Singing Webern, Sounding Webern: Bethany Beardslee, Grace-Lynne Martin, and Marni Nixon, 1950–1957

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In her 2017 autobiography *I Sang the Unsingable: My Life in Twentieth-Century Music*, soprano Bethany Beardslee (1925–) reflects on her experience performing and recording the music of Anton Webern during the 1950s: "Webern's sparse serial music, with its pointillist style, was different, all in short time durations. It appealed to a whole new generation. This said, my opinion of Webern—why I hate his music—is formed through a performer's perspective."[1] There is reason to take Beardslee's "performer's perspective" seriously. For it is a voice like hers—the voice of a solo soprano—that is the defining sound of Webern's oeuvre. Seventeen of his thirty-one published opuses include voices. A soprano soloist features in fourteen of these works, twelve of which include no other voices (see table 1). The previously unknown works discovered after Webern's death follow this pattern to an even greater degree: of these forty-six works, most of which predate Webern's opus 1, twenty-nine include a solo soprano.[2] Webern's first forays into atonality (the song collections published as opuses 3 and 4), his initial experimentation with the twelve-tone method ("Mein Weg geht jetzt vorüber," op. 15, no. 4), and his first entirely twelve-tone opus (the Three Traditional Rhymes, op. 17) all involve a soprano soloist.[3] From 1915 to 1925, he composed almost exclusively vocal music, publishing eight consecutive works for solo soprano with various configurations of instrumental accompaniment (opuses 12–19). These eight works, more than any others, evince two essential elements of Webern's aesthetic world: a predilection for Marian themes and an

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1. Beardslee, *I Sang the Unsingable*, 279.
2. I count publications such as the Eight Early Songs and Two Pieces for cello and piano as eight and two works, respectively. Some of the groupings of these early works are suggested by Webern's sketches, but many are the result of posthumous editorial decisions, and none of these works were in any case published in groups until decades after Webern's death.
3. See Shreffler, *Webern*, 6. See also Shreffler, "'Mein Weg.'"

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Table 1 Webern's vocal works with opus numbers

Works for solo soprano without other voices	Works for solo soprano with other voices	Works for choir without solo soprano
Five Songs op. 3 (1907–8) Four Songs op. 4 (1908–9) Two Songs op. 8 (1910) Four Songs op. 12 (1915–17) Four Songs op. 13 (1914–18) Six Songs, op. 14 (1917–21) Five Sacred Songs, op. 15 (1917–22) Five Canons, op. 16 (1923–24) Three Traditional Rhymes, op. 17 (1924–25) Three Songs op. 18 (1925) Three Songs op. 23 (1934) Three Songs op. 25 (1934–35)	Cantata no. 1, op. 29 (1938–39) Cantata no. 2, op. 31 (1941–43)	*Entflieht auf leichten Kähnen*, op. 2 (1908) Two Songs op. 19 (1926) *Das Augenlicht*, op. 26 (1935)

obsession with maternal symbolism more generally, often expressed through allusions to his own deceased mother.[4] Helen Pridmore summarizes all of this well when she notes that "Webern wrote for the voice throughout his life, so his vocal writing can serve as a kind of timeline of developments in his compositional style."[5] If one is pressed to select a single sound to represent his body of work, the voice of a solo soprano would appear to be the right choice.

And yet: scholars and performers alike have long focused their attention on Webern's instrumental music. The causes of this trend are manifold. It seems safe to assume, for example, that Beardslee is not the only soprano to have hated Webern's vocal works. "They are atonal, they are angular, and they require the singer to perform large intervallic leaps and awkward intervals," notes Pridmore.[6] These qualities have frequently been viewed as evidence of an unnatural approach to vocal writing, particularly given Webern's tendency to compose for the voice as if it were just another instrument. In the Five Canons for soprano, clarinet, and bass clarinet, op. 16, for example, canonic procedure imposes an "instrumental" discipline on the voice; according to Anne Shreffler, the voice is "instrumentalised" and challenged "to behave like a clarinet."[7] This effect is especially pronounced at the opening of each canon, all of which are begun by one of the clarinets, compelling the voice

4. Julian Johnson has explored this aspect of Webern's oeuvre in depth: Johnson, *Webern*, 159–66; Johnson, "Webern's 'Middle Period.'"

5. Pridmore, "Aural and Vocal Approach," 415.

6. Ibid., 416. In addition to Pridmore's article, a recently published monograph by Loralee Songer has attempted to present works by Webern and other members of the Second Viennese School as viable choices for vocalists: Songer, *Songs*.

7. Johnson, *Webern*, 158; Shreffler, *Webern*, 11; Shreffler, "Anton Webern," 286.

Example 1 Webern, Five Canons for soprano, clarinet, and bass clarinet, op. 16, no. 1, mm. 1–4

to keep up.[8] Example 1 demonstrates this phenomenon as it appears in the opening of opus 16, no. 1.[9] (The continuations of the clarinets' lines after the initial canonic segment are omitted for clarity.) The resulting line stretches the voice to its limits, as Julian Johnson describes: "In his attitude to tessitura, just as in his attitude to rapid changes of register in broad sweeps, often over two octaves, Webern may well be accused of mishearing the aural result, of idealising a soprano sound that remains unlikely to be realised." The voice, Johnson continues, has long been "the sign of corporeality in music."[10] By asking it to do everything an instrument does, Webern's vocal music seems to rob it of the very qualities that make it human.

But this music's difficulties do not alone account for the bias against it. Two different groups of Webern's instrumental works, originating from either side of his vocal decade, have commanded so much attention as to frequently crowd out the vocal works. The first group consists of the "aphoristic" works composed in the years leading up to the First World War. Fixating on the brevity and sparseness of these works has been a staple of Webern reception from the beginning; to this day, one rarely encounters a concert review or set of liner notes that does not address this topic. The second group consists of the twelve-tone works composed in the final two decades of Webern's life, whose high degree of systematization has drawn the attention of academics and composers from the postwar era onward. These two types of work have thus come to represent "typical Webern": either a very brief work, such as the Five Pieces for orchestra op. 10, or a slightly less brief

8. See Moldenhauer and Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern*, 274.

9. Examples 1 and 2 were transcribed from Anton Webern, *Fünf Canons nach lateinischen Texten* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1928). All instrumental parts in the examples for this article are notated at pitch.

10. Johnson, *Webern*, 157.

but rigorously organized work, such as the Symphony, op. 21. Many of the works for solo soprano composed between 1915 and 1925 feature "neither brevity nor system," and were thus "bracketed out of the Webern canon."[11] In this way, it was an instrumental image of Webern that, as Nicholas Cook observes, dominated the discourse until "overturned" by scholars like Shreffler and Johnson in the 1990s.[12]

Over the course of this article, I tell a forgotten story from the half century that Cook describes. While this story is in line with the priorities of recent Webern scholarship, it also complicates the picture of postwar reception against which that scholarship is often defined. For during the very years in which a cool and calculating Webern was being celebrated by composers and intellectuals, a different image of the composer was emerging in concerts and recordings. From 1950 to 1957, a trio of US sopranos—Beardslee, Grace-Lynne Martin (1929–2012), and Marni Nixon (1930–2016)—performed and recorded the entirety of Webern's vocal music. Most of their live performances were US premieres; prior to 1950, there had been just three public performances of Webern's vocal works in the country.[13] Furthermore, their performances included the posthumous world premieres of four of Webern's vocal works. Most crucially, these three artists' recordings were the first-ever recordings of the vast majority of Webern's vocal compositions.[14] Beardslee recorded Webern's opus 12 for Dial Records, while Martin and Nixon performed under the direction of Robert Craft on Columbia Records' *Anton Webern: The Complete Music*. The degree to which these recordings increased access to Webern's vocal music can hardly be overstated. With concert performances few and far between, those interested in Webern's music might have turned to scores. Yet several of Webern's later works were not published until the mid-1950s, and many others were difficult to find; John Cage once complained about having to copy out the Symphony by hand at the New York Public Library, as the score was "nowhere to be bought."[15] Since most lacked access to Webern's vocal

11. Shreffler, *Webern*, 3–4.

12. Cook, "Inventing Tradition," 177. In addition to the work of Shreffler and Johnson, two doctoral dissertations from the 1990s bear mentioning: Kronick, "Musical Invention and Poetry"; Reinhardt, "From Poet's Voice." There were a few exceptions to the trend observed by Cook. Dorothea Beckmann published a dissertation on Webern's vocal works in 1970: Beckmann, "Sprache und Musik." As Kathryn Bailey notes, additionally, lyricism (with its obvious connotations of vocality) has been a consistent if not especially prominent topic in discussion of Webern's music for years: Bailey, "Coming of Age," 648.

13. Two of the Five Songs on poems of Stefan George, op. 4, were performed in 1924 and 1925. The Five Sacred Songs, op. 15, were performed in 1926. All three performances took place in New York.

14. The one exception is a 1956 recording of the Two Songs op. 8 and Four Songs op. 13 led by Pierre Boulez and sung by Jeanne Héricard, which predates Martin's recordings of those works by one year.

15. Quoted in Hicks, "'Our Webern,'" 10.

works via performances or scores (not to mention Cage's ability to decipher those scores), the appearance of the Dial and Columbia recordings thus transformed those works from music that existed in theory to music that existed in practice. As Carolyn Abbate reminds us, "music is written by a composer, but made and given phenomenal reality by performers."[16]

Taking Webern's works from the written page to "phenomenal reality" was no easy task. With few models on which to base their performances, Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon crafted their own strategies for overcoming the challenges of Webern's music. In many cases, these strategies eschewed an emphasis on the more avant-garde aspects of Webern's works in favor of looking for links, whether technical or aesthetic, between those works and more familiar tonal repertoires. This approach proved effective. The three sopranos received near-unanimous praise for their execution and interpretation of Webern's vocal works. In reviews of their concerts and recordings, critics began to portray Webern as a composer who was as fluent in vocal idioms as in instrumental composition. For a time, it seemed as if his vocal works might come to rival his instrumental works in status and prevalence.

Almost none of it stuck; this is a *forgotten* story. Despite the acclaim their performances initially garnered, Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon became footnotes in the history of Webern's music, and lessons learned from their performances had to be relearned later on. My project is therefore not only to document these three sopranos' work, but also to understand the factors that led to its disappearance. One such factor was the evolution of performance practice throughout the 1960s and '70s, which tended to cast postwar-era performances in a negative light; I address this topic in the penultimate section of the article. Another was sexism. As I document, the critical response to these sopranos' performances sometimes invoked sexist tropes, even amid otherwise positive reviews. These moments unfolded against the backdrop of an avant-garde musical culture that already tended to discount the contributions of performers—a phenomenon Nicholas Mathew has described as "modernism's vanishing performer."[17] Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon were thus doubly disadvantaged. They were both performers and women, and they were operating within an environment in which neither was taken seriously.

This particular combination is familiar. As Abbate points out, there has been a long-standing tendency for the history of classical music to be "more a history of composers and compositions, and less a history of singers, instrumentalists, or the cultural contexts of performance"; and as Heather Hadlock notes, "female singers' contributions to the creative process have historically been silenced or written off."[18] By reinserting Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon

16. Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, x.
17. Mathew, "Darmstadt Pianism."
18. Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, x; Hadlock, "Return of the Repressed," 234.

into the narrative, I aim to push back against both of these trends, and to strike a balance between the two kinds of history that Abbate describes. What follows is a history of Webern's music in which the particular qualities of that music matter a great deal. But it is also a history of Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon themselves, of what they accomplished, and of how they did it. This latter history is concerned with what Abbate calls the "facts of life" of vocal music: "grounded and intensely material" performances, "laboring singers," and "breathing that becomes singing."[19] Pamela Karantonis and Pieter Verstraete describe something similar in their introduction to a recently published volume on Cathy Berberian, another renowned performer of modernist vocal music. Berberian's 1966 essay "The New Vocality in Contemporary Music," they argue, enacts a "feminist revision" of music history by centering "a voice whose powers are inseparable from a body that lives a daily and prosaic life—a fact that should be celebrated in vocal art—despite the voice's potential to transcend the everyday with sublime artistic expression."[20] Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon each possessed such a voice, and their work is an indispensable part of the story of Webern's music. Since Webern's "abstractly conceived" works rely "heavily on translation into viable performance practice," Cook argues, "those who actually played it occupied an increasingly vital role in production and dissemination."[21] As did those who sang it, we might add.

1950–52: Bethany Beardslee

As a student at Juilliard in the late 1940s, Bethany Beardslee harbored no dreams of becoming a modern music specialist. She loved art song and eschewed opera.[22] But in 1950 she met a French pianist named Jacques-Louis Monod. Monod had recently arrived in the United States with René Leibowitz, his former teacher at the Darmstadt *Ferienkurse*. Hoping to follow in his teacher's footsteps, Monod proposed a partnership with Beardslee: "In rapid-fire French, he went on and on about Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and someone called Anton Webern. He also spoke of making me a great singer of contemporary music—he'd been entirely convinced by my performance that night. I had no idea *who* these people were he was talking about."[23] Though unfamiliar with the music Monod loved, Beardslee agreed to record Webern's Four Songs op. 12 with him. The session

19. Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, vii.

20. Karantonis and Verstraete, "Introduction/Overture," 15. Berberian's essay was published in the Italian journal *Discoteca* as "La nuova vocalità nell'opera contemporanea."

21. Cook, "Inventing Tradition," 189.

22. "I thought Wagner's music long and the plots stupid": Beardslee, *I Sang the Unsingable*, 46.

23. Ibid., 62.

was scheduled for May 16, 1950, just eleven days after the duo's first meeting. Beardslee had to practice.

For Beardslee, Webern's vocal works were "a test," "real killers," and a "rite of passage into the world of new music." When recalling the process of learning these works in her autobiography, she included a reproduction of the score of opus 16, no. 5, the first five measures of which feature an unholy smorgasbord of sevenths, ninths, and even wider intervals (see example 2); "any singer can see what I mean about the difficulty."[24] But Beardslee got the hang of it before long, buoyed by countless hours spent rehearsing with Monod at his Upper West Side apartment. In the adjacent apartment lived a woman who "gave us no end of grief when we rehearsed the Alban Berg and Anton Webern songs." If Beardslee and Monod rehearsed after dinner, the woman would bang on the wall between the two apartments; Monod "banged angrily in response."[25] Beardslee did not possess perfect pitch, and the "wide intervallic lines" common to many of Webern's vocal works rendered the relationship between certain notes "not so apparent," and thus more difficult to sing accurately. In response, Beardslee developed a technique for making Webern's music easier to grasp. She practiced reducing those wide intervals "to a small cluster," thereby revealing that most were "just chromatic half steps" in disguise.[26] Even after applying this strategy,

Example 2 Webern, Five Canons for soprano, clarinet, and bass clarinet, op. 16, no. 5, mm. 1–5, vocal line only

24. Ibid., 70.

25. Ibid., 63.

26. Ibid., 75. Beardslee does not provide any further details of the mechanics of this technique, but presumably it involved collapsing intervals wider than an octave (e.g., conceptualizing a minor ninth as a semitone) and/or inverting intervals like sevenths. The phrase "small cluster" also suggests that Beardslee may have been thinking about the relationship between several notes within a phrase, and not just notes that were directly adjacent to one another. In a 2006 monograph on vocal performance practice, Martha Elliott cites Beardslee as one of several singers of contemporary music to have "achieved great things with hard work in place of perfect pitch." Elliott goes on to describe her own techniques for learning atonal music, echoing

however, those same intervals made Webern's vocal lines more difficult to retain. "I look at my old Webern scores and can't remember a single note," Beardslee later recalled. She had an easier time with the works of Milton Babbitt, whose *Du* and *Philomel* she premiered: "I am convinced it's because Milton's vocal lines contain a preponderance of thirds, fourths, fifths, octaves—all the intervals inherent in tonal music." But she still crafted an approach to Webern's music that worked for her: "Webern's vocal lines were hard to learn, but I found the secret to singing them: The challenge is to make them sound like music. I know that statement sounds ridiculous, but for me that's what singing new music has always been about."[27] Beardslee maintained this approach throughout her career; in a 1985 interview with the *Boston Globe*, she contended that "the only way to sing Webern is to sing it the way you sing Mozart."[28] To make Webern's music "sound like music" or like Mozart was to make it sound tonal, at least in some sense of the word. Beardslee repeated Webern's phrases over and over again in order to "find the important pitches that gave a tonal sense to the phrase," which she felt was a part of "all music, no matter what its compositional style." She attempted to "maintain all this through a legato line," since the "*legatissimo*, or connection, between the wide intervals of Webern's music is extremely important." "Somehow my ear found its way."[29]

Jacques Monod and René Leibowitz had come to New York to record with Dial Records, a small label founded by Ross Russell in the mid-1940s. Though Dial initially focused on jazz, Russell sought a new direction following the departure of Charlie Parker from the label in 1948. He had recently been introduced to the music of the Second Viennese School by Louis Gottlieb, a UCLA musicologist and former Schoenberg student. So when the Paris-based Blue Star Records offered a master tape of Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony op. 9, in exchange for the rights to distribute Dial's jazz releases in Europe, Russell saw an opportunity. Dial's "Library of Contemporary Classics" was born.[30]

In July 1949, Russell contacted Rudolf Kolisch, first violinist of the Pro Arte Quartet and Webern's former colleague in Vienna, to see if the Pro Arte might be interested in recording for Dial. Russell explained that Dial intended to "explore musical trails ignored by the large concerns," especially the Second Viennese School. He noted that the label had previously specialized

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Beardslee's account of learning Webern: "Sometimes it helps to transpose large leaps to smaller intervals within an octave, enabling you to really get the pitches in your ear. For example, a major seventh would become a half step down, or a minor tenth would be a minor third": Elliott, *Singing in Style*, 298.

27. Beardslee, *I Sang the Unsingable*, 72, 74.

28. Quoted in Dyer, "Farewell Not Goodby."

29. Beardslee, *I Sang the Unsingable*, 74.

30. On the Library of Contemporary Classics, see Hoek, "Beyond Bebop," and Smyth, "Schoenberg and Dial Records."

in "contemporary jazz"—"the so-called bebop movement"—which he felt put it "in a position to do the same sort of job with contemporary serious music."[31] Kolisch agreed to work with Dial, and suggested recording Webern's music. In January 1950, the Pro Arte Quartet recorded the Five Movements for string quartet, op. 5, and Six Bagatelles for string quartet, op. 9, at WOR Studios in Hell's Kitchen. The other side of the album featured a Leibowitz-led performance of the Symphony, op. 21, recorded in Paris and first released by Blue Star. On the cover was an illustration by David Stone Martin (see figure 1), an artist responsible for the covers of albums by Mary Lou Williams, Charles Mingus, Billie Holiday, and many other jazz greats.

Before Dial's first Webern album had been released, Monod and Leibowitz arrived in New York to record a second. On May 15, 1950, Leibowitz

Figure 1 Album cover by David Stone Martin for Dial Records' first Webern album. Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library, University of California, Berkeley. This figure appears in color in the online version of the **Journal**.

31. Ross Russell, letter to Rudolf Kolisch, July 22, 1949, Rudolf Kolisch Papers, 1886–1978, Houghton Library, Harvard University, item 184.

conducted the Quartet for clarinet, tenor saxophone, piano, and violin, op. 22, and the Concerto for nine instruments, op. 24. The next day, Monod recorded the Variations for piano, op. 27, and was joined by Beardslee in the Four Songs op. 12.[32] The final product of that session makes clear that Beardslee achieved her goal of making Webern's works "sound like music." Together with Monod, she ably navigated the many indications of "rit. - - - tempo" that litter the four songs, demonstrating the duo's ability to stay connected without becoming rigid, even at this early stage of their collaboration. In the opening song, Beardslee drew out the quiet longing of Peter Rosegger's text:

> Der Tag ist vergangen,
> Die Nacht ist schon hier;
> Gute Nacht, o Maria,
> Bleib ewig bei mir.
>
> Der Tag ist vergangen,
> Die Nacht kommt herzu;
> Gib auch den Verstorbnen
> Die ewige Ruh.
>
> *Day is gone,*
> *night is already here.*
> *Good night, O Mary,*
> *stay ever by me.*
>
> *Day is gone,*
> *night comes upon us.*
> *Give to the dead*
> *everlasting peace.*

Beardslee's tender rendition of two soft, high notes toward the end of the song, on the words "kommt" (m. 15) and "Ruh" (m. 21), is particularly striking. At the other end of the expressive spectrum, her performance of the fourth and final song leaned into its playfulness, as at the words "da kam ein Bienchen und naschte fein" (there came a little bee and nibbled delicately).[33] At moments like these, Beardslee's likening of singing Webern to singing Mozart does not seem so far-fetched.

Not that the critics noticed. In fact, only one critic—Robert Craft, whose own recordings of Webern I will turn to shortly—mentioned Beardslee by name. And even Craft had little to say, simply noting that Beardslee's pitches

32. See the recording session notes, Ross Russell Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, box 19, folder 14.

33. Both this translation and the translation of opus 12, no. 1, above were made by Beardslee; see Bethany Beardslee, letter to Ross Russell, Ross Russell Papers, box 19, folder 14.

Table 2 Contents of Dial's two Webern albums

	Webern: Symphony, op. 21 (1950)	*Webern: Concerto for Nine Instruments* (1951)
A side	Symphony, op. 21 (1928)	Concerto for nine instruments, op. 24 (1934) Variations for piano, op. 27 (1936)
B side	Five Movements for string quartet, op. 5 (1909) Six Bagatelles for string quartet, op. 9 (1913)	Four Songs op. 12 (1915–17) Quartet for clarinet, tenor saxophone, piano, and violin, op. 22 (1930)

were "generally accurate."[34] (A decade later, Craft and Beardslee would record music by Berg and Schoenberg together.) One reason why critics failed to comment on Beardslee and Monod's performance may have been its status as an outlier within the context of Dial's two Webern albums. In terms of repertoire (see table 2), the albums continued a trend begun by earlier concert performances of Webern's music in the United States, which were weighted heavily toward the two groups of instrumental music discussed above: "aphoristic" works (opuses 5 and 9 on the first album) and multimovement twelve-tone works (opus 21 on the first album and opuses 22, 24, and 27 on the second). Unsurprisingly, then, critics responded to the albums by taking up the well-worn tropes of brevity and structural systematization. Jerome Bohm deemed the Six Bagatelles for string quartet, op. 9, "epigrammatic," while Carter Harman noted that the longest bagatelle lasted barely a minute.[35] Richard F. Goldman, meanwhile, observed that Webern had sought "a reduction to bare minima in a music designedly stripped to what are conceived to be essentials."[36] Nor did Dial's presentation of the opus 12 songs do much to distinguish them from the instrumental works. Beardslee had sent Russell handwritten translations of the four songs, with texts by Peter Rosegger, Li-Tai-Po/Hans Bethge, August Strindberg, and Goethe, but neither the texts nor the translations were published in the album's liner notes.[37] While other works were the subject of mini-essays, furthermore, opus 12 received only a scant paragraph identifying it as a "short song cycle" influenced by *Pierrot lunaire*. Goldman assumed, perhaps rightly, that the songs had been "thrown in for good measure."[38] While Dial's two Webern albums represented an important step forward in terms of access to Webern's music, the (non)reception of Beardslee's contributions suggests that they had little initial impact on awareness of the composer's vocal works.

34. Craft, "More Webern."
35. Bohm, "Recent Records"; Harman, "Records: Atonal."
36. Goldman, "Reviewed Work(s): Webern," 632.
37. Beardslee, letter to Ross Russell.
38. Goldman, "Reviewed Work(s): Webern," 632.

But no matter; for Beardslee and Monod, Dial was just the beginning. In his review of the two Webern albums, Goldman expressed his hope that Dial would eventually present, "in equally authoritative performances, the remainder of Webern's music."[39] Dial never did, but Beardslee and Monod went on to introduce New York audiences to much more of Webern's vocal output. They mounted an all-Webern concert—the first in the United States—at Juilliard in May 1951, at which the Juilliard Quartet performed the Five Movements for string quartet, op. 5, while Beardslee sang the Five Canons, op. 16, and the second of the Three Traditional Rhymes, op. 17; the performances of the two vocal works were world premieres.[40] The following March, Beardslee performed the entirety of opus 17, as well as the Three Songs on poems by Hildegard Jone, op. 25. An announcement of the concert in the *New York Herald Tribune* reported that all six songs would be performed "for the first time anywhere" (true for opus 25, not for opus 17) and that "all but one of the songs is [*sic*] still in manuscript."[41] As noted above, many of Webern's works were either unpublished or difficult to access at this time, so Beardslee and Monod performed from handwritten copies that Leibowitz had brought with him from Europe.[42]

The exception noted in the concert announcement was opus 17, no. 2, "Liebste Jungfrau" (Beloved virgin). While the rest of opus 17 would not be published until 1955, "Liebste Jungfrau" had been published as "Geistlicher Volkstext" (sacred folk text) in a 1930 issue of *New Music*, a magazine run by Henry Cowell that printed scores of contemporary music. Webern hoped that the publication would give US musicians the chance to get to know his music,[43] but not all of those musicians liked what they found. Charlotte Porter Myrick of Santa Barbara, for example, wrote a letter to Cowell requesting that he discontinue her subscription to *New Music*. "I believe you would be safe," she argued, "in offering a large prize to anyone who can sing 'Geistlicher Volkstext' by Anton Webern published in your last issue."[44] Beardslee deserved that prize. The technical challenges of "Liebste Jungfrau" that Myrick alluded to are indeed considerable. To cite just one example: over the course of the final two measures of the vocal line, the soprano is asked to sing a descending major seventh, followed by an ascending augmented

39. Ibid.

40. According to Beardslee, Hans Moldenhauer informed her of the world premiere status of these performances years later, as he did with regard to her performances of the remainder of opus 17 and opus 25 the following year: Beardslee, *I Sang the Unsingable*, 72.

41. Berger, "Music News." Berger was evidently unaware of the previous year's performance of opus 17, no. 2, which had not been open to the public and was not reviewed; see Beardslee, *I Sang the Unsingable*, 70.

42. See Beardslee, *I Sang the Unsingable*, 63–65. These pages include a facsimile reproduction of Leibowitz's hand-copied score of Berg's "Schliesse mir die Augen beide."

43. See Anton Webern, letter to Adolph Weiss, July 13, 1930, Anton Webern Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel, MF 110.1-1282.

44. Mrs. Donald Myrick, letter to *New Music*, October 20, 1930, New Music Society Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, folder 222.

Example 3 Webern, Three Traditional Rhymes, op. 17, no. 2, mm. 17–20, vocal line only

eleventh, followed by a descending major seventh, followed by yet another descending major seventh (see example 3). In a clearer example of word painting than is usually found in Webern's music, the final two leaps combine to move from an A above the staff to a B below the staff, on the word "Sündenfall" (fall of man, original sin).[45] Yet critics at the March 1952 performance agreed that Beardslee handled phrases like these with aplomb. While Webern's vocal writing was "remarkably difficult," Harman reported, it was also "remarkably expressive."[46] Arthur Berger offered special praise for the Three Songs op. 25, "fragile little gems" that possessed a "quality that supersedes such considerations as whether or not one accepts the twelve-tone principle."[47] Seven years after Webern's death, the fruits of his work with Hildegard Jone—the defining artistic relationship of the final decade of his life—were heard for the first time in the United States.

Beardslee and Monod's performances of Webern's music culminated in an all-Webern concert at the 92nd Street Y in December 1952. Sponsored by the International Society of Contemporary Music, the concert featured nine works: Beardslee sang opuses 12 and 16, the Six Songs on poems by Georg Trakl, op. 14, and the Three Songs on Jone's *Viae inviae*, op. 23, the latter two of which were US premieres; the New Music String Quartet played opuses 5 and 9, as well as the String Quartet op. 28; and members of the quartet played the violin and cello pieces, opuses 7 and 11, with Monod. On the morning of the concert, an accompanying article by Pierre Boulez appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune*.[48] There, Boulez rehearsed arguments he had recently put forth in his essay "Schoenberg Is Dead," published in February of the same year.[49] Webern's music was "*the* threshold to the music of the future," Boulez argued, "and its role as such is

45. Example 3 was transcribed from Anton Webern, *Drei Volkstexte* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1955).

46. Harman, "Six Webern Songs."

47. Berger, "Concert and Recital: Songs by Webern."

48. Boulez, "Note to Tonight's Concert." According to Robert Piencikowski, the article was commissioned by Virgil Thomson, who was then music critic for the *Herald Tribune*: Piencikowski, "De-ciphering Boulez?," 78n58.

49. A slightly modified version of the *Herald Tribune* article appeared as "Für Anton Webern" in the 1955 German-language issue of *Die Reihe* dedicated to Webern; it was published as "The Threshold" in the 1958 English translation of the same issue. It appeared again in Boulez's 1966 *Relevés d'apprenti* and its 1968 English translation, *Notes of an Apprenticeship*. In both it was titled "Incipit," and was placed directly after "Schoenberg Is Dead."

unfortunately obscured when we think of it in terms of what has been too hastily labeled 'Schoenberg and his two disciples.'" Whereas Schoenberg and Berg had proven themselves to be part of "the broad current of German Romanticism" in "luxuriously flamboyant" works such as *Pierrot lunaire* and *Wozzeck*, Webern "reacted violently against all inherited rhetoric in order to rehabilitate the power of sound." Though the article was ostensibly intended to promote that evening's concert (an editorial note with details of the concert appeared beneath the headline), Boulez made no mention of it other than to note that "a concert devoted entirely to Webern is something at last to counteract the state of ignorance that exists with regards to his music." Boulez would himself go on to become a prominent performer of Webern's music, as I discuss below.

In the meantime, correcting the "state of ignorance" regarding Webern's music was left to Beardslee, Monod, and the New Music String Quartet. In this, the critics agreed, the performers were effective. "The participants engaged in last night's doings," asserted Harold C. Schonberg, "cannot be overpraised."[50] Both Schonberg and Berger recounted the quartet's "incomparable virtues," while also singling out Monod for the "superb feat" and "sheer tour de force" of accompanying from memory.[51] But it was Beardslee who made the strongest impression. Berger reported that "the young soprano . . . maneuvered the relentless vocal skips as if they were no more challenging than scale-wise passages." He went on to argue that Beardslee's voice was "extraordinarily suitable to the skips," lending "a curve to their ostensible angularity," which suggests that Beardslee's attempts at *legatissimo* singing had been successful.[52] Like Berger, Schonberg complimented Beardslee for the way in which she "nonchalantly handled the impossible skips of the songs" and "sang perfectly in tune throughout." He also reported that she possessed "a beautiful voice, something that not all singers of modern music own."[53] Here Schonberg betrayed a tendency, common among critics of the time, to counterpose technical prowess to beauty in discussions of modern vocal music. As I discuss in greater detail below, this tendency put female vocalists—who faced a particular set of expectations surrounding the lightness, ease, and prettiness of their voices—in a particularly challenging position.

Though Schonberg and Berger's evaluations of the performances were similar, the two critics did not agree as to the concert's broader significance. For Schonberg, it was "an evening of strange music." Though he applauded the "craft, knowledge, musicianship, and sensitivity" found in Webern's works, he

50. Schonberg, "Concert Devoted to the Works of Webern."

51. Berger, "Concert and Recital: Contemporary Music"; Schonberg, "Concert Devoted to the Works of Webern."

52. Berger, "Concert and Recital: Contemporary Music."

53. Schonberg, "Concert Devoted to the Works of Webern."

suspected that they were "too subjective and rarified . . . for any wide appeal." "In the present state of musical culture," Schonberg predicted, Webern would appeal "only to a devoted group of followers."[54] Berger adopted a more optimistic stance. He echoed Boulez's article in noting that "a program confined to the music of Anton Webern is not only without precedent here, but would be a rarity anywhere," while also asserting that it was "something to be promptly noted in historical records" and "of major significance to those who are concerned with the evolution of music in its creative aspect." For Berger, furthermore, Webern's works were not doomed to the niche existence forecast by Schonberg. "Through performances of last night's caliber," he argued, "we may come to appreciate Webern's music, for its sparse constellations of notes are almost all about color, subtle variations of loudness and delicate balancing of tones widely removed in pitch." Many performers mistakenly played Webern's music "heavily," Berger continued, even though it was actually as "tenuous" and "restrained" as French impressionism. Until others adopted the approach exemplified by Beardslee and Monod, he concluded, "its many beauties will remain latent."[55]

Also in attendance at Beardslee and Monod's all-Webern concert, sitting "way down front," were Robert Craft and Igor Stravinsky.[56] Craft included a review of the concert as part of a larger article he wrote for the short-lived, San Francisco–based magazine *Counterpoint.* He joined Berger and Schonberg in praising the performers, while also complimenting the construction of the program:

> The Webern concert by the ISCM was a great success. The *Quartet*, Op. 28 and the *Canons*, Op. 16 had to be encored, and, judging by the applause, all of the other music could have been repeated as well. The performances were devoted and letter perfect, especially those by the New Music String Quartet (which excellent group is coming to California in April) and the soprano Bethany Beardsley [*sic*]. I have never heard such delicate playing, such carefulness and such certainty. The choice and juxtaposition of Webern's fragile masterpieces made for a balanced and attractive program. For the present, perhaps, an all-Webern concert is the only way to approach this master; sandwiched between other music any piece of his is as lost as a lute solo would be between two Mahler symphonies.

Craft described Beardslee's performances as "the revelation of the concert." "In these works," he contended, "the whole language of music begins to change." Thereafter followed lengthy exegeses on "rhythmic-contrapuntal independence" in opus 16 and the structure of the twelve-tone row in the Quartet op. 28. These discussions led to an anxiously self-conscious

54. Ibid.
55. Berger, "Concert and Recital: Contemporary Music."
56. Beardslee, *I Sang the Unsingable*, 111.

paragraph in which Craft worried about whether he had presented Webern's music fairly:

> I fear I have conveyed the impression that because Webern's music is highly organized his methods are mechanical. If so the fault is not with me but in the confusion that exists in the popular mind about how music is written. But perhaps I should have spoken, for example, of the high B flat soprano entrance on the word "Charis" in Webern's *Cantata*, Op. 29 as one of the most "thrilling" and "dramatic" moments in all music. Would I have done my subject a greater service?

Craft capped off his review with a comment that anticipated the tone and content of the liner notes he would write for *Anton Webern: The Complete Music* a few years later, describing Webern as "the least mechanical" and "most vitally musical" of all composers.[57]

Curiously, Craft registered a rather different response to the concert in *Stravinsky: Chronicle of a Friendship*, a volume published in 1972 consisting chiefly of excerpts from Craft's diary. In the *Counterpoint* review, he had praised Webern's ability to write twelve-tone music without a trace of "tonal backsliding" or "yearning for tonal forms," sounding not unlike Boulez in "Schoenberg Is Dead"; yet in *Chronicle of a Friendship*, he admitted that "the abolition of harmony and of the consonance dissonance relationship strikes me tonight as too great a loss." Whereas he had reassured magazine readers that the "restrictions" of opus 28 did not "hinder the result, which is a musical masterpiece," he complained to himself of Webern's obsession with "limitations." According to his *Counterpoint* review, Webern's music constructed "an architecture which will weather the most severe of storms," but in his diary he called it "architecture with no furniture."[58] It is unclear why Craft's two evaluations of Beardslee and Monod's all-Webern concert diverged so greatly, but, in any case, he had already begun promoting Webern's music through his conducting. He had his eyes set on a lofty goal—recording the entirety of Webern's oeuvre for Columbia Records—and he was about to meet the two sopranos who would make it possible.

1954–57: Grace-Lynne Martin and Marni Nixon

Marni Nixon was a student at Los Angeles City College in 1948 when she met Leonard Stein, a pianist and Arnold Schoenberg's personal assistant. Stein had heard that Nixon was a crack sight-reader, so he asked her if she had any interest in singing music by Ernst Krenek with him.[59] The two soon formed an artistic partnership, performing music by an array of modernist

57. Craft, "Discoveries and Convictions," 16–18.
58. Ibid., 17; Craft, *Stravinsky: Chronicle*, 91.
59. See Nixon, *I Could Have Sung*, 52.

composers. As Nixon would later recall, Stein "understood this very cerebral music, but I sometimes felt that I was barely hanging on by the seat of my pants trying to survive. It was only after I sang it that I began to understand what I had sung."[60] Even so, Nixon quickly developed a reputation as a fearless performer of even the most fearsome scores, a skill that won her jobs over singers with "far bigger and more opulent voices."[61] Before long she made her debut at the Evenings on the Roof, a Los Angeles concert series founded by Frances and Peter Yates in 1939 to take advantage of the recent influx of émigré musicians into Los Angeles while reforming the city's conservative music culture.[62] There, Nixon came into contact with fellow soprano Grace-Lynne Martin. The two vocalists were born less than a year apart, in the neighboring cities of Altadena and Pasadena. Though Martin had not begun singing until the age of sixteen, her career took off rapidly following her graduation from Occidental College in 1951. She sang new music, early music, opera, and musical theater. As was the case for Nixon, Martin's appearances at the Evenings on the Roof led to a close working relationship with Stravinsky, and with his amanuensis, Craft.

Craft's interest in Webern's music originated from the same source as Beardslee and Monod's: René Leibowitz. Craft first encountered Webern's music as a student at Juilliard, where Leibowitz gave a lecture-demonstration on the Concerto for nine instruments, op. 24, during the 1946–47 academic year: "The outstanding musical experience of the school year was a visit by René Leibowitz, proselytizing for the music of Anton Webern and conducting his Concerto for nine instruments as an illustration to an analytical talk about the work. This event changed my life, and from that day I tried to learn all available music by the composer, which was very little."[63] Having noted the lack of access to Webern's music, Craft set to work remedying the situation. In 1950 he conducted works by Webern in two concerts of New York's Chamber Art Society. At the first concert, in April, he conducted the work he had heard Leibowitz conduct at Juilliard, the Concerto for nine instruments, in its first public performance in the United States; after the concert, Harold C. Schonberg praised the work's "blobs of instrumental color."[64] At the second concert, in October, Craft led the

60. Ibid., 54.

61. Quoted in Holmes, "Conversation with Marni Nixon," 375.

62. For the most complete scholarly treatment of the Evenings on the Roof, see Crawford, *Evenings*. Though there is no single Evenings on the Roof archival collection, many relevant materials can be found in the Peter Yates Papers at the University of California San Diego, and in the Lawrence Morton Collection of Materials Relating to the Monday Evening Concerts, 1950–1971, at the University of California, Los Angeles. A complete list of programs and works performed beginning in 1954 (after which point the series was known as the Monday Evening Concerts) and continuing through 1971 can be found at http://www.mondayeveningconcerts.org/uploads/6/2/6/5/62651779/monday_evening_concert.pdf.

63. Craft, *Improbable Life*, 54.

64. Schonberg, "Chamber Art Unit."

world premiere of Webern's Three Songs op. 18, with soprano Madelyn Vose. Harman commended Vose for her "extraordinary singing," while Bohm noted that she "combined fine musicianship with assured tone production" in navigating Webern's "wide intervals and terse expressivity."[65] Craft's two Chamber Art Society concerts were part of a small flowering of performances of Webern's music in New York in the early 1950s, a period that also included the New York Philharmonic's performance of the Symphony, op. 21, in January 1950, Dial's two Webern albums, and the performances organized by Beardslee and Monod.

On the other side of the country, Craft promoted Webern's music through his appearances at the Evenings on the Roof. So committed was he that, at one point, Peter Yates made him promise to program Webern's works "in smaller amounts," so that the Evenings would not come to be "categorized [as] a festival of Webern."[66] Though Yates's fears would not come to pass, Craft's promotion of Webern's music did culminate in an all-Webern concert to rival the one mounted by Beardslee and Monod. In February 1954, Craft led a performance that included five of Webern's instrumental works (opuses 7, 11, 22, 24, and 27) and four vocal works (opuses 15–18). In the sole review of the concert, the *Los Angeles Times*' Albert Goldberg noted the unusually large audience in attendance and listed the works performed, "since newspaper files are sometimes consulted by historians years afterward." But Goldberg was not impressed by the music: "Quite likely so many Webern pieces were never heard together before, and more than likely they never will be again, at least in this community, so that anyone who feels that way about it could properly call the occasion an historical one. You could also, with equal propriety, call it a pretentious bore." Though the concert offered a rare opportunity to hear four of Webern's middle-period vocal works in one sitting, Goldberg did not comment on them. Instead, he argued that Webern's works "all sound the same" to the ear, however many "niceties of notation" differentiated them on paper. Nor did Goldberg have anything to say about the evening's soprano soloist, Martin. "Everybody deserves credit for a difficult job," he concluded, "if that is any consolation."[67] Other reports suggest that the audience also found the concert less than stimulating. With one notable exception—film composer Miklós Rózsa stormed out midway through the concert—the audience's response was muted. Pianist Leonard Stein had hoped for a stronger reaction, whether positive or negative: "Some of them must have hated it; and how much better it would have been for them to boo."[68]

65. Harman, "Craft's Unit"; Bohm, "Chamber Music."

66. Robert Craft, letter to Peter Yates, February 20, [1951], Peter Yates Papers, box 3, folder 47.

67. Goldberg, "Webern Pieces."

68. Quoted in Crawford, *Evenings*, 106.

Two years later, in a March 1956 article for the *New York Times*, Berger argued that the core repertoire of modern music was surprisingly well represented on recordings. The exception to that rule, he noted, was Webern's works. Berger deemed this a "shocking" omission given Webern's stature, though he conceded that his works tended to be "not commercially rewarding."[69] What he did not know was that, at that very moment, a group of musicians in Los Angeles was working to rectify the dearth of recordings of Webern's music. Just a few days after the all-Webern concert of February 1954, Craft, Martin, Stein, Nixon, and a host of other musicians headed into the studio to begin the three-year process of recording Columbia Records' *Anton Webern: The Complete Music.*

Craft faced an uphill battle in his attempts to bring his Webern project to fruition. Columbia had barely been convinced to take on the project in the first place, agreeing only when Stravinsky threatened to cease recording his own works if they rejected Craft's project. Like Beardslee and Monod, furthermore, Craft had difficulties in procuring sheet music, and was forced to extract many of the instrumental parts by hand, in some cases using photostats of Webern's manuscripts sent from Vienna by Universal Edition. Even once work on the album was under way, it was so underfunded that completing it required Stravinsky to donate studio time left over from another project. To save money, Craft used the Evenings on the Roof programs as de facto rehearsals for upcoming studio sessions. The all-Webern concert on February 8, 1954, for example, was followed by a recording session on February 12 covering many of the same works; and Nixon and Stein performed songs by Webern in November 1955 before recording them shortly thereafter. But Craft was unable to program Webern's orchestral and choral-orchestral works at the Evenings, citing "union rules" as the reason (though budget constraints may have also been a factor). So he spent his days driving around Los Angeles, rehearsing with each of the musicians slated to record for the Columbia album individually, in their own homes. The musicians' reaction to this procedure was unsurprisingly negative, as it made their parts feel "like ciphers." But over time, Craft later reported, most "became engrossed in [Webern's] music."[70]

Craft asked Martin and Nixon to split Webern's fourteen works featuring a solo soprano between them.[71] Nixon sang the solos in the Cantatas nos. 1 and 2, opp. 29 and 31, and performed the works for voice and piano with Leonard Stein, while Martin sang the works for soprano solo and mixed

69. Berger, "Basic Modern Works."

70. Craft, *Improbable Life*, 166–67.

71. At the time the Columbia album was being produced, the works that predate Webern's opus 1 had yet to be discovered, so these fourteen works plus the three works for choir without solo soprano (opuses 2, 19, and 26) represented the entirety of Webern's vocal music.

instrumental ensembles, opuses 8 and 13–18.[72] Like Beardslee, Martin was able to familiarize herself with Webern's idiom through a series of strategies aimed at making his works "sound like music." In her copy of the Five Canons, op. 16, for example, she often indicated the enharmonic equivalent of her assigned pitches, so as to yield a more tonally intelligible interval between one pitch and the next.[73] Thus the C♯ at the end of measure 4 in the first canon was labeled "D♭," turning the leap to the ensuing B♭ (m. 5) from an augmented ninth into a minor tenth. Martin spelled out this procedure explicitly at the end of the fourth canon. Above the final F♯, she wrote "= G♭ → E♭ →," pointing to the E♭ with which the fifth canon begins on the following page, and turning an augmented second into a minor third (see figure 2). In other cases, the enharmonic reconceptualization of certain pitches seems to have been motivated by a desire to clarify a vertical sonority. The G♯ on the word "Crux" (cross) at the opening of the third canon, for example, is labeled "A♭," a perfect fourth above the just-sounded E♭ in the bass clarinet, rather than an augmented third (see figure 3).[74] As is evident in figures 2 and 3, many of the other markings in Martin's copy of opus 16 are more or less what one would expect to find in a performer's copy of any piece of music. English translations are written under the Latin words, key expressive directions are circled or underlined, and vertical lines indicate the rhythmic position of the soprano's notes in relation to those of the clarinets. There are several exhortations to "count" and "keep tempo." Yet the banal nature of these markings is itself noteworthy. While, as noted above, Webern's vocal music sometimes seems to call the voice's very humanity into question, Martin's score shows her engaging in the very human process of taking a text apart, highlighting its most important facets, and finding ways to understand it. That process is especially worth observing in Martin's case, since, unlike Beardslee (who wrote and spoke extensively about performing modern music, Webern's included) and Nixon (whose own thoughts on performing Webern I will turn to shortly), Martin left no record of her perspective on this music. These scores thus provide the best clues as to how she approached singing it.[75]

72. There is no obvious reasoning behind this division of labor, other than the fact that Nixon and Stein were already close collaborators.

73. Grace-Lynne Martin's copy of Anton Webern, *Fünf Canons nach lateinischen Texten* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1928), private collection, courtesy of Jennifer Ingle Briguglio Bandy.

74. Here, too, Martha Elliott's work on vocal performance practice echoes the approach of these pioneering performers of Webern's works: "If the spelling of pitches is confusing," she notes, "I often write the generic interval above the notes": Elliott, *Singing in Style*, 298.

75. Beardslee and Nixon both published autobiographies, as well as participating in numerous interviews toward the end of their careers. As I note in the conclusion to this article, Martin eventually moved away from performance and focused her efforts on education, which might help to explain why she did not do the same.

Figure 2 Second page of Webern's Five Canons, op. 16, no. 4, from Grace-Lynne Martin's copy of Anton Webern, *Fünf Canons nach lateinischen Texten* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1928). Private collection. Reproduced courtesy of Jennifer Ingle Briguglio Bandy. This figure appears in color in the online version of the **Journal**.

Figure 3 First page of Webern's Five Canons, op. 16, no. 3, from Grace-Lynne Martin's copy of Anton Webern, *Fünf Canons nach lateinischen Texten* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1928). Private collection. Reproduced courtesy of Jennifer Ingle Briguglio Bandy. This figure appears in color in the online version of the **Journal**.

Nixon's scores also display a human-centered approach to Webern's music, but in a different way. Unlike Martin, Nixon made no attempts at recontextualizing certain pitches via their enharmonic equivalents. For the most part, in fact, Nixon's scores are unadorned.[76] Translations are inserted and there is the occasional circling of a dynamic marking, but the best indication of how Nixon heard these works lies above the music. In most of her scores, she wrote one or two key words at the outset of the work. Opus 12, no. 1, for example, is "religious," while opus 12, no. 3, is "moralizing." Above opus 3, no. 3, are the words "spring, warm day, expectency [*sic*]" (see figure 4). Thus, like Martin, Nixon sought to translate Webern's unfamiliar musical idiom into more legible terms. "My own experience," Craft commented in the album's liner notes, "is that you will never get very much out of Webern until you undertake to sing it yourself: as soon as one gets the habit of singing the intervals one takes much greater pleasure in the music."[77] How much pleasure Martin and Nixon took in Webern's music is unclear; if Beardslee's attitude toward it is any indication, perhaps not much. But both sopranos found ways of habituating themselves to Webern's musical language. Their work was about to pay off.

In February 1958, Milton Babbitt made reference to Craft and Columbia's recently released Webern album in his infamous *High Fidelity* essay "Who Cares If You Listen?" During Webern's lifetime, Babbitt contended, his music "was regarded (to the very limited extent that it was regarded at all) as the ultimate in hermetic, specialized, and idiosyncratic composition; today, some dozen years after the composer's death, his complete works have been recorded by a major record company, primarily—I suspect—as a result of the enormous influence this music has had on the postwar, nonpopular, musical world."[78] Babbitt was right that Webern's influence among postwar composers had a lot to do with getting the Columbia project off the ground. He seems not to have imagined, however, the many ways in which the album would take Webern's music out of the realm of "hermetic, specialized, and idiosyncratic composition" and beyond the "nonpopular" musical circles in which it had previously circulated.

Anton Webern: The Complete Music was released in March 1957 as a four-LP box set, which included a twenty-nine-page booklet of notes and translations and sold for $23.98.[79] That figure was almost exactly four times what each of Dial's Webern albums had sold for earlier in the decade ($5.95), though it was considerably more expensive on a per-record basis than nonspecialty LPs, which typically sold for between $1 and $4 throughout the 1950s.

76. Marni Nixon Papers, Johns Hopkins University. This collection is still in the process of being cataloged; a partial finding aid can be accessed by contacting the Friedheim Library Archivist.

77. Craft, liner notes to *Anton Webern: The Complete Music.*

78. Babbitt, "Who Cares," 127.

79. See "March P'kages [*sic*] Spell Quality."

Figure 4 Webern's Five Songs op. 3, no. 3, from Marni Nixon's copy of Anton Webern, *Fünf Lieder aus "Der siebente Ring" von Stefan George* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1921). Marni Nixon Papers, Johns Hopkins University. Used by permission.

Even with the steep price tag, however, the album was the closest thing to a smash hit Webern's music had ever seen. Krenek sent his congratulations to Craft, reporting that the album appeared to be "selling rapidly."[80] Glenn

80. Stravinsky, *Selected Correspondence*, 2:328.

Gould complimented Nixon on her performance.[81] Beardslee also took note, later recalling that Nixon's voice so resembled her own that "for years I got credit (often in print) for her Webern."[82] Critics hailed the album as "an event in the annals of recording" and "an epical undertaking . . . accomplished with epical success."[83] Academic publications such as the *Musical Quarterly* and *Music and Letters* published reviews, but so too did audiophile magazines like *Billboard*, as well as weekly periodicals like the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Saturday Review*. Major newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* covered the album, as did the local papers of Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Tucson, Arlington Heights (Illinois), and Uniontown (Pennsylvania). The album also circulated abroad; while on Wake Island during a tour of the South Pacific, Craft met a Swiss traveler who thanked him for making Webern's music accessible.[84] Several reviews contrasted the popularity of Webern's music among members of the postwar avant-garde with its status in mainstream contexts. As Desmond Shawe-Taylor noted, "no recent composer is more venerated among young musicians, or less familiar to the general public, than Anton Webern."[85] But critics also wondered whether the album might help Webern's music to gain wider acceptance. While "Webern's followers have not been legion," a critic for the *Morning Herald* (Uniontown) argued, the release of the Columbia album meant that "his admirers must rapidly increase."[86] For Sam Hood of the *Pittsburgh Press*, the album presented the opportunity to judge Webern's "nuclear idiom" on its own merits: "no longer will musicologists, theorists, atonal cultists or even the critics of Webern have the final say. Webern's music—all of it—can now rise or fall strictly on its own."[87]

"One thing for which I, at least, was not prepared," admitted Alfred Frankenstein, was "Webern's heavy emphasis on the voice."[88] Frankenstein was one of several critics who observed, with seeming surprise, that a significant portion of Webern's oeuvre consisted of vocal music.[89] This fact was theoretically observable prior to the album's release, though performances of Webern's vocal works remained all but nonexistent outside of New York and Los Angeles. As noted above, furthermore, several of the later vocal works had been published only in the preceding three years. Frankenstein remarked that "singers avoid [Webern] because of the difficulty of his music,"

81. See Nixon, *I Could Have Sung*, 127.
82. Beardslee, *I Sang the Unsingable*, 188.
83. Rogers, "Full Output"; Frankenstein, "From Contrapuntal Kaleidoscopy."
84. See Stravinsky and Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary*, 116.
85. Shawe-Taylor, "Complete Webern."
86. "Composer's Recordings Released."
87. Hood, "Complete Webern Works Available."
88. Frankenstein, "From Contrapuntal Kaleidoscopy."
89. See also Downes, "Records: Webern"; Hood, "Complete Webern Works Available"; Shawe-Taylor, "Complete Webern"; and Yates, "Anton Webern Complete."

but argued that "Webern's musico-poetic scansion is altogether perfect." Though Webern "sometimes goes to incredible extremes in the musical involvement of his vocal line," he continued, "you will nevertheless hunt in vain throughout his works for an instance of false or forced accentuation."[90] Edward Downes took Frankenstein's argument even further. Like Frankenstein, he began by acknowledging the difficulties of Webern's works: "jagged, plunging, vaulting vocal line[s], beside which the athletic agonies of Kundry, Salome and Elektra are nursery tunes." He went on to describe two moments from Webern's middle-period vocal works:

> The gasping rhythms, introducing rests at the most awkward place in a sentence, or even between the syllables of a word, are wonderfully suggestive of the singer's being unexpectedly overwhelmed by the tension of [her] own feeling. Such emotion-laden words as the German for "martyred" and for "carry" (referring to the cross that Jesus carried) in the Op. 15 Sacred Songs, or "eternity" and "virgin" in the religious songs, Op. 17, are split up in this violent style.[91]

Downes made the crucial observation that naturalness was not the be-all and end-all of text setting, that awkwardness could sometimes serve just as well. Indeed, the correspondence between "tragen" (carry) and "gemartert" (martyred) that Downes identified in opus 15, no. 1, makes for an evocative introduction to the song's Passion scene (see example 4).[92]

In parallel to this focus on Webern's vocal works, Martin and Nixon earned consistent praise from critics. In fact, the two sopranos were among the few performers to be mentioned by name, as many critics struggled to evaluate performances of Webern's little-known music. "The work of Robert Craft and his corps of instrumentalists and singers is difficult to evaluate," observed Ronald Eyer, "because there is so little precedent for the reviewer to refer to."[93] Harold Rogers found the performances convincing and authentic—"as far as one can say who is unfamiliar with this music."[94] But all agreed that the two sopranos had acquitted themselves well. Yates noted that Craft was lucky to have "two matched sopranos of exceptional quality and distinctive voice" at his disposal.[95] For Shawe-Taylor, Martin's and Nixon's ability to sing "not only with astounding accuracy, but with positive charm and grace" was "one of the achievements of these records."[96] Downes deemed their performances "astonishing," and claimed that they

90. Frankenstein, "From Contrapuntal Kaleidoscopy."

91. Downes, "Records: Webern."

92. Examples 4 and 5 were transcribed from Anton Webern, *Fünf geistliche Lieder* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1928).

93. Eyer, "Evolution of a Composer."

94. Rogers, "Full Output."

95. Yates, "Anton Webern Complete."

96. Shawe-Taylor, "Complete Webern."

Example 4 Webern, Five Sacred Songs, op. 15, no. 1, mm. 1–5

(continued)

had achieved "what one would have said was impossible": singing "Webern's cruel vocal lines neatly, accurately, with expression and without screaming."[97] These latter two comments again point to the tightrope that female vocalists were often expected to walk when performing modern music, echoing earlier responses to Beardslee's performances. Shawe-Taylor made clear that "astounding accuracy" was not enough; the conventionally female attributes of "charm and grace" were also expected. Downes's mention of "screaming," meanwhile, alluded to entrenched stereotypes of women's voices as "high and shrill" even as he complimented the two singers.[98]

Yates, who had spent years listening to Martin and Nixon at the Evenings on the Roof, provided the most in-depth evaluation of their performances. The two sopranos, he argued, brought different qualities to the table.

97. Downes, "Records: Webern."

98. See Dunn and Jones, introduction to *Embodied Voices*, 8.

Example 4 continued

tra - gen bis an die sel - bi - ge Statt, wo er ge - mar - tert ward.

Flatterz.

Nixon's voice possessed a "unique timbre" and "instrumental impersonality" that allowed her to render Webern's songs for soprano and piano "as directly as finely colored drawings." Martin presented a "broader line" and more "vibrant singing," with which she was able to "individualize the humanity of the voice among the instruments" in the works for soprano and mixed instrumental ensembles, opuses 13–18.[99] When one listens to the Columbia album with Yates's assessments in mind, two differences between Martin's and Nixon's performances are immediately evident.[100] Martin sang with vibrato throughout, not only at climactic moments but also at gentler

99. Yates, "Anton Webern Complete."

100. Copies of *Anton Webern: The Complete Music* are held by many libraries and are widely available for purchase. In addition, the performances of opuses 1–13 found on the album are available via Naxos Music Library.

ones, as on the words "bess're Leben" (better life) in the closing measures of opus 15, no. 5. Nixon used less vibrato and frequently opted for "straight" tone, and her voice also tended to be softer than Martin's—though none of this is to suggest that Nixon was incapable of delivering expression and power, as her performance of the words "alle Tage in Sehnen leben" (live all days in longing) in opus 3, no. 2, makes clear. In addition to these differences, Yates's evaluation of the two sopranos may have been shaped by the repertoire each had to sing. "Finely colored drawings" is an apt description of Nixon and Stein's performances of the songs for voice and piano, which still sound present and clear to this day, taking full advantage of the sparse textures and frequent silences throughout many of the songs. Yates was correct, furthermore, that Martin's performances highlight "the humanity of the voice among the instruments," even if it also seems reasonable to suppose that Martin had to sing louder and with more vibrato than Nixon simply to be heard amid the densely contrapuntal writing of the middle-period vocal works.

Years later, in her autobiography, Nixon offered a perspective on Webern's music that paralleled Yates's comments, but with one crucial difference:

> Most of the vocal music I had performed required some kind of emotional interpretation and connection, but this music was more abstract and extremely complicated rhythmically and melodically and had to be executed purely and cleanly. I was also becoming aware that if the piece were well written, the humanity in the text and the music would come bursting through without needing too much embroidery from me.[101]

Whereas Yates contrasted Nixon's "instrumental impersonality" with Martin's "humanity," Nixon suggested that the former was what allowed the latter to flourish, an approach perhaps evident in her lightly marked scores of Webern's works. In a review of the album for *The Guardian*, Edward Greenfield offered a similar perspective on Webern's music. Greenfield contended that, in the middle-period vocal works, Webern "masks the emotions and moods he is portraying under the fearsome intellectual framework of his contrapuntal technique." "Yet masked or not," Greenfield concluded, "the emotions are there: of that Craft makes me confident for the first time."[102]

1978: "An Excelsitude of Incomprehension"

If the story were to stop right there, one might think that 1957 was a turning point in the history of Webern's vocal music. Martin's and Nixon's recordings had accomplished what Beardslee's could not, as a chorus of

101. Nixon, *I Could Have Sung*, 53.
102. Greenfield, "Gramophone Records."

critics finally took notice of the fact that, yes, Webern had composed a great many vocal works and, yes, they were worth a listen. Yet it would be another several decades before Webern the composer of vocal music truly arrived. To understand why, it is necessary to pay a visit to the moment that irrevocably shifted perceptions of Martin's and Nixon's performances: Columbia's release of a second album dedicated to Webern's complete works in 1978, led by Pierre Boulez and compiled from recordings made over the previous ten years.[103]

Many critics began their reviews of the 1978 album by acknowledging the impact of its predecessor. It would be "unthinkable," argued Peter G. Davis, "to discuss the new Boulez recordings of Webern without also reconsidering the Craft versions, recordings that had an incalculable effect on attitudes to Webern's music."[104] Charles Acton noted that the 1957 album contained the sole recordings of eighteen of Webern's thirty-one published works prior to the release of the 1978 album, while Alan Rich likewise cited the former album's role in bringing Webern's music out of the phase in which it was "much discussed, but little heard."[105] Yet most critics also agreed that the earlier album did not compare favorably with its successor. Audio quality played a part in this assessment, several critics noting how much richer and purer the new stereo recordings sounded in comparison to the older mono renditions. But the bigger issue was the performances themselves. Beauty, Davis asserted, had emerged "only fitfully on the Craft records."[106] Rich was even harsher. The title of his review contained a not so subtle dig—"Webern Anew: Genius over Craft"—and within it he described the 1957 album as "wrongheaded," "tidy and prissy," "an excelsitude of incomprehension," and "a monstrous falsification of the sound—indeed, of the underlying aesthetic—of Webern's music."[107] "We owe much of our knowledge of this music [to the] pioneering 1956 [*sic*] Columbia mono set," John Von Rhein concluded, but "Boulez's superior versions show how much we've learned about Webern since then."[108]

Which begs the question, What had they learned? For most critics, the 1978 album offered the more expressive approach to Webern's music. Robert Croan characterized the Craft-led performances as "rigidly mechanical"

103. The album was released late in the year in 1978, such that many reviews of the album were not published until 1979; to avoid confusion, I refer to "the 1978 album" and "the critics of 1978" throughout.

104. Davis, "Accomplished New Versions."

105. Acton, "Records: The Whole of Webern"; Rich, "Webern Anew."

106. Davis, "Accomplished New Versions."

107. Rich, "Webern Anew." It is possible, of course, that Rich did not write his own headline; I cited above music history's most famous instance of an editorial headline—Milton Babbitt's "Who Cares If You Listen?" In any case, the headline of Rich's article certainly matches the spirit and tone of his review.

108. Von Rhein, "Classical: Boulez-Webern."

in comparison to the "flexibility," "humanity," and "genuine expression" of the newer album.[109] Since Webern's style was "not exactly second nature" to musicians of the 1950s, Davis contended, "it would be unfair to heap too much blame" on Craft. Yet that is exactly what he did, citing "the mechanical nature of the playing" and "almost complete disregard of the composer's subtle dynamic markings." Craft's musicians, Davis argued, displayed a "dogged sense of getting the notes right at all costs," and lacked a "deeply felt musical impulse." The result was "rather mean-spirited renditions" of Webern's works that made "a pretty poor case for the music."[110] Rich predicted that the Boulez album "should banish forever . . . the notion that structural exactitude in music is incompatible with emotional communication." He described the newer album as "an intelligent, moving reaffirmation of some of the most original and powerful music this or any other century has produced"; the earlier album he deemed "a fast-turning kaleidoscope of jingling trivialities."[111]

These reappraisals of the 1957 album, striking though they are when considered next to the overwhelmingly positive reviews the album received at the time of its release, are in line with shifts in the performance practice of modernist music that had taken place in the intervening years. Miriam Quick cites the 1957 album as an archetypical example of the "avant-garde 'Darmstadt'" approach common in the decade and a half following the Second World War, in which works by Webern and other modernist composers were conceived of as "radical, innovative examples of objective musical structures." In accordance with this view, performers prioritized "detached articulation," "generally fast tempi," "dry acoustics," "precision," "clarity," and "the singularity of each note."[112] The critics of 1978 clearly understood the 1957 album in this way, with their references to "mechanical" playing and "structural exactitude," but the language they used to describe the earlier album was often less neutral than Quick's; besides adjectives like "wrongheaded," "prissy," and "monstrous," Rich's review included cutting references to "believers and nonbelievers" and "number freaks."[113] Such animosity is not surprising, since many performers had spent much of the previous two decades attempting to move past the "avant-garde 'Darmstadt'" approach. As Timothy Day has documented, the performers of the 1960s and '70s "began to emphasize continuities" in Webern's music and "discover the lines that might be constructed from the flecks and flashes of different colours and timbres," resulting in performances with "soft, subtler, more

109. Croan, "Records."
110. Davis, "Accomplished New Versions."
111. Rich, "Webern Anew."
112. Quick, "Performing Modernism," 103–4.
113. Rich, "Webern Anew."

flexible contours."[114] Critics like Rich were thus evaluating the 1957 album not only in terms of its quality, but also with regard to its association with an approach to modernist music that they saw as rigid, unfeeling, and passé.

Whether or not that association was justified is a more complicated question. It is true that the 1957 album features faster tempos and less rubato than the 1978 album. But it is not at all clear that those traits are sufficient to qualify it as an example of Quick's "avant-garde 'Darmstadt'" approach. To begin with, Craft was associated neither with Darmstadt nor with the US avant-garde. Rather, his primary influences in recording the Webern album came from the older generation, whether Stravinsky or (by way of Leonard Stein) Schoenberg. Almost all available evidence, furthermore, suggests that Craft and his collaborators did *not* view Webern's works as "radical, innovative examples of objective musical structures."[115] In the album's liner notes, for example, Craft noted that the opus 16 canons "have provoked the observation . . . that Webern's music is unvocal," since "voice and clarinets have the same music." Yet "none of our singers," he reported, "have ever said the same." Indeed, the markings in Martin's and Nixon's scores make clear that they approached Webern's music as something that could be learned, experienced, felt, and understood. Craft likewise took issue with "the mechanical so-called Webernites" and their perspective on Webern's vocal works. "One hears so much," he complained,

> about an abstract Webern, about constructions which one would suppose to be more suitable to instrumental forms. But actually, his vocal and instrumental forms are never confused or overlapped. Vocal music undoubtedly had the greater attraction for him, the musical "expression" of texts, not their "setting." He chooses texts that are lyric and tragic and expresses them musically. There is no inspirational difference in this between Webern and Schubert. The fact that Webern composes with strict contrapuntal means does not deter the expressive substance.[116]

In the final sentence, Craft enacted the very thing that Rich would later credit to Boulez: a rejection of "the notion that structural exactitude in music is incompatible with emotional communication."[117] But we need not take Craft's word for it. As I have detailed above, the performances on the 1957 album were not received as inexpressive or mechanical at the time—just the opposite. Krenek even praised the album as a "welcome contrast to

114. Day, *Century of Recorded Music*, 178. For another example of this trend, see Quick's discussion of Herbert von Karajan's recordings of orchestral music by Webern with the Berlin Philharmonic, which were released in 1975: Quick, "Performing Modernism," 85.

115. One possible exception might be Craft's review of Beardslee and Monod's all-Webern concert of 1952, which focuses on structural and forward-looking aspects of Webern's music (see pages 95–96 above). As noted above, however, it also rejects a "mechanical" image of Webern.

116. Craft, liner notes to *Anton Webern: The Complete Music.*

117. Rich, "Webern Anew."

the pseudo-ethereal style that has already become a kind of convention for Webern's music."[118]

Perhaps the strangest aspect of these shifts in the reception of the 1957 album is the role of Pierre Boulez. After all, it was the pronouncements of the "frosty, hyper-cerebral structuralist" Boulez that, as Tim Page notes, did "more than anything else to establish meticulously organized Webernism as a secular religion" during the 1950s.[119] The best-known of those pronouncements is "Schoenberg Is Dead," but Boulez expressed a similar perspective in the article he wrote for the *New York Herald Tribune* prior to Beardslee and Monod's all-Webern concert in December 1952, as noted above. Compared to the liner notes Craft wrote for his Columbia album five years later, Boulez's article is the much clearer example of the "avant-garde 'Darmstadt'" approach. Yet Boulez's "most outrageously provocative statements about Webern," as Quick notes, all predate his engagement with Webern's music through conducting it from the mid-1950s.[120] As "Webern and Webern-inspired contemporary music gradually receded back to the margins" in the years that followed, furthermore, "an equally slow but persistent shift" occurred in Boulez's professional status. Though he continued to compose, "his influence as a composer declined as his fame as a conductor grew."[121] By the time his Webern album was released, Boulez no longer occupied his former firebrand position. Rather, he was a renowned and respected conductor, recently the music director of the New York Philharmonic and the winner of multiple Grammy Awards. Craft, by contrast, was still known primarily as an associate of the by then deceased Stravinsky. Rich even conjectured that "Craft's purpose in the Webern album, conscious or otherwise, was apparently to suggest a furtherance of this implausible entente between the aesthetic of Stravinsky and that of Viennese atonality."[122] The reception of Boulez's album and attendant reevaluation of Craft's may thus have had as much to do with the two men directing the performances as with the performances themselves.

118. Stravinsky, *Selected Correspondence*, 2:328. Day contends that the critics of 1957 complained about the album's "dryness and lack of sensuousness," but such views were in fact exceptional; Day cites one of just two contemporary reviews to use the word "dry": Day, *Century of Recorded Music*, 180.

119. Page, "Webern after Webernism," 251.

120. Both Leech-Wilkinson and Quick cite 1954 as an important turning point in Boulez's attitude toward Webern's music: Leech-Wilkinson, "Musicology and Performance," 793; Quick, "Performing Modernism," 127.

121. Botstein, "Confronting the Recent Past," 175. Botstein's article was written on the occasion of Craft's and Boulez's deaths less than two months apart in late 2015 and early 2016. The two men's Webern performances had remained intertwined, each releasing a second recording of Webern's complete works (Boulez with Deutsche Grammophon, Craft with Naxos) in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

122. Rich, "Webern Anew."

All this is not to deny a difference between the performances on the two albums. I would agree with the critics of 1978 that the Boulez-led album is generally of a much higher quality. But how could it not be? The 1978 album was a well-funded project featuring an all-star cast of musicians: besides Boulez, the performers included Charles Rosen, Isaac Stern, Gregor Piatigorsky, the London Symphony Orchestra, and the Juilliard Quartet. The 1957 album was an underfunded and underrehearsed affair, so rushed in its production that Craft included a paragraph in the liner notes acknowledging a handful of wrong notes and expressing his hope that the lightly edited performances contained "a quality of excitement that compensates for much."[123] Looking back on the album in 2006, Craft even admitted that he considered the performances on the 1957 album to be "woefully inadequate," though they had "helped others to achieve better ones" and "stimulated a worldwide awareness of the composer."[124] My aim here is thus not to suggest that the 1957 album is some wrongfully neglected masterpiece, but simply to point out that the appearance of the 1978 album distorted perceptions of the earlier album in a way that tended to undersell its impact. The *Hartford Courant*'s Bruce Taylor, for instance, contended that the 1957 album "was not generally considered to be an unqualified success" at the time of its release—even though that is precisely what it was considered.[125] For an even clearer example of this sort of revisionism, consider the one critic who reviewed both albums, *The Guardian*'s Edward Greenfield. As cited above, Greenfield praised Craft's ability to bring out the emotions of Webern's music in his review of the 1957 album. He also noted how "the singers and players constantly surprise one by achieving the near-impossible."[126] Two decades later, he had either changed his earlier opinion or simply forgotten it. In Craft's renditions, Greenfield asserted, "Webern's skeletal scores were made to rattle drily" as a result of the "brutal style," "fast tempi," and "aggressive recording quality."[127]

One of the reasons why Martin's and Nixon's performances on the 1957 album have been overlooked, then, boils down to bad timing. Evolving perceptions of Craft, Boulez, and postwar performance practice more generally led to the two sopranos' performances being lumped in with an unfashionable approach to Webern's music, whether or not they were actually good examples of it. Yet while the same could be said of all of the performances on the 1957 album, no other part of it was subject to a sharper reversal of

123. Craft, liner notes to *Anton Webern: The Complete Music*.

124. Craft, *Down a Path*, 80. Boulez, for his part, grew to feel similarly about the recordings of Webern's opuses 8, 13, and 21 that he made with Domaine Musical in 1956; see Leech-Wilkinson, "Musicology and Performance," 793, and Quick, "Performing Modernism," 126–27.

125. Taylor, "Boulez Realizes Webern."

126. Greenfield, "Gramophone Records."

127. Greenfield, "Economy Drive."

critical opinion in 1978 than the vocal performances—because the performance practice issue was not the only factor. As I noted at the outset of this article, sexism also played a part. I turn now to that topic, which is critical to understanding not only the reevaluations of Martin's and Nixon's performances on the 1957 album, but also the more widespread tendency to underrate the contributions of Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon to the reception of Webern's vocal music.

Just as Martin and Nixon had received greater acclaim than any of the other performers featured on the 1957 album, soprano soloists Heather Harper and Halina Łukomska were praised in many reviews of the 1978 recordings. Harper, in particular, was cited by several critics as delivering some of the album's strongest performances. Of her renditions of opus 3, no.1, "Dies ist ein Lied für dich allein" (This is a song for you alone), Robert Markow wrote that "the opening words . . . are delivered with such sensuous delicacy, expressiveness and clarity of diction, that one's attention is immediately captured and riveted to the song." Each song, he suggested, should be "savored like a tasty morsel."[128] Lauretta Thistle likewise praised Harper's ability to take "difficult intervals in her stride" and keep listeners' minds "directed to the meaning of the songs." Both Harper and Łukomska, Thistle argued, succeeded in moving "beyond technique towards humanity."[129] The positive reception of Harper and Łukomska's performances led several critics to compare them with the earlier performances of Martin and Nixon. Acton, for example, reported that the "sheer authority and high standard" of Harper's performances "produces a whole new world compared with what one has heard before."[130] Among many similar comments, one stands out. "Perhaps the most marked improvement here over the earlier set," Davis argued, "may be heard in performances of the vocal music." He continued, "Both Halina Lukomska [*sic*] and, especially, Heather Harper sing the various lieder with a musical sensitivity and feeling for the text that totally escaped Mr. Craft's singers, Marni Nixon and Grace-Lynne Martin, who sound like programmed robots by comparison."[131]

Davis's likening of Martin and Nixon to "programmed robots" resonates with other critics' complaints about the mechanical, unsubtle, and inexpressive performances on the 1957 album. But it is also possible to understand his assessment of Martin and Nixon in terms not so much of their era as of their gender. In Davis's formulation, the two sopranos were not just robots, but *programmed* robots. So who programmed them? The answer, presumably, would be one of the prominent male figures involved in the production

128. Markow, "Webern Highly Recommended."

129. Thistle, "Master of Miniature." Thistle was, to my knowledge, the only female critic to review either of the two Columbia albums.

130. Acton, "Records: The Whole of Webern."

131. Davis, "Accomplished New Versions."

of the 1957 album: Craft, Stein, Stravinsky, or—from beyond the grave—Webern himself. In this way, Davis indulged in a trope that, as Abbate observes, has roots in the nineteenth century:

> This notion of the "instrument" can be broadened to include the performer, who might similarly be construed as a medium, channeling musical thoughts from elsewhere, "played" by an inscription, or by a musical work. Dead instrument and live performer might seem to be quite different, but collapsing them, in particular when the performer is female—hence assumed more amenable to manipulation, paralysis, or control—is a familiar Romantic cliché.

"The gesture that dismisses the (female) performer as mere instrument," Abbate concludes, has remained "extraordinarily resilient."[132] Hadlock outlines another example of that gesture in her analysis of musical settings of the writings of E. T. A. Hoffmann, in which music comes "not from but through" female vocalists; one of those vocalists, Olimpia in Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann," turns out to be an actual robot.[133]

At first glance, this discourse seems to overlap with the above-cited discussions of the way in which Webern's music "instrumentalises" the voice, to borrow again from Shreffler.[134] Yet there is a crucial difference. Contemporary scholars like Shreffler and Johnson engage with the voice-as-instrument idea either to demonstrate Webern's out-of-touch approach to vocal writing or to make clear the Herculean efforts that vocalists like Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon must undertake in order to sing his music. Unlike Davis's "programmed robots," the sopranos imagined in these scholars' work might well fail to successfully execute Webern's works. But if they fail, they fail because they are only human. Johnson even goes so far as to suggest that fallibility is central to the aesthetic of many of Webern's vocal works. In particularly intense moments, he notes, the voice is asked "to go beyond its own reach, to transcend its own human limits," to become "more-than-human." "This breaks the voice," he continues, "but also produces a unique humility and calm."[135] Take, for instance, the final measures of opus 15, no. 1 (see example 5), the opening of which is presented above as example 4. Jesus comforts a weeping Mary, assuring her that he is about to gain entrance to the afterlife. As the song slows to its conclusion, the soprano is asked to ascend an augmented octave to a high C♯ on the word "Himmelreich" (kingdom of heaven) in measures 13–14. As if that were not enough, the onset of that note is marked "*ppp*," and it is followed by a crescendo that should ostensibly occur over the span of a single quarter note. Even for Jesus, heaven lies just out of reach. On the 1957 album, Martin

132. Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 6–7.
133. Hadlock, "Return of the Repressed," 223.
134. Shreffler, *Webern*, 11.
135. Johnson, *Webern*, 157–58.

Example 5 Webern, Five Sacred Songs, op. 15, no. 1, mm. 11–15

(continued)

sang these notes in time, in tune, and with expression; to complain that she did not achieve a true *ppp* is to miss the point. It would be wrong to lay the blame for the technical impossibility of this music at the feet of the sopranos who perform it—or even, perhaps, at Webern's feet—for it is this impossibility that makes the music sing.

Davis was not the first critic to encounter difficulties when attempting to square the technical demands of Webern's vocal music with the expression he expected of vocalists. Indeed, the same issue is evident in all the other gender-inflected comments that I have highlighted over the course of this article. Like Davis, Shawe-Taylor contrasted technical prowess ("astounding accuracy") with expression ("positive charm and grace") when reviewing

Example 5 continued

Martin's and Nixon's performances.[136] So too did Harold C. Schonberg, when he asserted that Beardslee's "beautiful voice" was "something that not all singers of modern music own."[137] Downes, meanwhile, worried not about a lack of expression but an excess of it when recounting how Martin and Nixon sang "Webern's cruel vocal lines neatly, accurately, with expression and without screaming."[138] Though all of these comments were complimentary where Davis's was critical, they evince a similar brand of sexism. They suggest that most female vocalists would have either robotically reproduced pitches or given in to emotion, even if these three women did not;

136. Shawe-Taylor, "Complete Webern."
137. Schonberg, "Concert Devoted to the Works of Webern."
138. Downes, "Records: Webern."

that, one way or another, to sing Webern's music is to surrender one's humanity. But the experiences of Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon tell a different story. They had agency, choosing to perform music with challenges so severe as to deter many others before and since. They worked to overcome those challenges, delivering performances that amazed listeners with their accuracy and their beauty, their expression and their craft. And they showed why the voice—even in the works of Webern—is "the sign of corporeality in music," as Johnson puts it.[139] Could there be any more persuasive evidence in support of the notion that, as Nixon claimed, the "humanity" in Webern's music will inevitably come "bursting through"?[140] That, in Craft's words, Webern is "always composing to the ear even when he is most vainly appealing to the eye"?[141] That, as Page so succinctly puts it, "Webern sounds"?[142]

Davis, Downes, Schonberg, and Shawe-Taylor represent just four voices amid a sea of responses to Beardslee's, Martin's, and Nixon's performances that otherwise range from positive to very positive. Nevertheless, they provide a hint as to why Webern's vocal music—and the work of these three sopranos with it—was neglected for as long as it was. Consider the following question: Has Webern's vocal music been overlooked because it is sung by women, or have those women's performances been overlooked because they were singing Webern? The fact that Webern wrote almost no music for a solo voice other than soprano renders impossible what could have been a fruitful point of comparison.[143] But Davis's "robots" quip, like other critics' wrestling with issues of emotion and accuracy, does suggest that the tendency to ignore Webern's vocal music was partially a reaction to female performers holding the legacy of a renowned and influential composer in their hands. As Abbate writes, "Imagining that a transcendent voice speaks through female bodies and vocal cords means that certain protections, certain mental firewalls, must be in place, assuring listeners that the women are neither misinterpreting the message nor doing the unthinkable, inventing the message on their own."[144] Given the historical prevalence of this phenomenon (further examples of which are discussed by Abbate and Hadlock) and the era in which these sopranos performed, it seems safe to assume that comments like Davis's are more like the tip of the iceberg than isolated instances of personal bias, more rule than exception. Sexism was not the only factor to have shaped the trajectory of Webern's vocal music; as I have documented, others included the diminished role of performers in postwar

139. Johnson, *Webern*, 157.

140. Nixon, *I Could Have Sung*, 53.

141. Craft, liner notes to *Anton Webern: The Complete Music.*

142. Page, "Webern after Webernism," 249.

143. The only music that Webern wrote for a solo voice other than soprano is a few movements of bass solo in the Cantata no. 2, op. 31.

144. Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 8.

modernist circles, the shifting reception of the 1957 Columbia album after 1978, obsession with the systemization of Webern's instrumental works, and the sheer difficulty of his vocal music. But it was a factor. "As vocality itself is often marginalized and even problematically feminized," argue Karantonis and Verstraete, "making a case for its authoritative status, as a brand of authorship, requires some open critique."[145] I hope to have provided such critique here, because Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon were—in a very real sense—coauthors of Webern's vocal music.

Epilogue: "The Sound of the Music"

In 1978, as critical opinion of Martin's and Nixon's performances on the 1957 album flipped sharply, Beardslee's recording of Webern's opus 12 for Dial Records was already all but forgotten. Despite Ross Russell's conviction that contemporary classical music would sell as well as bebop, Dial folded in 1954. Within a few years, the label's two Webern albums had become "collector's items, found now and then in the shops" but otherwise difficult to come by.[146] But for Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon, the Dial and Columbia albums were only a small part of what became long and varied careers; as Mathew observes, "the story of modernism's vanishing performer cannot conceal the obvious: that performance carries on regardless."[147] The three sopranos kept singing.

Martin began a collaboration with Leonard Stein, and in 1962 the two gave the world premiere of Webern's newly discovered Five Songs after poems by Richard Dehmel (1906–8) at the First International Webern Festival in Seattle. The concert was the first public hearing of five of the more than twenty songs for soprano and piano accompaniment that Webern composed prior to his opus 1. Webern biographer and festival organizer Hans Moldenhauer sent Martin a thank-you note afterward, referring to her as a "comrade" and an "exquisite artist."[148] The following year, Martin and Stein performed works by Webern at the University of British Columbia, where one critic described them as a "new kind of musical hero" for their championing of modern music.[149] Later in life, Martin taught widely throughout the greater Los Angeles area, and founded the music program at Mayfield Senior School in Pasadena. She died in 2012.

145. Karantonis and Verstraete, "Introduction/Overture," 11.

146. Berger, "Basic Modern Works."

147. Mathew, "Darmstadt Pianism," 72.

148. Hans Moldenhauer, postcard to Grace-Lynne Martin, May 1962, private collection, courtesy of Jennifer Ingle Briguglio Bandy.

149. Campbell, "UBC Gets New Type."

Nixon became famous as the ghost singer for films such as *West Side Story* and *My Fair Lady*, leading Stravinsky to complain that she had wasted her "better-than-violin distinctions of pitch" as she "graduated from Webern to Liza Doolittle."[150] But Webern remained a part of her repertoire. She continued performing with Stein, and the duo routinely programmed works by Webern. In 1971 they mounted a Webern and Bach concert at the Evenings on the Roof, which had long since outgrown the roof and been rechristened as Monday Evening Concerts. The program included Webern's opuses 8 and 13–18, the very works that Nixon had *not* sung on the Columbia album. John Rockwell of the *Los Angeles Times* echoed Yates's earlier evaluation of Nixon's Webern performances, praising her "sense of pitch and clear, white soprano," which were "not only superb for intervallic clarity, but coloristically appropriate to the child-like, religious songs."[151] Nixon's illustrious career culminated in winning the George Peabody Medal in 2011, and she died in 2016.

For Beardslee, singing Webern fitted seamlessly within a career that came to be defined by modern music. Beardslee and Monod brought songs by Webern to places like Webster College in St. Louis and Barry College in Miami during their tours of university campuses in the mid-1950s, the product of what Beardslee described as Monod's "naïve idea that every college in the United States was just dying to hear the music of the Second Viennese School."[152] She had a point; a critic at a 1954 performance in Rochester admitted that he "could find little meaning" in Webern's music, though hearing it was at least "an experience."[153] But the tours did afford Beardslee the opportunity to hone her interpretations of Webern's works. Following a 1974 "Homage to Webern" concert at Carnegie Hall, Harold C. Schonberg reported that Beardslee was "so attuned to the Webern intervals" that the music sounded "no more difficult than if [she] were singing Schubert or Brahms" (a comparison that would have delighted Webern). The key to Beardslee's success, Schonberg contended, was that she "approached the music simply as music"—precisely what Beardslee would later report in her autobiography.[154]

It would be another two decades before Webern's vocal music finally had its moment in the sun. In what Julie Brown has described as "an intentional 'greening,'" the 1990s saw scholars and performers move away from conceptions of Webern as a "mathematical, intellectual harbinger of high modernism" and toward "Webern the lover of lyric poetry and nature."[155] That shift is typically (and not incorrectly) attributed to

150. Stravinsky and Craft, *Themes and Episodes*, 122.
151. Rockwell, "Anton Webern Sampling."
152. Beardslee, *I Sang the Unsingable*, 113.
153. Southgate, "Soprano, Pianist Offer Song Program."
154. Schonberg, "Concert: Webern's Rarefied World."
155. Brown, review of *Webern and the Lyric Impulse*, 144.

changing perceptions of Webern following the publication of Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer's *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of His Life and Work* in 1979, just a few months after the appearance of Boulez's complete works album, as well as to the opening of the Moldenhauers' archive of Webern materials to researchers in the late 1980s.[156] Yet I cannot help but wonder if the contributions of Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon were a necessary step along the way. Just as the critical reevaluation of the 1957 Columbia album in 1978 did not change what that album had meant in the preceding decades, the scholarly reevaluation of Webern that took place in the 1990s does not indicate that the "greener" Webern first appeared only then. "Much of what is said about pieces," as Daniel Leech-Wilkinson argues, "is actually about performances of pieces," since "scholars of music absorb from their performance-surroundings ways of understanding the nature of compositions and of their composers."[157] The "changed priorities in modernist music" and the aesthetic shift "away from formalism and towards perception" during the 1960s and '70s, Leech-Wilkinson notes elsewhere, were apparent in performances long before they made their way into academic contexts.[158] So what if the image of a "mathematical" and "intellectual" Webern was not an interpretation that reigned supreme for four decades, but rather one that reached its apex in the mid-1950s only to be immediately undermined by performers like Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon? What if the turning point was neither the Moldenhauers' work nor the release of the 1978 album, but Beardslee's recording session with Dial Records in 1950, or the all-Webern concert at the Evenings on the Roof in 1954? "It has taken musicologists half a century," notes Cook, to complete the "180-degree reversal in critical interpretation" of Webern's music that I have described here. "But that only illustrates once again," he continues, "the oblique relationship between talking about music and playing it. For all the time, the new—or old—Webern was there to be heard in concert halls and on recordings."[159] Webern was indeed there, but not by chance. In the summer of 2020, I spoke to Bethany Beardslee, the lone surviving member of this trio of sopranos. She described audiences' reactions to her performances of Webern's works during the 1950s. "People wanted to hear the sound of the music," she told me.[160] Thanks to the work of Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon, they could.

156. The bulk of the Moldenhauers' Webern collection is now held at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, with a few select items at the Library of Congress.

157. Leech-Wilkinson, "Compositions, Scores."

158. Leech-Wilkinson, "Musicology and Performance," 798.

159. Cook, "Inventing Tradition," 201.

160. Bethany Beardslee, interview with the author, June 18, 2020.

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Abstract

Anton Webern's vocal music has long been overshadowed by the aphoristic miniatures and rigorously organized twelve-tone works—both largely instrumental genres—for which the composer is best known. Yet over half of Webern's output consists of vocal works. During the 1950s, as composers and intellectuals celebrated the "instrumental" Webern, an alternative view of the composer was emerging through the performances of three soprano soloists. Bethany Beardslee gave posthumous premieres of three of Webern's

works in New York and recorded his Four Songs op. 12 for Dial Records. On the other side of the country, Grace-Lynne Martin and Marni Nixon performed works by Webern at the Evenings on the Roof in Los Angeles, and collaborated with Robert Craft on Columbia Records' *Anton Webern: The Complete Music*. Beardslee, Martin, and Nixon adopted a variety of approaches to learning Webern's famously difficult works, and their work paid off: all three sopranos earned praise for weathering the extreme technical challenges of Webern's soprano lines while also delivering musically satisfying performances. Yet these performances have been largely forgotten in the decades since, as a consequence of changing attitudes toward postwar performance practices as well as the sometimes sexist views of male music critics. Nevertheless, the performances of these sopranos constituted a crucial step toward perspectives on Webern that are now current among contemporary performers and scholars, and understanding their contributions is essential to understanding the vocal side of Webern.

Keywords: Webern, Craft, recordings, vocal, soprano