
Three Piano Pieces, op. 11

Title	Three Piano Pieces, op. 11
Time of origin	1909/10
Premiere	14. January 1910, Wien, Ehrbar-Saal
Duration	ca. 14 min.

1. Mäßig
2. Mäßige Achtel
3. Bewegt

The Three Piano Pieces were written during Schönberg's extremely productive creative phase in 1909, during which he also composed the Five Pieces for Orchestra, op. 16, and "Erwartung," op. 17. Apart from fundamental innovations in the functional formation of material (above all the dissolution from the form-building hierarchy of tonal systems), essential elements of musical tradition have been preserved. In the first piece of op. 11, for example, a three-part form (A-B-A') can be recognized in rough outlines, and at the beginning, it can be clearly recognized that motivic elements are worked out in a manner that reminds of Liszt's technique of thematic transformation. Likewise, the compact motivic technique, the well-balanced articulation and the rhythmic structure could establish a connection to Brahms' last piano intermezzi.

The second piece, with its slow, somber theme over a bass ostinato of two notes, admittedly harmonizes with traditional patterns of experience to a much greater extent than the concluding piece, whose considerable compositional density and impulsively eruptive expressive gestures led Theodor W. Adorno to speak of an example of "informal" music. Schönberg's radical "need for self-expression" that was observable around 1910, often regarded as being an impulse-driven, seemingly presuppositionless approach to tradition that is accompanied by artistic-religious ideas, in fact proves to be the result of exceptional rational consideration. In this sense, Ernst Bloch's term "logic of expression" seems, applied to Schönberg, to be two-faced: "Every chord," states the composer in his "Theory of Harmony," "corresponds to a necessity [...] of my urge to expression; perhaps, however, also to the necessity of an inexorable but unconscious logic in the harmonic structure."

The aesthetics of an uncompromising ego-oriented expressive will, which Schönberg shared with Wassily Kandinsky during this period, in the piano pieces admittedly avoided repetition, the consistent use of thematic work and, of course, tonal triads, but it nevertheless realized almost imperceptible motivic linking techniques and a balanced sense of proportion in the sequence of tension and release. This is obviously not a procedure that destroys tradition without hesitation, but merely a fundamental process of abstraction, in which all that had already become a cliché, a worn-out gesture in

“classical” formal patterns was to be returned to a substance that had not yet been reduced to a scheme: to a balanced relationship between the compact and diffuse, the loud and soft, the fast and slow, in which traditional formal structures (viewed in a very broad sense) continue to play a large role.

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