
Piano Piece, op. 33a



Title	Piano Piece, op. 33a
Date	1928/29
First performance	2 December 1931, Berlin
Duration	ca. 3 min.

On 8 June 1928, Arnold Schönberg received a letter from Universal Edition, his Vienna publisher for many years. It announced a “collection of modern piano music in six volumes,” to be published under the title *Musik der Zeit* [“Music of Our Time”]. The publication was designed as a low-budget advertising vehicle for contemporary works, mainly drawing from the publisher’s catalogue. Schönberg’s op. 11/1 piano piece was intended to be the series’ crowning finale.

However, the composer did not hold great store by the idea of dislodging a part of a completed piece. According to a record of the discussion, he suggested arranging a poem from his successful melodrama cycle *Pierrot lunaire*, op. 21 as an independent instrumental piece. After repeated demands, he finally sent an entirely new piano composition to Emil Hertzka, Universal’s manager, on 25 April 1929 – half a year after the scheduled publishing date – for which he demanded the considerable fee of 500 Reichsmarks. He knew that an anthology with a claim to topicality could not do without a contribution written by him. In addition, the composer found publication in a collection appealing, promising a greater chance of dissemination than a separate edition; although his last piano music, the *Suite*, op. 25, was only a few years old, his work with the “method of composing with twelve tones related only to one other” had considerably developed in the meantime.

The earliest musical idea was probably a harmonic grouping; op. 33a begins with six chords of four notes each, which present the basic twelve-tone row and its inversion like a motto. Similar to the fourths harmonies TETRACHORDS from the op. 9 Chamber Symphony, these chords appear several times at key points in the piece, at the same time forming its structural backbone. Spaced in octaves, the first four notes of the melody entering in bar 3 are identical with chord 4, while the continuation corresponds to chords 5 and 6; the accompaniment consists of the notes from chords 3, 2 and 1.

All of the piece’s other themes and motifs can be traced back to the pitch grouping revealed at the outset. The songlike secondary theme begins with an unobtrusive accompanying pattern in the treble which corresponds to the basic row – i.e. chords 1, 2 and 3 – while the melody sounding in the bass unfolds the inversion transposed by a fifth (i.e. chords 4, 5 and 6) linearly. At the center of the piece is a type of development or episode, thematically freer and loosening the close connection with the four-note groupings. After a build to fortissimo, the initial harmonies return, now resolved in loose pitch relationships.

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