
String Quartet No. 2, op. 10



Title String Quartet No. 2 in F-sharp minor, op. 10

Time of origin 1907/08

Premiere 21 December 1908, Wien, Bösendorfer-Saal

Duration ca. 30 min.

1. Mäßig
2. Sehr rasch
3. Litanei. Langsam
4. Entrückung. Sehr langsam

The Viennese years around 1908 marked a phase of artistic awakening for Arnold Schönberg, but were accompanied by a severe personal crisis. Schönberg's family life was severely disrupted by his wife Mathilde's intimate relationship with the painter Richard Gerstl, who had set up his studio in the Schönbergs' house in the Liechtensteinstraße in Vienna's 9th district and had taught them and painted portraits of both. In 1907 Schönberg's intensive activity as a painter began, yet another reflection of his inner need to find an artistic outlet for his aesthetic visions. In 1907 and 1908, Schönberg compensated his private misery, deepened by the disappointment that Gustav Mahler had left for America, by breaking with musical tradition: the dissolution of tonal harmony into atonality and the transition to his expressionist period – a pivotal moment in the compositional development of the 20th century.

The Second String Quartet in F-sharp minor, op. 10, represents a watershed in this evolutionary process both in the handling of material (concision of form, release from consonance) and in the history of the string quartet genre (through the addition of a solo soprano). Having completed the First String Quartet in D minor, op. 7, and the Chamber Symphony, op. 9, Schönberg now turned away from single-movement works and returned to multi-movement cycles. The earliest evidence of op. 10, found in his third sketchbook, is dated 9 March 1907, the day he finished the composition of the choral work "Friede auf Erden" ("Peace on Earth"), op. 13. The third movement was completed on 11 June 1908 in Gmunden am Traunsee, followed by the second movement on 27 July; the fourth was probably composed there as well. As in the case of the First Chamber Symphony, Schönberg repeatedly revised his new quartet (including several arrangements for string orchestra).

In the first movement, the structure is determined less by the key scheme than by the presentation of the thematic material; the reduction of tonal relationships strongly limits their influence upon the formal design. It is a sonata-form movement largely lacking in contrast and containing five thematic ideas. All are related by motivic transformation to the first theme of the main group, which is rooted in the key of F-sharp minor. During the

subsidiary group, tonal relationships are obscured, while throughout the development section, with the exception of a few sidelong glances at the tonic key, an abeyance between the keys F-sharp minor and C major, established at its beginning, remains throughout. At first, the recapitulation avoids re-establishing the home key and is instead ushered in by an A minor/D minor complex. As in Schönberg's chronologically related a cappella chorus "Friede auf Erden," we note a tendency to shy away from modulations that engender a sense of form.

The D minor scherzo consists of two large thematic groups followed by a highly contrasting section resembling a development. The first complex contains a reminiscence of the main theme of the first movement, from which it is derived through segmentation. In the trio, the second violin quotes the Viennese folk song ("O du lieber Augustin, alles ist hin" ("Oh, you dear Augustin, all is lost"), which Schönberg scholars have interpreted both as an autobiographical reference to his marital crisis and as a symbol of his abandonment of functional tonality.

The two poems by Stefan George, "Litanei" ("Litany") and "Entrückung" ("Rapture"), are taken from "Der siebente Ring," a collection of his poems published privately in 1907. Here, Schönberg has worked these into a set of variations followed by a finale far removed from traditional form conceptions. Using chromatic and altered quartal harmonies, the finale is replete with what Anton Webern called "harmonies never heard before, detached from all tonal relationships." The theme of "Litany" comprises four figures extracted from the opening movement and the scherzo which function as 'leitmotifs' within the work's underlying program; this third movement may be viewed as a development section for the two that precede it. Set in E-flat minor, it is richly contrapuntal if less prone to modulation, its variations closely adhering to the form of the poem. In the first variation, the soprano enters with a melody that retains its thematic independence throughout the remaining variations. Discussing the finale in his "Program Notes for the Juilliard String Quartet Performance of the Four String Quartets," Schönberg remarked: "The fourth movement, 'Entrückung,' begins with an introduction, depicting the departure from earth to another planet. The visionary poet here foretold sensations, which perhaps soon will be affirmed. Becoming relieved from gravitation, passing through clouds into thinner and thinner air – forgetting all the troubles of life on earth – that is attempted to be illustrated in this introduction."

A single line from George's poem "Entrückung" – "Ich löse mich in Tönen, kreisend" ("I am dissolved in swirling sound") – might stand as a motto for the progressive tonal language of this finale, which otherwise adheres to the standard classical design: introduction, main group (verses 1 to 3), subsidiary group (verses 4 and 5), development (verses 6 to 8), coda. In juxtaposition to sections that entirely suspend the feeling of key – in particular the introduction, which sets up "twelve-tone" fields, but organizes them around fifth relationships –, other passages offer conspicuously tonal cadences. As in the scherzo, the writing generally employs a free-floating tonality. For the performance of "Entrückung," Schönberg gave priority to the quality and expressive projection of timbre, as is particularly evident in the handwritten instructions he entered in one of the sources of op. 10. Here, for instance, is how he imagines a musically transcendent depiction of a

gossamer mist as it slowly dissipates: "The whole must be like a breath. Nothing may emerge above the others. Only the voice may be emphasized, but even that only through the timbre, not through the strength of sound."

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