
Six Pieces, op. 35



Title	Six Pieces for Male Chorus, op. 35
Time of Origin	1929/30
Premiere	2 November 1929, Berlin, Berliner Rundfunk 24 October 1931, Hanau
Duration	ca. 13 min.

1. Hemmung
2. Das Gesetz
3. Ausdrucksweise
4. Glück
5. Landsknechte
6. Verbundenheit

Arnold Schönberg directed several choral ensembles in Vienna and the immediate vicinity around 1900. In the process, he occasionally wrote pieces for his singers, although many of the scores were probably lost when the ensembles disbanded. Almost thirty years after his active time as a choral conductor, he received two commissions for compositions that led to a renewed examination of the demands of amateur music. In April 1928, he wrote arrangements of folk melodies for mixed choir as well as for voice with piano accompaniment for the "Volksliederbuch für die Jugend." A few months later, on September 5, 1928, Alfred Guttmann, a physician as well as a committed music publisher and educator, wrote a letter to Schönberg stating that he had been "striving for years to improve the musical literature of our singers." As artistic advisor to the Workers' Choral Society, he asked for "one or two choral pieces" for "a collection of music for male choir that was in preparation [and would] comprise 200 to 300 choral pieces." Schönberg was initially upset by the expectation of having to participate in such an extensive collection and be placed in equal standing with so many other composers. In March 1929, however, he decided to devote his full attention to the project. In order not to overburden the amateur singers, he wrote a four-part tonal canon. After completing about three fourths of the piece, Schönberg put the draft aside and decided to write a new piece that would "keep quite close to my actual style and yet should not be as challenging to perform as it might seem at first sight, because the individual parts are not so difficult, but are rather very singable." Aware of the difficulties of his musical language, Schönberg pointed out to Guttmann that rehearsals should not concentrate on "chordal effect" which "is almost exclusively the case when it comes to male choirs." Schönberg finally submitted the choral piece "Glück" for the planned publication. At the same time, he worked out texts for five other pieces for male choir. In 1930, he set the remaining texts to music under the title "Sechs Stücke für Männerchor" (Six Pieces for Male Choir), op. 35. Within the framework

of the linear structure of twelve-tone writing, Schönberg knew how to accommodate the singers by simplifying aspects of the harmonic level. "Landsknechte," op. 35/5, is largely limited to the basic row and its inversion at the interval of a fifth, thus resulting in the formation of thirds and sixths that are easier to sing. While the rhythm is elaborated in many layers, the compositional process remains comparatively simple and offers audible harmonic emphases. The fact that the chords are linked with onomatopoeic imitations of horse hooves and gunfire may have further engaged the singers. In a letter of February 1931, Alban Berg highlights the successful combination of popular elements with a high compositional standard: "and yet, behind the absolute eternal value of this opus, there also seems to me to be something transitory: just as you address contemporary notions of community in the magnificent lyrics [...] so it seems as if you (who have always shown everything to the younger generation) also wanted to show something in retrospect and thereby demonstrate that such simple forms, otherwise belonging only to lowly communal music, can also aspire to the highest artistic development and mastery."

Eike Feß | © Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien
www.schoenberg.at