

Modernist Music for Children: Three Sketches of Anton Webern in the Midcentury United States

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In a June 1962 article, *New York Times* critic Harold C. Schonberg offered his take on the future of the music of Anton Webern in the United States: “The chances are that Webern will appeal, in the long run, only to a refined taste. His music may be too abstruse, too forbidding, ever to attract a mass audience. For he is a highly abstruse composer.”¹ An initial inquiry into the history of Webern’s music in the United States yields little to counter Schonberg’s pessimistic stance. Though Webern never set foot in the country, he did benefit from the growing prominence of US music institutions during his lifetime. He participated in the transatlantic trade of new music during the interwar years, receiving two US-based commissions. He taught US composers in Vienna, and even dreamed of emigrating to the United States as his life

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¹ Harold C. Schonberg, “Kindness Kills: Webern’s Most Ardent Disciples May Succeed in Destroying His Ideals,” *New York Times*, June 10, 1962.

in Austria became increasingly difficult over the course of the 1930s.² Nevertheless, at the time of Webern's accidental death in 1945 at the hands of a US soldier, his music was known by few in the United States and admired by even fewer. Over the course of the next two decades, Webern's music would occasionally receive a positive response from audiences and critics. For the most part, however, admiration for Webern's music was concentrated among those already inclined to appreciate his severe brand of modernism: composers, academics, and intellectuals. One familiar anecdote, for example, tells of the chance meeting of John Cage and Morton Feldman after a 1950 performance of Webern's *Symphony*, op. 21 at Carnegie Hall. The two composers, who had left the concert early to avoid a performance of Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*, agreed that Webern's work was "beautiful."³ Cage was "shaking with excitement."⁴ Inside the hall, however, a "sizable segment of the audience" had "exercised its prerogative to dislike the composition."⁵

In this article I tell a different kind of story about the history of Webern's music in the United States. The three historical scenes I sketch below consider moments when US musicians sought to render Webern's work accessible and appealing to mainstream audiences. Cage, Feldman, and other members of the midcentury avant-garde tended to celebrate aspects of Webern's works legible only to those well versed in twentieth-century compositional practice; Schonberg argued that it was the "abstruse quality" of Webern's music that "more than anything else . . . attracted his followers."⁶ But the musicians whose work I document here crafted a different approach. They took the qualities of Webern's music that had most often troubled critics—extreme brevity, sparse textures, and pervasive quiet—and rebranded them as qualities that could be appreciated by anyone, even children. Deploying the rhetoric of childhood

² Webern's *Symphony*, op. 21 was commissioned by the New York-based League of Composers in 1929, and his *String Quartet*, op. 28 was commissioned by the US patroness Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge for the Berkshire Music Festival in 1938. For information on Webern's teaching of US students, see Hans Moldenhauer, "Webern as Teacher," *Music Educators Journal* 57 (1970): 30–33, 101–3. For further information on Webern's dreams of emigrating to the United States, see Hans Moldenhauer and Rosaleen Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of His Life and Work* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 408–9.

³ Morton Feldman, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. Frank O'Hara (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2004), 4.

⁴ Michael Hicks, "'Our Webern': Cage and Feldman's Devotion to Christian Wolff," in *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff*, ed. Stephen Chase and Philip Thomas (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 3–21, at 10.

⁵ H. T. [Howard Taubman], "Hisses, Applause for Webern Opus: Philharmonic Audience Openly Expresses Mixed Reaction—All Approve Casadesus," *New York Times*, January 27, 1950.

⁶ Schonberg, "Kindness Kills."

as a marketing tool, they tapped into a strand of US middlebrow culture in which children's programs frequently courted adult audiences.

In each of the three sketches that comprise this article, those who advocated on behalf of Webern's music—Bernstein, Slonimsky, and even Webern himself—reached the same conclusion: that the best way to make his music accessible and appealing to adults was to first do the same for children. The first sketch focuses on a performance of one of Webern's Six Pieces for Orchestra, op. 6/3, at a New York Philharmonic Young People's Concert conducted by Leonard Bernstein in January 1958. This opening section serves as an introduction to strategies for promoting Webern's music that are common to all three sketches, as well as midcentury middlebrow culture more generally. The second sketch backtracks to 1936 and Nicolas Slonimsky's presentation of the fourth of Webern's Five Pieces for Orchestra, op. 10 as part of his Children's Page series for the *Christian Science Monitor*. The subject of the third sketch, finally, is Webern's *Kinderstück* (*Children's Piece*) for piano, which was composed in 1924 but not premiered until 1966. Each of these moments connects to different aspects of middlebrow culture, from music appreciation programs to cartoons, but they are linked by the central role of children. Considered together, they present new insights into the interactions between modernism and the middlebrow, between Webern and the United States; they present a new way of hearing and understanding Webern's music.

Sketch One: 1958

Webern's op. 6/3 opens with a plaintive viola solo and concludes, some fifty-five seconds later, with shimmering celesta and muted trumpet over murmuring sixteenth notes in the harp. "Pretty special stuff, isn't it?" With these words Leonard Bernstein described the work during the very first Young People's Concert he conducted. Webern represented an atypical programming choice for Bernstein, who considered the music of the Second Viennese School emblematic of "the growing gap between composer and listener."⁷ But Gunther Schuller had chided him for omitting Webern from his 1957 *Omnibus* program on modern music, writing:

Since most of the young generation of European composers . . . are greatly under [Webern's] influence (much more so than Schönberg's),

⁷ Alicia Kopfstein-Penk, *Leonard Bernstein and His Young People's Concerts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 151. For an essential document of the "growing gap," published just one month after the Young People's Concert performance of op. 6/3, see Milton Babbitt, "Who Cares if You Listen?" *High Fidelity* 8, no. 2 (1958): 38–40.

omitting him in your portrait of modern music tilts the argument heavily to one side. Mind you, I appreciate the problems involved. It would be hard, on a program directed primarily at a nationwide audience of laymen, to spend time talking about a composer almost totally unknown—even as a name—in America.⁸

Bernstein heeded Schuller's advice, conducting op. 6 not only as part of the Young People's Concert but also on several subscription concerts later in 1958, as well as programming Webern's op. 10/1 on another Young People's Concert in November 1964. The Six Pieces for Orchestra, op. 6 had indeed been "almost totally unknown" in the United States prior to Bernstein's performances. The work had not been a part of the small flowering of US performances of Webern's music during the 1920s and 1930s, which included the world premieres of his Symphony, op. 21 (in New York) and String Quartet, op. 28 (in Pittsfield, MA). In fact, the US premiere of op. 6 did not occur until 1957, when the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra performed it under William Steinberg. The work garnered applause that, as James B. Ball reported, was "not confined to a handful of self-designated avant-garde students in the second balcony"—an indication that support for Webern's music went beyond intellectual circles, at least to some extent.⁹ A few weeks later the orchestra brought the work to New York, where its reception was again relatively positive, although *New York Times* critic Howard Taubman conceded that he found it "difficult music to grasp."¹⁰

Bernstein may have felt similarly to Taubman, for he prefaced his orchestra's performance of op. 6/3 with a disclaimer: "Now here we're going to play you a tiny little piece . . . that's so special in its sound and in its meaning that a lot of people don't understand it at all and just call it crazy modern music."¹¹ Following the performance, Bernstein probed the audience's aesthetic response: "What did you think of it? Did you think it was ugly? Think it was funny? Think it was pretty? Did it make you have feelings?" After the last question, the cameras broadcasting the concert cut to a girl in the audience nodding in assent. "Well, that's wonderful, because you see, that's just the wonder of music, that it can make . . . different people have different kinds of feelings."¹² And with

⁸ Gunther Schuller, letter to Leonard Bernstein, January 14, 1957, in *The Leonard Bernstein Letters*, ed. Nigel Simeone (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 358.

⁹ James B. Ball, "Orchestra in Fine Concert: Pianist Firkusny Acclaimed; Webern Pieces Win Applause," *Pittsburgh Press*, October 26, 1957.

¹⁰ Howard Taubman, "Music: Welcome Guests: Pittsburgh Symphony on Yearly Visit," *New York Times*, November 13, 1957.

¹¹ "Leonard Bernstein: Young People's Concerts | What Does Music Mean (Part 3 of 4)," January 18, 1958, video, 14:59, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajKVWJ_dj8M&t=871.

¹² "Leonard Bernstein: Young People's Concerts | What Does Music Mean (Part 4 of 4)," January 18, 1958, video, 14:27, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlZdXS2Tbus&t=75.

that he moved on. The theme of that first Young People's Concert was "What Does Music Mean?" Perhaps fearing his audience would conclude that op. 6/3 possessed no meaning at all, Bernstein was content to demonstrate that it meant *something*, that it was "special in its sound" even if it was also "crazy modern music."

* * *

Bernstein's performance of op. 6/3 serves as an apt introduction to two strategies for promoting Webern's music found in each of the three moments I document. The first of those strategies involved recontextualizing the most outsized aspects of Webern's musical style. Many critics of the period mocked or were simply bewildered by the brevity, sparseness, and quiet of pieces like op. 6/3; at an early US performance of the Five Pieces for Orchestra, op. 10, for example, one critic described the work as "mere shadows of sound, as fugacious as vapor."¹³ But Bernstein celebrated these qualities. So brief was op. 6/3, he argued, that "if you even sneeze or cough you're liable to miss it." It was precisely this fleeting quality, he continued, that made the piece special: "it's so delicate and so deep inside that you mustn't even breathe while it's going on!"¹⁴ Where others heard absence, Bernstein heard presence. For him, the musical features that made Webern's music stand apart from typical concert fare were also what made it worth paying attention to. In this way Bernstein's presentation of op. 6/3 is an example of a recurring pattern in which modernism's tendency to "upend aesthetic norms and patterns" became "itself a conventional reading pleasure to be pursued by readers."¹⁵ The same impulse to valorize the ways in which Webern's music diverged from standard musical practices is evident in each of the two sketches below.

The second strategy that Bernstein employed to promote op. 6/3 came by way of his claim that "very often young people can understand this kind of music better than older people." With this seemingly offhand (but likely calculated) remark, Bernstein turned his attention from the children in the audience to the adults sitting beside them. The latter group, as Sharon Gelleny describes, constituted a significant proportion of the Young People's Concerts' television audience:

Despite the program's name and its original conception as a children's show, fan mail revealed a strong interest in the show on the part of adult viewers. In fact, by 1964, after the series was moved to primetime, most

¹³ L. A. S., "From Zurich to Boston," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 20, 1926.

¹⁴ "Leonard Bernstein: Young People's Concerts | What Does Music Mean (Part 4 of 4)," at 1:04.

¹⁵ Daniel Tracy, "Middlebrow Modernism: Professional Writing, Genre, and the Circulation of Cultural Authority in U.S. Mass Culture, 1913–32" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008), 4.

of the viewers were adults, with children and teenagers comprising only 11% and 6% of the television audience, respectively.¹⁶

Nor were the Young People's Concerts the only educational music program to cultivate an adult audience. As Rebecca Bennett observes, the decades preceding World War II saw an array of "increasingly popular listening lessons billed as 'music appreciation'" grow to become "not just . . . education for children but also a veritable music-appreciation industry targeting adults."¹⁷ One product of that industry (and an important forerunner of the Young People's Concerts) was the *Music Appreciation Hour*, an NBC radio program that ran from 1928 to 1942; the *Hour* averaged four million adult listeners each week in addition to seven million children.¹⁸

The Young People's Concerts were, in other words, part of the middlebrow. As Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch argue, middlebrow culture took many forms, including an "aesthetic mode" employed by artists, "consumption practices that negotiate[d] among both intellectual and whimsical tastes," and "dissemination and transmission practices that aim[ed] for success with a large cross-section of the public."¹⁹ The Young People's Concerts fell into this last category. Like many middlebrow programs in the postwar United States, their target audience was members of the growing middle class, who were given the opportunity to align their formerly working-class tastes with their newly elevated economic status.²⁰ Educational music programs fit neatly within this upwardly mobile agenda. Parents could listen to the *Music Appreciation Hour* or watch the Young People's Concerts alongside their children without having to fear revealing their own lack of knowledge; if a potentially negative implication of the word "middlebrow" was that it dumbed down high art for the masses, these programs tactfully sidestepped the issue by naming children as their ostensible audience.²¹ To be sure, not

¹⁶ Sharon Gelleny, "Leonard Bernstein on Television: Bridging the Gap between Classical Music and Popular Culture," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 11–12 (1999): 48–67, at 56.

¹⁷ Rebecca Bennett, "Debating Music 'Appreciation' outside the American Classroom, 1930–1950," *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 33 (2012): 128–51, at 128.

¹⁸ Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 404.

¹⁹ Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch, "Introduction: The Middlebrow—Within or Without Modernism," *Modernist Cultures* 6 (2011): 1–17, at 2.

²⁰ Randal Doane, "Bourdieu, Cultural Intermediaries and *Good Housekeeping's* George Marek: A Case Study of Middlebrow Musical Taste," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9 (2009): 155–86, at 156.

²¹ Debates over whether the term "middlebrow" held a positive or negative connotation raged from the inception of the term. For two pieces of midcentury writing often credited with tipping the balance toward the negative, see Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow," in *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (1947; reprint, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1974),

every educational program cultivated an adult audience, but many capitalized on the rising tide of middlebrow culture to draw in adults at the same time as educating children.

While middlebrow programs expanded the audience for “high” art along socioeconomic lines, that expansion was frequently accompanied by a restrictive and conservative approach to programming. As Bernstein’s hesitancy to program Webern’s music makes clear, some middlebrow producers saw modernism as rendering impossible the already challenging task of making classical music accessible; Walter Damrosch, conductor and narrator of the *Music Appreciation Hour*, refused to program contemporary works since he felt that “children should not be confused by experiments.”²² Some modernists, meanwhile, resisted what they viewed as a shallow and commercially motivated cultural phenomenon, with Theodor Adorno and Virgil Thomson both publishing attacks on the music appreciation industry.²³ Yet, as Sullivan and Blanch point out, recent scholarship has revealed many instances in which “the borders between modernism and the middlebrow no longer seem rigid.”²⁴ Christopher Chowrimootoo, for example, describes the operas of Benjamin Britten as examples of “middlebrow modernism” and argues for an examination of “the extent to which even the music of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern was implicated in ‘middlebrow’ compromise or eclecticism.”²⁵ But Britten’s operas, with their “pleasures of tonality, melody, sentimentality, melodrama, and spectacle,” make for much more intuitive examples of middlebrow modernism than the music of the Second Viennese School.²⁶ How, then, might Webern’s music be marketed as a middlebrow product?

The most crucial component of Bernstein’s answer to that question was his suggestion that children could understand op. 6/3 better than adults. It was not the first time he had floated such an idea;

176–86; and Dwight Macdonald, “Masscult and Midcult,” in *Masscult and Midcult: Essays against the American Grain* (1960; reprint, New York: New York Review of Books, 2011), 3–71.

²² Horowitz, *Classical Music in America*, 404.

²³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Analytical Study of the NBC *Music Appreciation Hour*,” *Musical Quarterly* 78 (1994): 325–77; and Virgil Thomson, “The Appreciation-Racket,” in *The State of Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1939), 121–31. For more on the resistance by modernists to the music appreciation industry, see Christopher Chowrimootoo’s article in this issue. Christopher Chowrimootoo, “Copland’s Styles: Musical Modernism, Middlebrow Culture, and the Appreciation of New Music,” *Journal of Musicology* 37 (2020): 518–59.

²⁴ Sullivan and Blanch, “Introduction,” 5.

²⁵ Christopher Chowrimootoo, “Reviving the Middlebrow, or: Deconstructing Modernism from the Inside,” in “Round Table: Modernism and Its Others,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 139 (2014): 187–93, at 192.

²⁶ Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten’s Operas and the Great Divide* (University of California Press, 2018), 3.

Bernstein frequently asserted that children “might be more open to the avant-garde” since they “were not so set in their tastes.”²⁷ He thus subscribed to an “essentialist view of childhood” widespread at the time that positioned children as, in the words of Michelle H. Philips, “redemptive, virtuous, originary, and universal.”²⁸ Bernstein’s presentation of op. 6/3 is an example of a subgenre of middlebrow modernism in which this conceptualization of children played a central role. In suggesting that children could find meaning in Webern’s music, he implied that adults could too—provided they approached it with the open mind of a child. Childhood served as “a legible pattern of behaviors” available to “all ages,” which Bernstein implicitly asked his adult audience to perform.²⁹ As the popularity of programs like the Young People’s Concerts and the *Music Appreciation Hour* indicate, there was money to be made by adopting this strategy. “No image carried so much cultural power as that of the child” in the postwar United States, notes Margaret Peacock, leading advertisers to use “the young to sell almost anything.”³⁰ By defining childhood in terms of openness to works like op. 6/3, Bernstein evinced an understanding of that power.

Sketch Two: 1936

While Bernstein sometimes expressed ambivalence toward the music of Second Viennese School and other modernists, Nicolas Slonimsky was “a vigorous champion of new music all his life.”³¹ After emigrating from Russia in the early 1920s, Slonimsky settled in Boston, where he took a job as Serge Koussevitzky’s personal secretary. In his spare time Slonimsky pursued a conducting career of his own, serving as the director of the Chamber Orchestra of Boston, “a new little orchestra which promoted ultra-modern music.”³² But audiences were not always receptive to his initiatives. As conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s

²⁷ Kopfstein-Penk, *Leonard Bernstein and His Young People’s Concerts*, 159.

²⁸ Michelle H. Philips, *Representations of Childhood in American Modernism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

²⁹ Robin Bernstein, “Childhood as Performance,” in *The Children’s Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities*, ed. Anna Mae Duane (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 203–12, at 204.

³⁰ Margaret Peacock, “Cold War Consumption and the Marketing of Childhood in the Soviet Union and the United States, 1950–1960,” *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 8 (2016): 83–98, at 85.

³¹ Allan Kozinn, “Nicolas Slonimsky, Author of Widely Used Reference Works on Music, Dies at 101,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1995.

³² Nicolas Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch: A Life Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 114.

eight-week season at the Hollywood Bowl in the summer of 1933, he programmed several modernist works—including Schoenberg's *Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene* and Varèse's *Ionisation*—to disastrous results. The musicians resisted and reviews were "sour." The performances often resulted in "the flight of puzzled and indignant audience members," and Slonimsky was branded "a dangerous musical revolutionary" in the press.³³ For years thereafter, he maintained that his conducting career had foundered due to his "insistence on programming new music."³⁴

Following Slonimsky's failure to promote modernist music to adults, he turned his attention to an audience both more youthful and personal. In 1933 Slonimsky and his wife, Dorothy Adlow, welcomed a daughter, Electra. Slonimsky embraced a new role as his daughter's tutor, directing "all [his] capacity for gimmicks on Electra" in the course of teaching her Latin, musical modes, and composition.³⁵ He even made a (perhaps misguided) attempt to engender in Electra an appreciation for modern music:

When Electra would demand a bottle, I would sit down at the piano and play a Chopin nocturne, completely ignoring her screams. I would allow for a pause, and then play on the piano Schoenberg's Opus 33a, which opens with a dodecaphonic succession of three highly dissonant chords. I would then rush in to give Electra her bottle. Her features would relax, her crying would cease, and she would suck contentedly. This was to establish a conditioned reflex in favour of dissonant music.³⁶

A few years after his daughter's birth, Slonimsky began crafting new pedagogical "gimmicks" designed for public consumption. Adlow worked at the *Christian Science Monitor* as an art critic, and in 1936 she arranged for Slonimsky to write articles on music for the *Monitor's* Children's Page. "I started a series of articles on the children's page of the paper," Slonimsky later recalled, "in which I attempted to present rules of music theory in a graphic manner, using simple diagrams and vivid illustrations. Some of them were rather corny."³⁷ Beginning with fundamentals like scales and rhythm before progressing to more advanced topics like form and counterpoint, Slonimsky's articles were peppered with limericks, catchphrases, and rhyming couplets. In "Fitting Chords to

³³ Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 140–41.

³⁴ Kozinn, "Nicolas Slonimsky."

³⁵ Lukas Foss was reportedly impressed with a seven-year-old Electra's theme and variations set; Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 144–46.

³⁶ Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 145.

³⁷ Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 146.

Melody,” he reinforced the prohibition against parallel perfect intervals with the following lines:

Consecutive octaves or fifths in good harmony
Ought not to be used lest ears they might harm any.³⁸

Another set of verses demonstrated the impossibility of triple sharps:

I thought I saw a triple sharp,
Haranguing from a tree;
I looked again, and found it was
A humble-looking flea.
Alas! I said, that isn't fair
To Mr. Chimpanzee.³⁹

There was even a poem recounting the tale of a performer driven mad by the impossibility of playing the celesta either quickly or loudly.⁴⁰ Years later (and with characteristic self-deprecation) Slonimsky admitted that his puns were “outrageous,” his jingles “inexcusable.”⁴¹

Yet it was not Slonimsky's verses but his illustrations that often served as his articles' *pièce de résistance*, displaying a deft application of the visual medium to pedagogical purposes.⁴² “About Triads and Harmony,” for example, featured color-coded rectangles that readers could cut out and rearrange in various ways to demonstrate the syntactical function of harmonies built on different scale degrees (fig. 1).⁴³ In “Shapes of Musical Pieces,” Slonimsky translated nested musical structures into a drawing of a girl holding a chocolate bar (fig. 2).⁴⁴ And “Ways of a Sonata” attempted to explain sonata form key relations by way of a world map in which the United States was the tonic, Europe the dominant (fig. 3).⁴⁵ At other times, Slonimsky turned not to illustrations but to modernist works when explaining core musical concepts. The locomotive-inspired pulsing of Arthur Honegger's *Pacific 231*, for

³⁸ Nicolas Slonimsky, “Fitting Chords to Melody,” in *The Road to Music* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1960), 34–38, at 38. *The Road to Music*, first published in 1947, is a compilation of Slonimsky's articles for the *Monitor's* Children's Page.

³⁹ Slonimsky, “The Musical Alphabet,” in *Road to Music*, 1–6, at 4.

⁴⁰ Slonimsky, “Fiddles, Horns, and Drums,” in *Road to Music*, 95–105, at 104–5.

⁴¹ Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 146–47.

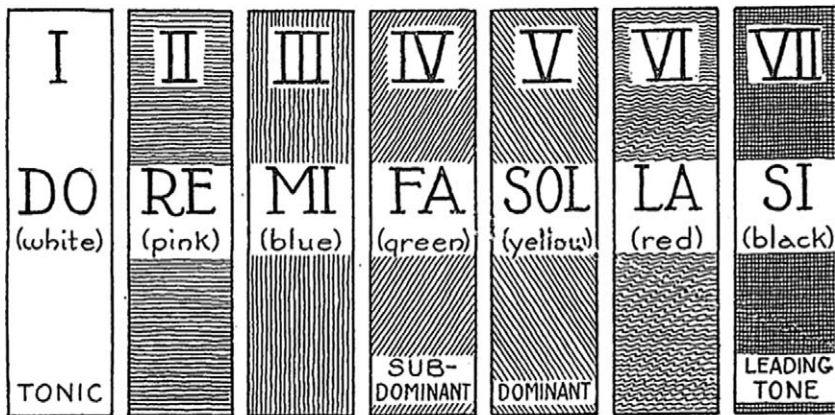
⁴² It is not clear who made the illustrations for Slonimsky's article. It seems reasonable to surmise that Adlow, a professional art critic, was involved, but an inquiry with Electra Slonimsky Yourke regarding this matter yielded no insights.

⁴³ Nicolas Slonimsky, “About Triads and Harmony,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 6, 1936.

⁴⁴ Nicolas Slonimsky, “Shapes of Musical Pieces,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 7, 1937.

⁴⁵ Nicolas Slonimsky, “Ways of a Sonata,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 4, 1937.

FIGURE 1. Illustration for “About Triads and Harmony.” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 6, 1936. Pages Obtained From The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved. Used under license.



The Cutouts With Which We Play the Harmony Game

example, served to demonstrate polyrhythm.⁴⁶ Indeed, Slonimsky took pains to introduce and validate modern compositional techniques at every opportunity. He introduced his audience to a “newfangled scale” that produced “an unusual modernistic effect,” smartly refraining from uttering that scale’s scary-sounding name—octatonic.⁴⁷ In an article entitled “Music Pleasant and Unpleasant,” he reminded readers that “what may be a Dissonance yesterday may be a Consonance today.”⁴⁸

Slonimsky’s predilection for illustrations and commitment to modernism came together on October 5, 1936, when Webern’s op. 10/4 appeared as part of an article entitled “The Orchestral Score.” Op. 10 already had an extended history in the United States. Slonimsky had in fact likely been present at the US premiere of the work, given by Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in November 1926. Although critics who attended the Boston premiere expressed bewilderment at the strange, hushed pieces, they also did something that most critics rarely did: they gave Webern the benefit of the doubt. The *Monitor*’s reviewer argued that “if we hear enough of this music, we may be able to follow the path of Schönberg and his associates.”⁴⁹ A *Boston Globe*

⁴⁶ Nicolas Slonimsky, “How to Understand Rhythm,” in *Road to Music*, 20–25, at 23.
⁴⁷ Nicolas Slonimsky, “Scales, or Tonal Ladders,” in *Road to Music*, 13–19, at 19.
⁴⁸ Nicolas Slonimsky, “Music Pleasant and Unpleasant,” in *Road to Music*, 87–94, at 90.
⁴⁹ L. A. S., “From Zurich to Boston.”

FIGURE 2. Illustration for “Shapes of Musical Pieces.” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 7, 1937. Pages Obtained From The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved. Used under license.



A Musical Piece in Three Parts, Each One of Which Has Three Parts, Is Like the Cover of a Chocolate Bar Which Shows a Girl Holding a Chocolate Bar With a Cover Showing a Girl Holding a Tiny Chocolate Bar Showing a Girl Holding Such a Tiny Chocolate Bar That You Can Hardly See if the Girl on the Cover of That Very Tiny Chocolate Bar Is Holding a Microscopic Chocolate Bar With the Same Cover

reviewer, meanwhile, prefigured Bernstein's presentation of op. 6/3 in noting that "one felt yesterday perfectly assured that these little pieces, queer as they sound measured by comparison with standard music, would grow rather than pall upon one with frequent repetition."⁵⁰

Yet when Koussevitzky led a second performance of op. 10 at a League of Composers concert in New York the following week, the critical response was more skeptical. "N.Y. Music World Stretched on

⁵⁰ P. R., "Modern Music at Symphony Concert," *Boston Globe*, November 20, 1926.

FIGURE 3. Illustration for “Ways of a Sonata.” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 4, 1937. Pages Obtained From The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved. Used under license.



Map of a Sonata

From the Home Key, or Tonic, You Travel Abroad Across the Modulation Ocean to the Dominant. From the Dominant You Go by Airplane for a Fast Trip Around the Mediant, Sub-Mediant, or Even the Remote Keys Before Starting on the Homeward Journey

Rack of Ultra-Modernism,” began the title of a review by Henrietta Straus, “League of Composers . . . Shatter Sensibilities of Critic, Who Is Moved to Bitter Thoughts.”⁵¹ The work’s reception was probably not helped by the program note accompanying the performance, which employed adjectives such as “pale” and “tenuous” and contended that one could detect “only the slightest tangible melodic content.”⁵² *New York Times* critic Olin Downes argued, along similar lines, that Webern’s music contained not even “an ounce of creative impulse.”⁵³ Though most reviewers derided Webern’s sparse textures, one approving voice was that of Paul Rosenfeld, who argued that the five pieces were “extremely diaphanous in orchestration and subtle in sound, plotted by shimmering combinations of harp, celesta, guitar, mandolin, and glockenspiel,” resembling “a flame passed from single instruments or slight complexes of instruments across wide gaps to other single or

⁵¹ Henrietta Straus, “N.Y. Music World Stretched on Rack of Ultra-Modernism,” *Baltimore Sun*, December 12, 1926.

⁵² Program, November 27, 1926, League of Composers/ISCM records, JPB 11-5, box 8, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁵³ Olin Downes, “Music: Boston Symphony Orchestra,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1926.

discreetly combined pieces of the band.”⁵⁴ But Rosenfeld, an advocate for new music throughout his career, was the exception that proved the rule. For other critics, Webern’s pieces were simply short. The fourth piece—lasting just thirty seconds—was the source of particular consternation. Downes mockingly referred to it as “commendably short,” while Lawrence Gilman of the *New York Herald Tribune* called it “Lilliputian.”⁵⁵ Gilman went on to describe the trombone’s descending augmented octave in mm. 3–4 with a memorably acerbic turn of phrase that Slonimsky would later anthologize in his *Lexicon of Musical Invective*: “the amoeba weeps.”⁵⁶

When the score of op. 10/4 appeared as part of Slonimsky’s 1936 article in the *Christian Science Monitor* (fig. 4), it looked a little different than it had on Koussevitzky’s podium. The score sported a simplified format in which all nine instrumental parts were notated in nontransposing treble clefs and German words were translated into English (Italian words remained unchanged). Most strikingly, drawings of each instrument adorned their first entrances, and an illustration of a mechanical metronome sat alongside the tempo marking. The text of Slonimsky’s article also focused on the work’s instrumentation, highlighting the outstanding qualities of each instrument in turn: first the mandolin, which gives out a “thin, tinkling sound”; then the viola, or, “a grown-up Violin”; after that the trombone, the only instrument with the remarkable ability to double in size; then the snare drum (“all the world loves the Drum”); and finally the celesta, with its “sweet metallic tones.” Slonimsky argued that op. 10/4 was composed expressly “so that every instrument would have a chance to play a few notes *SOLO*, which means all alone, so that other instruments would either wait or play very softly.”⁵⁷ Slonimsky thus adopted the same strategy that Bernstein would later use to promote op. 6/3. The ultra-thin texture of op. 10/4, a problematic bug for earlier critics, became for Slonimsky the music’s defining feature, that which afforded each instrument its moment in the sun.

“The Orchestral Score” is addressed to children. Like Bernstein’s Young People’s Concerts, however, the article also contained an implicit message for any parent who might be reading along with their child. Slonimsky’s presentation of op. 10/4 constituted a playful alternative to the responses to op. 10 a decade earlier, most of which were negative


⁵⁴ Paul Rosenfeld, “Musical Chronicle,” *The Dial* 82, no. 2 (February 1927): 175.

⁵⁵ Downes, “Music: Boston Symphony Orchestra”; and Lawrence Gilman, “Music: Week-End Dallyings with Modernists of Various Sorts,” *New York Herald Tribune*, November 29, 1926.


⁵⁶ Gilman, “Music: Week-End Dallyings.” For Slonimsky’s reprinting of Gilman’s review, see Nicolas Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers since Beethoven’s Time* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 249–50.

⁵⁷ Nicolas Slonimsky, “The Orchestral Score,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 5, 1936.

FIGURE 4. Webern, op. 10/4, as illustrated for “The Orchestral Score.” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 5, 1936. Pages Obtained From The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved. Used under license.

FLOWINGLY (♩ = M.M. 60) 

rit. tempo METRONOME rit. 5 ---- tempo



The musical score is arranged in ten staves, each with an instrument icon and name: Clarinet, Trumpet, Trombone, Mandolin, Celesta, Harp, Small Drum, and Viola. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings (ppp, pp, dolce, dolcissimo). Performance instructions include 'rit. tempo', 'tempo', and 'like a sigh ppp'. A metronome icon is present at the top right, and a box containing the number '5' is located above the second staff.

Universal Edition, Vienna, Austria

An Orchestral Piece by Anton von Webern, Which Is Only 6-1-3 Bars Long and Uses a Number of Unusual Instruments

or equivocal. No longer “commendably short” or a weeping amoeba, op. 10/4 became a joyful procession of instruments. This interpretation was made possible through the adoption of a childlike listening practice that prioritized openness and curiosity. Listening in this way, Slonimsky’s article seemed to suggest, could help adults and children alike develop a richer understanding of Webern’s unusual music.

Slonimsky's use of illustrations to render Webern's music more accessible connects it to a widespread element of middlebrow culture: cartoons. Like "The Orchestral Score," midcentury cartoons frequently used images of instruments as pedagogical tools. In 1946 Disney created an animated short based on Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, as part of the anthology film *Make Mine Music*. At the outset of the film, each instrument briefly appears on screen before transforming into the character it represents: the flute into Sasha the bird, the oboe into Sonia the duck, and so on. In the subsequent segment of *Make Mine Music*, "After You've Gone," instruments no longer represent characters but simply *are* the characters; anthropomorphized jazz instruments dance, juggle, and chase each other around to the music of the Benny Goodman Quartet.⁵⁸ Much like the instrument drawings in "The Orchestral Score," the instruments of *Make Mine Music* were intended to educate the audience and render the music more accessible. "The pictures of the instruments are our own little invention," Slonimsky noted at the conclusion of his article, "but they make the whole thing so much clearer."⁵⁹

If instruments-as-visual-aids were thought to make classical music more accessible, so too was the expert guidance of conductors, who often appeared in midcentury cartoons. However up-and-down Slonimsky's conducting career may have been, it allowed him to position himself as the holder of privileged musical insights. Beside the text of "The Orchestral Score" sits a silhouette of Slonimsky conducting during his 1932 tour with the Pan-American Association of Composers (fig. 5). The image is reminiscent of the silhouette of Leopold Stokowski that appears at the beginning of 1940's *Fantasia*—"standing on an Olympian podium, the conductor towers over the performance as Zeus."⁶⁰ In each case the message is the same: the conductor possesses knowledge that qualifies him to guide the audience through the complexities of classical music. Some of the appeal of "The Orchestral Score" thus stems from the way in which it brings its readers behind the curtain and makes the conductor appear more approachable. By demystifying the score, Slonimsky suggested that readers need not place all their trust in, as he put it, "the man who can read all the notes."⁶¹ In this way "The Orchestral Score" can be thought of as a distant cousin of the many midcentury cartoons that satirized the exalted

⁵⁸ Jack Kinney et al., dir., *Make Mine Music* (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Productions, 1946). See also "Make Mine Music—After You've Gone," video, 2:49, www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eZD7_DSLZA. Disney had employed anthropomorphized instruments once before in *Music Land* (1935), a *Silly Symphonies* short starring the warring residents of the "Land of Symphony" and "Isle of Jazz."

⁵⁹ Slonimsky, "The Orchestral Score."

⁶⁰ Mark Clague, "Playing in 'Toon: Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) and the Imagineering of Classical Music," *American Music* 22 (2004): 91–109, at 96.

⁶¹ Slonimsky, "The Orchestral Score."

FIGURE 5. Silhouette of Slonimsky, as shown in “The Orchestral Score.” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 5, 1936. Pages Obtained From The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved. Used under license.



Nicolas Slonimsky Conducting an Orchestra During One of His European Trips

image of the conductor. After Stokowski's brilliant entrance at the outset of *Fantasia*, for example, Mickey Mouse fails to conduct his orchestra of broomsticks during the film's famous sequence set to Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Mickey encounters a similar problem in *The Band Concert* (1935), in which Donald Duck repeatedly interrupts his performance of Rossini's *William Tell* Overture. Several Warner Bros. cartoons, including *Rhapsody in Rivets* (1941) and *Baton Bunny* (1959), likewise featured conductors as beleaguered protagonists. The former, which was nominated for Best Animated Short Film at the 1942 Academy Awards, features a canine conductor whose long white hair indicates a Stokowski parody.

Yet "The Orchestral Score" differed from midcentury cartoons in one crucial way. Most cartoons that employed classical music relied on a limited repertoire of canonic works and thus did not foster middlebrow modernism (*Fantasia*, with its segment featuring Stravinsky's *Rite of*

Spring, is a notable exception).⁶² But Slonimsky made middlebrow modernism a central component of his *Christian Science Monitor* articles. By allowing the music of Webern and other modernists to mingle with that of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and the like, Slonimsky suggested that modernist works were not only equal to canonic works but also just as essential to the musical education of children. In writing on modernist music, he steered clear of condescension:

Children are progressive and have a healthy curiosity. So I decided that . . . I would not talk down to my audience, whether they be children or adults. When I find that a “modernistic” example suits my purpose, I quote it, along with the rules and regulations for traditional music. When I feel like using a polysyllabic word, I use it. . . . I treat my readers with healthy respect.⁶³

Slonimsky’s articles are indeed chock-full of “modernistic” works and polysyllabic words that probably challenged some readers. But they are also infused with a can-do spirit, as typified by Slonimsky’s sign-off from a 1938 article, the last of his initial Children’s Page series: “If even a small part of the 24 stories on music that I have written here will remain in the memory of the reader, it will prove that appreciation of music can be communicated without too much painstaking study.”⁶⁴

* * *

Letters of appreciation and admiration for Slonimsky’s Children’s Page articles poured in from across the globe, providing a glimpse of the degree to which the “dissemination and transmission practices” of middlebrow culture met the aim of finding “success with a large cross-section of the public,” to quote Sullivan and Blanch.⁶⁵ Readers such as Chicago dance pedagogue Mary Wood Hinman wrote to request copies of articles they had missed or to inquire as to whether the articles would be published in a book form.⁶⁶ In a letter from Australia, Winfred R. G. Steber bemoaned the backwards state of music education in New South Wales.⁶⁷ There was even a letter from Harold Witt, an inmate at the

⁶² Daniel Goldmark, “Classical Music and Hollywood Cartoons: A Primer on the Cartoon Canon,” in *The Cartoon Music Book*, ed. Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor (Atlanta: A Cappella Books, 2002), 103–14, at 103–4.

⁶³ Slonimsky, *Road to Music*, vii.

⁶⁴ Nicolas Slonimsky, “About Modern Music,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 3, 1938.

⁶⁵ Sullivan and Blanch, “Introduction,” 2.

⁶⁶ Letter, Mary Wood Hinman to Nicolas Slonimsky, April 22, 1937, Nicolas Slonimsky Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress (hereafter NSC/MDLC), box 134.

⁶⁷ Letter, Winfred R. G. Steber to Nicolas Slonimsky, February 16, 1938, NSC/MDLC, box 134.

Illinois State Penitentiary.⁶⁸ Jennie F. W. Johnson of Delavan, Wisconsin, was one of several music teachers from around the country to praise Slonimsky's articles, describing them as "simple and understandable." The articles had been instrumental in Johnson's quest to develop the residents of her "small unmusical town" into music lovers of taste and erudition. When a farmer's wife asked her what counterpoint was, she told Slonimsky, "I explained as simply as I could when the next week appeared your column, illustrated upon the very subject." Johnson, the only resident of Delavan with a *Monitor* subscription, developed a system so as to ensure that maximum edification was squeezed from each issue. The magazine section of the paper was sent to a "young lawyer" who later passed it on to a teenage "shut in"; the Children's Page was given to a farm family on the outskirts of town who passed it on to another family, and so on and so forth.⁶⁹

Amidst Slonimsky's fan mail was a letter from Anton Webern. Following the publication of "The Orchestral Score," Slonimsky sent Webern a copy. On January 14, 1937, the composer responded:

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MUCH ESTEEMED MR. SLONIMSKY:

Your friendly letter with enclosures brought me very special joy. To realize that you have taken the trouble of making my music accessible to children and that you have actually succeeded in doing so gives me uncommon satisfaction and real consolation. That you used my own score to arrange it for children is a friendly thought on your part and it makes me happy that the notes that I have written appear on the Children's Page, dedicated specially to children. Yes, it is true that if the so-called adults, the grown-ups, had as few prejudices as children, then everything would be quite different.⁷⁰

Webern's enthusiasm is not surprising. Slonimsky's article conformed to a Romantic ideal of childhood innocence that was central to the composer's creative outlook. Among Webern's most treasured sources of inspiration, for example, was Peter Rosegger's *Waldheimat* (Forest homeland), a series of sentimental stories recollecting Rosegger's

⁶⁸ Letter, Harold Witt to Nicolas Slonimsky, undated, NSC/MDLC, box 134.

⁶⁹ Letter, Jennie F. W. Johnson to Nicolas Slonimsky, February 5, 1937, NSC/MDLC, box 134.

⁷⁰ Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music since 1900* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 1316. Slonimsky's translation is faithful to the German of Webern's original letter, which is held at the Library of Congress. See Letter, Anton Webern to Nicolas Slonimsky, January 14, 1937, NSC/MDLC, box 169, folder 4.

“childhood days and childhood home” in the Austrian province of Styria.⁷¹ Webern’s conclusion that “everything would be quite different” if adults had “as few prejudices as children” can thus be understood as an example of what Robin Bernstein identifies as a widely held view on the relationship between youth and adulthood: “It’s all downhill from the first breath: to grow is to lose sacred childhood innocence, and each day the juvenile human develops, the essential child dies off a little.”⁷² In Slonimsky’s article, Webern saw affirmation both of this perspective and of his music.

Webern rarely made children the explicit subject of his works; the *Kinderstück*, to which I will turn shortly, is one exception. Although many of Webern’s works are associated with childhood, that association is usually under the surface, evident only from correspondence, sketches, or diary entries. These sources reveal that the orchestral tone poem *Im Sommerwind*, for example, was inspired not only by the Bruno Wille poem of the same name but also by the Preglhof, the Webern family’s country estate in the Austrian province of Carinthia and a favorite retreat of Webern’s childhood.⁷³ In much the same way, op. 10 was “children’s music” long before it appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*. According to Julian Johnson, “the extreme fragmentation and erosion of the melodic voice” in aphoristic pieces such as op. 10/4 have often been interpreted as “a bleak annihilation of the subjective voice.” This view, Johnson argues, is a misinterpretation. As Johnson points out, Webern once reported that most of his pre–World War I works were composed in response to the death of his mother in 1906. Instead of fragmentation and erosion, then, Johnson hears in aphoristic pieces like op. 10/4 “the angelic presence which Webern identified with the continuing sense of his mother’s memory.”⁷⁴ This personal association with op. 10, even more than discourses of childhood innocence, may help to explain why Slonimsky’s article so delighted Webern. As an adult and father himself, Webern still identified as his mother’s son; Slonimsky’s article likewise encouraged its adult audience to rediscover a childlike way of listening. Op. 10/4, once music *of* children—or of one child, Webern—became in Slonimsky’s vision music *for* children. In each case, “children” meant the young and the old alike, actual children and children at heart.

⁷¹ Julian Johnson, *Webern and the Transformation of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 80–81.

⁷² Bernstein, “Childhood as Performance,” 205.

⁷³ Johnson, *Webern and the Transformation of Nature*, 21.

⁷⁴ Johnson, *Webern and the Transformation of Nature*, 127.

Sketch Three: 1966

Bernstein and Slonimsky's presentations of Webern's music position children as listeners and readers, respectively. But what of children as *performers*? As George Rochberg once mused, the intersection of child musicians and modernist music presents some potential difficulties: "It was apparently a fancy of Schoenberg's that someday schoolchildren would be taught to sing twelve-tone melodies. This raises some enormous questions and problems. First, from where would such a repertoire of singable tunes be drawn?"⁷⁵ In fact there is one work within Webern's oeuvre that partially answers Rochberg's question, a work not singable but playable by children: the *Kinderstück*. Composed in 1924, the *Kinderstück* was intended for a planned set of children's pieces. But the other *Kinderstücke* never materialized, and the one that was left was shelved.⁷⁶ Unpublished and unknown, the work was lost amidst the chaos and confusion of Webern's death in 1945. More than two decades later, in the spring of 1966, Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer discovered it among a collection of "muddled music manuscripts" hidden away in a Viennese attic.⁷⁷

That summer the *Kinderstück* was premiered as part of a Lincoln Center festival in honor of Igor Stravinsky. The festival's roster of artists reads like a who's who of twentieth-century music: Leonard Bernstein, Ernest Ansermet, Robert Craft, and even the eighty-four-year-old Stravinsky all took the podium; Elizabeth Schwarzkopf sang; Andre Watts played a piano concerto. And Aaron Copland narrated what must be the most star-studded performance of *The Soldier's Tale* on record, with Elliott Carter as the soldier, John Cage the devil. Over the course of three weeks in July, the festival presented a series of themed concerts that juxtaposed Stravinsky's music with the music of varied times, places, and traditions: "Stravinsky and the 18th Century," "Stravinsky and Italian Music," "Stravinsky and the Dance," etc. The penultimate concert, "Stravinsky and Recent Years," featured a program selected by Stravinsky himself, with music by younger composers such as Milton Babbitt and Pierre Boulez. Following the second intermission, Lukas Foss conducted the New York premiere of Boulez's *Eclat*. As Foss exited the stage, pianist Caren Glasser entered to perform the *Kinderstück*. Compared to the musical stars that preceded her at the festival, Glasser was an unknown quantity; then again, she was just nine years old.

⁷⁵ George Rochberg, "Reflections on Schoenberg," *Perspectives of New Music* 11 (1973): 56–83, at 74–75.

⁷⁶ Felix Meyer, "Anton Webern: *Kinderstück* M. 266, 1924," in *Canto D'Amore: Classicism in Modern Art and Music 1914–1935*, ed. Ulrich Mosch, Gottfried Boehm, and Katharina Schmidt (Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung, 1996), 356–57, at 356.

⁷⁷ Raymond Ericson, "New Webern Haul Found in a Dark Attic," *New York Times*, April 10, 1966.

The *Kinderstück* exhibits many of the same musical qualities that I have highlighted in other works of Webern. It is short, quiet, and full of silence. Two notes rarely sound simultaneously, producing a light and airy texture. The tempo marking is *Liebllich* (lovely). The one discernible motive is a single note repeated two or three times in quick succession—*tap, tap, tap*. Critics responded favorably to the work's premiere performance. *New York Times* critic Howard Klein described Glasser's performance of the *Kinderstück* as the evening's "one moment of warmth. She pecked her way through the . . . piano solo like an accomplished little musician and then delighted the audience by throwing in an encore, the short arrangement of the trumpet tune from Stravinsky's ballet, *Petruchka*."⁷⁸ Carman Moore of the *Village Voice* deemed Glasser "very poised" and found the *Kinderstück* "short, lean, and beautiful of phrase."⁷⁹ For *New York Post* critic Jay S. Harrison, Glasser's playing was one of the evening's several "exceptional" performances; the appearance of the nine-year-old Glasser and eighty-four-year-old Stravinsky on the same stage, he argued, constituted a rebuttal to "those who believe our era has neither parentage [n]or heritage."⁸⁰ Foss, the festival's artistic director, was also pleased with Glasser's performance, writing to her parents to tell them that "we were all charmed to have your talented daughter taking part in the Stravinsky Festival," and to express his confidence that Glasser would grow up "into a fine musician."⁸¹

Like Foss and the various critics in attendance, the Lincoln Center audience responded warmly to the *Kinderstück*'s premiere. As Glasser recalled in a 2019 interview, the decision to follow the Webern piece with the Stravinsky encore came only after the audience insisted that she return to the stage:

The remarkable incident started after I took my curtain calls and the applause started to die down. To the surprise of everyone back stage . . . the applause started to grow louder and louder, and whistles, stamping and yelling from the audience grew louder. This went on for

⁷⁸ Howard Klein, "Philharmonic Festival Offers Music Chosen by Stravinsky," *New York Times*, July 23, 1966.

⁷⁹ Carman Moore, *Village Voice*, July 23, 1966; article located in the Igor Stravinsky Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung.

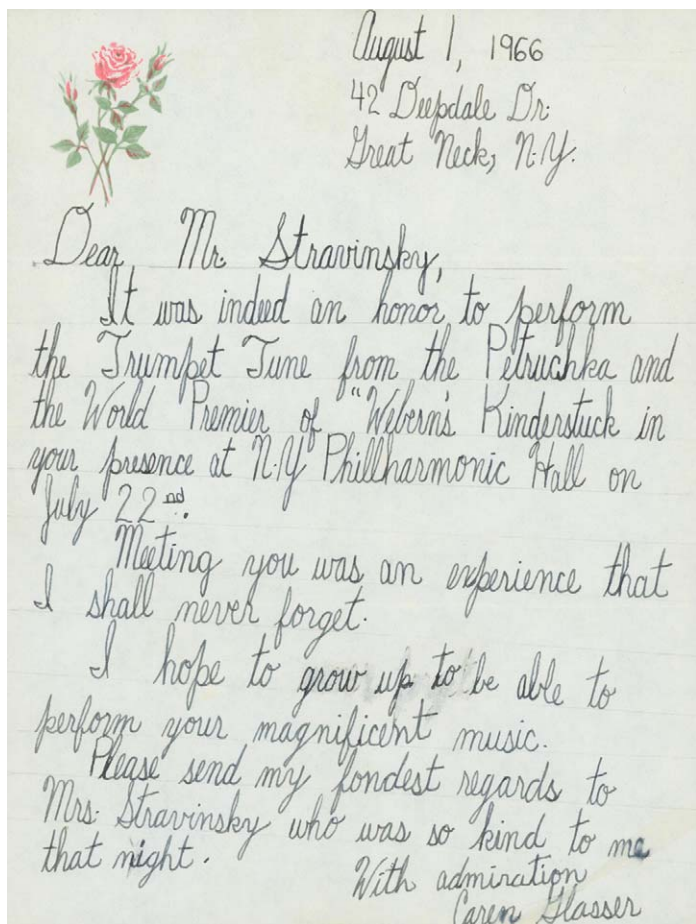
⁸⁰ Jay S. Harrison, "Stravinsky Festival Offers Program of Modern Music," *New York Post*, July 23, 1966. Harrison also referred to Glasser as both a "lass" and a "wench," an indication that child performers were not immune to gendered criticism. Gender also played a role in many facets of middlebrow culture. For more on this topic, see Sullivan and Blanch, "Introduction," 3; and Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 44–64.

⁸¹ Letter, Lukas Foss to Mr. and Mrs. Alex Glasser, July 28, 1966, *New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives*, <https://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/artifact/64ee6769-239f-4445-b4b1-79ba60e586cc-0.1/fullview#page/66/mode/2up>.

what seemed a long time. The backstage panels were cracked open to see what was going on—you could see everyone in the hall—balconies and orchestra section—standing up and facing the box on the first balcony, cheering, stamping, whistling and yelling.⁸²

Following the performance, Glasser met with Igor and Vera Stravinsky backstage; a little over a week later, she wrote a letter to Stravinsky thanking him for the opportunity (fig. 6). The letterhead sported a rose

FIGURE 6. Letter, Caren Glasser to Igor Stravinsky, August 1, 1966. Igor Stravinsky Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung (used with permission).



⁸² Caryn Glasser, email to author, December 5, 2019.

bouquet in the upper left-hand corner. "Dear Mr. Stravinsky," Glasser began, "it was indeed an honor to perform the Trumpet Tune from the *Petruchka* and the World Premier of Webern's *Kinderstück* in your presence at N.Y. Philharmonic Hall on July 22nd. Meeting you was an experience that I shall never forget." Echoing Foss's prediction, she expressed her hope that she would "grow up to be able to perform [Stravinsky's] magnificent music." "Please send my fondest regards to Mrs. Stravinsky," Glasser concluded, "who was so kind to me that night."⁸³

* * *

Compared to most of Webern's other twelve-tone works, the *Kinderstück* is an essay in simplicity. The entire piece is contained within six consecutive statements of the P_0 row form. Beginnings of phrases frequently coincide with new statements of the row, resulting in close synchronization between surface texture and serial construction. Since the *Kinderstück's* reemergence, many have interpreted this simplicity as evidence that the piece was an experiment with a new compositional method that Webern had yet to master. The Moldenhauers, for example, view the piece's repeated notes as a byproduct of Webern's excessively strict application of the twelve-tone method: "in the strict application of the method, all twelve notes of the chromatic scale must be introduced before any is sounded a second time, except when a given note is immediately repeated. This exception produces a 'Morse code' effect peculiar to many early compositions in the idiom and conspicuous also in the *Kinderstück*."⁸⁴ Viewed in this way, the *Kinderstück* appears as historically significant in terms of Webern's compositional development, but relatively unimpressive in terms of its compositional craft.

This focus on the *Kinderstück's* relationship to the twelve-tone method has obscured a different and equally significant interpretative angle. As noted above, many of Webern's works engage with themes of childhood, but such engagement is nearly always concealed from audiences (as in the case of op. 10). The *Kinderstück* is an exception to this rule and can thus be viewed as evidence in support of Chowrimootoo's claim that even members of the Second Viennese School sometimes participated in the "active cultivation of (as opposed to principled disdain for) audiences."⁸⁵ Webern is not typically seen as a composer particularly interested in courting audiences, but he declared his desire for his music to be *fasslich* ("comprehensible" or "graspable") on many

⁸³ Letter, Caren Glasser to Igor Stravinsky, August 1, 1966, Igor Stravinsky Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung.

⁸⁴ Moldenhauer and Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern*, 313.

⁸⁵ Chowrimootoo, "Reviving the Middlebrow," 192.

occasions. Such declarations may ring hollow; after all, Webern did not publish many of his most accessible works, including the *Kinderstück* and the numerous tonal works that predate his op. 1. Yet the simple act of composing a work entitled *Kinderstück* could be viewed as evidence that Webern was considering how to bring his music to a wider audience, even if he did not follow through. Thus the work might serve as an example of how the middlebrow functions as what Sullivan and Blanch call an “aesthetic mode,” operative not only in the reception of art but also in its production.⁸⁶

Clemens Kühn offers a perspective on the *Kinderstück* that supports this hypothesis. Instead of tying the “Morse code” effect to Webern’s application of the twelve-tone method, Kühn argues that the *Kinderstück*’s repeated notes ease the technical burden placed on any young pianists who might perform the work while simultaneously engaging in a childlike play. He likewise interprets the work’s “D.C. ad libitum” not as a structural marker but as an invitation to play, “understood not only as a prompt to become more familiar through repeated playing, but also as a reflection of the childlike joy of playing an already familiar game over and over again.”⁸⁷ As with Slonimsky, Kühn’s childlike perspective on Webern’s music results in a reappraisal of and renewed focus on the music’s surface. Precisely those surface features that earlier commentators identified as irregular or problematic—op. 10/4’s extreme brevity and idiosyncratic collection of orchestral instruments, the *Kinderstück*’s repeated notes—are valorized as engaging, graspable, and even potentially fun. Slonimsky and Kühn’s attention to the music’s surface also stands in marked contrast to a long-running tradition of uncovering hidden features in Webern’s music, evident not only in the attention paid to the *Kinderstück*’s twelve-tone construction but also in the numerous music-theoretical exegeses of op. 10/4.⁸⁸ The approaches to Webern’s music taken by Slonimsky and Kühn might therefore be understood as examples of what Jani Scandura calls “reading literally”: “Reading literally is thought to be the most naive of interpretive practices, the least well informed. . . . Yet what if reading literally could amount to something like a method, a method that is experiential and childlike, not so much resistant to the symbolic order as unsure of

⁸⁶ Sullivan and Blanch, “Introduction,” 2.

⁸⁷ Clemens Kühn, “Zwölfton- oder -Musik?” in *Musikwissenschaft zwischen Kunst, Ästhetik und Experiment: Festschrift Helga de la Motte-Haber zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Reinhard Kopiez et al. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998), 331–35, at 335. Translated by the author.

⁸⁸ For two prominent examples of the latter, see Allen Forte, *The Structure of Atonal Music* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973); and David Lewin, *Musical Form and Transformation: Four Analytic Essays* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

its parameters?⁸⁹ Scandura's proposed method calls to mind other, similarly oriented forms of reading, including Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's "surface reading" and Nicola Humble's "sitting back."⁹⁰ Although these concepts do not align perfectly with one another, they are all examples of the way in which the middlebrow can function as a mode of interpretation and reception, what Sullivan and Blanch refer to as "a form of reading practice."⁹¹ Scandura suggests that the naiveté and joy of childhood are virtues, worth aspiring to even if ultimately inaccessible (or not fully accessible) to adults. To read literally is not to read like a child, but to read while imagining oneself as a child. Put another way, the *Kinderstück* rewards "the adult who apprehends the work simultaneously from an imagined perspective of the idealized Child who delights in its strangeness"—reveling in Kühn's "childlike joy" and "familiar game"—as well as "from a more knowing perspective."⁹²

Crucially, Kühn's approach to the *Kinderstück* does not require that an actual child take joy in the work's "D.C. ad libitum" and repeated notes. Rather, his interpretation rests on adults finding the *idea* of a child engaging with the *Kinderstück* in this way to be both plausible and attractive. That same idea was likely a factor in the positive reception of Glasser's performance. Critics and audience members found Glasser's apparent mastery of Webern's music appealing; whether she actually liked or understood the *Kinderstück* was beside the point. As Glasser later recalled, her piano teacher coached her through the process of learning the work, such that she did "start to develop a feeling for the piece and how to phrase it." After working it on for some time, she reported, "I really started to feel it and was quite comfortable with it and grew to feel it was a charming little piece." But even if she had disliked the *Kinderstück* or felt baffled by it, there is a good chance that the response to her performance would have been similar. Whether in the form of a scholarly argument like Kühn's or a performance like Glasser's, the idea of a child interacting with music like Webern's is powerful. Years later, even the adult Glasser herself could not help but marvel at the scene: "who would [have thought] that a newly discovered

⁸⁹ Jani Scandura, *Down in the Dumps: Place, Modernity, American Depression* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 24.

⁹⁰ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21; and Nicola Humble, "Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading," *Modernist Cultures* 6 (2011): 41–59.

⁹¹ Sullivan and Blanch, "Introduction," 2.

⁹² Raymond Knapp, "Suffering Children: Perspectives on Innocence and Vulnerability in Mahler's Fourth Symphony," *19th-Century Music* 22 (1999): 233–67, at 264.

piece called *Kinderstück*, by a composer I had never played, would end up in my hands?"⁹³

Conclusions; or, Ambivalence and Nuance

At the outset of this article, I cited Harold C. Schonberg's prediction that Webern's music "may be too abstruse, too forbidding, ever to attract a mass audience."⁹⁴ As I have documented, a handful of US musicians in the middle of the twentieth century sought to prove Schonberg wrong. Determining whether or not they succeeded is largely a matter of defining success. "Mass audience" is probably a stretch, even considering such prominent venues as the Young People's Concerts, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and Lincoln Center. Occasional reports of positive audience response or a favorable review here and there indicate that there was some support for Webern's music in mainstream circles. While the efforts to advocate for Webern's music I have documented here were not total outliers, then, it is also difficult to tie them directly to a positive reception of that music—with the probable exception of Glasser's performance. Yet focusing on the size of the audience or the response to a single performance misses the point. The power of middlebrow modernism, as Chowrimootoo argues, lies in its ability to engender a "compromise or ambivalence in the relationship between high and low." That ambivalence allows us "to hear nuance in even the most radical cases of avant-garde extremism."⁹⁵ From the moment it arrived in the United States, Webern's music was viewed as one such radical case, and each of the three moments I have documented introduced the nuance of which Chowrimootoo speaks. Bernstein's presentation of op. 6/3 acknowledged the oddness of Webern's "tiny little pieces" but found in them joy instead of confusion. Slonimsky heard in op. 10/4 not a frustratingly brief series of scarcely audible sounds but a delightful parade of instruments in the manner of a midcentury cartoon. And Glasser's performance of the *Kinderstück* prompted the question of whether even Webern—the avant-garde extremist himself—may have maintained a more nuanced relationship with mass culture than is normally assumed. Perhaps Schonberg was right; Webern's music has never attracted a mass audience, and it seems unlikely that it ever will. But these moments confirmed that a children-oriented brand of middlebrow modernism could shed new light on Webern's works, that the process of

⁹³ Glasser, email to author, December 5, 2019.

⁹⁴ Schonberg, "Kindness Kills."

⁹⁵ Christopher Chowrimootoo, "Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013), 15.

cultivating a middlebrow mode of production or reception could be rewarding independent of any resultant growth in audience.

That process was not without its problems. Even though the Young People's Concerts sometimes made room for modernist music, for example, they rarely did the same for music beyond the European cultural tradition; and Slonimsky relegated South America to "relative keys" in his "Ways of a Sonata" world map. Both serve as evidence of Randal Doane's claim that "the representation of middlebrow taste for the *nouveau* middle class" in postwar US culture "reflected and produced anew the symbolic boundaries of whiteness."⁹⁶ Issues like these are part and parcel of positioning children as "redemptive, virtuous, ordinary, and universal," to recall Philips's description. The efforts of Bernstein and Slonimsky, as well as the later interpretation of Kühn, placed Webern's music within an imagined world in which childhood is akin to an idealized and abstracted sonic playground. Divorced from the pains that accompany any particular childhood—appearing, in Philips's words, as "a beloved space set apart from the disenchanting adult world of labor, materialism, and managed time"—their vision of childhood was universal.⁹⁷ By definition, then, it ignored the many particular contexts of childhoods in the United States.

That these issues should arise in relation to the music of Anton Webern is fitting. The features of brevity and sparseness made Webern's music ripe for the middlebrow modernism treatment, but that was not always enough; those same features turned off many listeners. Yet Webern exhibited an unwavering belief in the righteousness of his music, convinced that it could and should attract the mass audience that Harold Schonberg deemed unattainable. In the same article in which Schonberg bemoaned the abstruseness of Webern's music, he relayed a story similar to the "singing schoolchildren" anecdote about Arnold Schoenberg cited above: "[Webern] told a friend that it would take fifty years before the public caught up with his music. At the end of that time, Webern said, the public would be whistling his melodies."⁹⁸ This combination of esoteric music with an unceasingly positive perspective on that music's future was a trademark of Webern's outlook on the world, a heady mixture of naïveté, ignorance, and obliviousness most painfully evident in his late-in-life support for the Third Reich. Viewed in this more critical

⁹⁶ Doane, "Bourdieu, Cultural Intermediaries," 156. Here it is worth noting that the terms "highbrow," "lowbrow," and "middlebrow" themselves have origins in phrenology, a racist pseudoscience.

⁹⁷ Philips, *Representations of Childhood in American Modernism*, 2–3.

⁹⁸ Schonberg, "Kindness Kills." Schonberg's anecdote may have been inspired by a more familiar version involving postmen. See Moldenhauer and Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern*, 543.

light, Webern's letter to Slonimsky reads less like an expression of enthusiasm and more like an out-of-touch manifesto.

But to critique "overweening paradigms" in this way, as Chowrimootoo argues, "can easily become as unvarying as the paradigms themselves," making them appear "more coherent and unassailable than they really are."⁹⁹ The most appealing aspect of middlebrow modernism, in fact, may be its incoherence. The middlebrow was (and is) an expansive phenomenon, continually gobbling up further and further cultural objects. It was meant, at least ostensibly, for everyone. When crossed with modernist music like Webern's—music that from its inception has been defined by the degree to which it is *not* for everyone—the result was "middlebrow modernism," an apparent contradiction in terms. The three instances of middlebrow modernism I have documented all revolved around the same idea: that Webern's music could be heard, performed, and understood by children (and, by extension, adults). That idea is not especially coherent, and it is far from unassailable. Those who advanced it may well be accused of a childish zealotry, but they might equally be praised for their childlike open-mindedness. In 1996, on the occasion of Slonimsky's death, an obituary published in the *Christian Science Monitor* claimed that "only Nicolas would have obtained a musical gem by the controversial Anton von Webern for the Monitor's Children's Page."¹⁰⁰ Not *only* Nicolas, as it turns out, but the point stands: it was an idea as bold as it was strange. Pursuing it meant redefining what middlebrow music could be; what the music of Webern could be.

ABSTRACT

On several occasions in the midcentury United States, the music of Anton Webern was reimagined as music for children. In 1936 conductor and musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky published the score of Webern's op. 10/4 on the children's page of the *Christian Science Monitor*. In 1958 Webern's op. 6/3 was featured in a New York Philharmonic Young People's Concert, the first conducted by Leonard Bernstein. Eight years later, Webern's *Kinderstück* (*Children's Piece*) received its posthumous premiere at Lincoln Center, performed by a nine-year-old pianist. In each case children served as a marker of accessibility, meant to render Webern's music more palatable to adult audiences; thus was Webern's

⁹⁹ Chowrimootoo, "Middlebrow Modernism," 5.

¹⁰⁰ Roderick Nordell, "'Lexicon of Musical Invective' Author Leaves Bright Legacy," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 10, 1996.

music subsumed within the middlebrow circulation of classical music. Although recent scholarship has considered the intersections between modernist music and middlebrow culture, Webern's music has remained absent from these discussions. Indeed, Webern's terse, abstract, and severe compositions might at first appear ill suited to middlebrow contexts. Yet, as these three historical moments make clear, children served as a potent rhetorical force that could be used to market even this music to a broad audience of adults.

Keywords: Webern, Slonimsky, Bernstein, middlebrow, modernism, children