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## Six little Piano Pieces, op. 19

Title	Six little Piano Pieces, op. 19
Time of origin	1911
Premiere	4 February 1912, Berlin, Harmonium-Saal
Duration	ca. 5 min.

1. Leicht, zart
2. Langsam
3. Sehr langsam
4. Rasch, aber leicht
5. Etwas rasch
6. Sehr langsam

On a cold winter's day in 1911, Schönberg was at the time occupied with reading the proofs of his major theoretical and pedagogical work, "Harmonielehre" (Theory of Harmony), he took a day off in order to compose a set of five piano miniatures. "I said to Webern: for my music you must have time. It is not for people who have other things to do. But it is in any case a great pleasure to hear one's pieces played by somebody who has fully mastered them from a technical viewpoint." Schönberg made this note in his diary a year later, after the pianist Egon Petri had played the Six Piano Pieces, op. 19, for him in Berlin.

If one were to attempt to isolate the single genre that most accurately portrays Schönberg's compositional development throughout his life, his works for solo piano would be the obvious choice. Beginning with the late Romantic piano fragments in the musical language of Johannes Brahms through the free-tonal piano pieces op. 11 and 19, which mark his middle creative period, and extending to the twelve-tone piano pieces op. 23 No. 5, op. 25, and op. 33a and b, which enter a new epoch of tonal organization, one can observe what can be described a literally "unfathomable" diversity of musical composition and intellectual expression.

The miniature form and extreme aphoristic brevity may appear as a strange and confusing deviation from Schönberg's usual concise formulation of musical thought but is actually quite symptomatic of the free-tonal formal design of his works and those of his students – who innovatively followed his lead – during this period. The natural melodic flow and the expansive breadth that would reappear in the later dodecaphonic works has given way here to an epigrammatic expression: the furthest extreme, as it were, to the symphonic writing of the contemporary Gustav Mahler and also to Schönberg's own "Gurre-Lieder," a monumental work for orchestra, chorus, and solo voices that was completed around the same time.

Creating from the moment and reducing the work to the moment seems to form, as it were, the aesthetic program for the Piano Pieces op. 19: "I attempted to create a specific logical and beautiful idea, and I tried to clothe it in a kind of music that flowed naturally and inevitably from me. I write what I feel in my heart – and in the end what appears on paper is what first went through every fiber of my body." (Schönberg quoted by his student Josef Rufer, 1951).

This first of the op. 19 pieces is exactly seventeen bars long and consists of melodic nuclei that are not combined into a phrase but are heard one after the other, like disjointed thoughts. In the next piece, the rhythmic ostinato of repeated major thirds assures a far greater degree of stability, as though the composer had now underpinned the piano writing with tonality. In the third piece, the right and left hands develop in independent dynamic frameworks, thus forming a contrast with each other, in a very fragmented way. The next two pieces can be perceived as a combination of recitative and aria.

Gustav Mahler died in Vienna on 18 May 1911. For Schönberg he had been a mentor and a friend whom Schönberg was even to characterize as a saint. After the burial at Grinzing Cemetery, Schönberg painted a picture depicting the mourners (himself among them) at the composer's open grave. The colors, however, only superficially reflected his profound emotion; a few weeks later, in endless grief, he composed the sixth and last piece of op. 19. The day after the funeral, the "Neues Wiener Journal" described the atmosphere at the cemetery in a report that could also be applied to mood of the piano piece, pervaded with the sounds of church bells: "On this last path, the floodgates of heaven opened, and a downpour descended on the funeral procession. [...] It was touching how silent everything remained when the coffin was lowered into the depths. It was as if the whole world were holding its breath." (May 23, 1911)

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