

philharmonia orchestra

Salonen Visits the Schoenberg Family – Transcription

As part of our series of films about *City of Dreams* Esa-Pekka Salonen went to meet the family of Arnold Schoenberg to find out what it was like growing up with the father of serialism.

Esa-Pekka Salonen – Principal Conductor, Philharmonia Orchestra

So, we are at 116 North Rockingham Avenue. This is the house where Arnold Schoenberg lived since 50-something. Or was it even earlier than that?

Ronald Schoenberg

It was earlier, he moved here in 1936 I believe, right?

Laurence Schoenberg

First he was in New York and Boston...

Ronald Schoenberg

And then Hollywood for a very short while – West Hollywood I think it was – and then he got this house where he lived until he died in 1951.

We, like all children thought it was normal, right? But we had parents that spoke to us in German mostly, we answered in English mostly, and we developed what my father called “Schönster Language” which was a mixture of English and German. Really, I think it was relatively normal, other than we had a father who was very old.

Laurence Schoenberg

Actually I would have liked to have said we grew up here and we had to learn every one of his works, we had to study twelve-tone. That’s probably what most people would have expected but in fact, it was quite the opposite, as you’ll find out. We grew up as American children growing up in Los Angeles of all places.

Esa-Pekka Salonen

But there was maybe not a large, but quite an important circle of emigrants from Germany and Austria after the war so did the families have a lot to do with each other?

Laurence Schoenberg

I remember the cellist, Feuerman coming here, but that’s because his name was ‘Feuerman’. What could be better for a child than the ‘fireman’ coming? So did I appreciate the people that were here? Well, we knew the Kolisch Quartet but not because it was the Kolisch Quartet but because it was Uncle Rudy. I think with Klemperer who was here we always commented on how tall he was and how he had to bend down to get through the arch over here [points].

Ronald Schoenberg

Klemperer was here a lot. Klemperer was, in a sense, a good friend when they weren’t fighting, and as Larry said, he always had to stoop to get through the arch. But I always had a feeling that as tall as he was and as short as my father was, that he was actually looking up at my father.

Laurence Schoenberg

Again, from our perspective, things I remember vis-à-vis people coming over would have been his students. He would bring his composition students here for a performance. Later on, in this very room we're sitting in – and this I do remember quite well – is that every Sunday he would have his classes here. Those would be the private classes where there would be ten or twelve people and he would prepare those lessons. I remember clearly him preparing lessons because he did his preparation on large-sized butcher paper and then had it all on an easel. And he had designed a staff maker with crayons. I remember being able to draw the lines – that was my musical contribution!

Esa-Pekka Salonen

Did you have any kind of idea of your father's position in the world? How famous he was and how important he was?

Ronald Schoenberg

Really, very little because of course, here he was not recognised very much at all. Once in a while we would be told that. And at least my feeling was, "Well, yes" but you know, we were California kids.

Laurence Schoenberg

Fame here has been defined by wealth and popularity, neither of which he had so there's definitely a contradiction when someone tells you that your father's very famous in Los Angeles. That wouldn't be defined as being famous.

Esa-Pekka Salonen

But you didn't see him as a bitter man?

Ronald Schoenberg

I wouldn't say he wasn't bitter at times. He certainly was bitter at times; you can see that from his writings and the things he's known to have said, but he was willing to teach. I mean, if you can imagine somebody whose pupils in Europe were Webern and Berg and then he's teaching music appreciation to people who are basically in school because they're athletes, it's quite a different thing. He did have a love of teaching, though and he wanted to give something to everyone he taught, to the extent that when he taught his composition classes he would give separate examinations to each student based on what that person could or should know. He was a great believer that people should know the basics. There's a story of someone coming to study with him and wanting to learn his tricks – the tricks of the trade – and he took him into his study behind us and said, "First, you have to learn everything that's in here. I know every note that's in here," and it was the complete works of Beethoven, "And then we go on from there."

The music we heard was the music on the radio and he would listen to that religiously and see if they would play Schoenberg. They would have a programme of all their coming concerts and Larry would get paid 10 cents if he could find a piece by our father that was being played. It happened very infrequently.

Laurence Schoenberg

Either way, I didn't get wealthy on that!

Ronald Schoenberg

That was the music behind you. We had stacks of records they used to play, and that was my father's music, some of it.

Laurence Schoenberg

One of the first things they did on 70 recordings, one of the early things, believe it or not, was *Gurrelieder*. Now, can you imagine *Gurrelieder* on less than three minutes a side? Imagine how big this thing is and how you're constantly flipping them. I certainly heard more Strauss music than I heard Schoenberg music, growing up so we would have heard an awful lot of Strauss waltzes. We must have had little records of those.

Esa-Pekka Salonen

So this was a mind that was almost never completely at rest, there was something going on all the time. Did you experience this?

Laurence Schoenberg

A hundred years ago in 1909 I think he got a patent for a music typewriter where he actually designed the technology that one would need to type out a score. So he was always looking for, quote: "A better way to solution."

Ronald Schoenberg

Everything turned into an invention for him or turned into some project for him.

Esa-Pekka Salonen

So it's not a coincidence that this man was one of great inventors in all history of music.