

ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG'S RECORD COLLECTION AT THE ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG CENTER, WIEN

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SUMMARY. This paper examines Arnold Schönberg's record collection, held at the archives of the Arnold Schönberg Center. Transferred by the Austrian Media Library, it is now successively made available through the audio database of the Arnold Schönberg Center. Several examples from the collection are discussed, among them a personal message from the Schönberg Family. Music examples included Schönberg's own recording of *Transfigured Night* op. 4 and the Kolisch Quartet performances of his String Quartets. These acoustic documents illuminate Schönberg's performance aesthetics and compositional intentions. The paper emphasizes the archival approach to digitizing these records and preserving their authentic sonic qualities. Ultimately, it highlights the importance of meticulous archival work in uncovering Schönberg's multifaceted legacy.

Keywords: Arnold Schönberg, record collection, digitization, cataloguing, performance practice, historical recordings, audio preservation

The processing of historical estates always requires prioritization.² At the beginning of the cataloguing process, there are usually documents that are of primary importance for gaining knowledge about the person or subject at the center. Arnold Schönberg's estate was first catalogued by his wife Gertrud Schönberg. Together with his former assistants Leonard Stein and Richard Hoffmann, she inventoried his music manuscripts. Ten years after Gertrud Schönberg's death, in February 1977, the estate found its first permanent home in the newly established Arnold Schoenberg Institute at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. There, the materials were comprehensively catalogued and made accessible to researchers. In the 1980s, however, disagreements arose between the university and the Schönberg family regarding

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² This article is an extended version of a blog post that appeared online in German in the daily newspaper *Der Standard* on 4 March 2022.



the focus of the institution, which ultimately led to a legal dispute, prompting Schönberg's children Nuria, Ronald and Lawrence to look for a new home for the complete collection. The decision was made in favor of the city of Vienna, where the Arnold Schönberg Center Vienna has been open since 1998.³ Thanks to the comprehensive computerized inventory cataloguing that had already been carried out from the outset, the Arnold Schönberg Center was able to focus on digitizing the objects from the very beginning. Life and creative documents such as music autographs, writings, letters, calendars, but also paintings, photographs and everyday objects have already been inventoried as far as possible and are also accessible as scans on a large scale.

At best, there are surprises in a collection of this kind with items that have long been ignored. These include the waltzes for string orchestra from 1897, which were only performed again in 2004 after more than 100 years and whose melodiousness only reveals the personality of the later exponent of modernism on second hearing; or all the negatives from Schönberg's private photo collection, which were digitized in 2015 as part of an exhibition project and allow unexpectedly vivid insights into the composer's life.

Figure 1



**Arnold Schönberg's Record Collection
Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien**

³ The history of the estate is comprehensively described Therese Muxeneder, "The Arnold Schoenberg Estate." In *Bulgarian Musicology* 35/3-4 (2011), p. 152-165.

A more recent discovery concerns acoustic evidence from the estate: a collection of over 400 shellac records that cannot be made audible with conventional playback devices without changing the sound or even endangering the object itself. A cooperation between the Arnold Schönberg Center and Österreichische Mediathek [Austrian Media Library] for the professional digitization of the collection, which took place in 2019/2020, not only uncovered some unheard music, but sometimes came close to opening one of Andy Warhol's famous "Time Capsules" – albeit in acoustic form.

In contrast to his friend and former pupil Alban Berg, Schönberg was not a passionate record listener. In 1930, he flatly declared the gramophone to be an "enemy that is advancing inexorably [...]. The worst damage it causes consists [in] acclimatizing the ear to an unspeakably raw sound and to the pulpy, unclear composition of the sound body, which excludes any fine distinction."⁴

Viewed from a technical standpoint, Schönberg was right: low frequencies are cut off due to the limited size of the sound funnel, high frequencies fail due to the interaction between needle and diaphragm. Added to this are distortions that arise from the excessive demands placed on the technology by the broad spectrum of some recordings. Nevertheless, the gramophone sound was perceived as a miracle of "purity and faithful reproduction" – at least by inhabitants of the sanatorium society that was entertained by shellac discs in Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* [*Der Zauberberg*].⁵ Obviously, even a technically mediocre recording conveys more than an acoustic analysis can bring to light.

Perfection in the transmission can become a minor matter if the acoustic message only remains perceptible in some way. This is particularly evident in the case of a small-diameter disc from Schönberg's estate, which was originally intended for shipping. The object, according to the label an "RCA Victor Home Recording Record", is light, almost fragile. Every time it is played, the porous material wears away – similar to flexidiscs, which are still occasionally found in music magazines today.

The inscription is difficult to interpret: "ARTRUNUR | Arnold, Trude, Nuria Schoenberg | 20. I. 35" – it refers to father Schönberg, his wife and their daughter. All three had been in exile in the United States since October 1933, after Schönberg was dismissed from his professorship at the Berlin Academy of Arts following the Nazi takeover. Among the family members who initially remained in Vienna was Gertrud Schönberg's mother, Henriette Kolisch.

⁴ Arnold Schönberg: Antwort auf eine Rundfrage (1930) (ASSV 5.2.3.7.)

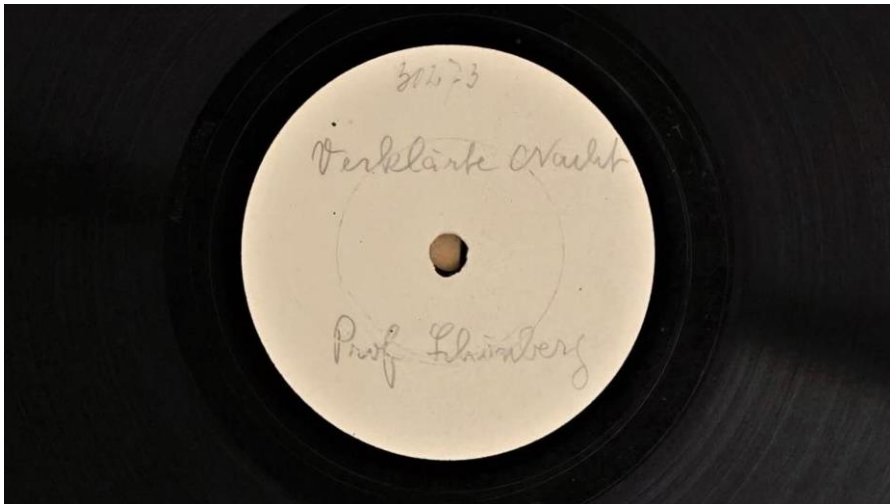
⁵ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, Vintage Books, New York, 1955, p. 637

The disc contains a greeting message to “Grandma”, which was recorded with a device distributed by RCA Victor and was to be sent to Austria.⁶

The parents talk about the guest room in warm California, the cold in Vienna and Henriette’s homemade jam. Important, however, is the final message from three-year-old Nuria, which, behind the whimsical nature of the recording, can also be heard as an urgent appeal: “Dear Grandma! Happy birthday to you! Come here very quickly!”

Arnold Schönberg’s string sextet *Transfigured Night* [Verklärte Nacht] op. 4, composed in 1899 during his summer holiday in Payerbach, was released exactly 25 years later as the first recording of his work by the National Gramophonic Society. The society, based in England, offered subscriptions for recordings of classical works, which were always recorded without cuts – not a matter of course in the early days of recording history. The expanded Spencer Dyke Quartet plays in a sober and sonorous manner and must have offered listeners of the time a welcome opportunity to familiarise themselves with Schönberg’s music.⁷

Figure 2



**Test-Pressing Transfigured Night op. 4, Ultraphon Berlin
Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien**

⁶ Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien (REC 424-426); an edited version of the recording is available at <https://youtu.be/zZ0GK7yDqZA?si=7qMx4DMjX7bBQX1J>.

⁷ Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien (REC 041-044).

The recording of the orchestral version of Opus 4, conducted by the composer himself four years later by Deutsche Ultraphon AG, which collaborated with renowned artists such as Marlene Dietrich and Erich Kleiber, opens up completely different dimensions. The recording of *Transfigured Night* with the Staatskapelle Berlin was made in the dance hall of the Victoria-Garten restaurant in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, which was known for its excellent acoustics. After the first session, legal problems on the part of the orchestra prevented the production from being finalized, which is why Schönberg only received three rehearsal discs of bars 1-200. No further copies of the recording have survived.⁸

Transfigured Night begins with a *d* repeated four times in the low strings. Schönberg chooses a slow tempo in order to articulate each note according to his musical conception – accentuated at the beginning, once almost aggressively and twice played out somewhat more broadly. The melody, which soon begins, develops with subtle tempo modulations. This creates emotional intensity, but above all emphasizes the structural characteristics of the music, melodic phrases and formal sections. Behind this is Schönberg's conviction that „dynamics, tempo, timbre [...] are really no more than the performer's resources, serving to make the idea comprehensible and admitting of variations.“⁹ Freedom in relation to the score is not only permitted here, but necessary in order to make the content of the music comprehensible to listeners. According to this understanding, the performance is a communicative means of presenting the musical idea – in the case of the records from Berlin by the composer himself.

Among the most impressive documents in which the “performance theory of the Viennese School” becomes audible are private recordings of all of Schönberg's string quartets made by the Kolisch Quartet at the United Artists Film Studios in Los Angeles between 29 December 1936 and 8 January 1937. Selected individuals, including Jascha Heifetz and George Gershwin, were invited to purchase one of 25 sets of 23 discs at cost price. The project was initiated by Schönberg's student Alfred Newman, a successful film music composer in Hollywood. Technically speaking, the conditions were ideal, but in view of the expensive studio time, only a few hours of recording were available. The four musicians were familiar with Schönberg's oeuvre and had already performed his works many times in Europe – with the exception of String Quartet No. 4 op. 37, which was to receive its world premiere the evening after the recording.

⁸ Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien (REC 150-152)

⁹ Schönberg, Arnold. “Mechanical Musical Instruments.” In *Style and Idea. Selected Writings by Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. by Leonard Stein. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1984, pp. 326-329, here p. 326.

The recording of the third movement seems unaffected by this difficult situation. The complete twelve-tone row of the work is heard in the form of an expansive, declamatory theme in unison with the four strings. The very first note undergoes subtle dynamic changes over almost eight seconds, supported by a well-measured vibrato. As in Schoenberg's recording of *Transfigured Night*, the repeated notes *d flat* and *g flat* are not played identically, but are emphasized differently depending on their position within the theme. After all twelve notes have been played, the phrase is concluded with a descending cello figure, which is reminiscent of a tonal cadence with the tone sequence *a flat/d flat* – the beginning of a retrograde inversion of the row. Correspondingly greater emphasis is placed on the note *d flat*, which also marks the beginning of a new section in a subdued, melancholy mood.¹⁰

Figure 3



**Kolisch Quartett and Arnold Schönberg, United Artists Studio, 1937.
Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien**

¹⁰ The recording can be heard in a visualization with the original manuscript:
<https://www.youtube.com/live/q1Pw1kqmbDI?si=hk1-BIJnCuHq0Y-H&t=1009>

Schönberg's record collection, as preserved in the estate of the Arnold Schönberg Center, invites comprehensive examination and is currently fully accessible via the catalogue of Österreichische Mediathek.¹¹ The recordings will be successively added to the database of the Arnold Schönberg Center.¹² The cataloguing does not aim at a continuous reproduction of entire works or movements, as is common with commercial transfers. Each record side is linked to an audio file in order to ensure the most authentic possible representation of the analogue object on a digital level. For highlights such as the first recording of *Gurre-Lieder* under Leopold Stokowski, you have to change the (virtual) disc 25 times – the effort is worth it. Other recordings bear witness to the technical limitations of the medium, as well as to the high demands that early performers faced. Schönberg is not always at the center of attention: occasionally the composer also received recordings of works by his pupils, among whom he valued the young Dika Newlin, who sent him a *Sinfonia for piano* in 1949, as a special talent. After the war, records became an important means of communication with the Old World. The composer received several audio documents from Europe, which gave him hope that his work would live on regardless of his direct influence. He was particularly pleased with a recording of the Concerto for Violin op. 36 with Tibor Varga and his former composition student Winfried Zillig as conductor of the Hessischer Rundfunk Symphony Orchestra.¹³ In a letter of thanks to the violinist, he expressed his enthusiasm: "I can fully and completely understand why everyone talks of you and your playing with such enthusiasm. It really sounds as if you had known the piece for 25 years, your rendering is so mature, so expressive, so beautifully shaped. I must say that I have never yet come across such a good performance without having myself helped with every detail. The fact that you discovered all this for yourself is not only evidence of your outstanding talent; it gratifies me, besides, in that it shows me how distinctly my music can speak to a true musician: he can know and understand me without explanations, simply through the medium of the written notes."¹⁴

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¹¹ <https://www.mediathek.at/katalog>

¹² <https://archive.schoenberg.at/av/tontraeger.php>

¹³ Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien (REC 213-214).

¹⁴ <https://repo.schoenberg.at/urn:nbn:at:at-asc-B058421>

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