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Webern Fünf Sätze

With one foot firmly in the kingdom of late Romantic music and the other pointing towards Webern's later, more abstract, style, the Five Movements for String Quartet, Op. 5 represents the first step toward a distillation of the aesthetic of Wagner and Strauss. Broad melodic inspirations are still to be found here, but the lush supporting textures one might find in the music of Webern's predecessors have been removed, lending a more intimate and almost haunting quality to some of these lines. And if we find in Wagner an outward manifestation of a rich inner life in full bloom, in these pieces we have an inward reflection of outer life, the individual's often anxiety-ridden response to an uncertain world, sensitive and intense.

The piece is arch-like as a whole. Extremely brief, the central third movement is perhaps as pure a musical portrait of dread and anxiety as one is apt to encounter, a moment of existential terror. This is flanked by two delicate, almost spectral slow movements composed of bittersweet sighs and whispers. The outer movements are more substantial. The first movement contains wild contrasts of energy and expression, with seeds of all that is to follow. It also hints at times at the lilt of Viennese dance music, so often representative of the life force to composers in this time and place. Here the music has a lonely cast, both nostalgic and regretful, which is taken up again in the final movement. By the final moments of the piece a woozy, distorted waltz becomes heavy and dark, with a sense of loss. Webern told his close friend Alban Berg that this piece was an outgrowth of his grief over his mother's death; eloquently bereft, this is music which speaks to the shadows of the soul.

Note by Mark Steinberg