
Suite in the Old Style



Title	Suite in the Old Style (G major) for String Orchestra
Time of Origin	1934
Premiere	18 May 1935, Los Angeles, Philharmonic Auditorium
Duration	ca. 29 min.

1. Ouverture. Fuga
2. Adagio
3. Menuett. Trio
4. Gavotte
5. Gigue

Schönberg's "Suite" was written during the last quarter of 1934, at a time when the émigré composer was just beginning to establish himself on the American West Coast. It is the first large-scale tonal work Schönberg completed after composing atonal and twelve-tone works for a quarter of a century. The fact Schönberg had not published a tonal composition since his Second String Quartet of 1908 should not, of course, lead one to assume that he did not continue to explore tonality in occasional works, arrangements of other composers' music, and several unfinished attempts. Schönberg spoke of a "longing" to "return to the older style" that had "always been powerful" in him: "So sometimes I write tonal music," he continued, "because for me, stylistic differences of this kind have no special significance." It was important for him to stress, however, that the renewed use of tonal procedures did not imply a concession to the tastes of the American public. In a preface to the "Suite" written at the beginning of 1935, Schönberg thus defended himself against the expected criticism of having renounced his twelve-tone methodology with this composition, and he emphasized above all the pedagogical aspirations of his work. The composer had written the "Suite" at the suggestion of Martin Bernstein, an ambitious musician who was establishing his career as the director of a student orchestra in New York University. Schönberg therefore called his work "a teaching example" of "those advances that become possible within tonality when one is really a musician and knows his craft: a real preparation not only from a harmonic point of view, but also in terms of melody, counterpoint, and technique [...]." And he added, with a touch of irony: "Without exposing the students for the time being to harm from the 'poison of atonality,' the aim here was to prepare them for modern playing technique through a harmonic language that leads to modern sensibilities." Accordingly, the musical techniques of the work are quite consistent in their variety and skillfulness with those procedures that Schönberg sought to illuminate in his own teachings of the masterpieces of the "classical" tradition. The "Ouverture," replete with fugal elements, illustrates

Schönberg's contrapuntal abilities; the dance movements "Minuet" and "Gavotte" demonstrate a special art of balanced, irregular use of rhythm and meter. The "Adagio" and the concluding, effective "Gigue" reveal above all the richly textured possibilities of motivic and thematic development. Schönberg's insistence on another occasion that with the "Suite" he had also created a "'teaching piece' for [his] composition students" further demonstrates the validity of his claim that he endeavored to build a didactic bridge between musical tradition and an emphatic commitment to "modernity." The dotted rhythm of the "Largo" opening of the "Overture," the gracefulness of the "Gavotte," the drone of the "Musette," and the 12/8 rhythm of the "Gigue" are only superficial indications of Schönberg's orientation towards tradition. Schönberg wants neither to imitate nor to alienate and parody the elements of musical tradition. Rather, he sees his work as a continuum of a tradition of "German music" extending back to Bach and Mozart that still lives on, and in his own compositions he tries to express what he has learned from the past in a contemporary manner. With "didactic examples" such as the "Suite," Schönberg wanted to highlight – as he himself said – a "novelty" that "never vanishes."

Matthias Schmidt | © Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien

www.schoenberg.at