
Die glückliche Hand [The Lucky Hand], op. 18



Title	Die glückliche Hand [The Lucky Hand], Drama with Music, op. 18
Time of origin	1910 – 1913
Premiere	14 October 1924, Wien, Volksoper
Duration	ca. 18 min.

Schönberg's "Drama with Music in one act" was first performed in the Vienna Volksoper on 14 October 1924, although it had been composed much earlier. Schönberg had already published the text, as his first completed and separately published literary work, in the "Merker" in 1911. The text was written after the completion of "Erwartung" ("Expectation") between September 1909 and June 1910. At the same time, Schönberg had also begun with the drafts for the music, but - quite unusual for a work of twenty minutes duration - it took until the end of 1913 before he reported in a letter to Franz Schreker that he had "laid a last happy hand" on his work. Egon Wellesz once characterized the composition as an exemplary work of musical expressionism, which he justified in particular with the adoption of "Strindberg's technique of short scenes as a drama form of the individual seeking to find his way through an alien world instead of relying on human relationships. And indeed, in the typification of the characters and in the static of the formal structure, influences can be traced above all from the Strindberg works "A Dream Play," but also from "The Father" or the first part of "To Damascus." The sequence of scenes is held together principally by the abstract figure of the protagonist, representing the brilliant artist incapable of communicating with the world around him, who resembles "Strindberg's Einsamer" ("the lonely one") (Theodor W. Adorno). In Schönberg's aphorism of 1909: "In him lies the motion of the world." Forestage a man lies with his face pressed down by a cat-like mythical creature that seems to have sunken its teeth into his neck. Through slight gaps in the rear curtain peer the faces of six men and six women. They speak very softly to him. Driven by the desire of unfulfillable dreams and the hope of happiness, the man attempts to face reality. The voices warn: "You, who have the divine in you, and covet the worldly! You cannot win." Out of growing circle of light in the middle of the stage the man lets himself be drawn into the bright sunlight of reality in the shape of a beautiful young woman, who offers him a goblet. As he drinks, the woman watches him with waning interest; indifferently she turns to an elegant but snobbish gentleman and leaves the stage on his arm. Although she returns, the man does not notice. He gazes at his hands while he speaks: "Now I possess you forever." In the following scene he is seen climbing out of a ravine, at the end of which two grottoes are visible. In one of them men are at work. He approaches an anvil, lays a piece of gold upon it. He splits the anvil with a hammer blow. When he pulls the gold piece out of the cleft in which it has fallen, it has become a richly set diadem. "This is the way to make jewels" he tells the workers, who begin to threaten him. The workshop disappears,

and in the second grotto the woman appears, half-naked. The snobbish gentleman throws the missing piece of clothing to the man with calm, cold indifference. The man desperately tries to approach the woman. As he gets close to her on a rock, it metamorphoses into a monstrous sneering mask. The woman pushes the rock, it topples over and hurtles down upon the man, changing into the fantastic animal seen at the beginning, with its teeth sunk into his neck. As in the beginning, the voices whisper to the man on the ground: "Did you have to live again what you have so often lived? And still you seek! – And torment yourself! – And are without rest."

Schönberg's one-act drama, defined by a "dream logic" (Kurt Blaukopf), reveals an interface between the metaphysics of art of the 19th century and the ideas of the avant-garde modern. On the one hand, the highly meaningful symbolical language seems to be closely connected with the romantic idea of the artist, who is compelled to reflect upon his ego, renouncing love and society for the sake of his art. He only finds comfort in what he creates through his experience with the blessed, "lucky" hand. On the other hand, the composer works musically with the advanced Sprechstimme technique used in "Pierrot lunaire"; pitch and rhythm are exactly notated, but the expression must be a combination of song and speech. Orchestral polyphony and musical-dramatic technique are used in a similarly radical way as in "Erwartung." At the same time, Schönberg returns to the monodrama and to more solid forms as well as a clear architecture of repetition.

At the time of composing "Erwartung" and "Die glückliche Hand," Schönberg – as a vehicle of his synesthetic concept of expression – was intensely investigating the possibilities of color psychology, and here he found similarities with the thoughts of Wassily Kandinsky. It is therefore hardly surprising that his "Drama with Music" attempts to treat gestures, colors and light "as tones are treated, playing with the appearances of colors and forms". Later, the composer pointed out resemblances between "Die glückliche Hand" and Kandinsky in the play "Der gelbe Klang" ("The yellow sound"), which appeared in the "Blauer Reiter" almanac. Certain similarities can also be found between Kandinsky's "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" and Schönberg's sketches for "Die glückliche Hand." Central to Kandinsky's reflections is the idea of an "inner sound" within the color, causing "spiritual vibrations," and thus being able to exercise "a direct influence on the spirit." "A spiritual event in the plot expresses itself not only with gestures, movements and music" but also by means of "colors and light," with which "music is made," as Schönberg remarked in 1928. His artistic idea fulfilled itself in the "structural equality" (Reinhard Brinkmann) of all levels of the drama necessary to transmit an overall form – scenically, optically, musically and textually.

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