
Friede auf Erden [Peace on Earth], op. 13



Title	Friede auf Erden [Peace on Earth] for Mixed Chorus a Cappella, op. 13
Time of origin	1907 – 1911
Premiere	9 December 1911, Wien, Großer Musikvereinsaal
Duration	ca. 8 min.

Arnold Schönberg took an interest in choral music as a composer over a period of five decades. His catalog of works, which contains multi-part vocal music using texts written both by the composer and also by other writers, includes about 80 finished and just as many unfinished works with choral scoring in various genres, styles and functional spectrums: ranging from the canons and contrapuntal movements that are quantitatively predominant in his oeuvre, a-cappella pieces ("Friede auf Erden") with different formal planning and dimensions, and folksong arrangements, to cantatas ("A Survivor from Warsaw") and oratorios, and also music theater. Contemporaries valued the "confident design" (Erwin Stein, 1926) of the choral settings and Schönberg's "tremendous expertise", which was guided by a genuine "yearning for working with voices" (Jascha Horenstein, 1927).

As was first communicated by Egon Wellesz without specifying further details, both "Peace on Earth" and the two Ballads, op. 12 were composed for competitions. Insights gained from Schönberg's correspondence reveal that the composition prize for "Peace on Earth" is associated with the 1st Styrian Music Festival, which was motivated – according to press reports – by the success of the opera "Salome" by Richard Strauss in the previous year, and was scheduled for the second half of May 1907 as the highlight of the theater season. The music festival program included three opera performances and three concert performances, including a celebratory event with the award-winning works from a composition competition which was sponsored by the Emperor (1st prize), by Styria (2nd prize) and by the city of Graz (3rd prize).

The call for entries specified that submissions were to be compositions for a choir of any configuration with the duration limited to approximately 10 minutes. The competition attracted considerable attention in the press as it was the first time in the Austrian music world that a first prize had been sponsored by the monarch. The entry "Friede auf Erden" submitted by the Viennese composer Arnold Schönberg was not awarded a price by the jury. The complexity of the score automatically disqualified Schönberg's work for the purpose of the music festival (the chorus only had one day to rehearse).

Drafts of op. 13 are found in Sketchbook III between the dates 14 August 1906 and 9 March 1907 (the completion of the choral setting and the first sketches for the Second String Quartet). An annotation found on a fair copy – that the work “is to be performed without accompaniment (a cappella) whenever possible; the organ should only be used as accompaniment when the purity of intonation fails” –, is probably to be understood in connection with the rehearsals of the Singverein in 1908 (under Franz Schalk) that were ultimately cancelled because of insurmountable difficulties. “Friede auf Erden” was finally premiered in Vienna on 9 December 1911 under the direction of Franz Schreker. Even before the first rehearsal Schreker suggested using “a string orchestra for support.” Schönberg, who had divided his time between Lake Starnberg and Berlin since the summer of 1911, finished his orchestral score (for both strings and winds) on 6 October 1911. Emil Hertzka, director of Universal Edition, had urged the publication of the initial a cappella version since August and had expressed his reservations to an additional orchestral accompaniment because of the costs. Schönberg replied that he had drafted the orchestral version only for the premiere “because without it Schreker cannot risk a performance with his young choir. It is an accompaniment that enables correct intonation but should not be seen as being a part of the composition!” The premiere in the Große Musikvereinssaal with 120 women and 80 men from the combined resources of the Philharmonische Chor and the Wiener Lehrergesangsverein was “an undisputed success,” according to a report by Franz Schreker, who dampened the volume of the Wiener Tonkünstler-Orchester “almost to the point of inaudibility.”

For the text of “Peace on Earth” Schönberg drew upon a Christmas poem written by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer in October 1886 (Meyer’s novella “Die Versuchung des Pescara” / “The Tempting of Pescara” dates from the same year) for the Christmas issue of “Schorer’s Familienblatt” (“Schorer’s Family Newsletter”). The Swiss poet would later allow Bertha von Suttner, whose peace movement he supported, to reprint “Friede auf Erden” in her periodical “Die Waffen nieder!” (“Lay Down Your Arms!”). The first verse of Meyer’s poem begins with the peace tidings of the Christmas story; the second and third verses depict the history of the world after the birth of Christ as a time of war, in which, however, the belief in justice and the hope for peace continue to be upheld. This peace is to become reality in future generations (fourth verse). Conrad Ferdinand Meyer’s concept of peace unites the perspectives of the real and the ideal in a thoroughly secularized background; Schönberg returns to a more religious perspective in a setting that is formally divided into ten sections.

The use of consonance and dissonance as well as the differentiation between homophonic and polyphonic techniques both correspond to an allegorical view of the concept of “ideal peace vs. real discord” that derives from the fundamental metaphysical idea that peace is the work of God. The contrast between heaven and earth is interpreted in a sacral manner by means of a major/minor polarity that is occasionally tempered by church modes. In a letter to the conductor Hermann Scherchen of 23 June, 1923, Schönberg wrote of his last work composed in tonal style that it was “an illusion for mixed choir, an illusion, as I know today; but I, as I composed it in 1906 (?), held this pure harmony among humans to be conceivable.” In May 1928 Schönberg authored an essay

(together with Richard Strauss, Julius Bittner and Felix Weingartner) for the "8-Uhr-Abendblatt" ("8 o'clock Evening Paper") on the theme "Fehlt der Welt eine Friedenshymne?" ("Does the world lack a peace hymn?") In a draft of the article, Schönberg's skeptical attitude concerning the influence of the arts on political events becomes clear: "It is perhaps correct that one must be religious in order to compose church music, or in love in order to compose love songs [...], but still one must certainly not be wounded in order to portray a wounded person or dying in order to portray a dying person. And so it would certainly be possible to compose a peace hymn without believing in an eternal peace."

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