

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Adagio and Fugue in C Minor, K. 546

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)



Composed in 1788, just three years before Mozart's death, the *Adagio and Fugue in C Minor* could be viewed as a brief culmination of all his best efforts in musical expression. It has been arranged for both string quartet and string orchestra.

Our attention is immediately riveted by the opening exclamatory statement of the *Adagio*. If that statement is disconcerting, so is the tragic sense of the music that follows it. The entire movement then alternates between the two startling effects with each instrument playing an important role. The *Adagio* leads directly into the complex *Fugue* where we are reminded of no lesser efforts than those of Johann Sebastian Bach to whom Mozart looked for inspiration. Emotional power, however, is not lost in the complexity of the *Fugue* and is even intensified in it. Curiously, the *Fugue* of K. 546 is based on an earlier fugue from the K. 426 keyboard work for four hands. That the later *Fugue* of K. 546 has a greater emotional impact than the earlier one says something about the singular power of the string quartet, a form that challenged even the genius of Mozart.

Lyric Suite

Alban Berg
(1855-1935)



In a letter to Frida Semler Seabury, Alban Berg wrote: "I declare firmly and decisively the great importance which sensuality has for everything spiritual. Only through an understanding of sensuality, only through a profound insight into the 'depths of mankind' (or should it rather be 'heights of mankind?') does one arrive at the true idea of the human psyche." He was also quoted in a 1975 *New York Times Magazine* article as having said, "The best music results from ecstasies of logic." These statements personify Berg's music in its combination of the Second Viennese School techniques of Arnold Schoenberg and the Late Romanticism of Gustav Mahler.

One of the important ideas Berg learned from his mentor, Schoenberg, was the concept of the "developing variation," *i.e.*, that the unity of a piece depends on its derivation from a single basic idea. While this concept was not strange to Brahms (nor to Beethoven) it was formalized by Schoenberg and promulgated by his students Anton Webern and Alban Berg. Another idea essential to the Second Viennese School, of which Berg was a leading member, was the twelve-tone system. Simply stated, this meant the use of all twelve tones of the chromatic scale before any could be repeated. Berg's music, however, transcends any one "system" or rigid notion of Modernism.

We could analyze the *Lyric Suite* strictly in terms of the twelve-tone system, but that would sell short its emotional impact. Despite its use of that system of composition, we should also dispel any notion that the *Lyric Suite* is not "lyrical." It retains all the beauty and singing qualities that we associate with the term, even if it redefines lyricism in the sense of its harmonic structure. If dissonances ring throughout the work, we need to recall that "dissonance" is merely the counterpart of "consonance," and music, including that of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, would be dull without it. The lyrical and poetic aspects of the work are evident, so much so that in 1976, Douglass Green, a professor of music theory at the University of Texas, studied a first edition of the *Lyric Suite* discovered by George Perle and deciphered the setting of a Baudelaire poem in the last movement. As Alex Ross notes in his

book, *The Rest is Noise* (Picador 1997), George Gershwin studied the score of the *Lyric Suite* and had it performed at various Paris parties, “no doubt to the puzzlement of the flapper crowds,” Ross adds.

Berg’s love affairs strongly affected his music. His marriage in 1911 to Helene Nahowski, presumably the illegitimate daughter of Emperor Joseph I from his liaison with Anna Nahowski, did not keep him from love affairs that inspired his work. Thus is the case with the *Lyric Suite* composed between 1925 and 1926. In the piece, Berg uses the motif A, B-flat, B, F, which, in German notation, represents his initials and those of his lover Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, sister of Austrian-Bohemian novelist, playwright, and poet Franz Werfel who, to add further interest to the tale, was a lover of Alma Mahler, widow of Gustav Mahler. In the fourth movement of the *Lyric Suite*, Berg quotes a melody from Zemlinsky’s *Lyric Symphony* that was a setting of the words, “You are mine.” By his own admission, Berg quotes the Tristan motif in the last movement of the *Lyric Suite*. That he did all of this within the tenets of the twelve-tone system is incredible. That he stretched the boundaries of those tenets to encompass his own romantic spirit is also a consideration.

In listening to the six movements of the *Lyric Suite*, you will notice many of Alban Berg’s imprints. For example, in the *Allegro gioviale*, the “jovial” quality indicated by the movement marking is veiled behind a dark harmonic structure and a sense of urgency.

The second movement, *Andante amoroso*, is, in fact, a moving romantic statement but touched with sadness and a growing tension. Berg’s A, B-flat, B, F motto is most prominent in the third movement, *Allegro misterioso; Trio estatico*, but perhaps more interesting is its ecstatic nature and its virtuosic demands. The movement fades away as mysteriously as it began.

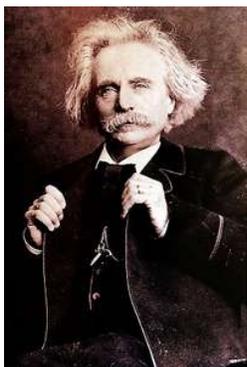
The fourth movement *Adagio appassionato* is an example of Adorno’s label of “latent opera” with its new depths of lyrical expression in a form where we do not expect it. It is in this movement that Berg gives his bow to Zemlinsky. He ends on a wonderful dissonant chord that prepares us for the next movement.

As its marking suggests, the highly emotional *Presto delirando* is a statement of almost brutal delirium outweighed only by its technical difficulty that includes breathtaking string techniques. The galloping rhythms of the *Tenebroso* bring a sharp edge of darkness to the movement.

The last movement, *Largo desolato*, suggests the desolation of a failed love affair and is an apotheosis of sadness before it fades away into a frightening nothingness.

String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 27

Edvard Grieg
(1843-1907)



In his chamber music, Edvard Grieg dispels our traditional notions of Grieg as the quintessential champion of Norwegian Romantic Nationalism. Here is no “Chopin of the North,” as Hans von Bülow called him. Gone is the composer of our early piano studies. Grieg himself recognized this departure in an 1878 letter to his Danish friend Matthison-Hansen where he confessed to “stagnating” because of his popular works such as *Peer Gynt* and to finding himself renewed in his writing for string quartet and his sonatas for cello and piano as well as violin and piano.

The G Minor String Quartet is a work of powerful impact, jarring contrasts, and exploratory harmony. Like other composers who turned from large-scale programmatic and nationalistic works, Grieg became more abstract and universal in his only string quartet. (Another remained unfinished at his death.) This is not to say, however, that he became less emotionally effective. Thus we have the G Minor Quartet

with its complex harmony, its honoring of form, and its suggestion of Impressionism that would come ten years later in Debussy's String Quartet written in the same key. None of this should suggest that the G Minor Quartet is void of the lyricism we associate with Grieg. It is there but more subtly used in the song motif, a quote from his setting of an Ibsen poem that marks the work and lends it a unity lacking in his other compositions.

Tempo markings tell much about the G Minor Quartet. Contrast is everywhere from the dramatic slow opening and agitated *Allegro* of the first movement to the *Lento* followed by the breathtaking *Presto* of the last movement. Between, we have the second movement which, after only a moment of "romance," flies into an agitated *Allegro*. The third movement *Intermezzo*, with its accents and lively scherzo, is not what we usually think of as that form. In the *saltarello* (a 16th century Italian dance form in triple time) of the last movement, we have a suggestion, but only a suggestion, of the Grieg we know. After the song motif of the first movement is reintroduced, the rousing dance form with its contrasting duplets and triplets suggests the Grieg who devoted his musical life to the exploration of Norwegian folk tunes. But here, as in Dvořák and Bartók, the folk music does not govern all but serves as a brilliant part of sophisticated composition.

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