Technology in Schoenberg’s “School of Criticism”: A Lesson from the Past

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On June 8, 1934, as he continued work on the longest of his [*Gedanke*](https://books.google.com/books?id=xOm3Ollp6qMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=schoenberg+musical+idea&hl=en&sa=X&ei=cxShVZ_rJ8z6-AHV_K_ICQ&ved=0CB8Q6wEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false) manuscripts, Arnold Schoenberg wrote some thoughts about how listeners process musical information:

The ability to recognize depends very largely upon familiarity with related, similar, or like objects…. Consequently in many ways recognition is re-recognition. This is so even where a (relatively) new object is involved whose (old) constituent elements are familiar and can be recognized ([Schoenberg 2006, 117](https://books.google.com/books?id=xOm3Ollp6qMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=schoenberg+musical+idea&hl=en&sa=X&ei=cxShVZ_rJ8z6-AHV_K_ICQ&ved=0CB8Q6wEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false)).

A little over a year later, as Schoenberg prepared for his appointment as professor of composition as the University of Southern California (USC) in the fall of 1935, he sat down for a [radio interview](https://books.google.com/books?id=DQQSLCwRyakC&pg=PR9&dq=schoenberg+and+his+world&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=swarthout&f=false) with the Dean of the School of Music, Max van Leuven Swarthout. Swarthout, who had studied as a young man in Europe, wanted to know about Schoenberg’s impressions of the differences between music education in his home and adopted countries. Schoenberg, who had been teaching American students since his arrival in Boston in fall 1933, found that these students were not without talent, but he was concerned about their lack of knowledge of musical literature. Only through the “familiarity with related, similar, or like objects,” he believed, were these students ever going to be able to engage in the process of recognition and re-recognition he described above. Thus, access to performances (for the ear) and musical notation (for the eye) were of paramount importance. Schoenberg told Swarthout that in Europe students could buy inexpensive study scores and attend as many concerts at opera houses and symphony halls as they liked for low prices, and he was frustrated that these opportunities were not readily available to his American students.

Schoenberg’s first students in Southern California were not only music majors. In fact, his [contract](http://www.schoenberg.at/letters/search_show_letter.php?ID_Number=17930) with USC required him, in addition to teaching courses for specialists, to give “extra-curricular lectures” each week. The university printed announcements informing the public not only of his two courses (“The Art of Contrapuntal Composition” and “Thematic Construction”) but also the two lecture series. One series was called “The Elements of Musical Forms as Determined by Analysis.” The university officially named the other “The Evaluation of Musical Works,” but Schoenberg preferred to call it a “School of Criticism.” The two lecture series, open to all university students as well as the general public, were a form of community outreach. The university produced a publicity flier touting only the lecture series, perhaps in an effort to drum up business. The publicity flier, in Folder 50 of the [Gerald Strang Collection](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/?option=com_content&view=article&id=738:satellite-collection-s29) at the [Arnold Schönberg Center](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/) (ASC), indicates that attendees had the option to pay $1 per lecture, $15 for one lecture series, or $25 for both series of lectures.

There is every indication that Schoenberg took these lecture series seriously, and believed that the general principle of recognition and re-recognition was as essential for their musical understanding as it was for his more advanced students. He sought as many students as possible for these lectures, particularly for the “School of Criticism” series. InNovember 1935 he wrote to [Bessie Bartlett Frankel](http://www.schoenberg.at/letters/search_show_letter.php?ID_Number=2789), President of the California Federation of Music Clubs, to recruit average concertgoers to come:

I would very much like to have you sometimes or at least once among the audience of this class, because I know, what I am doing there is of the greatest importance for everybody who is interested in music. I know from my experience of nearly forty years, that a real understanding for music has to be based on a sound capacity to distinguish between value and non-value. And I know, too, how new my attempt, to bring the amateurs not only, but also the musician to a real knowledge of basic elements for appreciation ([Schoenberg 1964, 195–96](https://books.google.com/books?id=bLf0u5GXo84C&printsec=frontcover&dq=schoenberg+letters&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CB8Q6AEwAGoVChMIsfe0l6qPxgIVAVgUCh3tUwCf#v=onepage&q=fraenkel&f=false)).

Schoenberg left behind no notes for these lectures. What we know about them can be gleaned from the class notes of two students, [Gerald Strang](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/?option=com_content&view=article&id=738:satellite-collection-s29) and [Bernice Abrams Geiringer](http://www.library.ucsb.edu/special-collections/performing-arts/pamss40), which are now on deposit at the ASC and the University of California Santa Barbara, respectively. This chart shows that Schoenberg usually discussed one composition per week between October 7, 1935, and January 27, 1936, but sometimes he spent two weeks on a single composition. This being the height of the Great Depression, it is not reasonable to assume that students attending the lectures purchased a copy of every score he discussed, and Schoenberg’s comments to Swarthout indicate that he understood this was not practical. Rather, Schoenberg projected scores on a screen. It is possible that he used an [opaque projector](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opaque_projector), a predecessor of an overhead projector. We know that Schoenberg was accustomed to using this technology in his classes and lectures in Europe from a [letter](http://www.schoenberg.at/letters/search_show_letter.php?ID_Number=2610) Gertrud Schoenberg wrote to Princeton University in advance of Schoenberg’s lecture there on composition with twelve tones in 1934.

Schoenberg began his “School of Criticism” with discussions of chamber music, but quickly moved to orchestral repertoire. The choice of repertoire may have been influenced by his desire for students to hear live orchestral performance. In fact, the [Los Angeles Philharmonic](http://www.laphil.com/philpedia/archives) performed most of the orchestral works during the 1935–36 season, and in the case of Mozart’s Symphony no. 40, Schoenberg’s Monday evening lecture followed immediately after a performance of the work that weekend. Neither of the students make mention of having attended a live performance, however, and the dates of his lectures do not line up so neatly with other Los Angeles Philharmonic performances.

For want of live performance, Schoenberg turned once again to technology. Phonograph recordings proved a valuable resource, and a series produced by the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy in [1934](http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/music/ormandy_minn/case6.html) and [1935](http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/music/ormandy_minn/case7.html) would have been particularly helpful. Schoenberg may have become aware of the recordings because the first work they recorded, on January 16, 1934, was his *Verklärte Nacht*. This series also included four of the works Schoenberg lectured on in his series at USC: Sibelius’ First Symphony, Bruckner’s Seventh Symphony, Mahler’s Second Symphony, and Schumann’s *Rhenish* Symphony. [Abrams](http://www.library.ucsb.edu/special-collections/performing-arts/pamss40) references the recording of Mahler’s Second in her notes specifically, which, along with the Bruckner recording, sold many copies. The commercial availability of these recordings made the works accessible outside the concert hall, affording Schoenberg’s students the opportunity to hear them repeatedly whenever they chose. In fact, in the back of his 1936 appointment book, Schoenberg wrote, “set a time at which students, with prior notification, can listen to *records* of their choosing while following along the *score*.”

In addition to phonograph records, a technology Schoenberg clearly embraced in his teaching was the radio. Radio broadcasts of major symphony orchestras were standard fare at the time, and though they did not offer the repeated hearings inherent in phonograph recordings, they did provide students an economical way to experience a live performance. Strang’s notes from November 18 indicate that the *Rhenish* Symphony had been on the radio on Sunday, November 17. Perhaps Schoenberg had asked the students to listen to the symphony as a homework assignment in preparation for the lecture the next day.

Schoenberg left USC after only one year, moving to the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in fall 1936. He did not teach music appreciation courses at UCLA, but he likely continued to encourage his students to listen to the radio. At least this is suggested by a previously unpublished worksheet held at the ASC in the [Gerald Strang Collection](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/?option=com_content&view=article&id=738:satellite-collection-s29), Folder 45. (A slightly different version is [ASC catalog number T76.05](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/archiv-2/texte).) The document reveals how Schoenberg guided his students’ listening experiences.

Fundamentally, Schoenberg asked his students to focus on the same basic information that [Abrams](http://www.library.ucsb.edu/special-collections/performing-arts/pamss40) records in her notes of October 21: key, time signature, genre, performing forces, tempo, general character, and which movement. But the radio worksheet fleshes this foundation out somewhat. For example, when Schoenberg refers to “general character,” he asks the students to classify their initial impressions of a work, suggesting the following adjectives: “dancelike, songlike, cantabile, lyric, heroic, pathetic, passionate, scherzando, grazioso, rhythmic,

fantastic, marchlike, stormy, fiery, noble-spirited, melodious, sentimental, burlesque, grotesque, ironic, folklike, exotic, national characteristic, picturesque, dreamy, descriptive of nature or definite moods, etc.” The worksheet also provides insightful information about how Schoenberg wished his students to categorize art music, including what divisions he perceived in the domains of harmony, orchestration, and form. For instance, one wonders what the distinctions were in Schoenberg’s mind among the harmonic categories “Romantic,” “chromatic,” and “Wagnerian.” In regards to styles of instrumentation what distinguishes “pre-Beethoven” from “classic,” or “Wagnerian” from the category “Strauss-Debussy-Tschaikowsky and other post-Wagnerian”? (Those interested in this question could peruse Schoenberg’s materials for a orchestration textbook, [ASC catalog numbers T68.12, T68.13, and T68.14](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/archiv-2/texte).) Pondering such differences not only reveals more about Schoenberg’s pedagogy in his adopted home, but also furnishes a lens onto Schoenberg’s own reception of Western art music.

Putting scores on a projector, placing recordings on reserve in the library for students to listen to, these activities seem commonplace, if not outmoded and quaint, today. But in their original context, these uses of technology reveal Schoenberg’s willingness to adapt to changing circumstances. Limited by the availability of scores and public performances, he brought performances into students’ classrooms and homes, in order to continue with a pedagogy he believed would be as successful for his American students as it had been for those he had taught in Europe. As with his later use of [liner notes](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/veranstaltungen-2/eventdetail/2667/-/arnold-schoenberg-symposium) to educate a broad general public, it is clear that in Schoenberg’s classrooms in southern California, pedagogical goals were always foremost in his mind, and that he engaged technology not merely for its own sake, but to serve these noble ends.

If Schonberg were around today, he would likely be on the forefront of the critical use of technology in the music classroom. He would ask first what he wanted his students to be able to do, and only then consider the technological options available to him to help them succeed. The Center in Vienna that bears his name is a testament to that legacy. A model of a twenty-first century archive, their [website](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/) boasts digital access to a wealth of materials, including [music](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/archiv-2/musik) and [text](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/archiv-2/texte) manuscripts, [letters](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/archiv-2/briefe), and other [artifacts](http://www.schoenberg.at/resources/pages/home.php). You can listen to [recordings](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/schoenberg-2/kompositionen) of all of Schoenberg’s compositions, [stream audio](http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/archiv-2/schoenberg-spricht) of Schoenberg speaking, or access videos on their [YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/user/ascvideo). Anyone teaching about Schoenberg’s music and life in music theory or music history courses can direct their students to these sources. And by encouraging students to interact creatively and critically with these sources, we not only deepen their understanding of Schoenberg’s musical, theoretical, philosophical, and aesthetic legacy, but we keep his pedagogical spirit alive.

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