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Schoenberg Quartet #2

Arnold Schoenberg's Second String Quartet, Op. 10, is widely considered to be a visionary work. But whereas it is oft remarked about this work that it sees into and points the way toward the future of musical rhetoric, it is interior seeing which lends it power and mesmerizing depth.

Schoenberg, active as a painter as well as a composer, produced a series of haunting paintings which he called "Visions." These are portraits whose searing eyes gaze intensely at, through, even into the viewer, searching for truth. This spirit is felt as well in the Second Quartet, a piece searching for a new world of self-expression. A hearing of this work convinced Wassily Kandinsky that he and Schoenberg were kindred spirits. Having attended a performance of the quartet, Kandinsky initiated a correspondence and a friendship with the composer. Like Kandinsky, Schoenberg was concerned with the primacy of introspection and emotion in art. Form was to arise out of the inner compulsion for self-expression; if necessary, the boundaries of the art form would shift to accommodate understanding won through interior questioning. In the case of this piece the gravitational relationships inherent in the tonal system, writing in a key, begin to yield to a freer treatment of pitch. Kandinsky writes to Schoenberg:

In your works. you have realized what I, albeit in uncertain form, have so greatly longed for in music. The independent progress through their own destinies, the independent life of the individual voices in your compositions, is exactly what I am trying to find in my paintings....I am certain that our own modern harmony is not to be found in the "geometric" way, but rather in the anti-geometric, antilogical way.

Certainly there is much of interest in the artistic links between these two great figures. However, one might argue that in terms of emotional sensibility Schoenberg may be closer to painters such as Kokoschka and Schiele, as well as to a writer such as Strindberg, in whose plays Schoenberg had great interest. This work not only occupies a pivotal place in the history of music, but is as well very much a child of its own historical period, pre-war Vienna. This is the Vienna of Freud, of Klimt, of Kokoschka, of Wittgenstein, a simmering cauldron of intellectual and artistic ferment. Dialogue between disciplines was commonplace and highly stimulating.

One may see here connections to Mahler, a composer with whom Schoenberg had a complicated relationship. Like Mahler's First Symphony, this quartet

features a quotation of a popular folk tune (more on this soon), and like Mahler's Second Symphony it features vocal writing in the third and fourth movements. More importantly, the expressive seed from which this quartet germinates finds itself firmly planted in Mahlerian soil. The rich, dark palette and late Romantic sensibility of Mahler inform the overall affect of the piece.

Much has been made of the progression of this piece from relative tonal stability to the instability of atonal writing, but in fact there is more ambiguity here than such a view suggests. The first movement starts firmly in f-sharp minor, but somewhat tentatively, quickly collapsing into a single, foreign pitch, catapulting the music into breathless uncertainty. (This quick move away from the opening material is reminiscent of Brahms' first string quartet.) The second theme we encounter evokes the world of the Viennese waltz, but fraught with anxiety, an early suggestion of the hallucinatory waltzes to be found in the String Trio, Op. 45, much later in the composer's life. Herein can be felt the central issue of the piece, familiar steps in an unfamiliar landscape. The movement ends temporarily at rest, but with a feeling of defeat.

The second movement, a scherzo, opens disembodied, drum-like on a single low cello pitch, perhaps an echo of the parallel movement in Beethoven's Quartet Op. 59 No. 1. As various spectral themes are brought in the movement takes on a macabre cast. One of the two most famous moments in the piece comes when the second violin begins the popular tune "Ach, du lieber Augustin, alles ist hin," music that would ordinarily be accompanied by the simplest of harmonies. However here it finds itself out of place, torn from its natural milieu. Schoenberg remarked to a student of his that the "alles ist hin" (all is lost) was "not ironical [but has] a true emotional significance." As the tune fades away fragmented wisps of the waltz theme from the first movement are heard, disoriented. After a wild unison passage for all four instruments a quickened version of the drum motive from the start of the movement flashes by as the music seems almost to vaporize.

The Litany that follows is a setting of a Stefan George poem, one where the speaker pleads for solace, for release from worldly passions in order to find peace. Significantly, all the musical material is drawn from the earlier movements; for example, the lonely viola line which starts the movement is a distended version of the opening theme of the piece, accompanied by a prolonged sigh in the first violin drawn from the waltz theme from that movement. Thus there is a sense of looking backwards, reflecting on one's past while searching for a way forward. The music unfolds as a continuous set of variations, embodying the feeling of wrestling with ideas. This is music of heart-wrenching drama, featuring one of the largest vocal leaps in the literature, a plummeting from the highest register to the soprano's lowest

("take from me love," after which the singer continues "and give me thy peace"). The brief answering coda for the quartet alone grows to a shattering cry which is choked off at its peak.

As if in shock from this suffocated outburst the final movement takes this passionate human cry and answers it with music which is cold and spare. There is no sense of anchor, of tonal underpinnings, and this introductory texture leads to the entrance of the soprano in what is one of the most famous lines in musical history: "I feel the air of another planet." Here is embodied a vision of a whole new space, having wandered far from the Viennese waltzes, the societal references of the first part of the piece. It is a world of subjectivity, of sensitivity to the sometimes alienated feelings of the individual. The poem, however, ends "Carried aloft beyond the highest cloud, / I am afloat upon a sea of crystal splendor, / I am only a sparkle of the holy fire, / I am only a roaring of the holy voice." Schoenberg saw this piece as the gateway to the next stage of his development as a composer. The initial performance of the quartet created a scandal, the cries of the public eventually completely obliterating the music. But the piece itself ends in an earned state of tranquility, a turn to F-sharp major, having traveled far from the ending of the first movement. Despite the fear of the new acted out by the Viennese public, we can see now that there is much beauty here, much imagination and color, and much profundity.

Note by Mark Steinberg