



# Biography

## The early years

Webern received his first musical instruction from his mother, an amateur pianist. In Klagenfurt, Edwin Komauer instructed him in the rudiments of musical theory, as well as in piano. Webern also learned to play the cello and participated in the local orchestra.

## First compositions

His first compositions, two pieces for cello and piano (1899) and several songs, date from the Klagenfurt period. In 1902, after graduation from the Klagenfurt Humanistisches Gymnasium, he attended performances of Wagner operas at the Bayreuth Festival; these left a deep impression on the young musician.

## The college years

That fall, he entered the University of Vienna, studying musicology and composition. He received his Ph.D. degree (1906) with a dissertation on the Choralis Constantinus II of the Dutch composer Heinrich Isaac (c. 1450-1517).

Meanwhile, in the autumn of 1904, Webern had become a private pupil of the composer Arnold Schoenberg. The association proved to be a decisive influence. With Schoenberg, and soon also his friend the young composer Alban Berg, Webern explored new dimensions of musical expression, leading to the breakthrough that established "atonality"--a revolutionary concept abnegating the necessity of a governing tonal centre.

## A new direction

Schoenberg's direction of Webern's musical development ended in 1908. By then, Webern had already written many works, including the orchestral idyll *Im Sommerwind* (antedating his study with Schoenberg), several string quartets, the songs based on poems of Richard Dehmel, the orchestral *Passacaglia*, Opus 1, and the choral canon *Entflieht auf leichten Kähnen*, Opus 2. These still adhere to traditional tonality, but, with the Stefan George songs (1908-09), Webern entered the realm of music no longer based on a fixed tonal centre.

## Compressed compositions

In 1911, Webern married Wilhelmine Mörtl, the daughter of his mother's sister. Because of the Roman Catholic prohibition of the union of first cousins, the marriage was solemnized only in 1915, after three of the couple's four children had already been born.

During the years 1908 to 1913 he held posts as coach and conductor in Vienna, Ischl, Innsbruck, Teplitz, Danzig, and Stettin. His compositions of that period reveal a growing tendency to compress the highest intensity of expression within the greatest formal brevity, characteristics that mark opuses 5 through 11.

## Expanded forms

The Cello Sonata (1914) marks his first effort to return to more expanded forms following his "aphoristic" period. Opuses 12 through 19 (composed between 1914 and 1926) are vocal compositions; except Opus 12, which employs piano accompaniment, these works are distinguished by highly original instrumental combinations.

## World War I

In 1915, during World War I, Webern enlisted for army service but was discharged at the end of 1916 because of poor eyesight. After a last theatre season in Prague (1917-18), he settled in Mödling, near Vienna, teaching privately and acting as supervisor for the Schoenberg-founded Society for Private Musical Performances (1918-22).

In 1924, Schoenberg formulated the 12-tone method of composition--the system in which a basic "row," formed from the 12 independent tones of the chromatic scale, is used melodically and harmonically through the devices of inversion, retrograde progression, and transposition, allowing for a total of 48 possibilities in which the chosen row may appear.

## Twelve-tone method

Webern adopted this system first in his *Kinderstück* for piano, employing the serial technique thereafter for all further compositions (opuses 17-31) and developing it with severe consistency to its most extreme potential. The instrumental works during that period (opuses 20, 21, 22, 24, 27, 28, 30) are governed by rigorous formal discipline.

## Inspiration

In the vocal realm, the lyrics of Hildegard Jone, a painter and poet, inspired all of Webern's later works (opuses 23, 25, 26, 29, 31). Always professing his ties with tradition, Webern was a foremost exponent of the genre of the German Lied. He also was a skillful arranger; notable among his orchestrations of classic works is the *Ricercata* from J.S. Bach's *Musical Offering*.

## Conducting

After the Society for Private Musical Performances was dissolved, he conducted several choirs, notably the "Singverein," a lay group especially organized to perform masterworks, such as Mahler's *Symphony No. 8*, in conjunction with the Workers'

Symphony Concerts. Both organizations, sponsored by the Social Democratic Party, were dissolved after the "Dollfuss Revolution" (February 1934). As guest conductor, Webern occasionally appeared with the Austrian Radio Orchestra and was invited to conduct in Switzerland, Germany, Spain, and England.

## Teaching

Although an outstanding teacher, Webern never received an appointment at the University of Vienna or the music academy. He held a minor position at the Israelitic Institute for the Blind (1925-31), and from 1932 on gave private lecture courses. Public recognition at home remained limited to the Vienna Music Prize, awarded to him twice (1924, 1932) under the Socialist regime.

## Political upheaval

Politically never active, Webern yet fell victim to the rising tide of right-wing nationalism. Schoenberg left Europe soon after Hitler came to power in 1933. The Nazis branded the music of the "New Vienna school" as "cultural Bolshevism" and "degenerate art" and banned performance of this type of music. Webern's artistic isolation grew complete with Berg's death in 1935, and his economic plight became desperate after the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938.

## World War II

The political upheaval brought to a halt the publication of his works. With almost no private pupils left, Webern had to resort to accepting such tasks as piano arrangements of works by lesser composers. Always of a retiring disposition, he fell into total obscurity with the outbreak of World War II.

Webern's disillusionment with the Hitler regime was deepened by increasing bombing raids. In February 1945 his only son, Peter, was killed in a strafing attack on a train. When the Russian Army neared Vienna, the composer and his wife fled to Mittersill near Salzburg, where their three daughters and grandchildren had sought refuge. Webern was accidentally shot and killed there by a soldier in the U.S. occupation forces.