

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Alban Berg Lyric Suite

The cultural milieu in which Alban Berg composed his Lyric Suite for string quartet was complex and fertile. Vienna in the early 20th century was a cauldron of ideas and explorations in the arts, and indeed in the understanding of our own souls. The ideas of Sigmund Freud had enormous influence on how humanity viewed itself, and the arts as an expression of this took on new forms and figures. The search for the truth underlying truth, the power of the subconscious mind to explain our needs, desires, and motivations, led artists to peer into the depths of their own emotions and reflect with probing sincerity what was found therein. In painting, figures such as Kokoschka and Schiele produced canvases which were raw, brutally honest musings on what were sometimes dark and even taboo themes. Inner truth was allowed to distort outer beauty in the service of artistic probity. In music the triumvirate of Schoenberg with his most important students, Webern and Berg, reshaped soundscapes in parallel with their colleagues' visual explorations. The violinist Felix Galimir, of the Galimir Quartet who worked with Berg, was fond of saying that one could not understand the music of these composers without knowing the plays of Strindberg. The psychological realism, the sometimes ugly and menacing faces of human nature, the torture of separateness and alienation found in these plays indeed find expression as well in the music of the so-called Second Viennese School.

At the time of the Lyric Suite's composition Berg had already enjoyed considerable success with his opera *Wozzeck*. He was known as a musical dramatist, well suited to the grand emotional sweep of opera. The symphonic model of the quartet, almost universally adopted for string quartets since the time of Haydn, is neglected in the Lyric Suite in favor of a more lyric-dramatic model. The form of the piece follows an expressive trajectory of intensification of mood which takes the place of more traditional formal models. The titles of the movements, *Allegretto gioviale*, *Andante amoroso*, *Allegro misterioso*, *Adagio appassionato*, *Presto delirando*, and *Largo desolato* give a sense of the descent into tragedy which the piece embodies. The three fast movements, each getting faster, alternate with three slow movements, each growing slower, so that the work evolves toward extremes of tempo and of mood. Besides the progression of mood, inclusion of material from each movement at some point in the following movement helps to bind the work together, giving it an organic sense of momentum. Theodore Adorno, a friend of Berg's, referred to the work as a "latent opera" saying of it "the Suite has the character of an accompaniment, as it were, to a course of events absent from it." Indeed it would not be difficult to imagine the work as a soundtrack for some sort of

ghastly silent film in which events turn from difficult but not yet hopeless to unbearable. Berg himself in a letter to Rudolph Kolisch, first violinist of the Kolisch Quartet who premiered the work, spoke of the piece as embodying "suffering destiny." Two quotations in the piece also give it a more specific emotional context. The first is from Zemlinsky's Lyric Symphony (from which the title of the quartet most likely came as well). The phrase which appears in Berg's work has a vocal text in the original: "You are my own, my own." In the Largo desolato the famous opening of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde appears, with its connotations of doomed, impossible love. Clearly this was a very personal and meaningful piece for the composer.

Exactly how specifically meaningful the piece was only became apparent in the 1970's when the composer and musicologist George Perle made a startling, revelatory discovery. He unearthed a miniature score comprehensively annotated by the composer on almost every page, revealing a secret program for the work: the clandestine, forbidden love between Berg and Hanna Fuchs-Robbetin. During a trip to Prague Berg had been hosted by the Fuchs-Robbetins who were friends of a friend, and he had fallen in love. The relationship continued over many years, painfully hidden and bereft of hope. The score of the Lyric Suite Berg had prepared for Hanna Fuchs-Robbetin explicating the programmatic nature of the work calls the piece "a small monument to a great love." Berg says as well "I have written...meanings into the score for you (for whom, and only for whom - in spite of the official dedication on the following page - every note of this work was written)."

This discovery puts the movements of the piece in a new light. The opening Allegretto gioviale is a prelude of sorts, revealing little of the tragedy to follow, but presenting the important musical materials of the piece. The second movement represents a domestic scene with Hanna and her two children, the third, whispered simmering anxiety, exploding in the middle section, the Trio estatico. The music of the Trio estatico is developed more fully in the Adagio appassionato, no longer muted as in its initial presentation. This movement contains as well the two instances of the Zemlinsky quotation discussed earlier. The Presto delirando is a feverish movement, filled with the "foreboding of the horrors and pains to come." Most startlingly, the final movement was found to be a vocal setting of a Baudelaire poem, the vocal part of which had been suppressed. All the pitches of the missing vocal part, save the single climactic note of the movement, are present and distributed among the parts, and the movement unfolds as a representation of images of barren landscapes, terror, and the inexorable and unforgiving procession of time of which the poem speaks. The work stands as a powerful expression of the deepest passion and tragedy, a gripping evocation of the inner world of a great composer and a tortured man.

Note by Mark Steinberg