

On Schoenberg Five Pieces

In a famous passage in *The Inferno* Dante conjures up an unforgettable picture of Ulysses. Dante's take on this famous character is quite different from the familiar story that we read in Homer. At the time of his homecoming, the Trojan War is behind him, as is the extraordinary series of trials and adventures that have impeded his return. He has experienced virtually everything that a man can experience in the known world, learned almost all that one can know. But Ulysses does not rest on his laurels, living out his life calmly at home. Instead, he sets out on another voyage, this time into uncharted territory, heedless to the dangers and to the warnings of well-wishers. Almost anyone else would have been content with a life so fully lived, but some restless, unsatisfied quality of mind and of soul spurs Ulysses on to seek new paths, new challenges, right up until his dying breath.

Arnold Schoenberg was Ulysses, and one can think of the Five Pieces for Orchestra as the vessel in which Schoenberg embarked on the last, greatest, and most dangerous journey of his life – into the uncharted waters of atonality. Unmoored from the safety of tonality, he faced challenges different from those confronting any earlier composer. Not only did he have to mold his musical thoughts into a coherent composition, but he even had to invent the language in which they were to be formed. Later on he was going to feel the need to systematize his thinking, creating what is called the twelve-tone technique, but at this point in his journey he was truly feeling his way as a composer, relying on his prodigious technique and impeccable ear.

However, he had company in the other arts. Very similar things were happening in painting, which was concerning itself less and less with the depiction of external reality. Schoenberg himself was an amateur painter, and the approximately 100 paintings of his that survive demonstrate his whole-hearted commitment to the movement of abstract expressionism in the visual arts.

But more revealing even than his engagement with the most progressive artistic trends of his time was his knowledge of the work of Sigmund Freud. Freud was changing our view of the human mind—fundamentally and, one suspects, forever. It should be remembered that Freud was responsible for the concepts of the subconscious, of neurosis, of paranoia, of memory suppression and clinical hysteria, as well as many other psychological terms that are common today. These ideas, conditioning how we today think of the unconscious workings of the mind, were notions that either were entirely new with Freud or were investigated and given credibility for the first time as the result of his work. Schoenberg was profoundly aware of Freud's psychological explorations. They seemed the perfect, almost inevitable match with the temper of the times.

And so we find that, when Schoenberg struck out on this new path, his music, which from the very beginning had been so intense in its expression, moved in the direction of extreme emotional states. When the music is calm, it is eerily, disturbingly so. When it is agitated, it can become frenetic, almost demented. At times, one extreme state seems to tip over into its opposite. People will probably never agree on whether the climax of the fifth piece is an outburst of ecstasy or a scream of pain—or perhaps those two states of mind are closer than we like to think. If this music makes us uncomfortable, that's not surprising. It's supposed to.

In the first movement we are conscious of the maximum amount of music being coaxed from a bare minimum of material—just the opening phrases for cello and clarinet and an ostinato figure.

The mood of the movement is nervous, obsessive. It begins as disjointed fragments and ends with regimented ticking, like some kind of demented clock.

The second piece could hardly be in greater contrast. At the insistence of his publisher Schoenberg grudgingly gave it a title, “Vergangenes” (sentimentally translated into English as “Yesteryears”). But as titles go it’s not half bad. In the greatest possible contrast to the first piece it has a clearly audible ABA form—i.e., song form. It is intimately scored in comparison to the first piece, and the feeling is quite nostalgic. It is possible that even in the works of Mahler there is no wisp of melody more touchingly beautiful than the opening few bars of this beguiling movement.

At the heart of the Five Pieces is the strange movement called “Colors”. Almost completely static, it invites the listener to hear gradually shifting instrumental timbres and melodic lines that creep along almost imperceptibly, like musical inchworms. Nothing in the movement should be “difficult” for the audience, as long as they have the good will to surrender utterly to the strange beauty of the music and to listen for the changes of color, of harmony, of melody, as they gradually unfold. For the orchestra there *are* difficulties, however. Every note of the piece must be played with the greatest beauty of sound, with precise and loving tenderness. This is not an easy task in a piece that requires extremely acute listening from every player. Everyone must match his sound exactly with other instruments that he is paired with, everyone must always be aware of the exact place of each note he plays in respect to what is happening in the whole orchestra. This is a tall order, and no audience will ever appreciate how difficult it is. But the result, on the occasions when Schoenberg’s intentions are truly realized, is utterly magical.

As if in reaction against the stasis of the third piece, the fourth is brief, nervous, full of contrasts, and it ends with violence. The many brief solos for different instruments, and the treatment of the horns as a separate choir within the orchestra with its own unique sound world, make this compressed movement seem like the world’s shortest concerto for orchestra. The feeling of the movement is that of a foreboding of disaster.

Yet in the fifth movement the disaster doesn’t occur. Instead, this comparatively extended piece is one long unbroken melody. It’s an unusual melody, to be sure, since there are no repetitions of any kind in the movement. Everything, once heard, is immediately displaced by something else, never to be heard again. The only time that this procedure is broken is at the stunning, blazing climax of the piece. The texture of the movement is very dense, but the melody always predominates, passing through all sections of the orchestra. It’s the duty of the conductor and orchestra to make sure that that continuous melody is always to the fore, despite the myriad details of a secondary nature that surround it.

One can, and often does, make too much of a point of the complexity of this music. Bach is complex too. In the end, the Five Pieces for Orchestra is a piece of music, just like any other. We respond to it intuitively, the better we get to know it the more it says to us, and at a certain point in our coming to grips with it, we realize there is literally no end to what we will find in it. It has remained touching, exhilarating and disturbing for over a hundred years. And, for some reason, it seems to remain eternally new.