

Carolyn Dehdari

Discovering a Lost Composer: Vilma Webenau and Her Music

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Harrison Powley, Music

Walking down the streets of Vienna, my eyes pass over new faces and names, wondering if I will ever find something familiar. I think of all those that would be familiar in a different time: Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, Schoenberg. But there is one face I am looking for that few others would recognize; it is a woman's face, a woman who composed, taught music, and worked with Schoenberg. This woman was Vilma Weber von Webenau, who saw many decades of progress and destruction in her life from 1875 to 1953.

In 1898, Webenau moved from Graz to Vienna and became one of the first private students of Arnold Schoenberg. Under his direction in Vienna and later in Berlin, Webenau studied theory, counterpoint, and composition. From their later correspondence it is evident that they became good friends. Although from 1909-1912 she studied instrumentation with Fritz Cortolezis, her correspondence with Schoenberg shows that even after he had stopped instructing her, his compositions continued to influence her, such as the widely known *Pierrot lunaire*.

Since her death in 1953, Webenau's music has sat in an archive. Little has been written about her life or music. As a critic said in her day, her style seems to have developed under the influence of Schoenberg, but not necessarily in his same pattern. Her music is more tonal and approachable than the twelve-tone method her teacher is famous for; however, it can also be expressionistic and often chromatic in a late or post-romantic fashion. Her compositions include works for solo voice and piano, operas, chamber string groups, full orchestra, solo piano, solo violin, and music to accompany the spoken voice.

Webenau's music balances elements of expressionistic and romantic styles, bordering chaos while staying mostly within the realms of tonality. In my efforts to bring her interesting music to light, I have discovered the need to discover more about her life as well; for this reason, I am in Vienna searching for any clues.

In the meantime, however, I have been able to work with her music in many ways. According to plan, I was able to help organize the Fall 2004 Sophie's Daughters' Concert in connection with both the Germanic-Slavic Department and the School of Music. Although the program taken from women composers of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna was originally planned to have over five works by Webenau, her music was met with some resistance, especially her songs. In the end, we were only able to perform two of her works, a string quartet with movements about various flowers and a piano suite of the seasons. Supervising the rehearsals for the string quartet and also performing in it, I was able to ensure that the performance went as closely to Webenau's wishes as possible. I also helped the pianist with some difficult hand-writing and musical issues, as none of Webenau's music has been published. For the string quartet, I was with help able to create

our own edition of the parts. The audience received these pieces with enthusiasm, and many listeners expressed that they were among their favorites of the evening.

With this success, I decided to take the songs, which had been met with resistance, and seek a second opinion from a professional tenor. With his encouragement, I am working on critical editions of one of Webenau's string quartets and a song cycle. Here in Vienna, I am researching more about her life, culture, and history. Maybe one of the faces I see on the streets will know who this woman was and remember the days when her music played.