
String Quartet No. 3, op. 30

Title	String Quartet No. 3, op. 30
Time of origin	1927
Premiere	19 September 1927, Wien, Konzerthaus, Mozart-Saal
Duration	ca. 30 min.

- I. Moderato
- II. Adagio
- III. Intermezzo. Allegro moderato
- IV. Rondo. Molto moderato

“Last Sunday [I heard] your 3rd Quartet played by Kolisch! I search for words to describe my impression; perhaps I can say it best this way: that with each new work from you, I acquire a whole new world view.” – With this letter of 25 November 1927 Anton Webern expressed his enraptured opinion of Schönberg’s op. 30. More than 18 years lie between Schönberg’s Second and Third Quartets. During this time the composer explored the possibilities of 12-tone composition with the Five Pieces for Piano op. 23, the Serenade op. 24, and the Piano Suite op. 25, but op. 30 is his first dodecaphonic string quartet. Composed between 24 January and 8 March 1927, the work was finished in an astonishingly short time for music of such complexity. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge commissioned the piece on 2 March (at a time when it was already almost finished), and it was premiered in her presence at a chamber music festival in Vienna on 19 September 1927. In his notes to the first recording (performed in Los Angeles by the Kolisch Quartet), Schönberg recollected, “Neither at this first performance, nor at some following performances at Prague and Berlin, did it provoke any kind of riot, as my former two string quartets had done. This might make one think that now my music was understood and I had finally succeeded in convincing the public of my mission as a composer. But it would be a great error to assume this [...] Because, while in spite of the riots, caused by a part of the public, there were always a certain number of critics who stood by my work against the opposition, now there was a certain unanimity among these judges, saying that I might possess a remarkable musical knowledge and technique, but did not create instinctively, that I wrote without inspiration. I was called a constructor, a musical engineer, a mathematician.”

In response to these criticisms, Schönberg insisted that his compositional style of the late 1920s differed little in affect from that of decades earlier. Throughout the latter part of his career, Schönberg maintained that dodecaphony was only a tool, a means of organization, but should not be mistaken for the music itself. As he explained in a revealing and often-quoted letter to his brother-in-law Rudolf Kolisch, “You have rightly worked out the rows in my string quartet [...] You must have gone to a great deal of trouble, and I don’t think I’d

have had the patience to do it. But do you think one's any better off for knowing it? I can't quite see imagine it. [...] I can't utter too many warnings against overrating these analyses, since after all they only lead to what I have always been dead against: seeing how it is done; whereas I have always helped people to see: what it is!" (Berlin, 27 July 1932). After the formal innovations of his first two quartets (a single, through-composed movement in the case of the First, and the addition of a voice in the Second), Schönberg returned in his Third Quartet to the standard four-movement structure, a counterbalance to its harmonic innovations. The first movement (Moderato) is in sonata form with two forms of the row fulfilling the traditional harmonic function; it employs the standard structure of exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda. An ostinato of staccato eighth notes, described by Schönberg as a link between the various characters and moods, pervades almost the entire movement. The combination of sonata form and the procedure of developing variation in this movement represents the classical and romantic elements inherent in Schönberg's style. The second movement (Adagio) is a Theme and Variations with two consecutive themes of ten measures each. Models for a slow variation movement can be found in numerous works of Viennese classical composers. The third movement, which Schönberg named Intermezzo (Allegro moderato), assumes a form typical for an inner movement of a classical string quartet, a minuet, and the ternary form applies not only to the movement in general but also to each of the three parts individually. The final movement, Rondo (Molto moderato), was described by Schönberg as being a sonata-rondo.

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