
Suite, op. 25

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| Title | Suite for Piano, op. 25 |
| Time of origin | 1921–23 |
| Premiere | 25 February 1924, Wien, Konzerthaus, Mozart-Saal |
| Duration | ca. 16 min. |

1. Präludium
2. Gavotte
3. Musette – Gavotte
4. Intermezzo
5. Menuett – Trio
6. Gigue

When one examines Schönberg's catalog of works by opus numbers, the seven years after 1912, the year in which the epochal "Pierrot lunaire," op. 21, was composed, seem to have been a period of low compositional production. The First World War may have been the external reason for his silence, but on closer inspection we can see that he had embarked on an intensive search; he was working on a huge symphonic project, writing the text for "Jakobsleiter" (Jacob's Ladder) and composing the first part of that large-scale work for vocal soloists, choir and orchestra.

Following the opp. 11 to 21, which were written in a veritable creative frenzy and pursued the detachment from major/minor tonality, Schönberg strove to consolidate these newly gained musical energies. The very beginning of "Jakobsleiter" already indicates that the path proceeds in the direction of a thematic and chordal twelve-tone complex (although, as Schönberg himself stated, it is here an isolated instance, not a methodical idea). "After that I was always occupied with the aim to base the structure of my music consciously on a unifying idea, which produced not only all the other ideas but regulated also their accompaniment and the chords, the 'harmonies.'" (Letter to Nicolas Slonimsky, June 3, 1937). As Schönberg neared this goal in the year 1920, his creative production gained new impetus, resulting in the Five Piano Pieces op. 23, the Serenade op. 24, and the Suite for Piano op. 25 that were written more or less simultaneously up until 1923.

Schönberg was probably referring to the first versions of the Präludium and the Intermezzo of the Suite op. 25 from the summer of 1921 when he stated that he had "found something that will ensure the predominance of German music for the next hundred years" (as his pupil Josef Rufer recorded). With all the irony that may resonate in this remark, Schönberg was to be proven right in a certain sense: The "method of composition with twelve tones related only to one another" would shape the music of the 20th century in most diverse variations.

More essential to Schönberg than any hegemonic implications, however, may have been the significance of the method for his own creative work. Apart from their very different effects, the works of the following years show an effort to reclaim traditional forms for the transformed, post-tonal musical language. The Suite op. 25, for example, returns directly to the works of Johann Sebastian Bach – and, indirectly, Mozart and the music of the 19th century as well as Schönberg's own attempt of 1897 ("Gavotte und Musette for String Orchestra") – in an endeavor to fill these historical movement types with new content.

The twelve-tone row upon which the suite is based – in which the retrograde, by the way, begins with the tone sequence B–A–C–H (B flat–A–C–B) that was time and again used by predecessors of Schönberg, including Bach himself – uses only eight of the 48 possible permutations in this piece (the original row, retrograde, inversion as well as retrograde inversion of the row, and the tritone transpositions) – a limitation that Schönberg is able to compensate by flexibly manipulating the technique according to the character of each piece.

The Präludium, whose first draft is dated July 24 to 29, 1921, gains its propulsive gesture not only from the opening theme but also from the repeated notes that begin in the third measure. Only in the middle of the short piece does a repeated sigh motif allow a brief breath pause.

The second piece, the graceful Gavotte and Musette, provides an antithesis which is no less lively; the movement's origins in dance are distinctly audible (especially when compared to the suites of Bach) even though the meter is difficult to identify on first hearing, due to the highly varied rhythm and syncopated accompaniment.

According to the date (July 25, 1921), Schönberg began composing the Intermezzo at about the same time as the Präludium. However, this slow movement at the Suite's center differs from the Präludium in that, whereas the twelve-tone row in the latter piece was developed as a polyphonic interweaving of independent voices, here an accompanying sequence in the treble contrasts with a quiet melody in the low register. What seems "forbidden" when considering the rules of twelve-tone technique – namely, the repetition of a tone before all others have sounded – is a frequent occurrence in the work of Schönberg that arises from compositional circumstances. There are passages in his twelve-tone works which can scarcely be analyzed schematically, yet the logic of a structure based on the tone-row is always present. Here, the accompanying sequence is derived from a section of the tone row while the remaining pitches are used to shape the theme. On this basis, the piece, which is less reminiscent of the Baroque era than of 19th century piano music, develops at a calm tempo, albeit interrupted by a few outbursts.

This is followed by the Menuett and Trio, the latter of which is probably one of the most frequently printed of Schönberg's piano works: in harsh martellato, all row permutations that are used in the suite are linked canonically. This episode, which to a certain extent demonstrates the twelve-tone method in textbook fashion, takes up barely more than a minute; it is framed by the restrained Menuett, characterized by a song-like melody, in which Schönberg shapes the dodecaphonic progression in a very free manner.

The suite concludes with a Gigue that presses forwards with almost unbridled rhythmic energy. According to the historical model, one would expect a 6/8 time signature here, which Schönberg, however, replaces with a 2/2 time signature whose metrical structure is varied by meticulously notated accents as well as occasionally inserted measures with 3/4 time signature. It cannot be ruled out that Schönberg knew Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Little Gigue in G major, K. 574, in which deviations from the 6/8 time signature are shaped by similar accents and variations of the meter. Such a model would undoubtedly fit the Suite, a work replete with innovative drive and yet tellingly attuned to musical history and tradition.

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