
Three Satires, op. 28



Title Three Satires for Mixed Chorus, op. 28

Time of origin 1925

Premiere unknown

Duration ca. 11 min.

1. Am Scheideweg (At the crossroads)
2. Vielseitigkeit (Manysided)
3. Der neue Klassizismus (The new classicism)

Schönberg composed the “Three Satires for Mixed Chorus” when he was 51 and at the peak of his career; shortly before beginning the composition, he had been appointed Ferruccio Busoni’s successor at the Berlin Akademie der Künste, and the twelve-tone technique had established itself to a certain degree.

While Schönberg was recognized as a composer as never before, he remained sensitive in his artistic self-image: “I wrote [the Satires] when I was very much angered by attacks of some of my younger contemporaries at this time and I wanted to give them a warning that it is not good to attack me,” he explained in a letter of 1949 to the American composer Amadeo de Filippi. In the preface to the “Three Satires,” he names four groups he wanted to target: first, those “who seek their personal salvation on a [compositional] middle path.” Further, all those who orient themselves on the past, looking backwards instead of forwards, third, the “folklorists,” and fourth, “all ‘... ists’ in whom I can only see mannerists.”

Although it was intended as an immediate response to trends of the time, the Satires’ message is still clear enough today. “Am Scheideweg” addresses the first target group: those who employ tonal as well as atonal principles without understanding cause and consequence. The text “Tonal” is set to a C major triad that is a part of the twelve-tone row. This tonal cell is deliberately employed (contrary to the principle of avoiding major/minor groupings that give the impression of a tonal focus) to form a musical equivalent to the contrast between “tonal” and “atonal” in the text. A canon is invoked to disturb those that reject the art of refined polyphony: the basic row and its retrograde are combined into a 23-note double row and executed as a four-part canon. A stretto coda that employs the basic row concludes the canon.

In this as well as in the next piece, “Vielseitigkeit,” the strikingly simple rhythmic structure contrasts with the complex pitch order. The piece is a mirror canon constructed from slightly modified twelvetone rows according to the rules of counterpoint. This special artifice is evident when the page is turned upside down: the same piece of music results and is readable by the inverted key signature at the end of the staff. In this second chorus, the visual impression of the notation already suggests the extremely complex polyphonic

structure. The piece is reminiscent of the so-called 'eye music' of the 15th and 16th centuries. The tonal sequence c–e–g, which occurs as in the first piece, remains largely in the background here.

No. 3, "Der neue Klassizismus," is a cantata for mixed chorus with viola, cello and piano accompaniment. It predominantly targets the musicologist Hugo Riemann (although Schönberg does not mention him specifically in the preface). In the 1916 edition of his "Musiklexikon" (music encyclopedia), Riemann had made disparaging remarks about passages in Schönberg's "Harmonielehre," an attack which the composer had still not forgiven in 1926 when he wrote the Satires, even though Riemann had long since died and the passage in question had long been deleted. Apart from that, Stravinsky is the main target.

Borrowings from the baroque cantata form are obvious. A tenor recitative (marked "eventuell Solo" – possibly solo) is followed by an instrumental interlude and the aria for bass (again "eventuell Solo") and chorus "Dem kann die Macht der Zeiten nichts mehr anhaben" (The forces of time can no longer touch him). This is followed by another interlude and the chorus fugue "Die Hauptsache ist der Entschluß" (The most important thing is the decision). Another instrumental interlude, using themes from the first, leads to a 'triple fugue' whose themes are taken from the same row. In addition to the interludes, the instruments' role is to support the vocal lines, a precautionary measure going back to Schönberg's choral work "Friede auf Erden."

The "Satires" conclude with three canons composed diatonically. In a separate preface, Schönberg justifies this by stating that he wanted to prove that he was able to compose diatonic canons, a technique which "although not appreciated very much, is still considered difficult." Moreover, the canon happens to be the traditional form that comes closest to meeting the requirements of the twelve-tone method.

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