
String Quartet No. 1, op. 7



Title	String Quartet No. 1 in D minor, op. 7
Time of origin	1904/05
Premiere	5 February 1907, Wien, Bösendorfer-Saal
Duration	ca. 44 min.

[Principal part] – Scherzo – Adagio – Rondo Finale

Schönberg's main composition during the years 1904 and 1905 was the D minor String Quartet. The first sketches were made in the summer of 1904, but he did not finish the work until the following year, during his summer stay in Gmunden am Traunsee. The premiere in the Viennese Bösendorfer-Saal by the Rosé Quartet on 5 February 1907 ended in a tumult, as reported by Paul Stefan, an early chronicler of the circle around Schönberg: "The work seemed impossible to many and they left the hall during the performance; a particularly witty listener even left through the emergency exit. As the hissing continued afterwards, Gustav Mahler, who was in the audience, approached one of the malcontents and said, wonderfully emotionally and at the same time flaring up for disenfranchised art: 'You should not hiss!' – The anonymous person, proud in the face of the great intellectuals (faced by his concierge, he would have collapsed): 'I also hiss when I hear your symphonies!' – Mahler was blamed for provoking this scene."

In a sketchbook of Schönberg from 1904/05, some programmatic notes have been preserved that most likely refer to the music of the first quartet: they range from "rebellion, defiance" and "despair" to "combative power, development of fantasy, impetus" and "highest sensual intoxication" to "quiet happiness and the return of tranquility and harmony." In later years, Schönberg made it unequivocally clear that, although he had laid down such a "program," it was of completely private nature, belonging to the genesis of the work and not its aesthetic substance. Instead, he always pointed out, not without pride, the constructive achievement of this generously dimensioned work that consists of wide-spanned melodies as well as differentiated rhythms and counterpoint.

Schönberg combines the individual elements of the sonata cycle (first movement, scherzo with trio, adagio and rondo-finale) in the movements of one single "double function form," which has at its center an extended development section. He intended Beethoven's Third Symphony to be recognized as the form model for his composition: "Alexander von Zemlinsky told me Brahms said that every time he faced difficult problems, he would consult a significant work of Bach and one of Beethoven, both of which he always used to keep near his standing-desk [...] In the same manner, I learned from the 'Eroica' solutions to my problems. How to avoid monotony and emptiness, how to create variety out of unity, how to create new forms out of basic material, how much can be achieved by slight

modifications if not by developing variation out of often rather insignificant little formulations. Of this masterpiece I learned also much of the creation of harmonic contrasts and their application." ("Program Notes for the Juilliard String Quartet Performance of the Four String Quartets")

Schönberg, of course, did not want to speak of a "mechanical copy," but rather to relate the procedure to the "essence" of the model. He once used a vivid metaphor to express the same thought: "... in one respect, the works in every style are as different as are all wines: When you pour them into old wineskins, then the essences of old wines are still there. Common (and that is the old wineskin), is only our way of thinking." That Schönberg's compositions were at the time perceived as being so disturbing was thus due to both the recognition of his historical responsibility and the endeavor to find expression for the radical developments of the present age.

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