Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire*: the Genesis, Evolution and Execution of its Sprechstimme
Pierrot lunaire, Op. 21 – “O alter Duft” (song #21, mm.1-3)

A Survivor from Warsaw, Op. 46 – mm. 35-36
Origins of *Sprechstimme*

- **Early Melodrama**
  - *Pygmalion* (Coignet – 1770; Benda – 1779)
  - *Ariadne* (Benda – 1775)

- **“Modern” Melodrama**
  - *Königskinder* – Engelbert Humperdinck (1897)
  - *Enoch Arden* – Richard Strauss (1897)
  - *Das Hexenlied* – Max von Schilling (1902)
Humperdinck’s *Königskinder* – Act I

Werd’ ich ihn erreichen?
“It originated in Schoenberg’s mind. It was – if you will – an inspiration.”

“I don’t think he did. Since Schoenberg lived, so to speak, in a completely different world, it is very unlikely that he heard any Humperdinck except perhaps Hänsel und Gretel . . . The idea of the “melodrama,” as it was called, was generally known . . . but the way Schoenberg used it was certainly quite new . . .”

Gurre-Lieder, Part III. 1912 autograph study score

Gurre-Lieder, Part III. 1913 Piano/Vocal Score, transcribed by Alban Berg
“Regarding the melodramas in the *Gurre-Lieder*: the pitch notation is certainly not to be taken as seriously as in the *Pierrot* melodramas. The result here should by no means be such a songlike *Sprechmelodie* as in the latter . . . [There is] no [need to keep the] . . . interval proportions!”


Pierrot lunaire, "Mondestrunken," mm. 23-25. Published score
Pierrot lunaire, "Nacht," m. 6-8. Used by permission, The Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit at The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York
What did Schoenberg want?

• Preface to *Pierrot lunaire*
• Score and Recordings (over 36 recordings, including two conducted by Schoenberg)
• Letters, essays and interviews
• “Expert” assessment (Reinhold Brinkmann, Erwin Stein, Joan Allen Smith, Jonathan Dunsby)
The melody given in the *Sprechstimme* by means of notes is not intended for singing (except for specially marked isolated exceptions). The task of the performer is to transform it into a speech-melody, taking into account the given pitch. This is achieved by:

I. Maintaining the rhythm as accurately as if one were singing, i.e. with no more freedom than would be allowed with a singing melody;

II. Becoming acutely aware of the difference between singing tone and speaking tone . . . it must never be reminiscent of singing . . .

Sentence 1:

The melody given in the *Sprechstimme* by means of notes is not intended for singing (except for specially marked isolated exceptions).

Sentence 2:

The task of the performer is to transform it into a speech-melody, taking into account the given pitch.
There was …

“a conflict, from the very beginning, in Schoenberg’s mind between a desire for speech character and another, seemingly incompatible desire for an exact rendering of the notes.”

Pierrot lunaire, "Rote Messe," mm. 24-25
Recordings

• Ilona Steingruber-Wildgans, Reciter; Vladimir Golschmann, Conductor (1961) – very little vibrato, but also no rising/falling from pitch

• Mary Thomas, Reciter; David Atherton, Conductor (1973) – lots of rising and falling, but also lots of vibrato

Most “Sung”

• Yvonne Minton, Reciter; Pierre Boulez, Conductor (1977) – lots of vibrato on Sprech passages; straight tone on “gesungen” passages; most classically sung recording in discography

Most “Spoken”

• Helga Pilarczyk, Reciter; Pierre Boulez, Conductor (1961) – very narrow range; little dramatic or dynamic contrast
Most “Authentic/Original”

• Erika Stiedry-Wagner, Reciter; Arnold Schoenberg, Conductor (1940) – very speech-like; not as accurate in regard to pitch or “interval integrity”; not as wide-ranging as other recordings

Most “Bizarre and Crazy”

• Barbara Sukowa, Reciter; Reinbert de Leeuw, Conductor (1988) – outrageous and “over-the-top”; incredibly “inaccurate”; affected; very exciting!

Most “Textbook”

• Christine Schäfer, Reciter; Pierre Boulez, Conductor (1997) – very well-performed; pitch and/or interval-accurate; sliding between pitches; vibrato on gesungen pitches – “straight” tone on Sprechstimme pitches; effective; dramatic but not melodramatic