
Four Pieces, op. 27

Title Four Pieces for Mixed Chorus, op. 27

Time of origin 1925

Premiere unknown

Duration ca. 8 min.

1. Unentrinnbar (Inescapable)
2. Du sollst nicht, du musst (You May Not, You Must)
3. Mond und Menschen (Moon and Mankind)
4. Der Wunsch des Liebhabers (The Lover's Wish)

A flourishing of bourgeois choral singing in the early 19th century was fostered by Carl Friedrich Zelter, a friend of Goethe. From the beginning, the newly founded choral societies directed their attention on different repertoires; the "Berliner Singakademie" dedicated itself to the cultivation of older music (especially that of Johann Sebastian Bach), while the "Berliner Liedertafel," founded in 1809, concentrated on contemporary music.

The gap between the areas of focus widened even farther when the powerful Cecilian movement, a restorative reaction to the liberalization of the Enlightenment, took hold of both Catholic and Protestant church music. From that time on, only church music approved by the Council of Trent was performed; contemporary music had to follow historical models. Therefore, the division into different areas occurred rather quickly. On the one hand, the Liedertafel's development was marked by an unmistakable chauvinistic undertone while, on the other, the church choirs under the influence of the Cecilian movement became insular, largely estranged from the music of their time. Only the oratorio choirs, despite their fixation on Bach and Handel, also devoted themselves to contemporary composers, thus establishing a tradition which was further developed by Berlioz, Liszt, Brahms, and also the Schönberg of the "Gurre-Lieder." Schönberg's "Friede on Erden" of 1907 was written for a very versatile modern choir, but since ensembles that were capable of performing such works did not exist until the 1950s, the work was initially deemed to be unperformable.

Eighteen years later, Schönberg again devoted himself to the a cappella choir genre with the Four Pieces for Mixed Chorus, op. 27. Despite the dodecaphonic texture, No. 1 in particular is reminiscent of the settings for choir handed down from the 19th century. The difficulties of intonation resulting from the atonal constellation are compensated by a strikingly uncomplicated rhythm.

Apart from the many accidentals, the notation superficially does not differ strongly from that of works in the standard repertoire. Like traditional choral music, the four-part setting seeks an easily understandable balance of construction and sound. The melodic

idiom also adheres to principles of simplicity; two row forms are canonically intertwined – the basic set and its inversion transposed a fifth lower.

No. 2, "Du sollst nicht," is closely related in thought to "Die Jakobsleiter" and "Moses und Aron." Schönberg biographers agree that this piece constitutes a significant step in his gradual return to the Jewish faith. Whereas "Die Jakobsleiter" still constitutes an eclectic mix of ideas originating with Balzac, Strindberg and anthroposophy, this chorus recapitulates that the Jewish prohibition of images of God (Aniconism) is a theological certainty.

For the third and fourth choruses, Schönberg chose a literary source popular in the Vienna School, the anthology "The Chinese Flute" by Hans Bethge. No. 3, "Mond und Menschen," contrasts the calm constancy of the moon's orbit with the erratic instability of human life. No. 4, "Der Wunsch des Liebhabers," is accompanied by four instruments: mandolin, clarinet, and muted violin and cello. The chorus and the instruments are closely interwoven; one instrument plays the melody in the form of the basic row or its inversion while the other three accompany. The mandolin portrays the lover, its rapturous style evoking memories of the custom of the nightly serenade.

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