

Webern's Literary Encounter with Hildegard Jone

While Webern's introduction to Hildegard Jone and his immediate interest in her poetry have long been a matter of record, the circumstances surrounding his early settings of her texts are less clear. In what form did Webern know these poems and what were his literary sources? How might this information contribute to our understanding of his musical settings? Jone's poetry manuscripts, now located at the Paul Sacher Stiftung, can offer preliminary answers to these questions¹⁾.

Webern's very first Jone settings, the *Drei Gesänge* op. 23, provide a case in point. It is clear from a letter to Jone of September 3, 1933, that his primary literary source for these texts was the Tirolean journal *Der Brenner*:

“Ich habe *vorläufig* die Komposition von Texten aus Ihrem “*Viae inviae*” beendet. Es ist so gekommen, wie ich es vorhatte: 1. Lied: “Es stürzt aus Höhen” bis “den Himmel und die Seele überglüht noch lange Glut”. 2. Lied: “Herr Jesus mein” bis “auch Euch erwartet Tag.” (Also die ganze Seite aus dem “*Brenner*”). Ich sage “*vorläufig*”, weil ich die Empfindung habe, bald wieder auf Worte von Ihnen zurückkommen zu müssen. Doch glaube ich, einstweilen wenigstens sollen zunächst diese 2 Lieder *für sich* allein bleiben. Sie schließen sich musikalisch zu einem *Ganzen* zusammen; im Sinn einer gewissen Gegensätzlichkeit.”²⁾

Webern's reference is to the most recent issue of *Der Brenner*, which contains Jone's poetic cycle, *Viae inviae*³⁾. This issue was dedicated to the memory of Ferdinand Ebner (d. 17 October 1931), Austrian philosopher and frequent contributor to the journal. Jone's reverence for Ebner permeates her later writings and her *Viae inviae*, an extended elegy on Ebner's death, makes eloquent and abundant reference to his ideas. Webern selected a central passage of this elegy as the basis for his *Drei Gesänge* and he underscored the special significance of these texts by acknowledging Jone's cycle in the title of the published score⁴⁾.

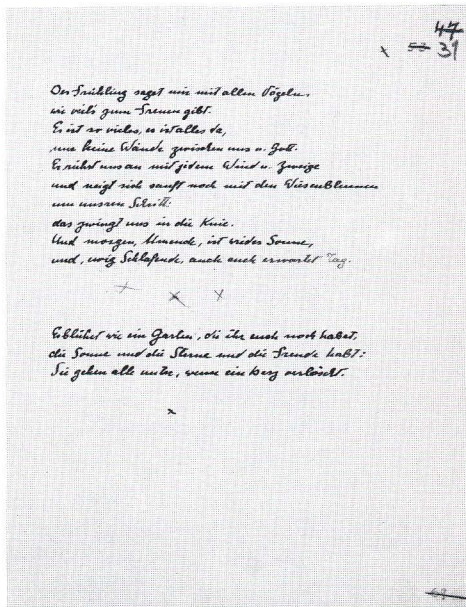
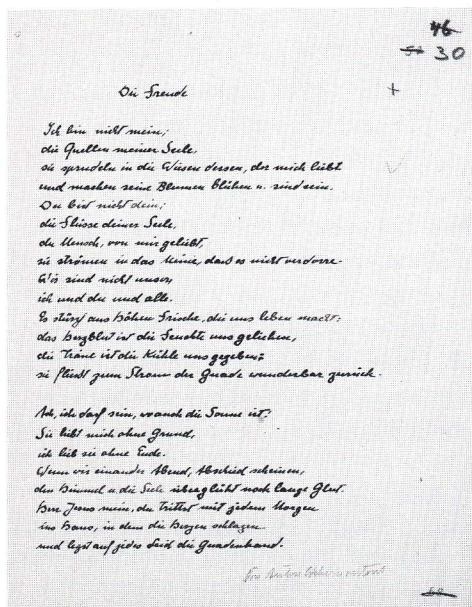
While the letter quoted above establishes *Der Brenner* as his current textual source, it also raises a number of important questions. Why, for example, does Webern feel compelled to clarify where each text begins and ends, a preoccupation with basic versification evident throughout his letters on these songs?⁵⁾ Webern's remarks that the two songs represent, at least “temporarily”, a complete unity seem ambivalent. They are also prophetic, for he does indeed return to this passage of *Viae inviae*, setting the opening stanzas as the song *Das dunkle*

Herz⁶). And perhaps most puzzling, why, in an earlier letter to Jone, did Webern refer to these texts by the title *Die Freude*, when this title appears nowhere on the pages of *Der Brenner*?⁷).

The answers to these questions lie in a different Jone source, her autograph anthology entitled *Sator*⁸). This volume currently contains eight poetry books dated intermittently from 1931–37, and a number of miscellaneous loose pages. Among these loose pages are two leaves containing a poem entitled *Die Freude*. This poem, which Jone later incorporated into *Viae inviae*, appears to have been the original inspiration for Webern's *Drei Gesänge*⁹).

The poem identified here as *Die Freude* corresponds to the passage Webern selected from *Viae inviae*, but with a number of important exceptions. The earlier poem lacks the opening stanza, "Das dunkle Herz". This stanza was added when the poem was incorporated into *Viae inviae*. The remainder of *Die Freude* matches line-for-line with the passage from *Viae inviae*, but the versification of these lines is markedly different. The passage in *Viae inviae* also omits the title *Die Freude* and is identified simply as part I, section 3.

This reuse of material and the discrepancies which result are characteristic of Jone's extremely fluid, "organic" approach to writing poetry. Both her cycles and her poetic sources were subject to frequent



Hildegard Jone, *Die Freude* (1934), Gedicht aus der Sammlung *Sator*, Manuskript S. 30/31 (Sammlung Hildegard Jone)

revision and reorganization, and many texts appear in a variety of sources over the course of many years. Jone's revisions often consisted of interweaving old with new material in order to emphasize different thematic connections. These types of changes do not represent "corrections", but instead yield alternate versions or re-readings, all of which remain viable. *Viae inviae* is representative, for it was fashioned from old and newly-written material in the winter of 1932, shortly after Ebner's death. A number of the poems in this cycle reappear in later sources. *Die Freude*, for example, was not only recast and incorporated into *Viae inviae*, it reappears, in yet another guise, in Jone's first published collection, *Selige Augen*¹⁰.

To return to Webern's *Drei Gesänge*: it is clear from his March 3 letter to Jone – where he refers to *Die Freude* as "Ihr Gedicht" – that Webern originally understood the op. 23 texts as a single, extended poem. And while the passage in *Viae inviae* ultimately served as his working text, the resonance of the earlier version initially proved problematic. Webern's concern with the delimitation of stanzas most likely arose from his acquaintance with this material in more than one version. His many line references in letters to Jone indicate how he has chosen to group these stanzas. An analysis of the op. 23 songs should thus regard not only Webern's music but also his distribution of stanzas and the ideas therein as reflecting his own, personal reading of this material. Webern's remarks on the musical form of each song should also be viewed in this light¹¹.

Webern's early encounter with *Die Freude* may also have contributed to his ambivalence regarding the finality of the songs *Es stürzt aus Höhen* and *Herr Jesus Mein*. He may have been unsure how to reconcile the new stanza, "Das dunkle Herz", which is written in third-person narrative voice and strongly Goethean in tone, with the previously-written material, which is written in the first person, more reflective in tone, and overtly Ebnerian in reference. Webern's decision to work backwards through the passage in *Viae inviae* may consequently have stemmed from his indecision on how to treat the opening stanzas, "Das dunkle Herz" and "Ich bin nicht mein", where this break occurs. It is this juncture and his own, musical response that concerns Webern in a letter to Jone of March 20, 1934:

"Inzwischen ist das dritte Lied fertig geworden. Da es die Worte von "Das dunkle Herz . . ." bis ". . . ich und du und alle" umfaßt, ist es recht lang geworden und stellt der musikalischen Form nach eigentlich eine Art "Arie" dar: bestehend aus einem langsamen Teil und ab "Ich bin nicht mein . . ." einem schnelleren, der aber trotzdem die Tempovorschrift "*Ganz ruhig*" trägt. Dieser 2. Teil ist fast im Flüsterton gehalten. Vielleicht können Sie doch aus dieser

Beschreibung ungefähr entnehmen, wie ich im Besonderen den 2. Teil Ihrer Worte aufgefaßt habe: nach einem großen Aufschwung des ersten ganz unvermittelt völlige Stille, Ruhe, Einfachheit. Den Titel habe ich mir so gedacht: Drei Gesänge aus *Viae inviae*."¹²⁾

Webern's *Drei Gesänge* op. 23 are the first in a series of Jone settings, spanning more than a decade and comprising sixteen completed movements and three fragments. Both his protracted engagement with this poetry and his working relationship with the poetess were unique to Webern's experience as a composer. His familiarity with Jone's autograph sources and her working methods, in particular her preference for cycles and thematic groupings and her predilection for redefining texts by placing them in new contexts, appears to have influenced not only his choice of texts but also his interpretation of them. Evidence suggests that Webern frequently encountered his chosen texts on more than one occasion, in more than one source, and, at times, in more than one version: his working literary source was consequently not his only source¹³⁾. As seen with *Die Freude*, this could have important ramifications for his semantic as well as his syntactic understanding of a text. Greater familiarity with Jone's poetic sources and Webern's chosen texts can only enhance our appreciation of his musical settings.

1) Jone published few of her written works, which include a vast number of poems, stage plays and aesthetic essays.

2) Josef Polnauer, ed., *Anton Webern: Briefe an Hildegard Jone und Josef Humplik*, Wien 1959, p. 22.

3) *Der Brenner* 13 (Herbst 1932) pp. 60–74. Webern's op. 23 texts, found on pp. 64–65, comprise the third and final section of *Viae inviae*, part I, "Heimgang des Lebens". – Jone's copy of this issue, inscribed by the journal's editor, Ludwig von Ficker, is currently in the Hildegard Jone Collection (PSS; item not inventoried). – The Webern Collection at the Paul Sacher Stiftung contains no copies of *Der Brenner*.

4) In addition to dedicating the songs to Jone, Webern provided the following title: *Drei Gesänge aus "Viae inviae" von Hildegard Jone*. Webern was inconsistent in identifying his literary sources in print, and an open acknowledgement such as this was not altogether common.

5) Polnauer, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–27. See, in particular, letters from July 29, 1933, January 6, 1934, and March 20, 1934.

6) While the op. 23 score reflects the ordering of texts in *Viae inviae*, Webern worked his way backwards through this material: the closing stanzas "Herr Jesus Mein" were composed first, followed by "Es stürzt aus Höhen". Webern then resumed work on a previous project, the instrumental movement that would become his *Konzert* op. 24, movement I. A short time later he interrupted this instrumental sketching to return once again to *Viae inviae*,

this time to set the stanzas which open the section as the song *Das dunkle Herz*. In the published score, *Das dunkle Herz* is song 1, *Es stürzt aus Höhen* is song 2, and *Herr Jesus Mein* is song 3. That Webern did, in fact, originally plan for *Es stürzt aus Höhen* and *Herr Jesus Mein* to stand alone is confirmed by a letter to Jone of 20 December 1933. Here he promises an Abschrift of the two songs as a belated Christmas gift: Polnauer, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

7) “. . . Daß Ihr Gedicht die ‘Freude’ heißt ist ja wunderbar . . .”; letter of March 3, 1933, in: Polnauer, *op. cit.*, p. 21. This letter dates from Webern’s sketches on *Herr Jesus Mein*, begun February 1, 1933. All of the sketches for op. 23 are contained in Webern’s third sketchbook, that which, in a foreign hand, is labelled “II”. Neither the title *Die Freude* nor *Viae inviae* are indicated on these sketchbook pages.

8) Hildegard Jone Collection (PSS). *Sator* is a retrospective anthology assembled in 1937. The title *Sator* is derived from a poem by the same name, currently on loose leaves in the back of the volume and dated “Mai 37”. There appears to be no direct connection between Jone’s title and Webern’s use of the Sator palindrome for his *Konzert* op. 24.

9) The text on these two pages is in black ink. Jone’s annotation at the bottom of the first page, “von Anton Webern vertont”, is a later pencil addition.

10) Hildegard Jone, *Selige Augen*, Wien 1938, pp. 63–65. Here Jone synthesized the two earlier versions, reverting to the original versification and reintroducing the title *Die Freude*, but preceding this poem, found on pp. 64–65, with the single stanza “Das dunkle Herz”. This stanza appears as a separate poem on p. 63 and is thus not technically part of *Die Freude*. Many other *Sator* poems were also included in this collection. – The galley proofs for *Selige Augen* are in the Hildegard Jone Collection. I am grateful to Melanie Kronick for providing me with a copy of the published volume.

11) Webern’s comments to Jone are found in a letter of March 20, 1934, in: Polnauer, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

12) See note 11.

13) Webern’s literary sources and their relationship to his Jone settings are explored in my dissertation, *From Poet’s Voice to Composer’s Muse: Text and Music in Webern’s Jone Settings*, *Opp. 23–31* (forthcoming).