

# DALLAS Observer

May 22, 2015

## Soluna's and Nasher Soundings' Pierrot Lunaire Did Not Disappoint

<http://www.dallasobserver.com/arts/solunas-and-nasher-soundings-pierrot-lunaire-did-not-disappoint-7247913>

By [Jonathan Patrick](#) Friday, May 22, 2015



Lucy Shelton's Pierrot Lunaire

*Zachary Stephens/ Nasher Sculpture Center*

What's music apart from the production and organization of sound? Truthfully, not much. More or less, that's it. That's music's skeleton. Allow some space to take into account certain conceptual nuances here and there and you have its flesh, too. Of course, there's a lot of wiggle room left in that definition, a lot of space for creative license and interpretation. Which is exactly the point. After all, the production we

speak of can and does sometimes take the shape of [non-production](#), and the organization of that production is often translated into disorganization, or, at least, perceived as such.

In the realm of contemporary music (let's say, the last fifty years or so, both in experimental and pop music), the inclination to sidestep standard definitions of music — to make music sound and move in what are, by convention, very unmusical ways — is far from unusual. And over the last twenty years, it's downright commonplace.

Why is it then, roughly one hundred years after the birth of musical modernism—when atonality was born and subsequently [systematized](#), that these sort of approaches still face aggressive opposition from many audiences? Why do people feel estranged and offended by what can be reduced, simply, to the production and organization of sound?

Rothko's abstraction, Picasso's fragmentation, nearly one hundred years on, while still arresting, hardly seem capable of offense in the same way that music of roughly the same period does. (Maybe it has something to do with one way in which sound art differs from strictly visual art: duration. For the most part, one has to endure through a specified period of time to experience the performance or recording of a piece of music. You can look away from a painting after seeing it completely, but you can't "look away," so to speak, from a work of music before its completion without failing to experience it in full).

If you were to choose but one musical work to test this phenomenon — to put it generally, music's unique ability to challenge, to upset — Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* would be right near the top of the list. Over 101 years after its debut performance, *Pierrot Lunaire's* ability to shock and alienate remains intact. You need only witness most listener's reactions to it to reason as much. Its most recent local performance — Wednesday at Nasher's latest Soundings installment — was no different. Although the location and occasion for this performance all but assured an amicable reception, subtle telltale signs of discomfort still dotted the audience: awkward laughter, the tireless fidgeting of bodies in seats, half-sick grimaces of vague surfeit. And I imagine had this performance not started in the light of day, the effects might have been more intensely expressed.



Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg

*Courtesy Wikimedia*

Bathed in a shower of ghostly purple, with soprano Lucy Shelton seated centerstage, noosed by a ring of chamber players, the concert began. What followed was a display of thorns, scrapes, screeches, howls, ripples, slams, and highly, *highly* manicured instrumental work; the timbres and textures of which

weren't so much sculpted as etched. Throughout *Pierrot Lunaire's* unfolding, the lines and throughways of standard composition were crinkled, creased and smashed to shards, each sonorous blow jump-cutting from the last, often from twitchy silence to probing eruption. Overtones of low-end rumble and high-end shrill slithered atop a subtext of drunken eroticism and hypnagogic symbology. The imagery, courtesy the source text of Albert Giraud's "Pierrot Lunaire" poem cycle, shuddered like a fever dream, a procession of vivid scenes involving moonbeams, blood, celestial flora, disfigurement, and impossible, if lurid, beauty.

Even at a distance, Shelton made herself known—she, too, *made* the performance. In her berserk, devilish sung contortions — throaty gargles and hisses, and each interval in between — she conjured the absolute essence (and then some) of *Pierrot Lunaire's* smiling lunacy, a cabaret gone creep show, exquisite sound art as inscrutable horror. Shelton's capacity to project, her delightfully impish theatrical mannerisms, and her dynamic presence were the cornerstone on which the performance's success was erected.

It was a thrill to see that to this day, when performed this zealously, *Pierrot Lunaire* can still conjure the impulse and anxious energy of early twentieth-century musical modernism. When properly realized, the piece is something of a one-to-one reflection, a reminder, of what it's like to witness infinite musical possibility made momentarily finite, tangible. Like feeling around blind, struck with confusion and unknowing, Wednesday at the Nasher was a taste of what it feels like — or more accurately, felt like — to experience actual musical invention, to have the floor of all that's familiar pulled out from beneath you: *Like re-experiencing music for the first time all over again.*