
Piano Piece, op. 33b



Title: Piano Piece, op. 33b

Date: 1931

First performance: 20 September 1949, Frankfurt am Main

Duration: ca. 4 min.

The American-born bassoonist Adolph Weiss became Schönberg's pupil in 1924 through the influence of Edgar Varèse. After returning to the United States, Weiss introduced his Six Preludes for Piano to the public; it was the first work by an American composer to use the principles of the twelve-tone method. The pieces, an excerpt from the 1927 cycle Twelve Preludes, were published with analytical notes in the *New Music Quarterly* (April 1929), which was under the guidance of composer Henry Cowell; subscribers regularly received examples of current production which had no chance of publication via the usual channels. Other than American composers, works by the "very best Europeans" were published; after Anton Webern's *Geistliches Volkstext* ["Spiritual Folk Text"], op. 17/2, scheduled for October 1930, music by Schönberg was also planned. Through Adolph Weiss, he agreed to send a piano piece for the moderate fee of 100 dollars. His former pupil expressed irritation when Universal Edition published a work of Schönberg's with the opus number 33a; he wrote in German: "I believe that the number is that which you have given as opus for the composition you wish to give our publishing house, i.e. for \$ 100. Is there perhaps a piano piece opus 33b which we could have on these terms?"

Schönberg acted quickly. He composed a new piece in three days (8 – 10 October 1931) which was named *Klavierstück*, to be published in the April 1932 issue of the *New Music Quarterly*. Instead of an analytical foreword, the title page bore this note: "Arnold Schönberg has requested that we not publish biographical data or musical explanations of his work, since both his music and his musical standpoint are well known."

As with the only slightly older op. 33a piano piece, Schönberg restricted his use of the twelve-tone row to the original form, its inversion transposed at the fifth, and the corresponding retrogrades. Unlike op. 33a, however, he derived themes and motifs only rarely from related row segments, leaving his melodic invention to work freely with pitch selections, whereby the course of the row derivations always remained immutable. For example, the songlike melody at the outset is comprised of two consecutive pitches each of the row, while the remaining pitches appear as counterpoint in the bass. A secondary theme (bar 19) connects three non-consecutive pitches from the original form and the inversion; the remaining nine sound as accompaniment according to the order stipulated by the row. This ostensibly schematic procedure yields melodic variety, simultaneously guaranteeing uniformity on the sonic level. Repeating pitch selections result in similar motifs and themes, lending the piece clear, comprehensible structure. Eduard Steuermann, Schönberg's pupil and pianistic champion, described the composition (which is not very difficult in terms of

keyboard technique) as a “quietly flowing ‘song without words’ bringing us in calm devotion all the nuances of the musical idea.”

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