
Five Piano Pieces, op. 23

Title Five Piano Pieces, op. 23

Time of Origin 1920/23

Premiere Autumn 1923, Hamburg

Duration ca. 12 min.

1. Sehr langsam
2. Sehr rasch
3. Langsam
4. Schwungvoll
5. Walzer

With the final movement of his String Quartet No. 2, op. 10, Arnold Schönberg transcended the boundaries of the major/minor tonal system in 1908. The words of Stefan George's poem "Ich fühle Luft von anderem Planeten" (I feel the air of another planet), sung by the soprano, would prove symbolic for Schönberg's immediate future. Work after work, he revealed unfamiliar worlds of sound and expression, constantly inventing new strategies for transforming the creativity of his imagination into a viable musical architecture. "Pierrot lunaire," op. 21, which earned Schönberg considerable success, marked the end of this highly productive compositional phase in 1912. During the war he was able to complete only his Vier Orchesterlieder (Four Orchestral Songs), op. 22. Additionally, he worked on an oratorio in several parts, striving to create structural elements that would provide unity. In retrospect, Schönberg viewed this phase as a time of seeking to combine the freedom he had gained with a secure basis in compositional technique: "In the past, harmony had served not only as a source of beauty, but also [...] as a means of distinguishing the characteristics of form. [...] The fulfillment of all these functions - comparable to the punctuation in a sentence, the subdivision into sections and the grouping in chapters - could hardly be guaranteed with chords whose constructive values had not yet been explored. [...] A new colorful harmony was born; but much had been lost." The impression within the public sphere was that Schönberg had become compositionally silent, especially since no new work of his had been performed since the epochal premiere of "Gurre-Lieder" in 1913. This situation appeared to change when, on 30 June 1920, he received a request from Henry Prunières, editor of the French music journal "La Revue musicale." The first issue of the magazine was to contain a sheet music supplement entitled "Tombeau de Claude Debussy," for which some of the "best musicians in Europe" were asked to contribute – "an artistic event that would have great moral significance in uniting artists throughout the world." The title "Tombeau" refers to a genre that was especially common in France during the 17th and 18th centuries: it usually denoted a sophisticated composition that paid tribute to the memory of a famous person.

In addition to Schönberg, illustrious colleagues such as Béla Bartók, Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky would also pay their last respects to the French master. Schönberg completed a piano piece on July 9, 1920, nine days after receiving the letter. The opening establishes a somber tone. A melody unfolds in the upper voice, whose intervallic makeup is freely employed in the two accompanying voices. A polyphonic movement unfolds, with three voices containing 21, 20, and 13 notes respectively. Subsequently, these notes appear once again in exactly the same order, but now the rhythm and octave register are modified in such a way that a completely new musical character emerges. Segments of these note sequences also appear in other passages: they may be difficult to identify audibly, yet they are essential to the organic structure of the composition. On July 27, 1920, Schönberg completed another piece that contrasts sharply with its predecessor through its employment of an ascending gesture. Schönberg dated the beginning of a third piece one day later: its structure consists of regularly recurring constellations of pitches that are repeatedly rearranged in groups of figures and chords. The concept seemed promising - nevertheless, it took Schönberg two and a half years to complete the composition. In the meantime, the request of the "Revue musicale" was no longer an option, since Schönberg had decided against submitting his piece. The impetus for resuming the project came from a commission from the Danish music publisher Wilhelm Hansen that stipulated a multi-movement ensemble work as well as a cycle of three to six piano pieces for a substantial fee. The required workload was enormous, especially since Schönberg also had to fulfill the obligations of his personal publisher, Universal Edition. The previous months had been characterized by searching and experimentation: with the piano pieces of 1920, Schönberg had discovered ways of separating note sequences from their connection to musical figures and establishing them as the structural backbone of a composition. In July 1921, this approach resulted in a piano piece in which the method of working with pitch constellations was condensed into a series of the twelve tones of the chromatic scale: this series was now the sole basis for all musical figures. The piece would later function as a "prelude" to the Suite for Piano op. 25, which was published by Universal Edition in 1925. At the same time, Schönberg was working on an instrumental work that would eventually become the Serenade, op. 24, although at this stage it only existed as a series of completed and uncompleted individual movements. His numerous obligations prompted Schönberg to act more decisively. He conceived a cycle for Wilhelm Hansen that would eventually bear the neutral title Five Piano Pieces, op. 23. The former "Tombeau pour Claude Debussy" was to be the opening piece, followed by the other piece that had already been completed in 1920. Between February 6 and 8, 1923, Schönberg composed the third piece, whose form Erwin Stein compared to a fugue in his article "New Principles of Form." In contrast to op. 23/1, which is based on a tone row, Schönberg devised here a five-note motive that appears "frequently as a salient thematic component" – in other words, it is audibly recognizable due to a uniform rhythmic texture: "but otherwise the various forms of the basic idea intersect and intertwine in such a way that seemingly completely free melodies and harmonies emerge." (Erwin Stein, "New Principles of Form") For the fourth piece, Schönberg resumed work on the unfinished movement from July 1920 and marked regularly recurring pitch constellations with the

letters A to D, which he occasionally further differentiated by using Arabic numerals. By analyzing his own composition, he was able to finally complete the earlier draft by February 13. Immediately afterwards, he began work on the final piece, which is as pianistically demanding as it is compositionally unusual. A series of twelve notes is used in the same sequence almost throughout, although rhythm and octave register are treated freely. The row never appears in the form of a theme; rather, portions of the row appear as melodic gestures, while the remaining pitches assume the role of an accompaniment. Despite what seems like an experimental compositional process, Schönberg did not write a mere academic study piece, but rather had the series unfold within the 3/8 time of a waltz, whose character permeates both accompaniment figures and melodic phrases. It is a historical irony that this furious waltz is still regarded as Schönberg's first twelve-tone piece. The composer was not entirely blameless for this misunderstanding: the Five Piano Pieces were given the opus number 23, while the Serenade became opus 24. The Suite for Piano, actually completed in between the two works, and with the Prelude composed in July 1921 serving as the opening movement, was intended to conclude the series as a model for the twelve-tone method of composing - and thus assigned the opus number 25. Seen from this perspective, the Five Piano Pieces, op. 23 indeed function as a precursor. They reveal the composer exploring different ways of structuring a musical architecture out of abstract sequences of notes - with the twelve-tone row being merely a special case. Beyond its musical as well as historical significance, the cycle invites the listener on a journey through worlds of expression and sound. The musical spectrum ranges from the restrained opening to the controlled, expressive construction of the middle piece, and on to the extraordinary finale, in which a seemingly rigid structural principle is transformed into a variety of musical gestures.

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