

Natalia AFEYAN<sup>1</sup>**A Clown's Journey: 3 X 7****Abstract**

A clown travels through times and identities. A personage is handed over to different creators and audiences. A voice changes its purpose. This article observes the metamorphoses of Pierrot from Commedia dell'arte through the romantic *malheureux*, the decadent Dandy to the perpetual loser and peace-seeker of the turn of the century, following the works of three authors: Giraud, Hartleben, and Schönberg. When and where is this journey going to end? – We don't know.

**Keywords:** dodecaphony; lyrics; translation; Symbolism; Schönberg; melodrama; singing

**Резюме****Пътешествията на един клоун: 3 X 7**

Един клоун пътува през времена и идентичности. Един герой минава през различни автори и публика. Човешкият глас променя своето предназначение. Предложеният текст наблюдава метаморфозите на Пиеро от *Commedia dell'arte* през романтичния страдалец, декадентския денди до вечния несретник, търсещ покой, следвайки произведенията на трима автори: Жиро, Хартлебен и Шьонберг. Кога и къде ще завърши това пътуване? – Никой не знае.

**Ключови думи:** додекафония, стихове, превод, символизъм, Шьонберг, мелодрама, глас

When in 1884 the not-so-famous Belgian symbolist poet and literary critic Albert Giraud published the first part of his Pierrot trilogy, *Pierrot lunaire*, he believed he was destined for a remarkable place in the future. And so it happened indeed, but not at all as Giraud had imagined.

The undeniable fame belongs to *Pierrot lunaire* opus 21 by Arnold Schönberg, an Austrian and later American composer born in 1874 in Vienna and who died in Los Angeles in 1951. Schönberg did not place his Pierrot in any of the genre limitations known to his era, such as a song cycle, a monospiel, an opera or a chamber work. He - quite spontaneously - called it “three times seven

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Her repertoire includes over 20 roles, including Hänsel (Humperdink's *Hänsel und Gretel*), Carmen (Bizet), Amneris and Azucena (Verdi's *Aida* and *Il trovatore*), Mother (Stravinsky's *Mavra*)... Her concert repertoire is dominated by music of the twentieth century. She is the first performer in Bulgaria of Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, having accomplished over 30 performances within 35 years in many countries over the world. She has also premiered vocal-instrumental cycles by Stravinsky, Luciano Berio, Otorino Respighi...

She is highly regarded as an interpreter of Mahler, Richard Strauss and others, but has also performed many times in Verdi's *Requiem*, Mozart's *Requiem*, Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, Händel's *Messiah*, Bach's cantatas.

Since 1991 she has lived and worked in Melbourne, Australia. At Melbourne State Opera, she performed Azucena from *Il trovatore*, Amneris from *Aida*, Nicklaus / The Muse from Jacques Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*, Carmen by Bizet.

Since 1995 she has been a full-time lecturer at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne. The subjects she taught were solo singing and interpretation; vocal ensembles – opera and concert-oratorio; acting for singers. Her students have won awards at prestigious national and international competitions. She currently teaches at New Bulgarian University in Sofia.

melodramas". From this point on, the Three and the Seven, accompanied by the Thirteen<sup>2</sup>, became emblematic of the work.

Schönberg selected twenty-one poems from the German translation of the fifty *Pierrot lunaire: rondels bergamasques* by Albert Giraud. The translation itself was an extraordinary phenomenon; done by the German poet and playwright Otto Erich Hartleben, it became a rare example of a translation surpassing by far the original in terms of literature - as if the pale pastels of the French-speaking Belgian were the canvas of the accomplished German harlequinade. From the latter Schönberg carved a three-part work, in the first part of which Pierrot the Poet, besotted with the lunar drink, wanders in indomitable ecstasy of artistic rebellion; in the second bloody madness prevails, a surreal defeat of matter and psyche; the third part is a return, an illusory reconciliation with "once-upon-a-time."



Top left: Opera singer Natalia Afeyan performs *Pierrot lunaire*, op. 21, by Arnold Schönberg.

Middle: The posters of two concert performances (1984 and 2015) of the same work in which she participated.

<sup>2</sup> The author is referring to Schönberg's triskaidekaphobia, a maniacal fear of the number 13.

Pierrot's three-stage birth can be described as follows: Giraud gave the clown of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* a Parnassian look of the *fin-de-siècle* Poet; Hartleben transformed the verse into a live, poignant and terrifying experience in the German language. The basis of the verses in both is the allegorical figure of a modern mime, but scattered and blurred from staring at different corners of Pierrot's mental chaos; Schönberg recognized the connections between the scattered symbols and rearranged them into a clear progression from ecstasy to death and finally to reconciliation with memory. His language is musical; he led the work from symbolistic poetry to dramatic expressionism.

As a musician and a frequent performer of the role, it would be remiss not to mention the Voice – this powerful instrument of symbolism. Schönberg's voice is not classically led in the conventional concept. The author called his soloist "Sprecher", a reciter who must actually be a woman, with a flexible, fully schooled vocal technique and musicianship. At the same time, all that schooling must be turned upside down in obedience to the will of the composer/God, who imposed most unconventional methods in order to achieve this overflow of symbols into a shattering expression. The requirement is to speak on a strictly defined vocal line, with only individual tones being sung. The effect is of overexposed speech, similar to the recitation in ancient Greek tragedies, but under the strict control of the composer. The timbre changes - sometimes smoothly, sometimes with terrifying suddenness; the interaction with instrumentalists is extremely important. But all this could not have been achieved had the text not been so thoroughly expressive. In this respect, Hartleben's work is astonishing.

In the preface to the second part of his trilogy, Giraud speaks of the *Pierrot lunaire* as of his lifelong shadow, his alter ego, whose "moonstricken" verses were the author's poetic return to the ideals of Parnassus after a delusion of artistic rebellion. The fifty rondels in *Pierrot lunaire* consist of a small number of delicate, sophisticated pictures and a large number of gloomy, sinister scenes, which progress in a terrifying crescendo. And yet the surreal power of the images - an executioner walking around with a basket full of severed heads dripping blood; tuberculous moon that spits white blood; the sun that cuts its veins and sprays the sky in red; Pierrot, who pierces Cassander's skull with a drill, then stuffs it with tobacco and smokes it like a pipe – is washed up by an absolute monotony of the verse, built almost invariably in an octosyllabic rhythm and presented with a dry, distant tone – a notably bloodless interpretation of a bloody drama. It would be different if the discrepancy between tone and content was conceived as an ironic effect, but Giraud was not a master of irony. Hartleben worked on the translation for six years. He often mentioned in letters that he frequently transformed rather than translated the text. In many places he took only one or two motifs from the original and

used them as a basis, rewriting the poem. Indicative is the fact that he mentioned Giraud only as “ein lebender Belgier”, or “a living Belgian”.

Hartleben broke up the monotony with inserted exclamations, questions and phrases with different metrics, while fully preserving the rondo-form. In Giraud’s text, for example, it is, "he imagined he had a plaster stain," whereas Hartleben split the verse into short, telegraphic words: "Stop!" - he thinks - this is a plaster stain! He rubs and rubs, but..." Unlike Giraud, who avoided any possible stress, Hartleben often repeated key words or phrases. The German turned many of the annoying comparisons of the original into metaphors or allegorical incarnations: “the moon **is** a laundress” instead of “the moon is like a laundress”. In places, he completely replaced the images with his own, much more picturesque and powerful. He also changed the verb tenses from the past imperfect tense to the present, and this instantaneity breathed life into the strange, often perverted scenes.

Pierrot's character is typical of the late 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> century: a prototype of a self-tormenting, self-dramatizing artist, whose stylized mask symbolized and at the same time concealed his sensitivity. For four centuries, Pierrot evolved from the silly clown of the *commedia dell'arte* with the traditional baggy white suit and floury face into a romantic, cursed one, then into a Baudelaireian dandy, later a decadent, and finally, a sadistic yet tormented figure, both killing and being killed, shaken by self-imposed agony of thoughts and imagination. Pierrot of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is no longer naive; he is a careless, worn-out, unattached being, capable of grotesque cruelty and engulfed by his fear of death. So is the Moon Pierrot, but he is also an artist who gives up the crystal bottles of the past and immerses himself in the moonlight - the erstwhile home of a Poet. I will quote number three and number one of Schoenberg's cycle in my (literal) translation from German:

#### The Dandy

*A fantastic ray from the moon  
Illuminates crystal vials  
On the black, sacred dressing table  
Of the silent Dandy from Bergamo.*

*In a ringing bronze dish laughs the fountain  
With a metallic sound.  
A fantastic ray from the moon illuminates  
Crystal vials.*

*Pierrot, with a waxy face, stands pensive  
And wonders: how to make up today?  
He ignores the carmine and turquoise  
And paints his face in a sublime style:  
With a fantastic ray from the moon...*

And these are the opening phrases:

Moondrunk

*The wine that eyes can only drink,  
Flows nightly from the moon in waves.  
And the tide floods  
The quiet horizon.*

*Wishes - sweet and scary –  
Float through the torrent.  
The wine that eyes can only drink,  
Flows nightly from the moon in waves.*

*The poet, in ecstasy,  
Stricken by the strange drink,  
Lifts up his forehead to the sky  
And sucks and drains in delight  
The wine that eyes can only drink.*

The seventh melodrama, which closes the first movement of the cycle, is of a distinct character – not just because it is the mystic number Seven. Written for voice and flute only, it precedes numbers that roar in pain and bash the mind with bloody surrealistic pictures; it serves as purification before sinking humans into horror and hopelessness. *Der kranke Mond* – the Sick Moon – is a refined moment in which a dying moon sheds pale, torture-born blood upon a mindless human creature living its petty useless life. The agony remains, of course, unnoticed, and then comes the penalty. Yet, Schönberg demands that the *Sprecher* does not perform this movement tragically.

At nightfall - number eight, the first melodrama of the second movement - giant black butterflies come out, kill the sun and plunge the world into silence. Then the world prays to Pierrot to bring its' laughter back (*My Healer of Souls, My Lord of the Moonlight, Your Snowy Highness - give me my laughter back ...*), tombs with fiery rubies are being robbed, in the Red Mass Pierrot tears his sacred clothes apart, makes love to a skinny gallows, cuts heads with the Moon, which turns into a yataghan in number 13 - the only song with a long instrumental prelude leading to the finale of the second movement (because it is the thirteenth perhaps?). Throughout the cycle (as I mentioned earlier), the numbers 3, 7 and 13 are imposed. Schönberg's researchers believe that this symbolism was sought after by the composer, who was fascinated with numerology, let alone suffering from triskaidekaphobia. Although somewhat off the point, I will mention a few facts: the work has three authors, 21 parts (the sum of the numbers is 3), coincidentally or not, it happens to be opus 21, the year is 1912. There are seven performers - five instrumentalists playing seven instruments, a singer and a conductor; Pierrot's motive is of seven notes (one for each letter of his name). Each poem consists

of three stanzas four verses, again four verses and five verses - a total of 13 verses. By the way, Schönberg himself was born on the 13<sup>th</sup> and, ironically, died on a thirteenth – as if to prove that the number brings disaster. He even chose a date for the premiere, with the sum of the numbers making a number three - October 16, 1912. And the composition itself is a transition to the dodecaphonic technique created by Schönberg - twelve tones; the seven tones of the scale and its twelve semitones. But let's leave this topic to people with more knowledge about numbers.

Schönberg's Three Times Seven structure makes the general idea very clear: Part One is about human's ignorance of universal sacrifice, global love and martyrdom – that is Madonna, Mother of all sorrow, with her stretched out arms carrying the body of her son and offering it to mankind, to those who avert their eyes when she approaches them; that is the feverish waltz of a girl whose blood stains the lips; the weeping moon that mourns human indifference... So humanity deserves punishment. That happens in Part Two when havoc engulfs everyone and everything into total horror. Pierrot the Punisher is being punished too; the global hell sobers him up. Now he is longing for harmony even if he has to find it in the nothingness.

Pierrot's transformation takes place in Part Three. He senses the ring of a crystal sigh from the past; hearing it, he forgets his sorrow. The torrents of moonlight return and Pierrot, no longer crawling in fear, creates verses that strike those around him. He hands knitting hooks to Duenna, who avidly awaits him all night - in vain, he pierces Cassander's skull and uses it as a pipe to smoke his tobacco, he takes a giant grotesque bow in Serenade and plays dreamily with it on Cassander's bald head ... Finally convinced of his poetic gift, he manages to remove the plaster moon stain from his tailcoat and admit his fatigue. This is the return: *“a moonbeam is an oar, a lotus is a boat. Pierrot returns to Bergamo, to home. The green horizon shines quietly to the east. A moonbeam is an oar.”*

Already home, “desires - sweet and scary” turn into “mischiefs” that dissolve into a breeze. All that remains is the *“alter Duft der Märchenzeit”* - the old breath of fairy-tale times. For the first time, life rises sunbathed and beautiful, unaffected by the moonlight.

## Bibliography

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