[...] secret science is not what an alchemist would refuse to teach you; it is a science which cannot be taught at all. It is inborn or it is not there. 

(Arnold Schönberg on teaching counterpoint)¹

Theoretical Preliminaries

“Western esotericism” is a contested category in academic research, and will undoubtedly remain so for some time.² Here is not the place to go into the current theoretical and methodological debate about how this field must be defined and demarcated,³ but a few introductory remarks are necessary to explain in what sense, in my opinion, a famous 20th-century composer like Anton Webern may be discussed within such a context.

The first point is that studying a person under the rubric of “esotericism” does not imply, by any means, that he or she must therefore be considered an “esotericist” or an adherent of an “esoteric tradition”. Western esotericism is not a descriptive label, but an etic,⁴ constructed, analytical category, pragmatically used by scholars as an umbrella term for gathering together a wide range of currents, personalities, ideas and even practices that have long been seen as somehow belonging together, and have tended to be marginalized in academic research.

² On the field and its academic development, see Hanegraaff, ‘The Study of Western Esotericism’, and for a comprehensive overview of currents and personalities see Hanegraaff et al., Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism.
³ For an up-to-date overview and discussion in Italian, see Grossato, Forme e correnti, particularly the contributions by Pasi and Hanegraaff.
⁴ Briefly stated, according to current terminology in the study of religion, emic stands for “the believer’s point of view” and etic for the use of scholarly, technical perspectives and terminologies. Hence we can etically use the modern academic term “Western esotericism” while acknowledging that many of those studied under that rubric would have identified themselves differently.
This category began to emerge in the 17th century in the context of a highly polemical discourse concerning what might be called “rejected knowledge”:5 claims of knowledge grounded in beliefs and worldviews that were in the process of being demarcated at that time, mainly by Protestant and Enlightenment historians, from what they considered to be “true” Christianity on the one hand, and “true” rational philosophy and science on the other.6

This ambiguous rest-category functioned as a virtual and increasingly reified waste-basket of rejected beliefs, referred to quite vaguely by a variety of names, such as “magic”, “occult philosophy” or even “mysticism”, and usually associated with irrational Schwärmerei and superstition. The term “esotericism” (first attested in 1828)7 only gradually came to be associated with this category, largely by “occultist” authors who wanted to turn it from a negative category of exclusion into a positive label for ideas and traditions that they considered valuable: because these authors tended to reject or at least criticize mainstream Christianity and its theologies along with such things as positivist philosophy and materialist science, what was rejected by those perspectives was naturally embraced by them.8

Scholars studying this domain have always been, and still are, tempted to fall into the trap of reification, thereby creating confusion between historical realities on the one hand, and the imaginal invention of an “esoteric tradition” and its adherents on the other. The common result is that highly complex personalities are artificially reduced to an “esoteric” identity, whereas in fact they usually participated in a variety of contemporary discourses, only some of which could be seen as falling under the modern rubric “Western esotericism”.9 In my

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5 This formulation is derived from James Webb, in his pioneering studies Occult Underground and Occult Establishment.
6 Hanegraaff, ‘Western Esotericism in Enlightenment Historiography’.
7 Matter, Histoire critique du gnosticisme. See discussion in Laurant, L’ésotérisme chrétien, 19; and Hanegraaff, ‘La nascita dell’esoterismo’.
8 Hanegraaff, ‘Forbidden Knowledge’, 247.
9 For example, the 15th-century Platonic philosopher, translator, physician and priest Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) is generally, and for excellent reasons, considered a key figure in the field of Western esotericism; but in my view it would not make sense to call him an “esotericist”. The point at issue may be clarified by drawing a comparison with a completely different field of study, that of the history of homosexuality, where analogous conclusions have been drawn already since Foucault, and in which Ficino happens to play a role as well. Both homoeroticism conceptualized as “Socratic love” (theorized at length in Ficino’s De amore) and the practice of sodomy (which he sharply rejected, but for which his city Florence was famous) are abundantly attested