
Three Pieces (1910)

Title Three Pieces for Chamber Ensemble

Time of Origin 1910

Premiere 10 October 1957, Berlin

Duration ca. 2 min.

1. Rasche Viertel
2. Mäßige Viertel
3. Gehende Viertel

“Every look can grow into a poem, every sigh can become a novel.” Schönberg’s foreword to the Bagatelles, Op. 9 by his pupil Anton Webern, which he paraphrased using terms such as “gesture” and “sigh of relief,” also describes the language of his own compositions at the outset of the style period which “dispenses with a tonal center” (“Rückblick”), especially the miniaturesque Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11 (1909), the Three Pieces for Chamber Ensemble (1910) and the Six Small Piano Pieces (1911). “The characteristic features of these pieces in statu nascendi were their extreme expressive power and their extraordinary brevity. Neither my pupils nor I were aware of the reasons for those characteristics at the time. Later on, I discovered that our feeling for form was right when it forced us to balance extreme expressive power with extraordinary brevity” (Schönberg, “Composition with Twelve Tones”). The new structural concept of music as an alternative to schematisms and formalistic repetitions corresponds to ideas of Expressionistic style; as Webern summarized in a 1932 lecture, they wished to “arrive somewhere else with every work – every work is something different, something new.” From the musical standpoint, the expressive tendency toward density applies equally to the pieces as totalities and to the elements within them – indeed, ultimately to the successions of notes – what Schönberg apostrophized as “working with pitches.” The need for expression intensifies the individual moment, so that repetitions and analogies are increasingly avoided. The directness of the musical events leads both to the dissolution of the traditional principles of form and to questioning formal unity in the conventional sense.

The lyrical brevity of the Three Pieces for Chamber Ensemble (composed in February 1910) – 12, 7 and 8 bars, the final piece remaining a fragment – is borne by an inner breadth of tonal speech, orchestrated differently each time. Instead of expansive motivic work, the writing is freely associative, creating many relationships and yet containing them in ambiguous balance. Even if the unfolding of a musical idea is formulated in its extreme reduction, Schönberg’s melos yet remains explicable and comprehensible.

With its steeply graded dynamics, the first piece derives a tripartite formal scheme from the initial idea of athematic close position, the voices crossing as structural elements.

The second piece numbers among the most radically conceived musical aphorisms in the Vienna School repertoire. Apart from the score's horizontal and vertical tonal relationships, the composition treats tone color and dynamics as equivalent structural parameters and – comparable to the “hard edge” technique in painting – are juxtaposed using sharply contoured sectioning and transitions – “micrologically formed throughout,” in Theodor W. Adorno's words.

“New characters arose, new moods and quicker changes of expression were created, and new kinds of commencement, continuation, contrast, repetition and ending came into use” (Schönberg, “Rückblick”). The “centerpiece” functions, so to speak, as a meditative point of repose between the complex polyphony of the first piece and the ostinati of the unfinished finale “movement.” By emphasizing the colorist aspect, the orchestral factor also becomes more distinct than in the first two miniatures. The static sound of the organ (or harmonium) forms an “infinitely tender, atmospheric background” (Adorno) from which crystallize tiny motivic particles, culminating in a widely drawn-out gesture from the clarinets before the torso ends with an abrupt caesura.

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