
Prelude, op. 44

Title	Prelude for Mixed Chorus and Orchestra, op. 44
Time of Origin	1945
Premiere	18 November 1945, Los Angeles, Wilshire Ebell Theatre
Duration	ca. 6 min.

Nathaniel Shilkret was a versatile American musician who always kept a busy schedule. An accomplished clarinetist, he played in orchestras and bands, emerged as a conductor with arrangements of popular music, and made a name for himself with numerous record productions. His compositional work was mainly devoted to film music, although he also wrote catchy songs. Moreover, he sought to expand his musical horizons: in 1934 Shilkret planned to take lessons from Arnold Schönberg, but the plan probably fell through. A good ten years later, he contacted Schönberg once again in relation to a project for the concert stage. Shilkret commissioned six American composers to write a piece for a large-scale Genesis Suite for narrator, choir and orchestra, which was to be released on record immediately after its premiere. With his "Bible Album" he sought to appeal to a broad audience: "My idea was aimed at the masses – I wanted to appeal to all record buyers [...] – not only music lovers who prefer an ultra-modern style, but all buyers who like music and the Bible." Schönberg agreed to compose a short prelude for choir and orchestra, especially since he would receive an exceptionally high fee of \$1,500. The remaining movements were composed by Shilkret himself ("The Creation"), Alexander Tansman ("The Fall"), Darius Milhaud ("Cain and Abel"), Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco ("The Flood"), Ernst Toch ("The Promise") and Igor Stravinsky ("The Tower of Babel"). The twelve-tone Prelude, op. 44 for mixed choir and orchestra was intended to be the opening movement of the suite. The row is arranged in such a way that the first eight notes, grouped in twos, result exclusively in intervals of thirds: this arrangement shapes the harmony of the piece, especially at the beginning. Melodic elements gradually emerge from a diffuse sound field depicting the state of the world before creation. Two contrapuntally-linked themes derived from various pitch combinations in the series occupy a central place. Initially performed by the English horn and the bassoon, the orchestral movement becomes increasingly dense, culminating in the choral entry right after a great climax. Schönberg, apparently concerned that his music might be interpreted too emotively at the premiere by the Los Angeles-based Jannsen Symphony Orchestra, noted in measure 12 of the short score: "Always without vibrato and Hollywood-style portamento; even large intervals must not be connected by sliding, but rather, if necessary, by shifting inaudibly. Such sliding is abominably sentimental." In the performance issued on record, the violins are clearly trying to realize the composer's expectations. The mixed chorus, on the other hand, lapses into clichés from 1940s film music both in terms of tone formation as well as intonation. Despite the work's concise and formally straightforward layout, Nathaniel Shilkret had misgivings. He confided

to his wife that “Schönberg’s piece is so ultra-modern and twelve-tone that even you with all your experience will imagine that a cat just jumped over the piano – it’s great music though – so new in sound.” He expressed similar reservations about Igor Stravinsky’s composition “Babel.” In order not to alienate his audience, Shilkret decided to place both works at the end of the pastiche, arbitrarily turning Schönberg’s Prelude into a Postlude.

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