
Frühlings Tod



Title Frühlings Tod nach Lenau für großes Orchester (Fragment)

Time of Origin 1897

Premiere March 1984 in Berlin

Duration ca. 10 minutes

Being self-taught, Arnold Schönberg had explored various genres early in his career. His early works include songs, piano pieces, choral pieces, works for small orchestra, and several movements for string quartet. A significant document that reveals Schönberg's development from compositional beginner to technically accomplished orchestral composer is the fragment of the tone poem "Frühlings Tod" ("Spring's Death") for large orchestra after Nikolaus Lenau. A short score of 255 measures and a full score of 135 measures have survived. The short score is dated July 20, 1897, and was written just two years after the beginning of Schönberg's full-time career as a musician: in 1895 he had resigned from his position as a bank clerk and initially earned his income by conducting workers' choirs. On 2 March 1896, he saw the first public performance of one of his own works, the "Notturmo für Streichorchester und Sologeige" (Notturmo for String Orchestra and Solo Violin). Given Schönberg's limited experience, "Frühlings Tod" amounts to an extraordinary achievement by a young composer. The fragment testifies to the preoccupation with the two great figures of the previous generation of composers, Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner. The dispute between supporters of the two composers had already largely subsided in Schönberg's day, as Schönberg recalled years later: "What in 1883 seemed an impassable gulf was in 1897 no longer a problem. The greatest musicians of that time, Mahler, Strauss, Reger, and many others had grown up under the influence of both masters. [...] What then had been an object of dispute had been reduced into the difference between two personalities, between two styles of expression, not contradictory enough to prevent the inclusion of qualities of both in one work." Elements of such a synthesis, which Schönberg illustrated using his tone poem "Pelleas und Melisande" as an example, can also be detected in "Frühlings Tod:" the harmony is indebted to Wagner's musical drama "Tristan und Isolde," while the motivic work is influenced by Brahms. Of similar importance to the masters of the past, however, were two of Schönberg's contemporaries: "Mahler and Strauss had appeared on the musical scene and their arrival was so captivating that every musician immediately felt compelled to take a stand, pro or con. Being only 23 years old at the time, this immediately sparked my imagination, and I began composing one-movement symphonic poems." The turn to program music can thus be seen as an attempt by the young composer to respond to the musical zeitgeist. Richard Strauss was an important supporter in Schönberg's career, providing him with a teaching position at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin. There is also a connection to Strauss via the text: the author of the

poem "Frühlings Tod," Nikolaus Lenau, also wrote an unfinished dramatic poem, "Don Juans Tod" (The Death of Don Juan) that Strauss adapted into a symphonic poem. "Frühlings Tod" by Lenau contains passages that, according to Walter Bailey's analysis, virtually demand musical illustration through music - with images of springtime winds, storms, nightingales and lightning. The young Schönberg conscientiously devoted himself to this compositional task. Already in the first bars, the text line "Warum ihr Lüfte flüstert ihr so bang?" is fleshed out by recurring figures played by woodwinds and strings *con sordino*. The formal structure is difficult to assess since only a fragment of the work has survived. A striking feature is an unaccompanied solo cantilena by the clarinet containing thematic elements that connect the preceding and following formal sections. It is not difficult to discern the influence of Wagner, whose method of using recitative-like transitions between scenes in his music dramas is also present here, with the English horn solo at the beginning of the third act of "Tristan und Isolde" serving as a prominent reference.

It is unclear why Schönberg did not complete "Frühlings Tod." It is possible that he would have eliminated the deficiencies in workmanship had he continued work on the fragment. Not long afterwards, he turned to Richard Dehmel's "Verklärte Nacht," op. 4, and thus transferred the essence of Richard Strauss's tone poems into the field of chamber music. It was not until 1984 that Riccardo Chailly performed "Frühlings Tod" with the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra. The music critic Albrecht Dümling wrote about the concert: "Even if [Schönberg] paid homage to the spirit of the times with the sequence-rich tendency towards infinite melody, one can already recognize something of his own musical style in the constructive unification of the theme. In contrast to the choral treatment of the horns, which is still unmistakably Wagnerian, the solo woodwind parts, and especially the oboe and the unaccompanied solo clarinet, which were probably meant to represent sounds of nature, are quite original. This early work, received with much applause, revealed a tonally sensuous lyricism, but in between also a courage for unanimity that is otherwise rare in Schönberg's oeuvre."

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