ARTS

OPERA

Incident at Mittersill

A new work explores the mysterious death of the composer Anton Webern

SUDIP BOSE

The bombs began falling with greater intensity in March 1945, as the war neared its end and the Soviet and Western Allied armies advanced upon Vienna. Though the Austrian composer Anton Webern lived 15 miles away from the city center, on a cul-de-sac at the base of a forested hill, the exploding bombs, blaring sirens, and almost constant fire of anti-aircraft guns were ever-present there, as well. For a composer who thrived on silence, it was too much to bear. It wasn't just the noise, however, that prevented him from working, or even that he was destitute, unable to perform in public, his music banned by the Nazis on grounds of "degeneracy." He was, above all, numbed with grief following the death of his son, Peter, a soldier in the German army. Webern, a nervous man during the best of times, was beaten down, on the verge of collapse, a devout Christian now questioning the existence of God.

At the end of March, German officials began evacuating civilians from Vienna. Webern's wife, Wilhelmine, could have boarded one of the refugee buses designated for women and children, but she would not countenance being separated from her husband. Instead, the Weberns decided to take refuge in the Alpine village of Mittersill, 230 miles away. Two of their three grown daughters, Christine and Maria, were already there with their own children, living in the home of Maria's in-laws. On Good Friday, March 30, with Vienna in a state of chaos, Webern and his wife packed all they could into two rucksacks. In the darkness of the next morning, they began walking, hoping to hitch a ride somewhere along the way. They walked for eight grueling hours—18 miles in total, burdened with the weight on their backs—to the town of Neulengbach, where they managed to get on a train continuing westward.

On Easter Monday, April 2, they disembarked at the picturesque town of Zell am See. There, while waiting on the station platform, they ran into their eldest daughter, Amalie. She and her two young sons had also fled Vienna, on a bus bound for Innsbruck and then southern Germany, but had decided, midjourney, to head to Mittersill instead. Heartened by this fortuitous coincidence, three generations of Weberns now boarded the train to Mittersill. It was, no doubt, a joyous reunion once they arrived at the village, and later, the family's ranks would grow yet larger with the

Sudip Bose *is the managing editor and fiction editor of the* Scholar.

US IMAGNO/AUSTRIAN ARCHIVES/GETTY

Anton Webern in 1940, a difficult year for the composer, during which he completed only one major work: the Variations for Orchestra, *Opus 30*

return of Christine's and Amalie's husbands from the front—17 people crammed into one Tyrolean country house. There, on a meadow overlooking the Salzach River, amid the serenity of evergreen forests and Alpine peaks, the extended family waited out the war's end. On April 30, Adolf Hitler committed suicide. Soon after, the Germans surrendered, and American soldiers occupied Mittersill, overseeing the transition to peacetime.

Webern suffered from malnutrition and a violent case of dysentery, but he soon recovered, even without the aid of medication. He began finding moments of solace in his new environment, taking long, meditative walks into the surrounding forests, delighting in the lichens, the mosses, the Alpine flowers. He read the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, copying line after line into his diary. He began to feel regenerated. Sitting with his wife on a bench near the Mittersill church one radiant summer day, while gazing up at the mountains capped with early snow, Webern said, "I would like to be buried here someday." He was only 61, too young for premonitions, but a few months later, he was dead.

.....

The death of Anton Friedrich Wilhelm von Webern—one of the most inventive artists of the 20th century, whose experiments in sound greatly influenced the course of contemporary music—was for many years a matter of rumor and conjecture. Only a few facts were known. On the evening of September 15, 1945, the Weberns dined at the home of Christine and their son-in-law Benno Mattel, who had set up residence of their own in the village. After dinner, two American soldiers came to the house to see Mattel. At some point, Webern went outside to smoke a cigar, and as he lit up, a confrontation with one of the Americans took place. Three shots were fired. Webern stumbled inside and died. The three bullet holes can still be seen on the façade of the house at Am Markt 101, just to the right of the front door.

Was Webern murdered, or was his death accidental? Who was the soldier who pulled the trigger, and had he acted in self-defense, after some provocation from Webern? Shortly after visiting Mittersill in 1959, a German-born American musicologist named Hans Moldenhauer became determined to answer these questions, and did so in a 1961 book, *The Death of Anton Webern: A Drama in Documents.* Based largely on this book, a new one-act opera called *The Death of Webern,* a moving and taut work by the composer Michael Dellaira, with a libretto by the poet J. D. McClatchy, has recently received its premiere,

with three performances in New York City by the Pocket Opera Players.

Writing an opera about a composer—especially one as pioneering and idiosyncratic as Anton Webern—can be tricky. To what degree should the work's musical idiom reflect, mimic, or comment on the music of its subject? Webern will forever be associated with Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, the three making up the so-called Second Viennese School. Though Webern's earliest works emerged from the plush world of post-Romanticism, he soon began experimenting with tonality and form, reducing harmony, melody, and rhythm to their constituent elements—sound distilled, with beauty revealed in the inherent severity and compression of a work. Some of his pieces last barely a minute, with each note containing a world of expression—and each silence, too.

A wonderful Webern-like economy characterizes Dellaira's score, not just in the orchestration for chamber ensemble but also in its intensity. The music is concentrated and spare, with a wide range of feeling communicated by the attenuated phrases that flit about the longer vocal lines. But Dellaira is not beholden to Webern; he can—and does—make use of a variety of musical styles precisely because this work, though ostensibly about Webern, is really the story of Hans Moldenhauer.

At the outset of the opera, Moldenhauer sits at his desk, wondering why the burden of investigating Webern's death has fallen to him. Against a brooding clarinet line and a roll of the snare drum suggesting gunfire, he laments that a "man who devoted his life to *sound*" has so easily been "swallowed by silence." When Moldenhauer later recalls how much the composer's music has meant to him, Dellaira quotes from Webern's early *Passacaglia*—a lovely moment of homage. But because the *Passacaglia* marked a point of departure for Webern—very soon after, he would move beyond the tonal world of Mahler, Strauss, and Wagner—the passage also invokes a deeper sense of nostalgia and loss.

Among the many felicities of McClatchy's libretto is how he treats the letters, statements, and affidavits that Moldenhauer assembled in his search, making poetry out of mundane official correspondence. Returning home from Austria, Moldenhauer sent letters of inquiry to the U.S. secretaries of State and Defense, in the hope that some record of Webern's death might be found—a most improbable gambit. Not surprisingly, the letters were shuffled down bureaucratic channels to assorted government archivists and military officers. As the opera shows, Moldenhauer encountered false starts and dead ends, indifference and obstruction. "In a time of war, papers are misfiled," sings an archivist with the War Records Division. "Facts, like lives, alas, are lost." After failing to make headway with both a State Department clerk and a military officer, Moldenhauer expresses a cynical frustration—"If you keep looking away, maybe it will disappear"—as the flute and clarinet spin out an urgent, restive line against a driving, repeated figure played by the cello and piano.

Moldenhauer's breakthrough comes when he learns that units of the 42nd Infantry, the famed Rainbow Division, were present during the American occupation of Mittersill and that an American soldier named Martin Heiman went to the house where Webern had been shot on that very night. Not only had there been a subsequent investigation, but Heiman, a German-born American, had acted as translator. In a remarkable fulcrumlike scene in the opera, Heiman reveals the name of the man who killed Webern—an army cook named Raymond Bell. There follows a beautiful canon (a musical form in which a phrase or melody uttered by one voice is repeated, after a short interval of time, by another voice or voices) in which Heiman names the other American soldier present at the Mattel house that night—a first sergeant named Andrew W. Murray. Dellaira's use of the canon is not coincidental, I think; it was one of Webern's favorite forms.

In his 1979 biography, *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of His Life and Work,* Moldenhauer,

writing in collaboration with his wife, Rosaleen, describes how, upon arriving at Mittersill after the war, Webern's son-in-law Mattel tried to purchase black-market goods from the American soldiers stationed in the village. One day, he approached Raymond Bell, looking to buy sugar, coffee, and American dollars. Bell alerted Sgt. Murray, but when the two reported Mattel to higher-ups at the Counter-Intelligence Corps, headquartered in nearby Zell am See, they were told to entrap and arrest Mattel themselves.

A sting operation occurred at Mattel's house on September 15—coincidentally the night Anton Webern and his wife dined there. The Weberns arrived around eight o'clock and subsequently enjoyed a meal with their daughter and son-in-law, as Wilhelmine Webern would later recount. Afterward, Mattel announced the imminent arrival of some Americans, so Webern, Wilhelmine, Christine, and the Mattels' three sleepy children retired to a room across the hall, where the children were put to bed. When Bell and Murray arrived soon after nine, Mattel served them drinks in the kitchen, and the three agreed upon a price for certain illicit goods. The Americans drew their pistols and arrested Mattel.

At precisely this time, Webern decided to indulge in a pleasure he had been anticipating all evening: a cigar that Mattel had procured for him. His wife did not want the smoke to disturb the three sleeping grandchildren, so Webern stepped outside into the darkness.

Bell, seemingly unaware that others were in the house, heard footsteps in the hallway. Curious, he, too, made his way outside, though what happened next can never be verified. Bell would later say that Webern—five feet three inches tall, 110 pounds, and in frail health—had provoked him into firing the three shots. Whatever the motive, Bell ran off for help, heading to a nearby inn, where a dance was being held for the Americans. Webern, meanwhile, struggled to get back inside the house. *Ich wurde erschossen,* he said—"I have been shot." Wilhelmine and Christine placed him on a mattress. He was bleeding severely from his stomach. *Es ist aus,* Webern said—"It is over"—and with those final words, as laconic and profound as the music he created, he began to slip out of consciousness. Medical help finally arrived, but Anton Webern was dead.

As the composer's body was taken away, Wilhelmine fell into a state of shock. It was left to Amalie Waller, awakened at four in the morning with the news of her father's death, to find out just where he had been taken. On that Sunday morning, her search led her to the Annakirche, Mittersill's small Baroque chapel. "And it was he," she would later tell Moldenhauer. "On a blanket, on the floor of the chapel, lay my father—dead. His eyes were open, dreadful terror stood in them."

During the military investigation, Bell continued to assert that he had acted in self-defense. Heiman maintained, however, that "to the best of my knowledge not the slightest proof existed that [Webern] attacked the cook apart from the testimony of the cook, who was about two heads taller than Mr. A. von Webern. I did not speak to a single officer familiar with the case who believed Mr. von Webern was guilty of anything in this connection. Certainly in my opinion he was a completely innocent bystander."

Bell, confined to quarters for a period of time after the shooting, returned to his hometown of Mount Olive, North Carolina, after the war and became a restaurant cook. He died an alcoholic on September 3, 1955, a decade after the incident with Webern. When Moldenhauer wrote to Bell's widow, a schoolteacher named Helen, he received a poignant response:

> I know very little about the accident. When he came home from the war he told me he killed a man in the line of duty. I know he worried greatly over it. Every time he became intoxicated, he would say, "I wish I hadn't killed that man." I truly think it helped to bring on his sickness. He was a very kind man who loved everyone. These are the results of war. So many suffer.

The most expansive scenes in the opera, full of pathos and heightened expressiveness, are the

dialogues between Moldenhauer and Helen Bell and Moldenhauer and Amalie Waller. The scene with Amalie is, for me, the highlight of the entire work; she recounts the desperation of the flight to Mittersill—the piccolo and violin playing in haunting unison, floating above the singers—and the traumatic experience of finding her father's body in the chapel. "You are the first man who has cared, Doctor," Amalie sings plangently. "I only wanted to discover the truth," Moldenhauer replies, an understated response burning with the intensity of his endeavor.

Webern's adoption of his teacher Arnold Schoenberg's 12-note system gave structure to the music he wrote after 1921, though his experiments with form and tonality were leading in that direction anyway. In 12-note music, the melodies and harmonies of a piece are determined by a specific arrangement of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale, the so-called tone row. The row occurs throughout the piece and can be manipulated in various ways: inverted, reversed, inverted and reversed. It might seem arbitrary, but in the hands of imaginative and inspired artists such as Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg, the system gave rise to an enormous range of expressive music. There is nothing cold or mathematical, for example, about Berg's valedictory Violin Concerto, or Webern's moving and gorgeous late cantatas.

In one of the opera's two flashback scenes, we see Webern giving a private lecture at his house, discussing the music of the Second Viennese School. He bemoans the fact that most people cannot come to terms with the new music, incapable as they are of appreciating anything that does not render a specific image or mood, or adhere to traditional tonality. But Webern argues that 12-note music is derived from nothing less than natural law, that he and Schoenberg and Berg have only developed and furthered a tradition inherited from Bach. "The classical forms have remained," Webern sings. "It was our task to extend and clarify them, to dislodge the keynote, and make way for the luminous harmony of the new laws. How 12 notes listen to each other, and in doing so show us the new worlds spinning inside the eternal universe." The scene is powerful, with passages marked by a Webern-like severity contrasting with a chorale that recalls the polyphony of Bach and Heinrich Schütz—new and old coexisting seamlessly.

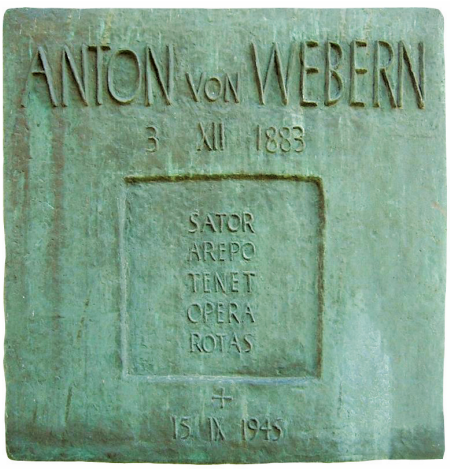
Webern goes on to ask what will happen to serious artists in the new Germany, branded by the Nazis as degenerate: "I cannot even think what and whom they will destroy. It is our duty to save what can be saved, for soon we may all be in prison for calling ourselves 'serious.'"

Without question, Webern suffered greatly under the Third Reich. More problematic than his seemingly complex music was his close friendship with Schoenberg, who was Jewish. In the opera's first scene, Moldenhauer holds Webern up as a "man who defended his homeland and its history, a man who spoke out against Hitler and the forces of evil." What an injustice that "*that* man is killed by those he looked on as his saviors." But this portrait of Webern is only partially true, and it omits a troubling side of the composer's character.

Perhaps as a result of his belief in the superiority of pan-Germanic culture, Webern embraced the rise of the Third Reich, often vigorously. He admired Hitler and the National Socialists, praised the Japanese entry into the war, and imagined a time when the entire world might be pacified by the new Germanic order. No evidence exists to suggest that Webern was an anti-Semite (though three of his children became Nazis as adults, Mattel was a Nazi storm trooper, and a few of Webern's close friends were also Nazis). He helped many Jewish friends during the difficult time preceding the annexation of Austria in 1938, and he later offered Jews refuge in his house, risking arrest and a possible death sentence. Yet how could a man whose closest friends and colleagues included so many Jews have failed to acknowledge the brutality of the Nazis?

To suggest that this cultured and intelligent man was startlingly simpleminded when it came to

politics is not to apologize for his delusions. There is an almost unbelievable story of a trip he took in 1936 to Barcelona, where he was supposed to conduct the premiere of the Berg Violin Concerto. The soloist on the occasion, Louis Krasner, accompanied Webern on the train journey from Vienna to Spain—yet rather than go through Switzerland, as almost everyone else attending the festival was doing, Webern insisted on traveling through Germany, for no other reason than to show his Jewish traveling companion that it was possible for him to survive in Germany unscathed. This naïveté revealed itself on another occasion when Webern decided to conduct a program of Felix Mendelssohn's music for the Austrian radio broadcaster RAVAG, at a time when the music of Mendelssohn, a Jew, was banned. This transgression (along with Webern's strong ties to cultural institutions supported by Austria's Social Democrat party) led to his immediate dismissal from RAVAG, for whom he had been conducting regular concerts.



As Webern's wife testified, "My husband was convalescent ... it would be against his nature to attack anybody, especially a soldier."

In 1934, Schoenberg, having emigrated to the United States, wanted to dedicate a composition to Webern, on the occasion of his former pupil's 50th birthday. But first, he needed Webern to answer a question: Was he a Nazi? Webern wrote back, emphatically stating that he was not, and expressing "a sense of the most vehement aversion" toward anti-Semites. Schoenberg was only temporarily put at ease. A few years later, he confronted Webern about the matter again, as reported in Kathryn Bailey's *The Life of Webern:*

> I have heard repeatedly in the last few months a rumor which I have not believed and which has been described by various sources ... as untrue. Nevertheless, under the circumstances it is necessary that I know the whole truth, and this I can get only through a direct answer to a direct question. Is it true that you have become a supporter, or even a member, of the Nazi party? There are few things that could give me greater joy than your answering no to the questions.

How Webern responded, or if he did so at all, is not known: no response to Schoenberg's letter has been found.

In times of war, of course, the choices a person makes in order to get by—and who is to say that Webern's choices were not entirely practical—are often fraught with ethical complication. That Webern was not morally guiltless during the most horrific period of the 20th century does not diminish him as a seminal artist, the creator of hugely influential pieces that are challenging and thorny, but luminous and beautiful, too. Wherever his sympathies lay, *The Death of Webern* makes clear that some of the questions that Hans Moldenhauer set out to answer will forever remain unknowable. At the end of Dellaira's affecting opera, with so many of the puzzle pieces put together, Moldenhauer still registers a note of deep pessimism: "Lies. Half-truths. No one knows. No one remembers. No one wants to remember." That a musical work about Anton Webern, who helped explode the world of tonality, should end quietly in C major—that most traditional of key signatures, the key of some of the greatest works of Haydn, Mozart, and Schubert, a key that conveys solidity, familiarity, and happiness—might be the most tantalizing irony of all. ●