

# “Give a man a mask and he’ll tell the truth”: Arnold Schoenberg, David Bowie, and the Mask of Pierrot

Alexander Carpenter

Volume 30, Number 2, 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1006375ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006375ar>

[See table of contents](#)

## Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

## ISSN

1911-0146 (print)

1918-512X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Carpenter, A. (2010). “Give a man a mask and he’ll tell the truth”: Arnold Schoenberg, David Bowie, and the Mask of Pierrot. *Intersections*, 30 (2), 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006375ar>

## Article abstract

There are striking parallels between Arnold Schoenberg’s treatment of the Pierrot character in 1912 and David Bowie’s adoption of Pierrot as an alter ego in 1980. For both musicians, Pierrot is a necessary mask, and each uses the “insolent clown” in his own way, but in the service of the same delicate negotiations between past and future, and between artifice and truth in art and self. In Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* and Bowie’s song “Ashes to Ashes,” we see and hear the music of the past alongside “a nostalgia for the future”: Pierrot provides the means—the mask—behind which musical reflection, self-examination, and psychological purgation can occur.

---

# “GIVE A MAN A MASK AND HE’LL TELL THE TRUTH”: ARNOLD SCHOENBERG, DAVID BOWIE, AND THE MASK OF PIERROT<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Carpenter

---

## INTRODUCTION

Although initially it might seem that arch-modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg and rock music icon David Bowie would be strange bedfellows, they share an intriguing relationship: each donned the mask of the Pierrot character, and for many of the same reasons. More specifically, the mask of Pierrot provided Schoenberg and Bowie the means for reflection upon the nature of art and the artist’s relationship to both his art and the world at large, and also upon personal lives and musical pasts that provided much of the substance and meaning of their respective works. Schoenberg’s 1912 melodrama *Pierrot Lunaire*, op. 21, is widely regarded as one of his most important compositions and is often described as a work of burgeoning neoclassic objectivism, characterized by parody and ironic detachment, that takes a step away from the intensely intuitive and deeply subjective expressionistic works that immediately precede it.<sup>2</sup> However, *Pierrot Lunaire*, with its highly satirical surface, is also a kind of musical and psychological summation, even a purgation of a creative and personal period in Schoenberg’s life—a turning point marking the effective end of Schoenberg’s free atonal “crisis” period and foreshadowing the more structured twelve-tone method.<sup>3</sup> David Bowie, almost seventy years later, adopted—literally—the guise of Pierrot for his 1980 album *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*, likewise a transitional work. As with Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, Bowie’s Pierrot-themed album served as both requiem for his earlier incarnations—as glam rock provocateur and avant-garde pop star—and as a means to establish a foothold in the future, namely the burgeoning new wave / new romantic aesthetic of the early 1980s, from which he would be launched into international superstardom.

---

<sup>1</sup> An early version of this essay was presented as a conference paper entitled “By this symbol is expressed ... everything that I am: Arnold Schoenberg, David Bowie and the Mask of Pierrot” at the annual conference of the Canadian University Music Society, University of Regina, June 6, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> See Auner (1997), Lessem (1979), Whittall (2004). Of course, Schoenberg himself insisted on the work’s “light, ironical satiric tone.” See below.

<sup>3</sup> Schoenberg’s so-called crisis years, 1908–09, encompass both his first wife’s affair with the painter Richard Gerstl (see below) and the advent of an intense compositional period predicated on an intuitive, psychological, or even psychoanalytic, hyper-expressionistic ethos. Lessem (1974) locates 1908 as the onset of a “crisis of expressionism” for both Schoenberg and his pupils; MacDonald (2008) includes the “crisis of 1908–09” in Schoenberg’s years of “peripeteia” (59).

This essay aims to contribute to the interpretation and understanding of the relationships between the music and biographies of both Arnold Schoenberg and David Bowie. It does so by contextualizing their respective uses of the Pierrot character and by examining how both musicians become inseparable from the sad, insolent clown. For both Schoenberg and Bowie, Pierrot's mask—as Oscar Wilde's well-known aphorism, and the title of this essay, suggests—makes it possible, even necessary, to use artifice to speak the truth about art and self, especially in moments of change and uncertainty. I begin this essay with a historical overview of the Pierrot character in the *Commedia dell'arte* tradition and locate his emergence as an archetype of the misunderstood artist in the latter half of the nineteenth century. I then revisit some of the potent autobiographical elements of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, challenging the characterization of the melodrama as a work of ironic detachment, a work from which Schoenberg stood at some distance. This discussion is followed by an examination of David Bowie's adoption of Pierrot as one of a number of his alter egos, in which I analyze the importance of Pierrot in his musical transformation from an androgynous iconoclast in the 1970s to mainstream new wave superstar of the 1980s. The essay concludes by reaffirming Wilde's point of view: the distance that wearing a mask presupposes is in fact undercut by the very nature of Pierrot, who symbolizes the artist at remove from humanity, but at the same time inevitably exposes the humanity of the artist.

## PIERROT: THE MASK AND THE CULT

Pierrot is usually described as a character from the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, but he is not really a direct product of Italian Renaissance theatre. Pierrot has been linked to Pulcinella and Pedrolino of the *commedia* as his distant ancestors; however, while Pierrot does share some features of these two characters, he follows a different evolutionary path, emerging as a unique character by the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> As A. G. Lehmann has noted, Pierrot is a “French interpolation” into the *commedia*, attributable to Molière's *Don Juan* of 1665 (1967, 209). In his earliest incarnations, Pierrot is something of a hapless and dull counterpart to the more cunning and quick-witted Harlequin, in

---

4 Pulcinella, according to Susan Youens, is Pierrot's forerunner in the *commedia*, “a character created in Naples who, chameleon-like, played many roles and who had a knack for parody, pranks, and playing the imposter” (1984, 96).

Robert Storey insists that Pedrolino, as he appears in Flaminio Scala's *Li Duo finti Zingari* (The two disguised gypsies) of 1611, is Pierrot's direct ancestor: “The Pedrolino of *Li Duo finite Zingari* represents a force, if symbol is too strong a word, of uncertainty, of misrule ... the *zanni* who, in name and personality, stands directly behind [Pierrot] ... the ‘Italian equivalent’ of Pierrot—is the Pedrolino of *Li Duo finite Zingari*” (1978, 14–41).

John Rudlin's study of *commedia* characters likewise claims Pedrolino as the forerunner of Pierrot, noting that the character's white-floured face allows for a wider range of emotional expressions. Pedrolino/Pierrot is also an introspective loner and completely honest. Rudlin describes Pulcinella, by contrast, as a chameleon and something of a sociopath, and while he has a complex interior life, he is in essence an egotist and a glutton (1994, 134–41).

Stan Hawkins also cites Pedrolino as Pierrot's direct ancestor and attributes the advent of Pierrot to the French mime Jean-Gaspard Deburau (2009, 60). Deburau did not literally create Pierrot, but rather brought him fully into the nineteenth century. See below.

essence a clueless rustic, far removed from the “pathetic moon-struck outcast” he becomes in his romantic, *fin-de-siècle* guise (210–11). Pierrot begins to reveal elements of the “melancholy artist-prototype” in the early eighteenth century, notably in Jean-Antoine Watteau’s 1716–17 *commedia*-themed paintings *Arlequin, Pierrot et Scapin*, and *Gilles* (Youens 1984, 99). While he does not look much like the modern white-faced and moonstruck Pierrot in these paintings, he nonetheless suggests some of the important qualities of his nineteenth- and twentieth-century successors: Pierrot is aloof and detached, invested with an air of lonely pride, self-sufficiency, and vulnerability (Youens 1984, 99). Pierrot is ubiquitous in Paris by the middle of the nineteenth century, becoming less of a prankster-chameleon and increasingly more detached, macabre, perverse, and dandified. Such a change is evident in the writings of Baudelaire, in the drawings of Adolphe Willette, and especially in portrayals of Pierrot by Parisian actor Jean-Gaspard Debureau (99–100). It may indeed have been Debureau who modernized Pierrot, creating a newly complex and nuanced character, described in 1832 by the French critic Jules Janin as “patient beyond measure; Pierrot is a loafer; Pierrot pokes fun under his breath; Pierrot has an air of knowing everything; Pierrot plays the fool; Pierrot possesses an admirable sang-froid; Pierrot—is the creation of Debureau” (qtd. in Storey 1978, 101).

Pierrot does not become fully invested with seriousness and deeper meaning, however, until the latter part of the nineteenth century, as part of the *commedia* revival, or *commedia* cult, as Dunsby (1992, 6) describes it. As of this time, “Pierrots were endemic everywhere in late nineteenth / early twentieth century Europe as an archetype of the self-dramatizing artist, who presents to the world a stylized mask both to symbolize and veil artistic ferment, to distinguish the creative artist from the human being” (Youens 1984, 96).

Indeed, in late nineteenth-century France there was a “popular Pierrot industry,” and by the 1880s it could be said that “Pierrot was all over the place” (Brinkmann 1997, 151). The French symbolists, especially Paul Verlaine, were particularly important to the cult of the *commedia*, and it is out of this tradition that Albert Giraud’s fifty *Pierrot Lunaire* poems of 1884 emerge.<sup>5</sup> Giraud’s poems trace an important trajectory: by the time we reach the final one, “Cristal de Bohême,” the poet himself has become Pierrot, thus binding together the moonstruck clown and the artist:

I’ve dressed as Pierrot  
To offer her whom I love  
A ray of moonlight closed up

---

5 Verlaine’s 1868 poem “Pierrot” introduces a very different version of the character, no longer the harmless lunar dreamer of old (“Ce n’est plus le rêveur lunaire du vieil air”), but rather a spectral, bloodless wraith, with eyes of burning phosphorous (“Ses yeux sont deux grands trous où rampe du phosphore”) (Verlaine 1999, 122). It is striking to compare Verlaine’s invocation of Pierrot with the faces in some of Schoenberg’s expressionistic paintings, circa 1910–11 (his so-called Visions or Gazes), which are rather hazy and indistinct—spectral, perhaps—but feature glowing and penetrating—indeed, burning—eyes. Schoenberg owned a German translation of a selection of Verlaine’s poems, but this collection contains none of Verlaine’s *commedia*-themed works. For scans of Schoenberg’s paintings, and for a catalogue of Schoenberg’s personal library, see the website of the Arnold Schönberg Center in Vienna, <http://www.schoenberg.at>.

In a flask of Bohemian crystal.

...

Just like Pierrot, with his flowered head,  
I carry under my mask and greasepaint  
A ray of moonlight closed up.<sup>6</sup>

Here, as the nineteenth century is drawing to a close, the artist definitively dons the mask of Pierrot, a mask that becomes a potent and paradoxical strategy through which the artist can explore a certain artistic ferment, the relationship between artist and world, and especially the artist's inner world. The paradox lies in the assumption of an identity, in playing a role—a Pierrot—as a means of exploring and expressing one's authentic identity. It is this vision of Pierrot as simultaneously character and poet, mask and man, that can contextualize Schoenberg's musical meditations on the insolent clown representing the confluence of art, self, and society.

### SCHOENBERG'S *PIERROT LUNAIRE*, OP. 21

Giraud's Pierrot poems—subtitled *Rondels bergamasque*—trace a narrative different from Schoenberg's melodrama, which comprises a selection of twenty-one of the poems, translated into German by Otto Erich Hartleben. In Giraud's collection, which is not really a unified cycle, the poems that feature Pierrot explicitly are interspersed with those depicting nature, other *commedia* characters, and an array of fantasy scenes and grotesqueries. Schoenberg, in response to a commission from the Viennese actress/reciter Albertine Zehme, selected the poems for his *Pierrot Lunaire* to construct a fairly specific narrative, that of “the plight of the artist in society” (Simms 2000, 125). This would likely not have been Schoenberg's first encounter with Pierrot. Both in Vienna and especially as a cabaret composer/arranger at Berlin's *Überbrettl* between 1901 and 1903, Schoenberg would have been exposed to the *commedia* revival that was sweeping the stages of Europe. As M. A. Katritzky asserts, “At the turn of the century, promoted by gifted directors such as Craig, Reinhardt and Meyerhold, in London, Berlin, Moscow, Paris, and Vienna, the comic masks of the *commedia dell'arte* ... played leading roles in an increasing number of mainstream plays, ballets, and operas” (1998, 100).<sup>7</sup> When Zehme commissioned *Pierrot Lunaire* in early 1912, then, Schoenberg may have already had some familiarity with the modern *commedia* tradition and its characters, especially newly resonant Pierrot. In fact, one of Schoenberg's Berlin cabaret songs (his *Überbrettl Lieder* of 1901) is a setting of Otto Bierbaum's text “Gigerlette,” which invokes Pierrot, referencing him in female form:

---

<sup>6</sup> Je suis en Pierrot costume / Pour offrir à celle que j'aime / Un rayon de lune enfermé / Dans un beau flacon de Bohème / ... Comme Pierrot, dans son chef blême, / Je sens, sous mon masque grime, / Un rayon de lune enfermé (qtd. in Simms 2000, 122).

<sup>7</sup> As an interesting aside, Max Reinhardt was a friend and early supporter of Schoenberg. Reinhardt was apparently enamoured by the *commedia* revival, and his “use of *commedia* did give its image and tricks much circulation” (Green and Swan 1986, 110).

Miss Gigerlette invited me to tea.  
 Her gown was as white as snow;  
 She was done up exactly like a Pierrot.  
 I'd wager that even a monk  
 Would look upon Gigerlette with pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

While Schoenberg, to the best of my knowledge, does not mention the Pierrot character in his writings before 1912, he was himself an artist living in the midst of a *commedia* revival, was familiar with the cabaret and popular theatre of his time, and was friendly with *commedia* enthusiasts like Max Reinhardt. Schoenberg and Pierrot, then, might well have been acquaintances before the advent of the composer's epochal melodrama.

Schoenberg famously insisted on having conceived *Pierrot Lunaire* as having a "light, ironic satirical tone,"<sup>9</sup> and some musicologists have subsequently characterized *Pierrot Lunaire* as dispassionate and parodic, a work in which Schoenberg "holds himself aloof" from the expressionist qualities of his preceding works, those comprising "an authentic expression of a personal worldview unmediated by artistic conventions that are external to it" (Lessem 1979, 126). Joseph Auner has suggested that, because the work was commissioned, Schoenberg had a "feeling of detachment from the project" (1997, 120). Reinhold Brinkmann, moreover, regards the work as a somewhat generic historical statement, a representation of "the problem of the artist in the modern period" (qtd. in Simms 2000, 131). The music of the melodrama "thus wears a theatrical mask, uttering tones that are always modified by the sense of 'as though'" (131).<sup>10</sup> I would argue, however, that Schoenberg is not detached from *Pierrot*; rather, the melodrama is as much a vehicle for personal expression as any of the preceding expressionist works. The fact that *Pierrot Lunaire* and Schoenberg's most baldly autobiographical work, *Die glückliche Hand*, op. 18, are exact contemporaries—his work on op. 18 was interrupted by the *Pierrot* commission—suggests that the composer, already committed to self-examination and revisiting the past via *Die glückliche Hand*, would also be fully present in the melodrama. As discussed below, an autobiographical interpretation of aspects of *Pierrot Lunaire* is not only possible, but fruitful. Pierrot—the mask that veils as it reveals—is adopted by Schoenberg to facilitate his "ironic-satiric" commentary on the poetry and to generate a commentary about the modern artist

---

<sup>8</sup> Fräulein Gigerlette lud mich ein zum Tee. / Ihre Toilette war gestimmt auf Schnee; / Ganz wie Pierrette war sie angetan. / Selbst ein Mönch, ich wette, sähe Gigerlette wohlgefällig an. My translation. See below regarding Pierrot as an androgyne.

<sup>9</sup> According to Schoenberg's biographer Willi Reich (1981, 74), among others.

<sup>10</sup> Brinkmann calls the subjunctive "the mode of Schönberg's Pierrot music," no doubt thinking of Ferruccio Busoni's vivid description of the melodrama in 1913 (1997, 157). In a letter to Egon Petri, dated June 19, 1913, Busoni writes of the "masterful passages and some moments of genius" that he finds in the work, noting, "as if [als ob] a large musical mechanism had been assembled from crumbled ingredients, and as if some of these ingredients have been put to uses other than those for which they were originally designed" (Busoni 1987, 169).

Whittall (2004) has pithily addressed a number of the conflicting musicological perspectives on the question of *Pierrot* as a work of detachment versus autobiography.

and society, to be sure; but Pierrot also allows the composer order to reflect upon his own past, in a voice that is both Pierrot's and his own.

The melodrama is a complex and paradoxical work, born out of both the highly instinctive creativity that characterizes Schoenberg's early atonal works of 1908–09, and the burgeoning desire for ever greater coherence, cohesion, and logic. Ethan Haimo has remarked that *Pierrot Lunaire* comes from a "period of indecision and epitomizes [the] odd coexistence" of traditional and non-traditional methods of organization (2004, 154). Indeed, the melodrama combines intuitive, free, atonal writing with strict polyphonic procedures, including canon, fugue, and passacaglia, along with traditional musical styles, most notably the Viennese waltz. Theodor Adorno also identifies this paradox, citing "Schoenberg's two fundamental intentions, the explosively anti-conventional one and the cohesively constructive one," which would ultimately be synthesized in the twelve-tone method (2002, 640). During this volatile and liminal time, Schoenberg was "in the throes of reinventing himself," as Bryn-Julson and Mathews observe (2009, 21). *Pierrot Lunaire* must thus be understood musically as both a paradoxical and transitional work: a free atonal masterpiece and outgrowth of Schoenberg's psychological compositional aesthetic (art as the manifestation of inner need, of *Müssen*), but also a work that was stimulated by external forces—a commission—and in which some of the constructive elements of dodecaphony can already be found.<sup>11</sup>

The difficulty in interpreting the melodrama is compounded by the fact that Schoenberg spoke "with such a mixture of voices" (Simms 2000, 131), making it difficult to understand the work as a unified statement.<sup>12</sup> Susan Youens's oft-cited interpretation of *Pierrot Lunaire* looks to the work's core for answers, finding "the narration of an artist's rejection of and reconciliation with his past, of the spiritual violence that comes from the attempt to obliterate tradition and therefore to deny who and what one is" (1984, 114). This is an artistic and historical journey; Youens shies away from "the perils of biographical fallacy," electing to deny "a more personal meaning" to *Pierrot Lunaire* (114). There is much that is personal in this work, however. Schoenberg's melodrama is a reflection upon both his musical and personal history, and it is not biographical fallacy to see Schoenberg assuming, contingently, the paradoxical guise of Pierrot himself. Indeed, I would argue that Schoenberg's affinity for the Pierrot

<sup>11</sup> This is the case with no. 8, "Nacht," for example, which is a passacaglia with canonic sequences, but also a piece in which, in Schoenberg's words, "the content of [the first measure] is ... deployed in both the vertical and horizontal dimensions. This idea is only fully realizable in twelve-tone composition" (qtd. in Simms 2000, 138). Schoenberg insisted that, around the time he was composing *Pierrot* and *Die glückliche Hand*, he was thinking about this proto-dodecaphonic vertical-horizontal integration—specifically about the use of chords as motifs—"even before the introduction of the basic set" (qtd. in Dahlhaus 1997, 126).

<sup>12</sup> Schoenberg, it seems to me, speaks in *Pierrot Lunaire* with something akin to Mahlerian irony, itself a challenge to read at times. Mahler's symphonies have moments that are simultaneously parodic and sincerely sentimental, ironic and self-examining, and it can be difficult to know which "voices" are the authentic ones.

Moreover, as Dunsby observes, this question of "whose voice?" is further complicated by the fact that there is no protagonist as such in *Pierrot Lunaire*, "no lucid relationship between the focus of attention, the woman reciter, and the focus of textual attention, Pierrot himself" (1992, 35).



commission stems from the fact that he is himself a Pierrot at heart: a creature of both calculated outward gestures and deep, even haunted introversion.

As Pierrot, Schoenberg may well be commenting on his own past, especially the infidelity of his wife, Mathilde, in the summer of 1908, from which the marriage never recovered, and which coincided with Schoenberg's earliest atonal pieces.<sup>13</sup> There is, at least tacitly, a love triangle in *Pierrot Lunaire*, the same triangle that appears in the monodrama *Erwartung*, op. 17, of 1909 (with its themes of infidelity and psychological distress), and in the contemporaneous *Die glückliche Hand*, op. 18 (which focuses on the suffering of a cuckolded and misunderstood artist—see below). *Pierrot Lunaire*, when staged, quite often includes some representation of the triangle of Pierrot-Columbine-Cassander, a variant on the traditional *commedia* triangle of Pierrot-Columbine-Harlequin, in which Pierrot is hopelessly in love with the fickle and inconstant Columbine and usually loses her to Harlequin. In this autobiographical formulation, Cassander serves as the resurrected Richard Gerstl, the young painter who was Schoenberg's rival for his wife's affections. Schoenberg can thus be seen in the melodrama as taking vicarious revenge on his dead rival—whom he never forgot about or forgave—by boring a hole into his head to make a pipe in “Gemeinheit,” or by sawing away at his head with a giant violin bow in “Serenade” (see below).<sup>14</sup>

Brinkmann's interpretation of *Pierrot Lunaire* is, like that of Youens, somewhat cautious when it comes to these autobiographical elements. He describes the melodrama instead as “music about its own presence ... music about history”; Schoenberg's Pierrot is parodic and allegorical, with Schoenberg himself emphasizing the work's “light” tone, “referring to distancing as an artistic principle.” (1997, 146, 155). This view is, however, nuanced by his suggestion that, while *Pierrot Lunaire* is not primarily “sounding biography,” Schoenberg's Pierrot is himself clearly Viennese: “a Viennese puppet” (162). Brinkmann derives his conclusion by virtue of Vienna's *fin-de-siècle* Pierrot craze, the references to Viennese waltzes in *Pierrot Lunaire*, and the fact that at certain moments in the melodrama, Schoenberg himself seems to become the poet/Pierrot, encoding himself into the work through instrumentation, specifically the use of the cello, Schoenberg's own instrument (160–62). The waltzes in *Pierrot Lunaire* are a particularly important clue, as they are meaningful signifiers for Schoenberg (Carpenter 2009). They appear in his oeuvre in clusters, at moments of personal and artistic crisis and change, and often as tokens of Schoenberg's

---

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the texted music of the crisis years 1908–09 (i.e., the second string quartet, op. 10, *The Book of the Hanging Garden* songs, op. 15, the monodrama *Erwartung*, the *Die glückliche Hand*) seems to deal exclusively with Schoenberg's feelings about his failing marriage, inevitably and inextricably coupled with his artistic struggles and failure to be understood as an artist. As is the case in *Pierrot Lunaire*, artistic and personal suffering and struggle were never really separable for Schoenberg.

<sup>14</sup> Gerstl committed suicide when the affair with Mathilde ended later in 1908, and it became clear that he was no longer welcome in Schoenberg's circle. The painter's very name continued to be anathema to Schoenberg for the rest of his life, and the composer's resentment towards Mathilde resurfaced occasionally between the end of the affair and her death in 1923. On the Gerstl affair and Schoenberg's feelings towards Mathilde and Gerstl afterwards, see Beaumont (2000), Carpenter (2009), and Simms (2000).



past. The waltzes in *Pierrot* are part of the cluster that appears in the works of the tumultuous free atonal period of 1908–12; it is notable that the melodrama, as a transitional work, contains three prominent waltzes: “Columbine,” “Valse di Chopin,” and “Serenade.” It is not difficult to imagine the poignancy these particular texts may have held for Schoenberg, especially the latter two. The fact that “Columbine” is set as a waltz is significant because it is the only one of twenty-one pieces in *Pierrot* to directly address the female member of the melodrama’s love triangle. The “Valse di Chopin” is a timely meditation on memory and being haunted by the past, with the waltz playing an almost Freudian role as the return of the repressed: “Melancholy, sombre waltz / I can’t get you out of my head / You cling to my thoughts / Like a pale drop of blood!”<sup>15</sup> It is particularly significant that Schoenberg set “Serenade” as a waltz: as noted by Brinkmann, above, Schoenberg inserts himself here into narrative via the cello, and thus seems to appear in this number as *Pierrot*, himself, torturing his rival Cassander/Gerstl by playing on his head “with a grotesque gigantic bow.”<sup>16</sup>

To add further weight to the notion of *Pierrot Lunaire* as autobiographical, it is worth considering Schoenberg’s often-quoted remarks on the nature of *Pierrot* himself, which appear as a note in a copy of the score Schoenberg gave to his brother-in-law, the composer Alexander Zemlinsky, in 1916. In the note, Schoenberg muses about how the artist tries to avoid being identified as an artist by society—“we are trying our best to wipe off the imaginary moon spots from our clothing”—while simultaneously striving to live an artistic, inspired life, one in which poets and artists are crucified—“at the same time that we worship our crosses”—by society (Schoenberg, qtd. in Simms 2000, 126). Schoenberg’s note to Zemlinsky ends with a fascinating and ambiguous phrase, touching on what is surely a defining aspect of his personal philosophy, namely that your enemies give you the strength to carry on: “From the scorn from our wounds [from the cross of art] comes our scorn for our enemies and our power to sacrifice our lives to a moonbeam. One could easily get emotional by thinking about the *Pierrot* poetry. But for the cuckoo is anything more important than the price of grain?”<sup>17</sup> (qtd. in Simms 2000, 127). This reference to a cuckoo here is striking. It is, first and foremost, mistranslated: an idiomatic phrase, the original German, “Aber zum Kuckuck” means, loosely, “What the hell ...” A more accurate translation of this final phrase, in context, might be “But what the hell, isn’t there more to life than the price of corn?” referring to the disconnect between the dreamy, visionary realm of the modern artist and the mundane world. While this line of thinking risks wandering perhaps too far into the dangerous realm of psychobiography and the vagaries of translation, I

<sup>15</sup> Melancholisch dürstrer Walzer, / Kommst mir nimmer aus den Sinnen! / Haftest mir an den Gedanken, / Wie ein blasser Tropfen Bluts!

<sup>16</sup> Träumend spielt er auf der Glatze / Mit groteskem Riesenbogen.

<sup>17</sup> “Von der Verachtung für unsere Wunden stammt die Verachtung für unsere Feinde, stammt unsere Kraft, unsere Leben einem Mondstrahl zu opfern. Man wird leicht pathetisch, wenn man an die *Pierrot*-Dichtung denkt. Aber zum Kuckuck, gibt es denn nur mehr Getreidepreise?” (see Simms 2000, 235–36n35).

nonetheless think that Schoenberg's "Kuckuck," in relation to *Pierrot Lunaire*, is not wholly meaningless.<sup>18</sup> That Schoenberg, in thinking about Pierrot as the struggling modern artist and as an autobiographical character, would invoke a cuckoo suggests that the interpretation of the melodrama as an expressionistic reference to the Gerstl affair is more than merely plausible. Given the extent to which the themes of destroyed love and the suffering artist/cuckold characterize a number of Schoenberg's works between 1908 and 1913, it would be more surprising if these feelings and ideas were not somehow transmuted into *Pierrot Lunaire*.<sup>19</sup>

The irony said to characterize *Pierrot Lunaire* can thus be understood as twofold: first, a musical irony that involves the play of historical musical idioms, but second, as what Brinkmann calls a "cover that veils" Schoenberg's concerns about "the overturning of everything one has believed in" (qtd. in Brinkmann 1997, 148). This overturning of everything relates not just to the historical moment, but also more specifically to Schoenberg's artistic vision and personal life. Schoenberg is not so far removed from "his Pierrot" as is often suggested; rather, the "artistic success [of *Pierrot Lunaire*] is in part rooted in the composer's identification, even momentary ... with the images and gestures of his Pierrot" (Green and Swan 1986, 202–03). Courtney Adams's study of the relationship between Schoenberg's music and paintings reaffirms this: she quite rightly identifies autobiographical elements—an emphasis on loss, "self-focus and alienation"—in many of the works of the atonal period, and points specifically to some of the pieces in *Pierrot* as connected to Schoenberg's personal life, "especially those that reflect martyrdom, persecution, or horror," themes that are also strongly manifested in his paintings (1995, 9). After completing the first *Pierrot* setting, "Gebet an Pierrot," in a single day, Schoenberg famously enthused in his diary that the music was "being transmitted directly ... The sounds here are virtually a direct, animal-like expression of sensual and psychological emotions" (Schoenberg 1974, 34).<sup>20</sup> This direct expression of the psychological—strongly reminiscent, as Simms has remarked, of Schoenberg's

<sup>18</sup> I am very grateful to Dr. Raleigh Whiting of the University of Alberta's Modern Languages Department for a fruitful and informative email exchange about this passage. Dr. Jean Snoor of Memorial University was also pulled into this conversation and generously provided an ad hoc translation, which I draw upon here. I directed my initial queries about his passage to Dr. Kim Fordham at the Augustana campus of the University of Alberta, who also provided me with some very useful information and guidance.

As I understand it, the German word for "cuckold" would be *Hahnrei*, and so Schoenberg may well simply be using this phrase as a colloquial throwaway expression. However, Schoenberg did not necessarily have to use *Kuckuck* in this phrase: other animals can be substituted (especially *Geier*—vulture), and the meaning is unchanged.

<sup>19</sup> Although the sketches are undated, it would seem that *Die glückliche Hand*, op. 18, was, in the main, composed between 1911 and 1913. As mentioned above, *Pierrot Lunaire*, composed between March and July 1912, would have temporarily interrupted Schoenberg's work on op. 18, a work that dramatizes explicitly the triangle of Mathilde Schoenberg–Arnold Schoenberg–Richard Gerstl. In *Die glückliche Hand*, Schoenberg's character, the Man, suffers scorn and derision as both a misunderstood artist and a cuckold. At the end of the work, he is figuratively and literally crushed by the Woman and her well-dressed lover, the Gentleman.

<sup>20</sup> Die Klänge werden hier ein geradezu tierisch unmittelbarer Ausdruck sinnlicher und seelischer Bewegungen. Fast als ob alles direkt übertragen wäre.

compositional ethos as of 1909, at the apogee of the free atonal, expressionist period, when Schoenberg's approach to art relied heavily on instinct and the direct expression of the unconscious (2000, 126)—contradicts the notion of *Pierrot* as simply a work defined by parody, irony, and sarcasm, or as essentially a study of musical form, as Schoenberg suggested to Kandinsky, than to expressive content (Auner 1997, 120–21). *Pierrot* is, rather, a paradoxical blend of both detachment and unmediated self-examination and self-expression. For Schoenberg, *Pierrot*'s is a momentary but necessary mask: it is the modern artist's mask of extravagance and "ironic duplicity," to be sure, but behind the mask of *Pierrot* we find the artist irresolute, in the midst of a "*crise d'identité*" (Storey 1978, 126).

The *commedia* cult is thought to have come to an end around 1930, and while the cult is "long gone," asserts Dunsby (1992, 9), *Pierrot* nonetheless makes occasional reappearances throughout the twentieth century. Green and Swan (1986) cite a number of characters and works that continue the tradition of *Pierrot* and the *commedia* through the century: Charlie Chaplin, whose Tramp draws upon some of *Pierrot*'s traits, in that he is "a dreamer, a vulnerable and sensitive romantic for whom the world is a place of mystery—and sometimes a cruel and callous maze" (128); Federico Fellini, who "can see all of humanity through clown eyes" in his films, and throughout the 1950s and 1960s (culminating with the 1970 film *The Clowns*) uses a number of clown characters that invoke the naiveté, pathos, and dreaminess of *Pierrot* (155); and novelists like Isak Dinesen—who wrote *commedia*-themed stories and dressed up like *Pierrot*—and Evelyn Waugh, whose novels of the late 1920s to the early 1940s often used *commedia* stereotypes and employ variations on the *Pierrot*-Columbina-Harlequin triangle (251). In the latter part of the twentieth century, *Pierrot* also resurfaces in pop music. I argue in the second part of this paper that *Pierrot*'s most meaningful reincarnation, some fifty years after the effective end of the *commedia* cult, is brought about by David Bowie, who uses the mask of *Pierrot* in the service of his own personal and artistic crisis of the late 1970s.

## DAVID BOWIE AND PIERROT

How did Bowie arrive at *Pierrot* as the mask for his transformation from his provocative 1970s personae into one of the most iconic new wave stars of the 1980s, and ultimately a superstar of the burgeoning MTV era? No doubt his experiences with Scottish mime Lindsey Kemp in the late 1960s was a major influence. The qualities of theatricality and ironic detachment that mark much of Bowie's work are traceable back to his early mime training with Kemp, who was known for his experimental, avant-garde works and who connected Bowie to late-sixties queer culture (Waldrep 2004, 108). Kemp may well have provided Bowie with his definitive theatre training, introducing him to the *commedia dell'arte* tradition and to Japanese kabuki theatre, both aesthetic touchstones throughout Bowie's career. Bowie appeared in Kemp's 1967–68 touring production of *Pierrot in Turquoise* (though not in the role of *Pierrot*), and wrote several *commedia*-themed songs for the production, including "Columbine"

and “Threepenny Pierrot.” Bowie’s renowned facility in shifting from character to character and from musical style to musical style likely owes much to Kemp’s eclectic—and it should be added, highly sexualized—approach to performance, an approach that was predicated largely on the character of Pierrot. According to Bowie, Kemp “was a living Pierrot. He lived and talked Pierrot. He was tragic and dramatic and everything in his life—theatrical. And so the stage thing for him was just an extension of himself” (qtd. in Cromelin 1972). Certainly, we must regard Bowie as a Pierrot, too, and the ambiguity between performer and person, or persona and person he ascribes to Kemp was, for many years, Bowie’s defining characteristic as a pop performer. As I presently discuss, however, Bowie and Kemp were not the only artists to successfully employ the mask of Pierrot in this era.

### POP PIERROT: LEO SAYER’S SAD LITTLE CLOWN

Perhaps the best-known use of Pierrot in pop before Bowie can be attributed to the British singer/songwriter Leo Sayer, who wore a Pierrot costume and makeup in 1974 while performing songs from his first album, *Silverbird*. Sayer, who wrote a number of commercially successful songs, is remembered principally for his disco anthem “You Make Me Feel Like Dancing” (which won a Grammy in 1978) and for the 1977 ballad “When I Need You.” He originally rose to fame with his 1973 song “The Show Must Go On,” in essence a performance piece that would come to feature Sayer as Pierrot. Sayer chose the Pierrot image as a means to give the words of his songs intensified meaning, coming as they were from the perspective of the performer as a lonely clown:

It’s sort of a sad and lonely figure, and perhaps a bit of a moralizing figure ... He stepped into the limelight when we were first thinking about the album. I think he progressed quite naturally from the songs. See, my standpoint in the lyrics is rather one of a clown—a bit of an idiot ... We chose the Pierrot because he’s the sad, lonely figure who really doesn’t want to get involved at all. He’s the face behind me. You don’t tear the mask off the clown—you tear the mask off me and he’s the character inside. I think he’s the little sad character which lurks inside everybody. (qtd. in Cromelin 1974)

For Sayer-as-Pierrot, the point was to portray a sort of everyman-loner; it was also a gimmick, as he would admit in the years following, rather than a serious artistic statement. American audiences were not particularly interested in the Pierrot character, and Sayer himself wanted to be able to relate to the audience directly, not play a character on stage. Although it was originally just an album concept, Sayer found that British audiences liked the dress-up aspect of his performance and demanded the clown makeup. It soon became “jaded,” he recounts; moreover, the song most directly associated with his Pierrot character, “The Show Must Go On,” was for Sayer—a performer who insisted on the importance of the communication of emotion, and who imbued most of his songs with autobiographical elements—a silly tune, simply an amusing song without personal or emotional investment (Moore 1975). As Sayer suggests, it

was the addition of Pierrot that temporarily gave this otherwise frivolous little song some deeper significance. Sayer undeniably brought Pierrot to the attention of mainstream pop audiences; however, it would take several more years and a skilful, visionary performer like David Bowie to ultimately reconnect artist and clown in a meaningful way.

## BOWIE'S MASKS

While Bowie certainly would have been aware of Sayer's Pierrot, it seems unlikely he would have been moved or influenced by it. Sayer was not a trained mime or actor, nor did he have any pretensions to high art, in the way Bowie did as of the late 1970s. Moreover, Bowie had already been thinking seriously about the nature of Pierrot and music several years before Sayer's arrival on the pop music scene. The 1970s were the years in which Bowie himself emerged from relative obscurity as a British folk/pop scene into superstardom, in large part via the *succès de scandale* of his early, provocatively androgynous (or more accurately, flamboyantly gay) stage personae: glam-rock alien transvestite Ziggy Stardust and the kabuki-clad Aladdin Sane. Bowie apparently adopted these early personae—these masks—as a means to overcome his discomfort with performance. This would mark the onset of an artificiality for which he would become famous.<sup>21</sup> Bowie himself says of Ziggy Stardust, “I packaged a totally credible plastic rock star ... My plastic rocker was much more plastic than anybody else's” (qtd. in Welch 1999, 49). In the midst of the 1972 *Ziggy Stardust* tour, Bowie was clearly aware of the efficacy of the rock star wearing interchangeable masks: he recounted to rock journalist Charles Murray, “I'm still totally involved with Ziggy. I probably will be for a few months getting it entirely out of my system, and then we'll don another mask” (Murray 1972). Indeed, as Shelton Waldrep has noted, “The seventies were for Bowie a time in which he always wore a mask and seemed afraid to take it off lest his fame fade” (2004, 110). In another interview in the early seventies, Bowie asserted that his flamboyant stage persona was not gimmickry, but rather the terms he set for a rock-as-theatre approach in which the boundaries between a performer's on- and off-stage lives are blurred. Audiences, Bowie said, “must come on my terms or not at all. My performances have got to be theatrical experience for me as well as for the audience. I don't want to climb out of my fantasies in order to go up on stage—I want to take them on stage with me” (Mendelsohn 1971). Clearly still under the influence of his theatrical training with Kemp, Bowie goes on to insist that, while pop music can be serious, it should not be taken

<sup>21</sup> Much of the contemporary scholarship concerned with the glam-era Bowie tends to focus on sexual politics, on Bowie as a gender-bender—as homosexual or bisexual, or as sexually androgynous or ambiguous. For example, Auslander's (2006) study of glam rock examines Bowie's performance of a queer identity in the 1970s; Waldrep (2004) locates Bowie's within a Wildean paradigm for understanding camp and queer culture generally; Hawkins focuses on Bowie as a “dandy” who “resurrect[ed] androgyny and transvestism through intellectual stylishness ... rejected heteronormative constraints ... [and] heaped scorn on the machismo that typified the rock music of the day” (2009, 18). While Bowie's sexuality and relationship to queer culture is certainly an important aspect of his music and biography, and his work of the 1970s especially is commonly viewed through this lens, it is not the subject of this paper.

too seriously as a medium: “I think it should be tarted up, made into a prostitute, a parody of itself. It should be the clown, the Pierrot medium. The music is the mask the message wears—music is the Pierrot and I, the performer, am the message” (1971). Pierrot, in other words, obfuscates but also facilitates the underlying seriousness of the message.<sup>22</sup>

Even before the transformative early seventies, Bowie was already very interested in the idea of the performer wearing a mask. In 1969 he had composed and filmed *The Mask*, a promotional mime piece with narration in which he presciently appears as a performer who dons a mask, becomes famous, and then is subsequently corrupted by fame to the point where he can no longer remove the mask. In other words, for Bowie, performer and mask were inseparable from the start. Pierrot was not merely dress-up, but rather the medium itself—an embodiment of music—through which the performer’s message was conveyed. When the time came for Bowie’s message to change, following the creatively fecund and exhausting Berlin period, he turned once again to a familiar and necessary mask.

### BERLIN AND “ASHES TO ASHES”

Bowie’s return to Pierrot came in 1980, after a tumultuous near-decade of drug-fueled creativity. From late 1971 onwards, Bowie began to adopt a series of different personae for each album, including Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, Halloween Jack, and the Thin White Duke; each album also contains a change in musical style. By 1977, cocaine-addled, emaciated, and psychologically unstable, Bowie moved to Berlin with his friend, collaborator, and fellow drug addict Iggy Pop, in an attempt to break free from drugs and regain control of his life. In the three years that followed, Bowie produced his “Berlin Trilogy,” three albums that exemplify a potent experimental ethos and comprise his most influential and critically acclaimed work. These albums—*Low*, *Heroes*, and *Lodger*—were produced in collaboration with Brian Eno, who introduced Bowie to a number of techniques and concepts borrowed from the world of avant-garde art music—in particular minimalism and indeterminacy—in order to foster spontaneity, chance, and creativity in the recording studio. The Berlin albums also feature unusual song forms, unconventional instruments, and the use of new electronic effects and processors. Two of the three albums included all-instrumental B-sides that, while enduringly popular, do not betoken a performer aiming for chart success but rather a songwriter who is “intolerably bored” with conventional approaches to music and lyrics (Pegg 2006,

---

<sup>22</sup> Julie Pednault-Deslausier in her paper “Pierrot L.,” presented at the 2010 meeting of the American Musicological Society meeting in Indianapolis, shows that Pierrot is not only an archetype for the misunderstood artist, but also that, as an increasingly dandified and even grotesque figure closer to the end of the nineteenth century (as exemplified in Paul Margueritte’s 1882 play *Pierrot assassin de sa femme*), Pierrot becomes an archetypal hysteric-androgyne—a hybrid of sorts, without clearly defined gender, struggling to express himself. This has obvious implications for understanding Bowie as Pierrot, but also even Schoenberg, who certainly seems like a male hysteric during the crisis years of 1908–13, insofar as he “suffers from memory” (as Freud describes the hysteric’s condition) and his unconscious seeks a variety of avenues for expression.



307). The culmination of this experimental, introverted, and transitional period is the 1979 album *Lodger*, in which pop music conventions are fused with an array of world music influences and heterogeneous experimental sounds, textures, and performance practices.<sup>23</sup> Immediately following *Lodger*, Bowie took a U-turn—presaged in some of the *Lodger* songs—towards a more accessible, strongly pop-oriented aesthetic on his 1980 album *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*.<sup>24</sup> The album, on which the vestiges of the experimental ethos of the Berlin period are mitigated by the return of “more familiar pop melodies with a contemporary disco pulse” (Welch 1999, 133) was intended, in Bowie’s words, as a “purge,” as a means to revisit the past to better understand the present: “You have to accommodate your pasts within your persona. You have to understand why you went through them. You cannot just ignore them or put them out of your mind or pretend they didn’t happen or just say ‘Oh I was so different then’” (qtd. in Welch 1999, 132).

“Ashes to Ashes,” the first single from this album (on the cover of which Bowie appears in Pierrot costume), was released in August 1980 and accompanied by what was then the most expensive music video yet produced. The pivot point of Bowie’s changing musical direction, the song retains musical elements from the Berlin period and comments lyrically on Bowie’s personal history, but is really about the need not merely for reflection but for revisiting the past in order to break with it and move forward. The song itself does not directly reference Pierrot but rather one of Bowie’s earliest fictional creations, Major Tom, the astronaut protagonist of Bowie’s epochal song “Space Oddity,” who set the stage in 1969 for Bowie’s subsequent transformations into a coterie of otherworldly characters. “Ashes to Ashes,” as the title suggests, is a sort of requiem, in which Bowie buries Major Tom, now clearly an autobiographical character, representing Bowie’s musical and personal pasts, and especially his excesses of the 1970s.<sup>25</sup> The schizophrenia that this presupposes appears in the song itself, where the voice of Bowie the singer is often doubled or echoed by

---

<sup>23</sup> *Lodger* is a somewhat ambiguous and uneven album. As Marc Spitz suggests, it was regarded by critics in 1979 as “the least of the three [Berlin albums].” It was panned by critics like Jon Savage, whose *New Musical Express* review described it as “a nice enough pop record ... slightly faceless”; on the other hand, the musicians associated with it, like guitarist Adrian Belew, found it more experimental than the two previous Berlin albums, leading directly into the New Wave aesthetic of the early 1980s (qtd. in Spitz 2009, 298).

<sup>24</sup> Of course, it goes without saying that Bowie was a successful and accessible pop star throughout much of the 1970s, although his commercial success was somewhat uneven. Certainly, from *David Bowie* in 1969 to *Station to Station* in 1976, Bowie was in the pop mainstream, and his albums and singles consistently made the UK pop charts and had some success abroad; however, his music charted across a wide range, from the top to nearer the bottom. This paper argues that Bowie’s evolution into a New Wave superstar in the early 1980s—certainly coincident with the advent of MTV—eclipsed much of his earlier commercial success and marked a change in direction from the Berlin trilogy. In 1983, Bowie definitively broke into the U.S. market with the album *Let’s Dance*, which spawned three top ten singles; the accompanying videos received heavy rotation on MTV and led to Bowie’s definitive transformation into a pop music superstar of international scale and scope.

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to a reviewer of an earlier version of this article for pointing out that “Ashes to Ashes” is part of a tradition of pop songs that reference and recontextualize a group or artist’s earlier songs, or earlier incarnations of themselves, thereby making direct connections to the past and inviting autobiographical (re)interpretation (e.g., the Beatles’s “Glass Onion,” which mentions “Strawberry



Bowie's muted speaking voice in the background, and also in the song's music video, in which Bowie appears as three distinct characters.

"Ashes to Ashes" begins with an invocation of Major Tom: "Do you remember a guy that's been / in such an early song?" In the first bridge, Bowie / Major Tom sings of his failing health and of trying to stay clean: "I ain't got no money and I ain't got no hair / But I'm hoping to kick but the planet it's glowing." The chorus, which is blatantly autobiographical, identifies Major Tom as a junkie, "Strung out in heaven's high / Hitting an all-time low." In the song's final verses, Bowie / Major Tom sings of trying to stay clean, but in vain as the drugs keep returning: "The little green wheels are following me (oh no, not again) / I'm stuck with a valuable friend." The final verse of the song ends with a plaintive cry expressing the desire to be free of drug addiction: "Want an axe to break the ice / Want to come down right now." The song's codetta contains its most famous line, repeated like a mantra: "My mother said / To get things done / You'd better not mess with Major Tom." This childish rhyme—thought to have been derived from the nursery rhyme "My mother said / That I never should / Play with the gypsies in the wood"—should be interpreted as Bowie's attempt to recapture the innocence of his past. Indeed, the video evokes what Buckley (2001) describes as "a world of nostalgia, childhood reminiscence and distant memories" (368). According to Bowie himself, the song and video comprise "an ode to childhood, if you like, a popular nursery rhyme" (qtd. in MacKinnon 1980). "Ashes to Ashes" also affirms the need to move forward: Bowie asserts that the "general drive" of the song and video is towards a paradoxical "nostalgia for the future" (qtd. in MacKinnon 1980).

As Simms has noted in regards to Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, "Ashes to Ashes" is a work in which music and text align in such a way as to suggest a number of different voices. James Perone has described the "unusually high degree of contrast from phrase to phrase" in the song, with a number of key changes—the song modulates between A minor, G major, C major, and A major<sup>26</sup>—registral changes, and "contrasting singing styles"—a breathless falsetto in the first verse; a deadpan monotone (Bowie's *Sprechstimme*?) in the third; a low, enervated delivery in the chorus; falsetto again in verse four; and a plaintive, keening tone in the final verse. "The sectional nature of the music of the verses allows Bowie to shift poetic voice and focus easily from one section to the next" (Perone 2007, 81–82); that is, from Major Tom, to Bowie, to disinterested narrator and back. The nostalgic elements in the lyrics—Bowie's "ode to childhood," made explicit by the nursery rhyme at the end of the song, adds another poetic voice, enmeshing both childish and adult sensibilities into a single text.

---

Fields" and "I Am the Walrus"; Bob Dylan's "Sara" references "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands"; the Kinks's "Destroyer," which invokes "Lola," etc.).

<sup>26</sup> These chords are heard a semitone higher on the recording. It is logical to assume that the song was conceived, and perhaps recorded, using rudimentary chords and then transposed a half step higher by speeding up the final recording. As noted below, Bowie claims that the song was based on the very first guitar chords he had learned as a child, which were probably not A-sharp minor, G-sharp major, etc.

There is a further analogue with *Pierrot Lunaire*: specifically, in the suggestions of Bowie confronting and absorbing his own musical past, not only in the leftovers from the Berlin albums, but perhaps even in the funky slapping and popping of the song's main bass line, which hints at Bowie's "plastic soul" phase of the mid-seventies, in which he flirted with African-American musical styles (Perone 2007, 81). Looking more purposefully, Bowie's musical past is also found in harmonic reminiscences of Major Tom, as "Ashes to Ashes" is cast in a harmonic world similar to that of "Space Oddity." Particularly notable in both songs is the use of the subdominant chord. In "Ashes to Ashes," it is the chord F major (heard as F-sharp major on the recording), which appears prominently when the song suddenly modulates from G major to C major at the beginning of the second verse, when Major Tom's "message"—"They got a message from the Action Man"—is received by Ground Control. F major is also the first chord of the chord progression in the chorus—beginning "Ashes to Ashes, funk to funky"—its prominent placement further emphasizing its significance. The ethereal introduction to "Space Oddity" (which is predominantly in C major) is a subdominant F major 7th chord, which returns—prominently placed, again, as in "Ashes to Ashes"—as the leading chord in the harmonic progression of the song's two bridges, which begin "For here am I floating in / round my tin can."

Finally, Bowie looks back musically even farther than Major Tom, into his distant musical past, resurrecting in "Ashes to Ashes" some of the earliest music he learned to play, namely the chords to the song "Inchworm," from the 1952 musical *Hans Christian Anderson*. As Bowie recounts, "The chords were some of the first I learned on guitar. They're remarkable chords, very melancholic. 'Ashes to Ashes' is influenced by that. It's childlike and melancholic in that children's story way" (qtd. in Pegg 2006, 28). In the end, then, for Bowie/Pierrot of "Ashes to Ashes," it seems that, "to get things done" musically, old songs and old styles must be brought to light to be left behind. Bowie makes this clear not only in the music and lyrics, but especially in the revolutionary music video for the song, which laid the foundations for the music video not only as an essential promotional tool but also as an art form.

In the video—its release predates the advent of MTV by a year—Bowie appears as three different characters: as an astronaut (clearly Major Tom), an asylum inmate in a padded room, and as Pierrot. It is by far Bowie/Pierrot who appears most often in the video, as Bowie has assumed Pierrot as the central character for this album and creative period.<sup>27</sup> The video itself is an early example of a music video focused on abstract visual imagery rather than documenting a performance or strictly following a song's narrative. Bowie's adoption of the Pierrot image may have been his final creative transformation: what was to follow would be, for many fans and critics, a period of commercialism and artistic bankruptcy. While Bowie regarded the song as "wrapping up the seventies really for myself, and that seemed a good enough epitaph for it" (qtd.

---

<sup>27</sup> The video is about three minutes and forty-five seconds in length; Bowie-as-Pierrot occupies about half of the screen time, approximately one minute and forty-five seconds.

in Pegg 2006, 28), for cultural historian Michael Bracewell, “Ashes to Ashes” was Bowie’s “artistic suicide note” (1997, 197). *Creem* journalist Roy Trakin likewise bemoaned the fact that, “after [Bowie had] turned himself into the sad, Pierrot parody of himself in final decline ... the inevitable artistic nosedive occurred” (Trakin 1987).<sup>28</sup> This “sad Pierrot parody,” however, is also an instance of what Waldrep sees as “a rare display of sincerity,” in which the Pierrot character serves as a “distillation of the anxiety of the ... Berlin trilogy,” a dramatic staging of a final moment of interiority before moving on to a more objective approach to music-making and performance (2004, 126–27). Buckley characterizes “Ashes to Ashes” as a “public announcement of a desire to move his career into less experimental and more ‘normalized’ terrain” (2001, 367). The three figures in the video thus serve as “archetypes” from Bowie’s work of the preceding decade, and the “Ashes to Ashes” video kills them off in order “to lay to rest the ghost of impersonation” (367). This is especially true of Pierrot, who was perhaps Bowie’s first mask: it is fitting that he would wear the mask of Pierrot one final time as a means to lay bare his past and then bury it.

## CONCLUSION

Both Bowie and Schoenberg encountered Pierrot early in their respective careers, and each then again revisited the “insolent clown” about a dozen years later. For both, the intervening years separating incarnations of Pierrot was a period of peripeteia, marked by artistic ferment and experimentation, psychological trauma, and a certain degree of decadence. Bowie’s early years as a superstar-provocateur of the 1970s were made possible in large part by his exposure to the mask of Pierrot; in 1980 he put this mask back on to bring this period to a close and to make a final transformation into a modern new wave star of the nascent music video age. In a very different time and context, Schoenberg had already circumscribed a similar arc. He would have encountered Pierrot at the Berlin *Uberbrett* in 1901, if not before (and perhaps after), experiencing the *commedia* revival and “Pierrotomania” in its heyday; in 1912 he too came back to Pierrot, having passed through an intense period of atonal expressionism, arriving at a work that allowed him to revisit and re-evaluate his past while contemplating a future move to a more structurally coherent approach to composition. Schoenberg and Bowie both, in Paul Margueritte’s words, “took refuge” in Pierrot—Margueritte, dramaturge at the foreground of French *fin de siècle* “Pierrotomania,” saw the mask of Pierrot as the wellspring of art’s potency, as a place of pathos “where the power of a convulsed soul takes refuge” (qtd. in Weiss 2002, 43). For Schoenberg and Bowie, Pierrot proved a necessary mask: a gesture of artifice that provided the means for a sincere negotiation of identity and artistic needs. In sum, it is not merely coincidental that two of the century’s most iconic musical personages—Arnold Schoenberg

---

<sup>28</sup> Bowie later agreed with these assessments, recognizing in the late 1980s that the massive commercial success of *Let’s Dance* “put me in an extremely different orbit ... artistically and aesthetically. It seemed obvious that the way to make money was to give people what they want, so I gave them what they wanted, and it dried me up” (qtd. in Thompson 2006, 3).

and David Bowie—each had recourse to the mask of Pierrot in their respective careers, and in wearing that mask was able to explore and express profound truths about art and self.

#### REFERENCES

- Adams, Courtney S. 1995. Artistic parallels between Arnold Schoenberg's music and painting (1908–1912). *College Music Symposium* 35:5–21.
- Adorno, Theodor. 2002. Towards an understanding of Schoenberg. In *Essays on music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, 627–43. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Auner, Joseph. 1997. “Heart and brain in music”: The genesis of Schoenberg's *Die glückliche Hand*. In *Constructive Dissonance*, ed. Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey, 112–30. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Auslander, Philip. 2006. *Performing glam rock: Gender and theatricality in popular music*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Beaumont, Anthony. 2000. *Zemlinsky*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bowie, David. 1969. *David Bowie / Space Oddity*. Philips SBL 7912.
- . 1980. *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*. RCA BOWLP 2.
- . N.d. Ashes to Ashes. youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMThz7eQ6Ko>.
- Bracewell, Michael. 1997. *England is mine: Pop life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie*. London: Harper Collins.
- Brinkmann, Reinhold. 1997. The fool as paradigm: Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and the modern artist. In *Schönberg and Kandinsky: A historic encounter*, ed. Konrad Boehmer, 139–67. The Hague: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Bryn-Julson, Phyllis, and Paul Matthews. 2009. *Inside Pierrot Lunaire: Performing the Sprechstimme in Schoenberg's masterpiece*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Buckley, David. 2001. *Strange fascination—David Bowie: The definitive story*. London: Virgin Books.
- Busoni, Ferruccio. 1987. *Selected letters*. Ed. and trans. Antony Beaumont. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Carpenter, Alexander. 2009. A bridge to a new life: Waltzes in Schoenberg's chamber music. In *Schoenberg's Chamber Music, Schoenberg's World*, ed. James K. Wright and Alan M. Gilmour, 25–36. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press.
- Cromelin, Richard. 1972. David Bowie: The darling of the avant garde. *Phonograph Record* (January), rocksbackpages, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=7039&SearchText=bowie+>
- . 1974. Leo Sayer: The little clown. *Rolling Stone* (May 23), rocksbackpages, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=7152&SearchText=leo+sayer%3A+the+little+clown>.
- Dahlhaus, Carl. 1997. *Schoenberg and the New Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dunsby, Jonathan. 1992. *Schoenberg: Pierrot Lunaire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Green, Martin, and John Swan. 1986. *The triumph of Pierrot: The commedia dell'arte and the modern imagination*. New York: MacMillan Publishing.
- Haimo, Ethan. 2004. Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*: A cycle? In *Pierrot Lunaire: Albert Giraud-Otto Erich Hartleben-Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Mark Delaere and Jan Herman, 145–56. Louvain: Éditions Peeters.
- Hawkins, Stan. 2009. *The British pop dandy: Masculinity, popular music and culture*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.
- Katritzky, M. A. 1998. The *commedia dell'arte*: An introduction. *Theatre Research International* 23 (2): 99–103.
- Lehmann, A. G. 1967. Pierrot and fin de siècle. In *Romantic mythologies*, ed. Ian Fletcher and Paul Kegan, 209–23. London: Routledge.
- Lessem, Alan. 1974. Schönberg and the crisis of expressionism. *Music and Letters* 55 (4): 429.
- . 1979. *Music and text in the works of Arnold Schoenberg*. Michigan: UMI Research Press.
- MacDonald, Malcolm. 2008. *Schoenberg*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacKinnon, Angus. 1980. The future isn't what it used to be. *New Musical Express* (September), BowieGoldenYears, <http://www.bowiegoldenyears.com/articles/8009-nme.html>.
- Mendelsohn, John. 1971. David Bowie: Pantomime rock? *Rolling Stone* (Apr. 1), rock'sbackpageslibrary, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=688&SearchText=david+bowie%3A+pantomime+rock>.
- Moore, Anne. 1975. Leo Sayer: Very much myself. *LA Free Press* (May 16), rocksbackpages, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=11092&SearchText=Leo+Sayer%3A+Very+much+myself>.
- Murray, Charles Shaar. 1972. David at the Dorchester: Bowie on Ziggy and other matters. *New Musical Express* (July 22), rocksbackpages, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=2996&SearchText=ziggy+played+guitar>.
- Pegg, Nicholas. 2006. *The complete David Bowie*, 4th ed. London: Reynolds and Hearn.
- Perone, James. 2007. *The words and music of David Bowie*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Reich, Willi. 1981. *Schoenberg: A critical biography*. Trans. Leo Black. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Rudlin, John. 1994. *Commedia dell'arte: An actor's handbook*. London: Routledge.
- Schoenberg, Arnold. 1974. *Berliner Tagebuch*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Ullstein GmbH.
- Seabrook, Thomas Jerome. 2008. *Bowie in Berlin: A new career in a new town*. London: Jawbone Press.
- Simms, Bryan R. 2000. *The atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg 1808–1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spitz, Marc. 2009. *Bowie: A biography*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Storey, Robert. 1978. *Pierrot: Critical history of a mask*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Thompson, Dave. 2006. *Hallo spaceboy: The rebirth of David Bowie*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- Trakin, Roy. 1987. David Bowie: *Never let me down*. *Creem* (Aug.), rocksbackpages <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=7735&SearchText=bowie>.
- Verlaine, Paul. 1999. *One hundred and one poems by Paul Verlaine: A bilingual edition*. Trans. Norman R. Shapiro. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Waldrep, Shelton. 2004. *The aesthetics of self-invention: Oscar Wilde to David Bowie*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Weiss, Allen. 2002. *Breathless: Sound recording, disembodiment, and the transformation of lyrical nostalgia*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Welch, Chris. 1999. *Changes: The stories behind every David Bowie song 1970–1980*. Dubai: Carlton Books.
- Whitthall, Arnold. 2004. *Pierrot in context—Pierrot as context*. In *Pierrot Lunaire: Albert Giraud-Otto Erich Hartleben-Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Mark Delaere and Jan Herman, 37–46. Louvain: Éditions Peeters.
- Youens, Susan. 1984. Excavating an allegory: The texts of *Pierrot Lunaire*. *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 8 (2): 95–115.

## ABSTRACT

There are striking parallels between Arnold Schoenberg's treatment of the Pierrot character in 1912 and David Bowie's adoption of Pierrot as an alter ego in 1980. For both musicians, Pierrot is a necessary mask, and each uses the "insolent clown" in his own way, but in the service of the same delicate negotiations between past and future, and between artifice and truth in art and self. In Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and Bowie's song "Ashes to Ashes," we see and hear the music of the past alongside "a nostalgia for the future": Pierrot provides the means—the mask—behind which musical reflection, self-examination, and psychological purgation can occur.

## RÉSUMÉ

Il y a des parallèles frappants entre le Pierrot imaginé par Arnold Schoenberg en 1912 et le Pierrot qu'adopte David Bowie comme alter ego en 1980. Le Pierrot sert de masque nécessaire aux deux musiciens; chacun se sert du « clown insolent » à sa manière, mais au service des mêmes négociations délicates entre passé et avenir, entre artifice et authenticité de l'art et de l'être. Nous voyons et entendons la musique du passé juxtaposée à « une nostalgie de l'avenir » dans le Pierrot lunaire de Schoenberg comme dans la chanson *Ashes to Ashes* de Bowie. Pierrot fournit les moyens—le masque—derrière lesquels réflexion musicale, autoréflexion et purgation psychologique peuvent se produire.