved.

PART ONE

BACKGROUND

