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Sensitive, Totally Expert *Pierrot* at Tufts

by [Mark DeVoto](#)

This year, 2012, may be the centenary of the *Titanic*, but Igor Stravinsky identified 1912 as a watershed year in music history – the year when he wrote *The Rite of Spring*, when Claude Debussy composed *Jeux*, when Alban Berg composed his *Altenberg Lieder*, and Arnold Schoenberg composed. Each of these works represented a major turning point in its composer's career. The Music Department at Tufts University, under the energetic leadership of chairman Joseph Auner and pianist Donald Berman, has put forward a "Pierrot Project" in honor of Schoenberg's masterpiece through a course (with 12 students), an exhibition, composition of new works in honor, a handsome program flyer (with a moonstruck self-portrait by Schoenberg on the cover), and a fine concert on April 5 (with the real moon becoming full today). The concert even had a title: "Moondrunk Madness, Transgression, and Transcendence."

Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* originated in a commission from Albertine Zehme, a diseuse and mime, who wanted musical accompaniment to her recitation of poems in rondeau form by the Belgian symbolist and mystic Albert Giraud (1860-1929), translated into German verse by Otto Erich Hartleben (1864-1905). Schoenberg chose 21 ("thrice seven") of these texts and set them for *Sprechstimme* and individual combinations of five instruments, piano, violin (doubling viola), cello, flute (doubling piccolo), and clarinet (doubling bass clarinet). The poems themselves reflect various inspirations: exaggerated emotional states, nightmares, parodistic impulses and surrealist violence all hung on the peg of *commedia dell'arte*; one is reminded of the Gothic fantasies of Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* (1868-74) which startled the pre-Freudian world of Paris as much as the *Blaue Reiter* Almanac and Schoenberg's own monodrama *Erwartung* excited psychoanalytical circles in Vienna before the Great War.

Walter Piston once described *Pierrot Lunaire* as an example of a composer "searching for a system." A number of the separate pieces show an extraordinary concern with abstract structure, such as no. 8, *Nacht* (Night), which Schoenberg amusingly called a passacaglia but which is really a free invention on a three-note cell that permeates every measure. Another famous example is no. 18, *Der Mondfleck* (Moonspot), in which the piano projects the distorted outlines of an atonal fugue while the four other instruments hurry through a simultaneous double retrograde canon. Elliott Carter was said to have

asserted that no. 4, *Eine blasse Wäscherin* (A Pale Washerwoman), with its thin chordal texture of flute, clarinet and violin managed to systematically include all possible interval pairs. These structures are fascinating and even marvelous to examine on paper; in their atonal complexity they are virtually impossible to hear even after close study. Other pieces are apparently assembled from spontaneous gestures that disappear as quickly as they are born, without any apparent connection to each other or to the text. In the final poem, *O alter Duft* (O ancient fragrance), Schoenberg acknowledges the tonality that he had abandoned with a farewell gesture in parallel thirds.

Pierrot Lunaire even after a century is a difficult and total experience that has not lost its power to shake and shock. For the musician accustomed to the rest of the 20th century, *Pierrot Lunaire* still impresses the listener with the variety and vitality of its individual musical ideas. One recognizes how so many listeners were baffled by it from the start. Stravinsky, whose personal and intellectual relationship to Schoenberg and his music went up and down and back and forth for many decades, wrote in his *Autobiography* (1934) about his first hearing of *Pierrot Lunaire* in 1912: “I did not feel the slightest enthusiasm about the aesthetics of the work, which appeared to me to be a retrogression to the out-of-date [Aubrey] Beardsley cult. But, on the other hand, I consider that the merits of the instrumentation are beyond dispute.” Thirty years later he would write: “The real wealth of *Pierrot* – sound and substance, for *Pierrot* is the solar plexus as well as the mind of early twentieth-century music – were beyond me as they were beyond all of us at that time.”

The *Pierrot* ensemble that performed at Tufts included Susan Narucki (soprano), Sarah Brady (flute and piccolo), Diane Heffner (clarinet and bass clarinet), Joanna Kurkowicz, (violin and viola), Emmanuel Feldman (cello), and director Don Berman (piano). The singer’s *Sprechstimme*, with a wide range of vocal expression that every performer has found a major challenge, was brilliantly supported by a sensitive and totally expert instrumental ensemble. Projected supertitles gave the poems in translation with notable success. This outstanding performance formed the second half of the program. The first half included arrangements and original settings by student members of the project; two of Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* settings, in arrangements that included a solo horn and *Sprechstimme* parts executed by men, demonstrated a flexibility that Schoenberg himself might have approved. Original works included an *Indifferent Elegy* by Stefan Anderson, *Eine blasse...* by Kevin Laba, *Response: Valse de Chopin* by Michael Laurello, and *Départ de Pierrot* by William Kenlon. The student performers were well prepared and confident, and the performances were a credit to the composers no less than to the centennial of *Pierrot Lunaire*.

Mark DeVoto, musicologist and composer, is an expert in Alban Berg, also Ravel and Debussy. A graduate of Harvard College (1961) and Princeton (PhD, 1967), he has published extensively on these composers and many music subjects, most notably, harmony. His most recent book is *Schubert’s Great C Major: Biography of a Symphony* ([Pendragon Press](#)). His website is [here](#).