
Three Piano Pieces

Title Three Piano Pieces (1894)

Time of Origin 1894

Premiere unknown

Duration ca. 7 min.

1. Andantino
2. Andantino grazioso
3. Presto

On the occasion of Schönberg's 50th birthday in 1924, his boyhood friend David Josef Bach wrote about their time spent together: "To say it plainly, Schönberg was a resolute 'Brahmin.' I owe more to his urging, enthusiasm, and explanation than the knowledge of Brahms' chamber music in those young years; I am grateful to him, like the others in our circle, for the loving understanding of that music. [...] I still think today that Brahms' strict formal striving had the greatest influence on Schönberg; and if Schönberg has remained an 'absolute musician' despite all fashions and trends, for me there is yet an elective affinity therein. [...] Piano pieces from 1895 [sic] clearly show the influence of Brahms." Brahms' piano compositions, which Schönberg knew intimately, are characterized by a dense, fine web of motivic development, even the most seemingly trivial figurations included; details such as the passages in thirds or sixths, the wide sonic spacing favoring the low register and the individualistic predilection for forming rhythms with syncopations and triplets are notable.

Schönberg did not limit himself to superficial imitation of Brahms' style; he strove to use its inner, substantial characteristics for his own compositions. This is especially evident in the last of the Three Pieces, the longest and weightiest of the set. Whereas the first two keep to the lyrical tone of their beginning, the tripartite Presto unleashes a variety of musical expression.

Schönberg's admiration of Brahms' music led him later on to the formula "economy and yet abundance," an ideal which he followed in the third of his early piano pieces. Thus, in its middle section (*più lento*), the accompaniment to the melody in the upper voice falls back on the chromatic motif from the opening bars, whereas the melody acting as the second theme is derived from the transition between the sections. This detailed motivic work creates a bracketing of the formal sections, each contrasting in their expressiveness. These efforts are somewhat less distinct in the first piece (Andantino); it is characterized above all by its odd rhythmic design; it is notated in 2/4 time, although actually sounds in 6/8. This rhythmical tension gives the movement its life, especially in the development-like middle section, where the contrast latent in the first section now openly emerges.

On the other hand, the second piece (Andantino grazioso) is cast in a framework dominated by the upper voice and conventional modulations, holding to the gracious cadencing.

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