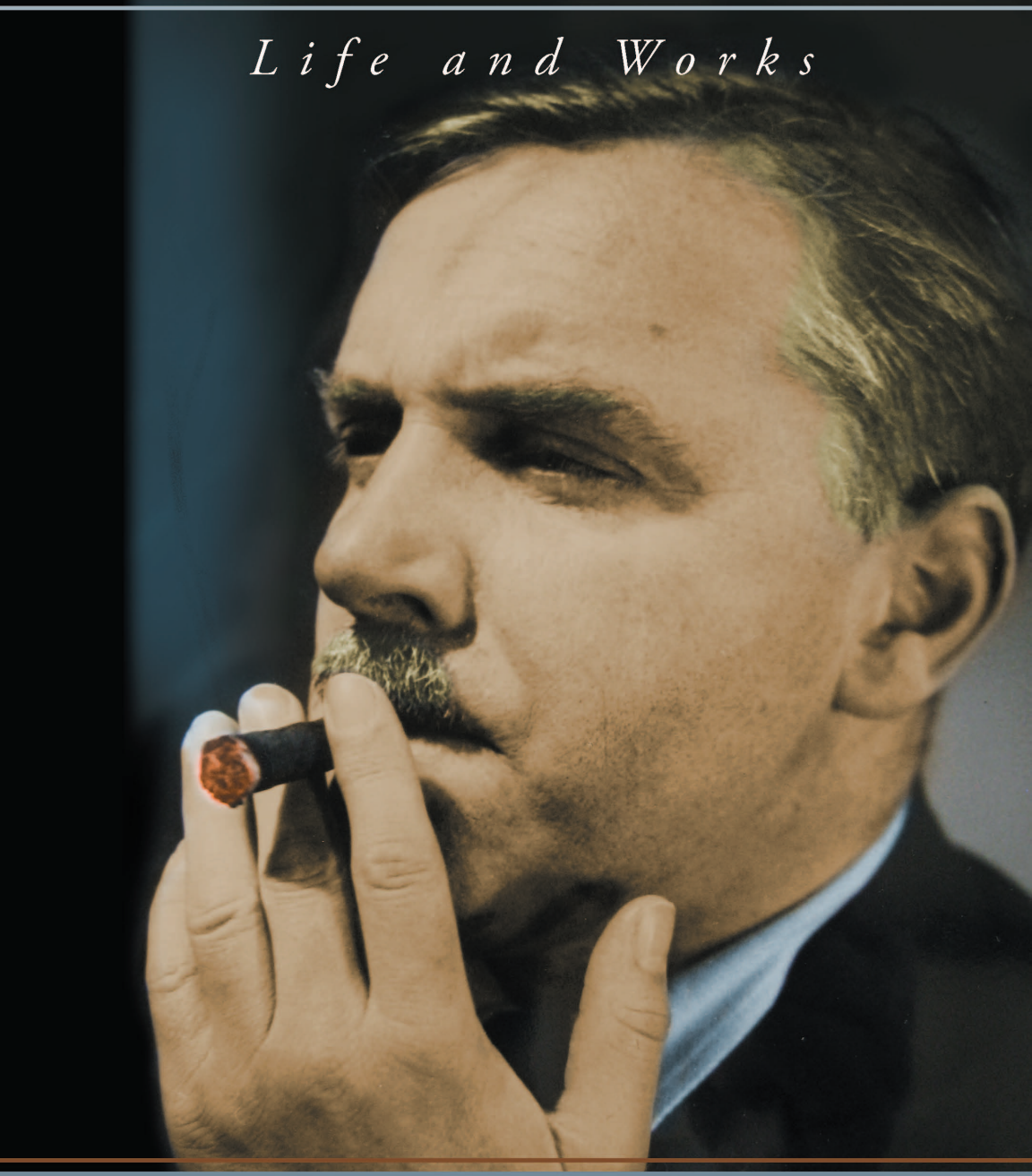
Othmar Schoeck

Life and Works



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Othmar Schoeck

Life and Works

Chris Walton

University of Rochester Press

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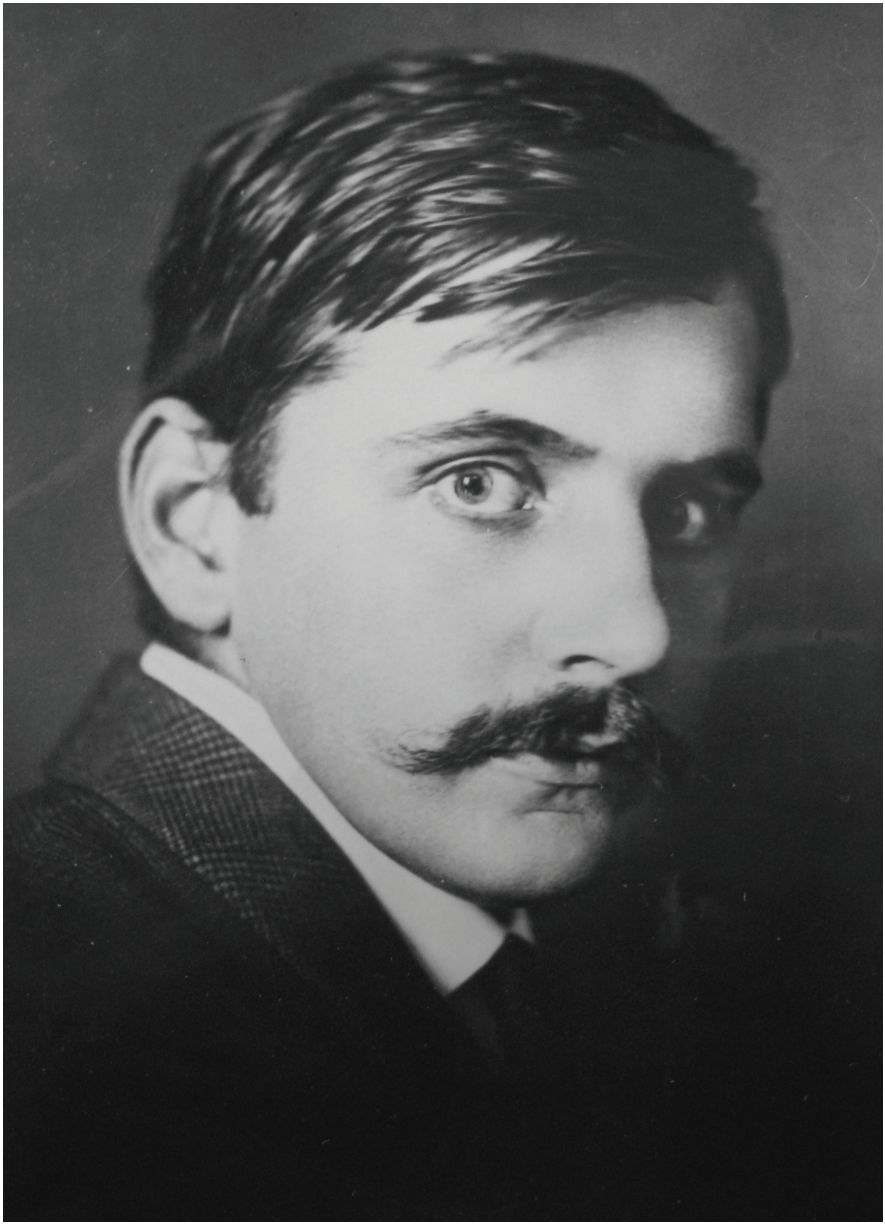
Dedicated to Wolfgang, Salome, Luzia,
Konrad, Judith, Isabel, and Alvaro Schoeck,
and to the memory of Elisabeth
Schoeck-Grüebler and Georg Schoeck



Othmar Schoeck, ca. 1909. Courtesy of Zentralbibliothek Zürich.

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Acknowledgments

The origins of this book lie in the current copyright legislation. In 1988 I completed a biography of Othmar Schoeck as my doctoral dissertation at Oxford University. The contract for its publication was signed with Atlantis Musikbuch-Verlag shortly before that company was sold by its owner, Daniel Bodmer. The next owner in turn sold Atlantis on within a matter of months. After a somewhat meandering path through various hands, the company was bought by Schott of Mainz, who was thereby under a contractual obligation to translate my book into German and publish it. The translation was made by Ken Bartlett, and the book appeared seven years after its completion. The publication process was as pleasant as any first-time author could have wished, and I retain happy memories of my work with both Ken and the excellent personnel at Schott's. Several years later, I decided to publish the original English version. However, my contract with Atlantis/Schott meant that a large percentage of royalties from any other edition of the book would by necessity go to the original publisher. There is nothing in the least odd about this. But given that the market for a book on Othmar Schoeck is not vast, the percentage in question was enough to deter any English or American publisher from taking on the project.

As the fiftieth anniversary of Schoeck's death approached in 2007, and in view of the fact that there was still no biography in English of the composer, I decided to revisit the idea of publishing my original book. The matter of the royalties remained, however. Furthermore, I had in the intervening two decades published several articles and a further book on the composer (all in German). Since my job as Head of the Music Division at the Zentralbibliothek Zürich had made me responsible for the composer's archives for just over a decade, I had in addition uncovered new source material that needed to be incorporated into any biography. There were also several sources that I felt deserved an interpretation more nuanced than in my earlier book. In some cases the nuances were such that can perhaps only arise from an author's getting older. Certain things in the life of another that appear straightforward when one is twenty-four years old and single can look quite different when one is forty-four, married, and a father three times over, with two of the three on the cusp of puberty. In order to circumvent the copyright problem and to do justice both to the new source material and to my new interpretation of the old, I decided to write a new book. There are naturally many parallels between the two "lives," for the main characters in the narrative are the same in each case, and I have not refrained from quoting certain important source documents here just because I did so before.

But the first book had been restricted to the composer's life, with relatively little discussion of the music itself—that being the brief of my doctorate at the time. I wanted in the present case to allocate ample space to the music too. Both life and music are dealt with chronologically here, for the simple reason that it seems the most obvious decision. Chronology is a powerful thing. It reflects how we in general perceive our own lives, and it is perhaps the most useful anchor when considering the lives of others. So a straightforward "life and works," chronology and all, is what this is. The result is a book far longer than the first, though it took less than a third of the time to write. Getting older makes some things easier, too.

I append below a list of those individuals and institutions who have aided me in my Schoeck researches over the years. It is chastening for me to read through it, as many have died since the first book was written, though in my mind's eye and ear they and their voices remain as vividly real as when I met and spoke with them. Just as I completed the first draft I learnt of the death of Elisabeth Schoeck-Grüebler, the wife of the composer's nephew (and herself related to Schoeck through the Fassbind family); five weeks later her husband Georg also passed away. Elisabeth was—though to write about her and Georg in the past tense is both jarring and painful—one of the few historians to engage objectively with the life and music of Othmar Schoeck, and much in the present book is indebted to her work. She was also a witness at my wedding, and she became a much-loved godmother of our first daughter, who bears her name; Elisabeth's eldest daughter Salome in turn became godmother to our son, and he bears the names of her three brothers as his own. Georg Schoeck was a noted classical scholar and author with a range of intellectual interests as wide as those of his wife, and his reminiscences of his uncle are among the most vivid on record. The present book—as was intended from the start—is dedicated to Elisabeth, Georg, and their children, as a meager token of gratitude for their support and encouragement over many years.

Several friends and colleagues have in the course of my work given of their time, energy, and ideas to such an extent that merely to name them in a list would be unkind—which is not, of course, to imply that those listed below were in any wise of lesser importance to my project. If it were not for Robin Holloway's Cambridge lecture series of 1983 on twentieth-century music, I would not have become interested in Schoeck in the first place. And I particularly wish to express my gratitude to Martin Germann, Harry Joelson-Strohbach, Christoph Keller, Jürg Stenzl, and above all to my doctoral supervisors, John Warrack and the late Derrick Puffett, for my many conversations with them proved more stimulating to my work than they could possibly know. Assistance with typesetting the music examples was kindly provided by my student Fritz von Geyso. Permission to print those music examples was generously given by Universal Edition, Breitkopf & Härtel, Bärenreiter, and Hug Verlage.

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The prime object of my gratitude, as always, is my family: my wife Riëtte and our children Elisabeth Irmgard Elena, Elza Lotte Glenys and Alvaro Wolfgang Konrad.

Abbreviations

CWZ	Chris Walton. *Othmar Schoeck und seine Zeitgenossen*. Winterthur: Amadeus, 2002.
DPS	Derrick Puffett. *The Song Cycles of Othmar Schoeck*. Bern: Peter Lang, 1982.
HCD	Hans Corrodi. Diary (manuscript; held by the Zentralbibliothek Zürich).
ISCM	International Society for Contemporary Music
KTV	Kantonsschulturnverein (cantonal school gymnastics association)
PSR	Peter Sulzer. *Zehn Komponisten um Werner Reinhart*. Vols. 1–3. Zurich: Atlantis Musikbuch-Verlag, 1979, 1980, and 1983.
SMZ	*Schweizerische Musikzeitung*. Zurich: Hug.
woo	without opus [no.] (German: WoO. Werk ohne Opuszahl)
WVG	Werner Vogel. *Othmar Schoeck im Gespräch*. Zurich: Atlantis, 1965.
WVZ	Werner Vogel. *Othmar Schoeck: Leben und Schaffen im Spiegel von Selbstzeugnissen und Zeitgenossenberichten*. Zurich: Atlantis Musikbuch-Verlag, 1976.

NB: almost all the extant correspondence to Schoeck, and most letters from Schoeck to others, are today held by the Zentralbibliothek Zürich. Where such correspondence is mentioned or quoted in the text without further reference, then the reader may assume that it is held by the Zentralbibliothek Zürich.

All letters to Hermann Burte mentioned here, and copies of correspondence from Burte to Werner Reinhart, are held by the Burte archives in Maulburg in Germany.

Note on orthography: The German “sz” (“ß”) is printed throughout as “ss.”

Introduction

Schoeck and the Swiss

Is there a topography of music? Some innate correlation between habitat and harmony, sound and space? Or is it mere conditioning that conjures up in our mind's eye the glories of Prague at the close of Smetana's *Vltava,* or swans circling above the endless Finlandian forests of Sibelius's Fifth Symphony? Is it wishful thinking that the music of Elgar seems to mirror the very contours of the Malvern Hills, while the ballets of Copland somehow summon up visions of the vast plains of the American West, even to those who have never seen them? And why do certain works by Grieg send us pining for the fjords? Of course, place is often depicted most vividly of all by those who do not belong there, but whose concern is to construct an exoticized Other. Spain seems to lie before us far more clearly in the Iberian fantasies of the French, China in the *chinoiserie* of Puccini, and Antarctica in the Seventh Symphony of Vaughan Williams than in anything any Spaniard, Chinese, or musicking penguin might contrive.

Of all the exotic locations popularized by travelers and travel writers of Europe since the heyday of the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century, one close to home proved to possess an appeal as powerful as it was lasting. Switzerland—to be precise, the sublime Switzerland of the Alps with its spectacular sunsets, lakes, and waterfalls—exerted an immense influence on the Western psyche. Byron, Shelley, Mark Twain, and Turner: the Anglo-Saxons in particular made of Switzerland an exotic, "imaginary" location, extolling both its natural virtues and the charmingly tenacious independence of its populace. But apart from those popularizing painters and printmakers who churned out engravings by the kitschy thousand of those Alpine sunsets, lakes, and waterfalls, Switzerland impinged upon the world of art in a manner at once more circumlocutory and yet far more immediate, namely as the point of origin for some of the most significant moments in Western culture. For without Switzerland, arguably, there would be no *Frankenstein,* no *Woyzeck,* no *Ring of the Nibelung,* no *Tristan und Isolde,* no *Rite of Spring,* no *Soldier's Tale,* no *Ulysses,* no *Zauberberg,* no Dada *entier.* Indeed, one could argue that modernism itself was born on the Gablerstrasse in the Zurich suburb of Enge in 1857, when Richard Wagner's stifled sexual urge found expression in the yearning prelude to *Tristan.* And what was perhaps the world's grandest modernist project of all—as grand in scope as in its failure—was also begun from there: the Soviet Union, brainchild of

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, *aka* Lenin, who moved with ease from the Spiegelgasse to the Kremlin. His apartment in Zurich, as it happens, had been next door to the one in which a failed Hessian revolutionary of the previous century had lived and died: Georg Büchner, the dramatist of Danton and Woyzeck, buried today on the Zürichberg near the topmost stop of the nearby cog railway.

That Switzerland should have been home to the cutting edge of art might at first seem odd; but as much as it looks to us to be at the center of the map of Europe, it has, in a real sense, long been situated at its "borders." This is politically a fact today, on account of its self-imposed exclusion from the European Union, though this is merely the most obvious, contemporary signifier of a sense of "difference" that is much older. Switzerland has long remained a place of exile in the eyes of its neighbors, either as an exotic other for moneyed tourists, as a magic mountain for the tubercular, or as a temporary political elsewhere for foreign liberals and socialists unwanted or unsafe at home. All those prints, panoramas, postcards, and engravings were popular precisely because they signified a place, however geographically near, that was in fact far, far from one's own.

Musical depictions of Switzerland itself are more difficult to come by than the pictorial—perhaps not least because one cannot buy a symphony, sign it, stick a stamp on it, and send it home as proof of place—and they are usually unconvincing unless they include an alphorn, real or *faux* (such as the cor anglais in Rossini's *William Tell Overture*). There has been no Bartók or Kodály to take indigenous musical expression and merge it with the art and artistry of the West; there are no piano sonatas based on alphorn scales, no syncretic yodeling symphonies. Some have argued for the Swiss aura of those idyllic works of Brahms that were conceived by the Lake of Thun; but that too is a Swissness of the picture-postcard cliché, regardless of the actual, undeniable aesthetic worth of the music itself. The finest depictions of the Swiss landscape in music are perhaps to be found precisely where they have not generally been sought: in Wagner's *Ring*, where the composer's extensive Alpine wanderings through mountain passes, over glaciers, and alongside woodland torrents found a corollary in sound in the opening and close of the *Rheingold* with its swirling eddies and rainbow bridges in misty heights, and in the first act of the *Walküre* with its winter storms and balmy, moonlit nights.

In the reception history of the music of Arthur Honegger and Frank Martin, the two most widely known names in Swiss music, a hunt for traits specifically Swiss has never been of import, perhaps because they are seen both by their countrymen and by commentators abroad as essentially cosmopolitan in spirit. Indeed, Honegger is often, but mistakenly, regarded as having been French, though he was in fact a German Swiss who studied at the Conservatory of Zurich. But his home remained Paris for most of his life, and as a member of *Les Six* he was situated, if briefly, at the forefront of the musical avant-garde in the inter-War years. Frank Martin, who emigrated to Holland after World War II, was one of Switzerland's first composers to adopt the twelve-tone method (albeit in

a highly personal, haphazard fashion), and this in itself served to stamp him as "international."

It is in the music of their slightly older contemporary, Othmar Schoeck (1886–1957), that the (German) Swiss themselves have most often, and most obviously, sought to find trace elements of a "national character" in music.[1] Regarded by many today as perhaps the finest talent of that twentieth-century Swiss triumvirate, Schoeck remained obstinately homebound, whereas Honegger and Martin gladly sojourned on foreign shores. Born in Brunnen by the banks of Lake Lucerne, Schoeck moved to Zurich in his early teens to attend school. With the exception of a year's study spent in Leipzig and extended holidays back in the family home, he never lived anywhere else. It was also in Zurich that he died, just a few months after his seventieth birthday. His music is almost all vocal, which has not aided its export: some four hundred songs and eight operas stand alongside half a dozen orchestral scores, a handful of chamber works, and a number of small, occasional pieces for piano, most of them weak. He was decidedly anti-modernist in his literary tastes, preferring by far to set the early German Romantic poets and later gravitating toward the Swiss Romantics Gottfried Keller and Conrad Ferdinand Meyer. But the hunt for his Swissness was, and is, if anything an attempt to deny the reality that he was in his music and biography as far removed as possible from the picture that the Swiss like to have of themselves, and which is largely shared by the rest of the world.

What, then, is "Swiss"? This is not so easy to answer, for while Switzerland as a unified, modern state is just a century and a half old, its much older political stability, neutral status, and freedom from outside oppression largely spared it from the war and strife that helped to cement those notions of nationalism current since the late eighteenth century in France, Germany, or the Slavic states. For the Swiss themselves, as for outsiders, "Swissness" is most commonly denoted by punctuality, cleanliness, a staunchly Protestant work ethic, a clockmaker's devotion to detail, fidelity to accepted, moderate moral and political beliefs, and carefulness with money. All these clichés are as unremarkably banal as they are, in fact, remarkably accurate. And Schoeck? Notoriously unpunctual and disorderly, with holes in his socks, his manuscripts strewn on the floor and trodden underfoot, he spent his money as it came in, borrowed it when it didn't, then didn't pay it back, took barely a thought of the morrow, never got up before midday unless he had to, never went to bed until the early hours unless he had to, frequently drank to excess, and was possessed of a voracious (hetero)sexual appetite, with one bed-partner at a time not always enough: in short, a Romantic Bohemian such as one might expect to find in the semi-mythical garrets of Montmartre, not on the serenely civilized Zeltweg in central Zurich. Self-consciously Bohemian, to be sure, with an obvious need to live against the grain and to be observed doing so, but a Bohemian nevertheless. This is not to say that the urge to subvert the Swiss "virtues" listed above has not been just as compulsive for others, if in different ways. It is surely, in part, the origin of those extremities

in art already mentioned. As I can confirm from personal experience, a couple of years spent frequenting sedate coffee houses with spotless bathroom facilities can make anyone fantasize about booking a railway ticket to world revolution via the Finland Station. But in Schoeck, subversion and submission, resistance and acceptance play off each other in a myriad of ways that are responsible for much of the impact of his music. The extant recordings of his piano playing—as accompanist to his own songs and those of others—display in indubitable terms the extrovert Bohemian. The flexibility of tempo and immediacy of expression make the music sound as though it is being improvised before our very ears. And yet this merely demonstrates the immense control that the composer-as-performer was able to exercise over his material, a control so masterly that he was even able to conceal its existence. Regrettably, only one brief recording of Schoeck's conducting survives, though it supports the claims of those who insist that his art of interpretation was the same whether he sat at a piano or stood on the podium. His scores themselves, on the other hand—in their calligraphy probably as beautiful as those of any composer one could choose—display the archetypal Swiss clockmaker's ethos, being meticulously crafted for fullness of effect with economy of means. The late Derrick Puffett once remarked to me of his surprise upon at last procuring the score of a work by Schoeck that he had known for several years from a recording only. Certain passages with a particularly rich orchestral sound, he said, turned out to comprise just a few staves of music, exquisitely scored. The spacings, textures, and instrumental colors and combinations betray both the keenness of Schoeck's ear and the fact that, as the composer once admitted in an unguarded moment, this ostentatiously intuitive composer had in fact spent many hours studying in detail the orchestrations of Ravel, Stravinsky, and Strauss. Even in those of his late works where the inspiration is no longer at white heat, Schoeck's instrumentation still exudes a luminescence of which an Alban Berg would have been proud.

Schoeck has in Swiss writing also been celebrated as a typical example of so-called "helvetische Stilverspätung," or "Helvetic stylistic belatedness," namely that characteristic of much Swiss art by which trends from abroad do not properly impinge until at least a decade later than elsewhere.[2] There is assuredly an element of truth in this. Schoeck's best-known opera, *Penthesilea,* written 1923–25, is an example of bloodthirsty expressionism such as one found fifteen or twenty years earlier in the work of Strauss and Schoenberg. But if Schoeck came late to the modern, he caught up very quickly. There are passages in *Penthesilea* that one can explain as Schoeck's reaction to learning of Schoenberg's twelve-tone method, which had been formulated just a few months previously. But more than this: from 1923 to 1928 Schoeck underwent a stylistic evolution as astonishingly swift as it was extreme, covering in the space of some five years an aesthetic territory that took other composers decades to conquer. From a late-Romanticism rooted in Brahms and Wolf he moved through a vortex of expressionism and near-atonality to emerge in 1928, writing a ragtime-inflected

sonata for bass clarinet as neoclassical as anything to be found in the worklists of his better-known contemporaries, and an equally neoclassical, ostentatiously tonal *Zeitoper* about a marital squabble that is in its topic akin to Strauss's *Intermezzo* and Schoenberg's *Von heute auf morgen*. In the mid- to late 1920s Schoeck's music was hardly "behind the times," and we can from today's perspective even interpret his retreat thereafter (though the noun is admittedly loaded) into a superficially more conservative position, as in the case of the post-*Elektra* Strauss, as merely one of the many strands of a nascent post-modern aesthetic.

If there is, however, a single trait that one can observe throughout the whole of Schoeck's oeuvre, then it is a sense of impermanence, even of loss. Be it the loss of a supposedly paradisiacal, innocent childhood, the tautological loss of love (real, imagined, or fearfully anticipated), or even, at the close, the loss brought about by waning creativity—the loss, as it were, of the ability to express loss itself—all this imbues Schoeck's music with a sense of fissure, of fracture, and with it a striking modernity, even when the musical building blocks themselves are superficially unassuming or just downright conservative. There is, again, nothing very Swiss about all of this, nothing local or parochial. The closer one looks at Schoeck's music, the less it surprises that in his day it occasioned admiration from a wide spectrum of leading musicians and literary figures, from Alban Berg, Ferruccio Busoni, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Arthur Honegger, and Ernst Krenek to James Joyce, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Hesse.

And yet, regardless of how we might wish to position Schoeck away from isolated Alpine heights and into the musical mainstream of the twentieth century, we must be frank: his music will probably never attain the broad appeal of a Honegger, if only because it is so resolutely situated in the world of (German) song, making no fewer demands on the audience than does, say, the vocal music of Hugo Wolf. But the past twenty years have nevertheless seen a marked increase in the frequency of recordings and performances: his opera *Penthesilea* has enjoyed a dozen different productions since the celebrations surrounding the centenary of his birth in 1986 (the most recent being the near-simultaneous productions in Basel and Dresden in early 2008), while almost all his music is now available on CD. These recordings feature many first-rate performances from singers and ensembles both home-grown-Swiss and international, including such names as Ian Bostridge, Lynne Dawson, and the English Chamber Orchestra. The only major works that have not been released on CD in their entirety are, regrettably, his two most stage-worthy operas, *Don Ranudo* and *Vom Fischer un syner Fru*.

The single most important man in the reception history of Schoeck's music was Hans Corrodi (1889–1972), who became friendly with the composer in 1912. They were for a while close enough for them to holiday together, and Schoeck also confided highly personal matters to him in these early years—until, that is, he realized that Corrodi was planning to write his biography. At this point Schoeck ceased their intimacy, and the distance between them became ever greater as time went on. Corrodi's biography of the composer appeared

first in 1931, the second edition in time for Schoeck's fiftieth birthday in 1936, while the third, and last, edition came out in 1956, at the time of the composer's seventieth birthday. What Schoeck did not know was that Corrodi had been keeping a detailed diary from shortly after their first acquaintance, of which he alone formed the the subject matter. It was continued after Schoeck's death, to record the further reception history of the man and his music. Corrodi had it typed, copied, bound, and locked away in two Swiss libraries before he died, by which time it numbered some two thousand densely typed pages. He also used its contents as the basis for an expanded, unpublished biography, of which he made a second, condensed, version. He placed both in the Swiss National Library, under instructions that they were not to be published in full until after the death of Schoeck's wife and daughter. A copy of the shortened version has recently become available to scholars, though it contains nothing of substance that is not to be found in the (far more comprehensive) diaries. This confirms a statement by Corrodi's widow that these were in fact the principal source for the unpublished biography as a whole.[3]

Corrodi adored Schoeck's music and idolized the man. He was an equally devoted Wagnerian, and he despised the modernists, regarding Schoeck's music as the final peak of the Western tradition of which Wagner formed for him the highest summit; his devotion to Wagner also expressed itself in a pronounced anti-Semitism. Corrodi was by trade a German teacher, and he spent his working life at the Teachers' Training College in Küsnacht, just down the eastern shore of Lake Zurich, a few kilometers from the city itself. Corrodi published dozens of articles, almost all of them about Schoeck and his music; several dozen more remained unpublished. Schoeck's death did not stop Corrodi from writing about him, and he became one of the leading lights in the Schoeck Society that was formed just months after the composer's death.

The obsessive nature of Corrodi's passion cannot be denied, and it merits some attention here, not least because that obsession was also tolerated by Schoeck himself. Corrodi's widow even admitted to me that her husband—who was several years her elder—had made it clear before their marriage that she would always come second in his life, behind Schoeck. To what extent his partisanship for the composer had a homoerotic aspect is difficult to say. Corrodi's diary does record how on one occasion he found out that he was suspected of being homosexual. What is telling about his reaction is not that he found it absurd (which he did), but the fact that he felt no need to spend more than a few words denying it, which of itself suggests that there was little or no truth in it. It is likely in any case that he had been confused with his namesake Eduard Korrodi, the leading Zurich literary critic of the time, who was indeed gay.[4] No; much as we might today mock the romanticized male bondings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that we all know from the literature of the day, and much as we might write them off as a product of sublimated sexual desires (sublimated since "forbidden"), this is in some cases probably a

matter of our imposing our own (pseudo-) psychoanalytical fads on a quite different era. For his day Schoeck was himself unusually liberal in sexual matters. When Corrodi once raised the topic of Oscar Wilde, Schoeck's reaction proves that he found nothing odd or "immoral" about homosexuality—it was "natural," he said, adding with characteristic bluntness that "every dog has it in him"[5]—though such remarks are also infrequent enough to suggest in turn that he had no particular interest in it. So the possibility of deconstructing him and his first biographer as homophobic, closet gays recedes rapidly from view. Wittgenstein once remarked caustically about Freud's fondness for spotting phallic symbols in dreams: sometimes, he said, a top hat is just a top hat, and nothing more.[6] Similarly, the few close male friendships that Schoeck enjoyed cannot really be construed as anything but just that: neither more nor less "sexual" in nature than the same-sex friendships in which the rest of humanity daily participates.

Corrodi stares at us from the available (German/Swiss) literature in a single stock photograph taken in his late middle age (see fig. I.1): balding, bespectacled, terribly stern, the archetypal Germanic schoolmaster, and possessed of a disturbing, obsessive stare that somehow correlates with the racist anti-Semite who emerges from the pages of many of his writings. But while Corrodi has offered many a commentator a suitable target for demonization, there was enough to the man to warrant a more subtle investigation of him. He had a play performed at the Zurich City Theater in the mid-1920s; not particularly successful, to be sure, but judged good enough to be performed on its own merits. He was a keen amateur photographer and a not ungifted amateur painter. And to judge from numerous reports of former students, he was a first-class teacher. His wife Margrit was intellectually at least his equal and under the pseudonym "Margo Markwalder" enjoyed a highly successful career as a novelist in the 1950s and 1960s. Their elder son had a phenomenal memory and was by all accounts a linguistic genius (the word is used with caution, though justified by the reports of those who knew him, such as Daniel Bodmer of Atlantis Verlag); he died early, not long after his father. Their other son won the coveted "Knabenschiessen" competition when a teenager—the traditional annual shooting match for the youth of all Zurich, the winning of which brings fame and glory of a kind any adolescent male would desire. The Corrodis were thus no average family, and whatever Hans's failings as a biographer, he is to be taken seriously. Unfortunately for the composer, Corrodi's long-time dominance of the field of Schoeck studies meant that the biographer's aesthetic became overlaid upon the composer's own. In his old age, Schoeck made many remarks that betray an anti-modernist stance almost identical to Corrodi's; but the latter in his writings conveniently omitted to mention that Schoeck had in his younger years espoused quite different views altogether, showing a keen interest in the latest music of Berg, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Krenek, and their contemporaries. The obvious contradiction inherent in a composer's producing near-atonal works of music (as Schoeck did in the mid-1920s) while supposedly despising any hint

Figure I.1. Hans Corrodi in 1955.

of modernity went unquestioned for many years after Corrodi's death—indeed, until his diaries became available to researchers. As we shall see in due course, Corrodi's impact extended beyond Schoeck alone, for it seems likely that he also exerted a considerable influence on the figure of Zeitblom in Thomas Mann's novel *Doktor Faustus*.

Corrodi was not without his "competitors" (as he saw it). His younger contemporary Willi Schuh penned many articles on aspects of the composer's work, some of which were later gathered together in book form. Most of these, however, were originally reviews of first performances and eschewed anything biographical. Schuh was the most gifted of the early Schoeck commentators, but his proximity to the composer, both personal and geographical (they lived just a few streets apart), led him to avoid issues that could have muddied the waters of their friendship. It is a pity: Schuh would have been ideally placed to write the biography that could have put Schoeck studies on a firm foundation decades ago, but he chose not to. Corrodi's real successor was Werner Vogel, who in 1949 wrote the first-ever doctoral dissertation on Schoeck's music and in 1956 published a thematic catalogue of his works that remains valuable to this day. Now deceased, Vogel worked as a music teacher in Zurich, and he was by all accounts a fine pianist. He got to know Schoeck in the early 1940s when he began rehearsing with the composer's wife, Hilde, who was a soprano. Vogel's visits soon centered on the composer instead, and he began—in secret—to keep a diary of everything that Schoeck said and did. This was, *nota bene,* without knowing that Corrodi had already been doing the exact same thing for more than thirty years. Vogel published extensive excerpts from these diaries almost a decade after Schoeck's death.[7] They are fascinating, though since they record the views of the composer in his last few years, when he felt himself forgotten by the world, they record a man prone to bitterness and generally anti-modernist in his aesthetic ("I've never written a *single* measure of atonal music!" Schoeck insisted vehemently and erroneously a few months before his death).[8] This, however, when compared with earlier accounts, is but a small part of the story. It was only the "final chapter" of a life, though since it tallied with Corrodi's portrayal of the whole man, the unsuspecting reader had little choice but to read backwards, as it were, to construct a picture of a younger but equally anti-modernist Schoeck that was consistent with the man described by his diarists.

Vogel's documentary volume of 1976: *Othmar Schoeck: Leben und Schaffen im Spiegel von Selbstzeugnissen und Zeitgenossenberichten* ("Othmar Schoeck: Life and Work Reflected in His Own Words and Reports of His Contemporaries"), a kind of biography *manqué,* was, like Corrodi's book, a summation of its author's work and research of many years. In 1986, the year of the Schoeck centenary, Vogel published an edition of Schoeck's letters to his parents from his year of study in Leipzig (1907–8). That same year also saw the publication of a slim volume on Schoeck's childhood and youth by the composer's own nephew Georg (*Die Welt des jungen Othmar Schoeck*), which included not just fascinating family testimonies

but a host of reproductions of artworks by Schoeck, his father, and his brothers. Also among the centenary celebrations was the first-ever Schoeck conference, held in Bern, of which the papers were published two years later. In 1991, Georg Schoeck's wife Elisabeth published *Post nach Brunnen,* an edition of letters from Schoeck to his parents subsequent to those already published by Vogel. Both Georg and Elisabeth published several other valuable articles on the composer in the ensuing years.

While the bibliography on him is not insubstantial, Schoeck's music has not yet prompted what one might term sustained musicological enquiry. Derrick Puffett's brilliant doctoral study of the song cycles from 1976 (long since remaindered) is to date the only book in English on the composer or his work, and it is by far the best book on the music in any tongue.[9] English contributions to Schoeck studies otherwise comprise a couple of fascinating articles from the pen of Robin Holloway and a number of articles and reviews by Peter Palmer. Since Vogel there have been a few other doctoral and undergraduate theses on Schoeck's music, though with the exception of Puffett none has had any lasting impact on Schoeck studies. There is one each on the song cycles by Charles Cattin (1973)[10] and Stefanie Tiltmann-Fuchs (1975);[11] Canisius Braun's fascinating thesis on Schoeck's conducting career with the St. Gallen Symphony Orchestra (1989) has sadly remained unpublished and, it seems, almost completely unnoticed.[12] Then there is a thesis by Michael Baumgartner on *Massimilla Doni,* written in tandem with his editing of that opera;[13] the same author's doctoral thesis on female statues in opera—"Exilierte Göttinnen: Die Darstellung der weiblichen Statue in Othmar Schoecks *Venus,* Kurt Weills *One Touch of Venus* und Thea Musgraves *The Voice of Ariadne*" (2005) was still unavailable at the time of writing. Despite these several theses, the most significant contributions of the past thirty years in the German-speaking world, besides those of Georg and Elisabeth Schoeck, are probably the few articles by Jürg Stenzl and, most recently, by Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen (for full details of all these titles, see the bibliography at the end of this book).

There does exist, however, one large-scale musicological project concerned with Schoeck, namely the *Sämtliche Werke* (Complete Works) set up at Zurich University under the auspices of the Othmar Schoeck Society in the late 1980s, first with the medievalist Max Lütolf as chief editor, and latterly with his former assistant Beat A. Föllmi in that position. But as Föllmi has himself remarked, the principal purpose of the edition is merely to "lay the necessary foundations for [Schoeck] research to come about."[14] The forewords to the volumes that have appeared thus far contain much useful documentary information on early performances and the like. The editors of the edition, again under the auspices of the Schoeck Society, initiated a book series in the 1990s (*Schriftenreihe der Othmar Schoeck-Gesellschaft*), of which four volumes have now appeared, though they contain in total more contributions about other composers than they do about Schoeck himself.

When one compares him with his contemporaries (even excluding the "big names" such as Strauss and Mahler), one sees just how poorly Schoeck has fared in the research stakes. Two simple means of comparison offer themselves: the RILM ("Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale") database of abstracts of music literature and the "Doctoral Dissertations in Musicology Online" (DDM), run by the School of Music of Indiana University, Bloomington. A search in RILM for "Schoeck" gives 127 hits for the past forty-one years. A sample of his contemporaries fares as follows: Hans Pfitzner, 558 hits; Arthur Honegger, 399; Alexander Zemlinsky, 285; and Ferruccio Busoni, 717. The DDM database confirms the trend: Schoeck, 5 hits; Pfitzner, 12; Honegger, 11;[15] Zemlinsky, 16; Busoni, 32.

As already outlined, Schoeck's name is no longer unknown outside his native country. But there have only been two biographies of Schoeck to date (not counting Vogel's collection of documents), namely Corrodi's and my own. Both were published only in German (the latter in 1994). At the time of writing, a further biography, in French, is being written by Beat A. Föllmi. However, there is as yet no biographical study of the composer in English, and it is this state of affairs that the present volume seeks to address.

Today, in our post-Barthesian era when the *auteur* is supposed to be *mort,* the biographer who determines nevertheless to resurrect him in words must inevitably be mistrustful of himself and his task. For what biographer does not in some way identify with his subject, for bad or for good, and how can one avoid (re)creating him in one's own image? The temptation is constantly to cut one's subject down to size, to doubt all that cannot be proven ineluctably true, and to explain the composer's personality as if by drawing up a list of specific attributes and calculating the sum of them one could unfailingly elucidate the workings of his psyche. To be sure, any serious biographer will wish to avoid hagiography and to "humanize" his subject. But a portrait of the artist today that hopes to do justice to his "humanness" must also allow for the possibility that certain aspects of his life will remain unexplained and inexplicable to both biographer and reader. Almost all first-hand reports of Schoeck, for example—whether written or verbal—tell of the composer's "magnetic personality." During my research on Schoeck in Switzerland in the late 1980s, the emotive power upon his contemporaries of the man and his music was still palpable. On one occasion I visited an old, bedridden woman up on the Zürichberg, after a student acquaintance who tended to her remarked that she had sung in a choir under the composer some seventy years earlier. Her whole being became animated as she spoke of Schoeck, and she sang his song "Das bescheidene Wünschlein" from memory, entire and unprompted. She also mentioned a "Martha Nabholz" with whom Schoeck had enjoyed a liaison—did I detect a note of envy in her voice? It is too long ago to remember precisely, and perhaps I am now reading things in that were not there. But throughout my research I observed similar reactions among those who had known the man. To write of the "personal magnetism" of one's

subject goes decidedly against the grain for a biographer working in the early twenty-first century, attempting to scratch away the romanticized palimpsest to locate the "truth" lurking beneath the surface text. It smacks all too much of the cultic idolatry of the artist as perpetrated in the popular literature of the Romantics. And yet when intelligent, down-to-earth men and women, not otherwise given to hyperbole, idolization, or emotional indulgence, still speak of the composer's powerful personal aura, or of the mesmerizing effect of Schoeck's supposedly limpid blue eyes (even the cool, methodical, indubitably heterosexual Paul Sacher, billionaire conductor and patron, was one of those mesmerized thus, as he readily admitted), then one has little choice but to allow for certain aspects of the man that resist rational explanation (what on earth is an "aura"? And what, precisely, constitutes *mesmerizing eyes?* How does one describe or define them, except with the adjective thus?). These aspects were obviously vital to the manner in which the composer impinged upon his surroundings and engaged with his contemporaries. After all, it can hardly be a matter of mere chance that his every word and gesture was being recorded independently by two separate diarists at the same time, at opposite ends of Zurich. If I may generalize one last time: the Swiss on the whole are averse to wearing their hearts on their sleeves, to displaying excess of emotion, to erecting any cult of personality, and yet Schoeck prompted a good many of his contemporaries to do all of this for him. Perhaps his very "unSwissness" made his compatriots all the more keen to claim him as typically "Swiss," as if his example somehow freed them to postulate what they would really prefer "Swissness" to constitute, far away from all the clichéd norms.

In addition to the standard investigation of the facts of Schoeck's life and the notes of his music that are the topic of this volume, there must and will, therefore, also remain in the following biographical explorations a number of metaphorical rough edges, loose ends, and occasional subjective suppositions that will not be disguised as anything else. It is possible that some of these roughnesses are inevitable, as resulting in part from the friction between Schoeck's local specificity—that "Swissness" of his, at once dubious yet undeniable (for the geographical facts of his birth and life are fixed)—and his "generality," namely his position as a composer of significance within the musical traditions of Central Europe in the twentieth century. Perhaps locating those frictions themselves will make it possible to identify whatever correlations might actually exist between his music and his physical space. And perhaps—just perhaps—we might even find that Schoeck is indeed "Swiss" in some way after all.

Chapter One

Childhood and Youth

Birth may be an obvious place to begin the story of a life, but it is admirably finite; so we shall begin there. Othmar Schoeck was born in Brunnen in Canton Schwyz, in a villa overlooking Lake Lucerne, on 1 September 1886. The fact that the place of his birth is one of the most picturesque in Switzerland was no mere happenstance, for his father, an artist, had gone there in order to paint its landscapes. This Alfred Schoeck (1841–1931) was the only surviving child of a rich silk merchant from the city of Basel. His family, originally from the area around Heilbronn in southern Germany, had arrived there via France, where until the revolution a surgeon-Schoeck had been personal physician to the unlucky Princesse de Lamballe. Alfred had not inherited his family's business leanings, his ambitions being instead centered on the visual arts. This artistic streak was paired with a wanderlust such as one finds celebrated in the writings of the early German Romantics. So Alfred studied painting with Friedrich Horner and François Diday and thereafter spent a goodly portion of his considerable inheritance in traveling the northern hemisphere, hunting and painting. Photographs of him sitting at an easel, surrounded by trees and his own artwork, survive as testament to his exploits in Canada, the Lofoten islands, and the Dobruja.

When Alfred returned to Switzerland in the 1870s, it was not to his native city. Instead, he came to the region around Lucerne, which with its lakes, mountains, and forests is as good a spot for a painter as anything one might find in more extreme climes—after all, it had inspired Turner to some of his finest canvases thirty-odd years before. Alfred toyed with the idea of renting Wagner's former house in Tribschen but then went instead to Brunnen, on the other side of the Rigi mountain, booking himself a room in the fanciest hotel in the vicinity, the Waldstätterhof, which had hosted just about all the famous tourists that the nineteenth century could offer, including Queen Victoria. And it was here that Alfred finally fell in love and in 1876 married and quit his wanderings. His wife, Agathe Fassbind, was not just the daughter of the Waldstätterhof's wealthy owner but reputedly one of the prettiest girls in town. Her family history was also demonstrably Swiss, unlike Alfred's; one of her forefathers was Johann Rudolf Wettstein, who had been his country's representative at the negotiations for the Peace Treaty of Westphalia of 1648. Although the Fassbinds were Roman Catholic and Alfred Protestant, religious differences did not prove an unsurmountable hurdle. Agathe raised their children in her husband's faith, and she later converted, too.

In 1882, Alfred commissioned one Johann Meyer from Lucerne—the same architect responsible for the Waldstätterhof—to build him a villa on the "Gütsch,"

the cliff above Brunnen overlooking the lake.[1] He made sure that his "Villa Ruheim," as he called it, had enough room not just for a growing family but also for a large artist's studio on the top floor. Alfred and Agathe had six children altogether, of whom four boys survived into adulthood: Paul (1882–1952), who was an architect and a gifted watercolorist, but whose passion lay in writing; Ralph (1884–1969), who became an engineer but possessed a fine gift for portraiture; Walter (1885–1953), who took over the running of the family hotel, but whose real love was playing the cello; and Othmar, the youngest, and the only one who would live out his artistic inclinations to the full. They all inherited their father's artistic gifts to a greater or lesser extent—gifts passed on in turn to Walter's son, Georg, and to Georg's middle son, Wolfgang. But Alfred Schoeck was also a decent singer who had once sung the part of Max in a public performance of Weber's *Freischütz* in Basel.[2] So music was also actively cultivated in the Schoeck household. One of his earliest musical memories, so Schoeck recalled as an old man, was of his father singing the aria "to the evening star" from Wagner's *Tannhäuser*.[3]

Since painting was hardly going to support the Schoecks in the style to which they were accustomed, Alfred turned to the trade of his in-laws. In 1899 he had a hotel built that could cater for the growing tourist industry in Brunnen: the Hotel Eden, set into the side of the cliff beneath his villa (itself later to be renamed "Eden"). He left the running of it, however, to his wife and her right-hand woman, Mathilde Suter from nearby Ingenbohl, the daughter of the local composer and conductor Carl Suter.[4] So while the women ran his business, Alfred painted, and played with his children—by all accounts a model modern father, slow to chide and swift to bless. He now added portraiture to his activities, which proved to be perhaps his greatest talent. None of his many landscapes can match his charming portraits of his wife and children (see fig. 1.1). The family villa in Brunnen still houses the largest extant collection of Alfred's paintings, most of them in his former studio on the top floor, the "atelier," where are also stored the fruits of his earlier, peripatetic existence—birds' eggs, a mineral collection, hunting rifles, stuffed deer heads, marble busts, lava from Vesuvius, mounted butterflies, and antique carpets. There is even a vulture that hangs in static flight at the top of the stairs as if guarding the entrance to this schoolboy's paradise: it is a fitting metaphor for the house, where time itself seems to have been captured, embalmed, and put on display for future generations. In a small side room to the atelier there still stands the modest upright piano on which Othmar many years later would compose when visiting for the summer holidays.

Even the casual visitor to Brunnen understands immediately why a painter would wish to settle there. One arrives at an unassuming railway station, the twin peaks of the Mythen looming vast above it, then one traverses a small underpass to reach the main road, from where it is a ten-minute walk to the center of town and the banks of the lake. The little town boasts nothing spectacular in its architecture, with only a small, quaint chapel at its heart that gives any real sense of history to the place, the "Bundeskapelle," consecrated in 1636 and which features

Figure 1.1. Alfred Schoeck: Othmar Schoeck, aged ca. 8. Courtesy of the Schoeck family.

a superb altarpiece by Justus von Egmont, a student of Rubens.[5] But Brunnen's paucity of architectural splendor is inconsequential when one considers the stunning natural views offered from the lake's edge. The view is finer still from the terrace of the Schoecks' family villa, high up on the cliff—so fine that in the early twentieth century outside visitors were charged ten centimes per person to use the hotel lift that still runs from the ground floor up to the terrace.[6]

Brunnen lies at the place where Lake Lucerne merges into the Lake of Uri to form a single expanse of water. On the bank across from the town a steep incline rises to the Seelisberg, with a patch of green meadow at the halfway point. This is the Rütliwiese, the semi-mythical founding spot of Switzerland, where the representatives of the original three cantons gathered seven centuries ago to declare their independence from the Austrian yoke. But the weather is erratic, and mists often descend to obscure one's view. These can lift again, however, as quickly as they arrive. On some days, the air glows a marbled orange as the sun struggles to shine through the fog; at other times, the sun disappears in a blue haze that softens all contours of the opposite bank. And when all is clear, the forests below the Seelisberg shimmer a primeval green above the blue of the lake. It is no coincidence that the nearby Rigi was captured by William Turner in paintings known as the "Blue Rigi," the "Red Rigi" and the "Dark Rigi," for the ever-changing light in this region can at certain times of the year display a chameleon-like quality in which colors alternate with seeming incongruity.

When the weather is calm, the atmosphere of rest and quietness that the place exudes can easily make one forget its turbulent history. Brunnen's place near the head of the Gotthard Pass means that it has seen countless migrations through the ages. Here the armies of the Tsar and Napoleon lunged and parried, back and forth, more than a decade before Borodino—the Schoeck children still occasionally find the odd French coin in the soil of their garden today, presumably lost by some footsoldier slogging by with musket and pack. And when the Gotthard railway was built in the late nineteenth century, hundreds perished down in the hellish granite furrows that were groined beneath the green tranquility of the Alps. The luxurious Swiss transalpine trains carrying today's travelers from Zurich to Milan pass directly under the corner of Schoeck's villa, though they run too deep for even the slightest hum to be discernible on the surface.

Alfred's decision to enter the hotel business was an astute one, for during these years a flood of foreign visitors began that over the next century would be slowed only by two world wars. When one considers that this was also, in historical-geographical terms, a place of fracture—the site where little Switzerland had prised itself from the bosom of Austria—there is a certain logic in that this region drew to it many of the most significant aesthetic proponents of the modern in the decades before World War I. While Agathe Schoeck was pregnant with Othmar in the Villa Ruhheim in May 1886, Richard Strauss happened to be passing through the railway tunnel beneath her on his way back from Italy, about to stop off to view the Rigi and Lake Lucerne;[7] and in the days before Othmar's birth later that summer, August

Strindberg was in Weggis, just on the other side of the Rigi, finishing off the first version of his play *The Comrades*.[8] Over the coming years, the hotel guests who lodged at Eden and in the Fassbinds' Waldstätterhof would include aristocrats, musicians, writers, critics, publishers, translators, artists, and intellectuals from all over Europe. This cosmopolitan ambience would exert a considerable influence on Othmar and his siblings in their formative years.

It was Agathe Schoeck who took on the responsibility of starting her first three sons on the piano, but she had had her fill by the time Othmar's turn came. So he began piano lessons with a local teacher named Krieg instead, who soon stopped on account of claustrophobia. He was replaced by the excellent Marie Angele, a daughter of the music director in nearby Altdorf and herself a former student of the Royal Conservatory in Munich. This, however, was only one aspect of Schoeck's musical education. Together with various cousins and others, the Schoeck brothers put on Humperdinck's mini-singspiel *Seven Little Goats* for the seventieth birthday of their grandmother Fassbind in 1897. A charity concert they gave in the Waldstätterhof in August that same year even prompted a laudatory mention in the leading German music journal, *Die Signale der musikalischen Welt,* from its editor, Berthold Senff, a regular visitor to the hotel. It was at this time, too, that Alfred and Agathe first took their boys to the opera in Zurich, where Othmar saw Donizetti's *Fille du régiment,* Beethoven's *Fidelio,* and, a little later, Wagner's *Fliegender Holländer.* Alfred was no stranger to the Zurich Theater, for Othmar later recalled that he made a point of attending all the plays by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, an old acquaintance from his youthful hunting and painting trips to Norway.[9]

The childhood years of the four brothers in Brunnen are described in their various fragmentary reminiscences as having being utterly idyllic. Their tales of growing up amid the spectacular scenery of the region, of camping in a tent brought by Alfred from Canada, and of playing cowboys and Indians out in the woods behind the villa (with Othmar forced to play the squaw, as he was the youngest and the tubbiest) are irresistibly charming. The boys' fantasy was further stimulated by the books of Karl May, a German author immensely popular at the time, whose books were set in an invented Wild West that defined America for a whole generation of German-speaking children (even Adolf Hitler was a big fan, as Schoeck would discover over tea with the *Führer*'s sister many years later).

If their home in Brunnen was an "Eden" by name and nature, then Othmar by all accounts understood the onset of school as an expulsion from paradise. But his early school years hardly sound as disagreeable as commentators suggest he found it. He began his schooling with lessons from a Sister Marzelline from the nearby convent of Ingenbohl, progressed to the local primary school in Brunnen, and then completed his elementary education in Flüelen, just down the lake. We do not know much about Schoeck's forays into composition in these early school years. His first known piece was for piano, entitled "Mathilde [Suter] on Cleaning Day," written when he was about ten or eleven. Only a few such little

Figure 1.2. Anna Suter, Othmar, Mathilde Suter, Agathe, and Alfred Schoeck, mid 1890s. Courtesy of Georg and Elisabeth Schoeck.

piano pieces have survived from before the year 1990, none of them displaying any real sign of talent. His ambitions soon grew, however. His first attempt at anything larger-scale was an "opera" inspired by a book of Karl May's, *Der Schatz am Silbersee* ("The Treasure by Silver Lake"). He wrote it in about 1900 or 1901, to a libretto by brother Walter, with scenery organized by Ralph. It needed only a piano, a flute, two violins, and a cello and seems to have enjoyed a world premiere of sorts in the family home. It survives in only fragmentary form today but was at one time complete, for it is related that Grandmama Fassbind gave the boys a fee of twenty francs "for having finished it." Othmar attempted several other "dramatic" works at this time too (such as another May venture, *Der Ehri,* and the Grimm-inspired *Die Gänsehirtin am Brunnen*—"The Goose-Girl at the Well").

Alfred and Agathe had sent their three older boys to school at the *Evangelisches Pädagogium* in Bad Godesberg in Germany, but none of them liked it, so they were removed in 1900 and sent to finish their education in Zurich instead. Othmar was spared the experience of boarding abroad, and he followed them to Zurich at Easter 1901. There they lived under the watchful eye of Grandmother Fassbind, who had been despatched to act as their chaperone. Their apartment was at Moussonstrasse 12 in Fluntern, a suburb high up on the Zürichberg, though still within easy reach of the center—just a few streets from where, forty years earlier,

Brahms had holidayed and worked on his German Requiem. The city was still in the throes of the economic expansion enjoyed by so many central European cities in the late nineteenth century. Like most German towns, fin-de-siècle Zurich saw a huge building boom and the erection of neoclassical and art nouveau urban edifices that included its principal banks, the Conservatory, the Tonhalle (the city concert hall), the City Theater (renamed in the 1960s the "Opera House"), the marvellously mock-medieval National Museum, the new University premises and many private villas on the Zürichberg. But this was republican, Zwinglian Zurich, not royal Munich or imperial Berlin, so there are no grand spaces to complement the buildings or to allow one to stand too far back in admiration—public modesty has long been a civic virtue there. The Conservatory in particular, with its grand façade and beautifully ornamented great hall, is concealed from the main road by a cluster of eighteenth-century buildings, as if music were something to be practiced only in private among consenting adults.

Zurich further stood out from all the other cities on the periphery of German-speaking Europe, for it was situated in a democracy where freedom of speech was a long-held right, and where there was a tradition of accepting foreign nationals unwanted elsewhere. And although women would not have the vote for many decades to come, they nevertheless had far greater access to tertiary education in Zurich than was the case in the German empire to the north. Thus it was in Zurich that many of the finest minds of the day chose to study from the 1890s onwards, from Ricarda Huch to the future revolutionary Rosa Luxembourg.

Like his brothers, Othmar was sent to the so-called "Industrieschule," a cantonal high school where technical subjects were given preference. The vast majority of its school-leavers enrolled straightaway at the nearby Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, the Swiss federal technical university. Othmar's artistic leanings were already dominant, and it seems his parents assumed that he might choose to study architecture as had his brother Paul before him. But the Industrieschule, not surprisingly, placed the greatest emphasis on math, and this had long been Othmar's worst subject. His parents received letters recommending private math lessons to help him catch up, and there were hours of detention with extra work, but all to no avail. He was finally expelled from school in March 1904.

Despite his problems at school, Othmar's compositional output had increased considerably after the move to Zurich. His surviving compositions from these years are mostly songs, one of which was deemed good enough to see its way into print several years later (the Uhland setting "Ruhetal," Op. 3, no. 1 of 1903), while others really should have been published but were not (such as "Kinderliedchen," woo 6, "Perlen," woo 67, and the Goethe setting "Gefunden" of summer 1904, woo 68). Schoeck later claimed that several of his songs dated "1903" were in fact composed much earlier, and that he had simply written them out neatly in this year.[10] While his models are both clearly audible and the same as for any young German-speaking composer of the day—Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms—his best songs of this time nevertheless demonstrate a burgeoning

individuality and a high level of melodic inspiration. There is even a fragmentary piano trio entitled "Summer" (woo 61) from early 1903, whose Impressionistic harmony of regurgitated ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths proves that Schoeck was already familiar with Debussy's music.

Although they had ended in ignominy, Othmar's school years had not been in vain. His German teacher, one Hermann Bodmer, helped to confirm his love of literature, which had already been awakened by his parents and brothers back in Brunnen. There were also the joys of coeducation. Othmar arrived at school in Zurich at the age of fifteen, and the little available information that we possess suggests that he began to exert a considerable fascination upon the opposite sex. His blue eyes were counterpointed by a shock of blond hair, and his sense of humor—which by all accounts developed early—was paired with a boyish self-confidence. His physical needs, however, were for the moment being fulfilled in the sublimated fashion also beloved of English private schools, namely by the local school gymnastics association (the "Kantonsschulturnverein," hereafter "KTV"). Schoeck was a very good gymnast—for many years, his favorite after-dinner party trick, to the consternation of the more bourgeois of his colleagues, remained walking on his hands while smoking a cigar. But the KTV also provided access to alcohol by meeting once a week in the "Meierei" (the same bar where the Dada movement would be founded over a decade later). Furthermore, the association prompted a new foray into the world of musical theater when Schoeck assembled an "operetta" called *Josephine,* using popular melodies and home-grown tunes. It was performed in the "Ochsensaal," a hall on the Kreuzplatz, with the composer accompanying at the piano. Two of Schoeck's lifelong friends, Georges Treadwell and Armin Rüeger, first met him in the KTV. Treadwell remains peripheral in the story of Schoeck's life; Rüeger was anything but.

Schoeck and Rüeger had both the same year of birth and similar artistic leanings: where Schoeck painted and made music, Rüeger painted and wrote. Rüeger outlived his friend by only a few months and thus shared, too, his year of death. While Schoeck remained ever a highly social animal, surrounded by friends and admirers, his friendship with Rüeger went far deeper. Unlike his friend, Rüeger opted for a safe, bourgeois career, marrying early and running an apothecary's shop in the pretty little market town of Bischofszell, today an hour and a half by train to the north-east of Zurich. His artistic endeavors remained in the amateur sphere except for the three times when, at Schoeck's insistence, he wrote the libretti for his operas. These are all in different ways problematical, though their flaws are as much the fault of the composer as of the librettist. Both men knew that Schoeck's artistic gifts were the greater, and he dominated their artistic relationship from the start. But both also seem to have acknowledged that Rüeger's was the finer intellect, and he appears to have compensated for his artistic subservience by a readiness to pick an (intellectual) argument with Schoeck and pursue it mercilessly until his friend admitted complete defeat. The four Schoeck brothers were used to fierce debate within the family circle,

but Rüeger seems to have been the only man from outside to have been willing and able to argue with Othmar, and to be respected for it.

Othmar's father took with ease the expulsion from school of his youngest son. Othmar later remembered him as saying, "Just wait until you've achieved something, then they'll all crawl back," though it was probably little more than an off-the-cuff remark intended to console his child.[11] Othmar's dual talents, in painting and in music, now left both him and his parents unsure as to which career path he should follow. We do not know whose idea it was that he should concentrate on the former, but he now enrolled in the oddly-named "Painting School for Ladies" run by two leading local artists, Ernst Würtenberger and Hermann Gattiker, in the Zurich studio where the pre-expressionist painter Arnold Böcklin had once worked. Schoeck retained happy memories of his studies there, and continued painting landscapes until well into middle age. But music was not forgotten, for he hedged his bets by studying harmony and counterpoint concurrently with Lothar Kempter Junior, the son of the chief conductor of the Zurich City Theater. Schoeck later claimed that he had never worked so hard.

As usual, Schoeck and his brothers returned to Brunnen for the summer holidays. We have a report of life in the family hotel at about this time from the pen of an Englishwoman, Ann Bridge, who many years later recalled her impressions as follows:

> It was very full and my Mother, Grace, and I had to be accommodated in Herr Schoeck's studio, a huge room on the top floor with a sky-light and stuffed birds and animals everywhere. . . . The Schoecks were a delightful family, cultivated and musical . . . their pleasant heavily furnished sitting-room was the scene of small private concerts, week after week. Othmar Schoeck—as I remember him the youngest and the stockiest of the three brothers—played the piano with something of the same cool, scholarly quality as did Donald Tovey; it was no great surprise to me to learn, thirty years later, that he had become a well-known composer.[12]

The pull of music soon grew too strong for Othmar to contemplate a career in painting any further. So his studies with Gattiker and Würtenberger were abandoned in time for him to enter the Zurich Conservatory in the autumn of 1904. It is possible that Schoeck's parents had foreseen such a step and had wanted their son to spend the six months between his expulsion from school and the start of the new academic year in trying out his different artistic inclinations. Many years later Georges Treadwell claimed that it was another member of the KTV who had convinced Othmar that his future lay in music, one Georg Lehmeier, though of him we know nothing except that Schoeck dedicated to him a violin sonata that he wrote in 1905.[13] Whatever the reasons, Othmar was the only one of the four Schoeck brothers who would dare to take the plunge and follow his real calling. There would be no more talk of anything but music.

Chapter Two

Wolf amidst the Sheep

When Schoeck returned to Zurich in the autumn of 1904, he and Ralph shared an apartment at Seegartenstrasse 14, not far from the lake, and a short bike ride from the conservatory. This institution had been founded in 1876 and was still run by its first principal, Friedrich Hegar, the long-standing conductor of the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra, a violinist and composer, a friend of Brahms, and the dominant figure in the city's music life for over thirty years. He was also largely responsible for Zurich's reigning Brahmsian aesthetic. Only in the City Theater, under Lothar Kempter Senior, did the music of Wagner and the New Germans have the upper hand. It was with the elder Kempter that Othmar now took theory lessons at the conservatory. The teaching staff included many local lights: Hegar taught composition, Carl Attenhofer conducting, Johannes Luz organ, and Hans Häusermann singing. Schoeck also took violin lessons, though his teacher Alfons Grosser (the solo violist in the Tonhalle) found him so lazy that he seriously suggested he should return to painting instead.[1] Schoeck's favorite teacher was Robert Freund for piano. A Hungarian by birth, he had studied with both Carl Tausig and Franz Liszt, had enjoyed a career as a concert pianist, and had been among the first members of staff of the Zurich Conservatory back in 1876. Freund's wide circle of friends and acquaintances included many of the leading artists of the day, from Johannes Brahms, Gottfried Keller, and Arnold Böcklin to Richard Strauss and Friedrich Nietzsche. So it should not surprise us that he fascinated Schoeck, whose lessons were usually placed at the end of the day in order for the two men to retire to a café and talk into the evening. It was thanks to Freund, by all accounts, that Schoeck first became acquainted with the music of Hugo Wolf. This appears to have been in the autumn of 1905, for his influence appears suddenly, in the song "Himmelstrauer," Op. 5, no. 1, where Schoeck for the first time uses ostinato in the accompaniment, such as was typical of the mature songs of Wolf.

The Zurich Conservatory was hardly a hive of avant-garde activity—Kempter used the third act of Puccini's *Bohème* to warn his students of the horrors of parallel fifths, while Attenhofer referred to Reger's music as "dirt"—but it was probably no more conservative than any similar provincial institution in Germany or elsewhere. And in Friedrich Hegar the conservatory boasted a director who was highly regarded at home and abroad and was tolerant of aesthetic views different from his own. He encouraged his students to attend his rehearsals of the Tonhalle Orchestra, whose repertoire included modern German and French works, and where his interpretation of Debussy's *L'après-midi d'un faune* in particular made a huge impression on Schoeck.

Schoeck's studies included all the usual composition exercises and prompted him to venture for the first time into larger-scale chamber music and orchestral composition. There is the charming but impersonal Violin Sonata in D major (woo 22) of 1905 that Schoeck revised and published fifty years later, an equally charming but slightly more insipid Minuet and Trio for string quartet from 1906, and a cumbersome symphonic movement in E minor with the motto "I shall not let thee go unless thou bless me" (from the tale of Jacob and the angel in the Old Testament). There is little in any of these works that is more competent than one would expect from any above-average composition student. Schoeck's songs of these years are a different matter altogether, and they belie his later claim that he learned little at the conservatory. The years 1905 and 1906 saw the composition of some three dozen songs, most of which were later published, some showing real maturity (such as the setting of Goethe's "Diese Gondel vergleich ich," Op. 19b, no. 7.5, with its haunting, rocking accompaniment), despite the influence of Brahms, Schubert, Schumann, and Wolf being not yet properly digested. It is as if Schoeck felt that this or that poem would have attracted Brahms, and so deserved a more Brahmsian style, while another text reminded him of Schubert. But the youthful spontaneity of many of these songs is more than sufficient to sweep aside any aesthetic quibbles.

Wolf was not the only modern artist with whose work Schoeck came into contact during his conservatory years. Wilhelm Furtwängler arrived at the Zurich City Theater in 1906 to work for a few months as a lowly répétiteur, during which time he and Schoeck became friends—though we are not sure precisely when or how (and Schoeck was in any case away on his first annual stint of military service with Switzerland's militia army for two of those months, April and May). Schoeck and Furtwängler always remained on good terms, though it would be another half century before the latter would conduct anything by his friend. Of far more lasting significance to Schoeck was his discovery at this time of the poetry of Hermann Hesse. It seems that he and Hesse first met at a Tonhalle concert in about 1906, though they did not become properly acquainted for another five years. Of particular interest to us here is Schoeck's own (later) admission that his first-ever settings of Hesse songs, written over six months from late July 1906 onwards, were the result of an unhappy love for a fellow music student (the four songs Op. 8, plus Op. 24b, nos. 4 and 5, and woo 27). Her identity remains unknown, though the most likely candidate is one Marie Warpechovska, a student from Minsk whose mother worked as a midwife in Canton Vaud. Marie, a year younger than Schoeck, attended the Conservatory from 1903 to 1907, and Freund was among the lecturers whom they shared. Marie lived at the other end of town from Schoeck (on the Manessestrasse 69), though he often walked her home and once even organized a string quartet to serenade her from the pavement below her room. It is not clear why Schoeck should have singled out his Hesse settings as being a reflection of his lovelorn state, but perhaps the occasionally self-pitying tone of some of Hesse's poems had appealed to him. The last Hesse setting that he composed at

the Conservatory, "Vorwurf" ("Reproach," woo 27) of 11 January 1907, remained unpublished until recently. It closes "in greatest passion" with a quotation from the quintet in Wagner's *Meistersinger,* and the music switches from ***ppp*** to ***fff*** within just a few measures as the singer cries "You spoke so much this evening / and broke the word that you never gave me." Another of this batch of Hesse songs, "Kennst du das auch" (Op. 24b, no. 4), also includes a quotation, this time of a popular dance tune of the day.[2]

Whoever the object of his affection might have been, and whatever the precise import of these musical quotations, these Hesse songs are of considerable significance for the composer's biography. The reminiscences of his fellow female students in Zurich make it clear that he was the center of much attention from the opposite sex. This failed affair with Miss X however (or, more probably, Miss W), seems to have been his first real crisis of the heart. It coincided, too, with the composition of some of his best songs to date, albeit with "Vorwurf" an exception. There is a more important "first" here, in that Schoeck himself acknowledged his inspiration to have come from an unhappy relationship. The notion of the Artist-Unlucky-in-Love who, purged by his sorrows, brings forth works of Great Art, might seem to us a hangover from the trivial literature of the nineteenth century, but it appealed to Schoeck himself. Throughout his life he would draw attention to the fact that his best music, as he saw it, was the product of a slump in his love life. Not only did the conjunction between emotional/sexual frustration and the moment of inspiration become for Schoeck of great import, but it was in this specific case combined with the poems of Hesse. The memory of this experience was so powerful that during his greatest personal crisis, some forty years later, it seems to have been sufficient to lead Schoeck back from unfathomable depths of depression and the prospect of creative sterility.

Two days after he had composed his setting of Hesse's "Vorwurf" in Zurich, the world premiere of his first-ever commissioned work, two choruses for the carnival play *Das Glück in der Heimat* ("Happiness in the Home Country"), took place in Schoeck's native Canton Schwyz. This was the fiftieth anniversary of the so-called "Japanesen," a society in Schwyz—still in existence today—that organizes elaborate carnival theatricals every few years. Schoeck's choruses are not very adventurous (nor could they be, given the exigencies of an amateur, open-air performance), but they were well received in the press. Schoeck did not attend the premiere on 13 January 1907 but was represented by his elder brother Paul.

Schoeck's biggest professional opportunity to date also came thanks to connections at home. Mathilde Suter's elder sister Anna had studied singing at the Munich Conservatory in the late 1880s, and under the stage name of "Anna Sutter" she had become a favorite of the public at the Stuttgart Royal Opera House. Not even her colorful love life and the birth of two illegitimate children to different fathers proved a hindrance to her career (she was created "Kammersängerin" in February 1906). Othmar and Mathilde visited Anna in Stuttgart in late January 1907, where she introduced him to the high society of the Stuttgart music world,

including Hugo Faisst—the wealthy lawyer who had been Hugo Wolf's patron—and the Klinckerfuss family of piano manufacturers. The latter in turn were friendly with Max Reger, who happened to be in Stuttgart as part of a nationwide concert tour.[3] Perhaps Anna had timed Schoeck's visit to coincide with Reger's. In any case, it was *chez* Klinckerfuss that Schoeck was now brought face to face with a man who was already one of the best-known composers in Germany. Schoeck had a bundle of songs with him that Reger went through one by one at the piano, putting the ones he liked in one pile, the others in another. When he had finished, he announced that a publisher must be found for the songs on his right and proposed that Schoeck join his composition class in Munich. Schoeck seems not to have treated this offer seriously. But six weeks later it was Reger who took the initiative, in a letter peppered with underlinings:

> Dear Mr Schoeck!
>
> . . . I have accepted the position of University Music Director in Leipzig, and I have also taken on the direction of a master class for composition at the Royal Conservatory. . . . I hereby insist most urgently that you immediately enter this masterclass for composition in Leipzig, i.e., on 8 April (the beginning of the summer term). Leipzig is for you a much, much, much better base than Munich! [. . .]
>
> That I shall always hold my hand over you, protecting and promoting you, I'm sure I don't need to tell you; but you must always work very, very hard! [. . .]
>
> I want to make something quite proper out of you. So you simply *must* [underlined four times] enter the class on 8 April in Leipzig!

Schoeck hesitated again, but Hegar declared: "If a man like Reger writes to you like that, you can't not follow him!" So follow he did. Schoeck's final act at the Zurich Conservatory was to make his debut as a conductor on 23 March 1907 in the first performance of his ten-minute-long "Spanish Serenade" for five wind instruments and strings. The geographical adjective was later jettisoned, no doubt to avoid the obvious comparison with Hugo Wolf's *Italian Serenade*. The critics were positive, though one "r.h." in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, perhaps aware of Schoeck's imminent departure, declared that it was obviously influenced by Max Reger.[4] In fact, the piece is thoroughly Wolfian in style. Nevertheless, its youthful exuberance still makes it one of Schoeck's most successful orchestral works.

Schoeck returned to Brunnen to rest for a few days then departed for Leipzig, stopping off on the way to visit Hugo Faisst and Anna Sutter in Stuttgart.

Chapter Three

Leipzig, Munich, and an Awful Little Moustache

Schoeck arrived in Leipzig on 7 April 1907. As he had promised back in February, Reger soon put him in touch with his own publisher, Lauterbach and Kuhn, though after hearing Schoeck play to them for three hours they still showed no interest. By contrast, the Leipzig representative of the Zurich publishing house of Hug, Alexander Bartusch, was very keen indeed. Schoeck had met him on his second day in the city and was immediately impressed. Bartusch not only provided free coffee whenever they met at his apartment but also recommended a Zurich family from whom Schoeck could rent a room: a Mrs Eisele and her daughter Anny, a former student of the Zurich Conservatory who was now making a name for herself as a pianist. Schoeck moved in straightaway. He also promptly fell in love with Anny, though his letters to Armin Rüeger confirm his disappointment upon finding her possessed of firm moral fibre: "I'm not used to this!" he wrote.[1] A piano concerto for her was planned, though it was swiftly forgotten as it became clear that she had no intention of submitting to his charms. The link to Bartusch proved profitable, though: by 25 June 1907 Schoeck had signed a contract with Hug for his first eleven opus numbers. Opus 1 was his Serenade for small orchestra (for which he received one hundred marks), while the following ten numbers were of assorted lieder (at twenty marks per song).

Reger's tuition comprised reams of contrapuntal exercises that demanded precision of technique, posing limits in order to set the imagination free. Sadly, almost none of them have survived—Schoeck probably threw them away as of no artistic significance—but there is no doubt that his Leipzig studies provided an immense artistic stimulus. In his first weeks there Schoeck was producing more or less one new song a week alongside all his other work, and their quality was very fine indeed—they all soon found their way into print. Schoeck also became more adventurous in his choice of poet. Besides his staples such as Lenau and Uhland, he now set texts by Verlaine, Novalis, Michelangelo, and Li-Tai-Pe.

We know little of Schoeck's social life as a student in Leipzig, however, except that it resulted in a lifelong friendship with an older music student named Martin Kuntze-Fechner (1877–1950). But we do know that Hugo Faisst took the trouble to visit him, singing songs to Schoeck's accompaniment and wining and dining his young friend enough to be rewarded with the dedication of his six Uhland settings Op. 3—a rare honor, for Schoeck never allotted dedications