

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### **Alban Berg – Three Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6**

*Born February 9, 1885, Vienna, Austria.  
Died December 23, 1935, Vienna, Austria.*

#### **Three Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6**

Berg began this score in 1914 and completed it in August 1915. The first two pieces were performed in Berlin on June 5, 1923, with Anton Webern conducting. The first complete performance was given in Oldenburg, Germany, on April 14, 1930. The score calls for four flutes and four piccolos, four oboes and english horn, four clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, four trombones and tuba, bass drum, tenor drum, cymbals, tam-tams, timpani, snare drum, triangle, large hammer, glockenspiel, xylophone, celesta, two harps, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Berg's Three Pieces for Orchestra were given at Orchestra Hall on November 30 and December 1, 1961, with Hans Rosbaud conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on October 23 and 24, 1997, with Daniel Barenboim conducting. The Orchestra has performed this work at the Ravinia Festival only once, on June 23, 1990, with James Levine conducting.

At Mahler's funeral, on May 21, 1911, Schoenberg and his pupils placed a wreath on the grave with a card which read: "This rich man through whom we have come to know the deepest sorrow—the loss of the saintly Gustav Mahler—has left us, for life, a model we cannot lose: his work and his works." Alban Berg was one of those students, both of Schoenberg's teachings and of Mahler's compositions.

Berg traveled to Munich with Schoenberg and a fellow pupil, Anton Webern, to attend the posthumous premiere of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* in November, and he was in the audience at the first performance of the Ninth Symphony in Vienna the following June. As Pierre Boulez has suggested, the devotion of Berg and his fellow radicals was seen for many years as "narrow, local sentimental attachment," since "their link with this music was not at first sight obvious, whereas the contrast between it and theirs was patent."

But Berg was a genuine admirer and a true disciple. At the age of sixteen, he was blown away by the premiere of the Fourth Symphony in Vienna (that evening, he took Mahler's baton and kept it, as one of his most precious possessions, for the rest of his life). He was at the train station to say good-bye when Mahler left Vienna for New York City in 1907, never guessing that he would bid his final farewell scarcely four years later. Although Berg became a student of Arnold Schoenberg in 1904, and, along with Webern, was so influenced by him that their names would be linked forever as the second Viennese triumvirate, Berg was in fact Mahler's true heir in many ways (he is the only one of the three whose music ever actually sounds like Mahler's).

These three orchestral pieces are the works with which Berg reveals the depth of his indebtedness to Mahler's music as well as the strength of his attachment to Schoenberg, both as a man and as a teacher, with whom he recently had had a minor falling out. They are at once homage and appeasement. The temporary rift with Schoenberg was over Berg's first orchestral score, the *Altenberg* Songs—the first work he wrote after his teacher and mentor moved to Berlin. Although Schoenberg conducted them at a concert of new music in Vienna, on March 31, 1913—the audience was so hostile that Berg's songs were only half finished before the concert was stopped and the police called in—he later came down hard on Berg's music. The songs, he said, were too willfully novel, and, above all, too short for their own good; Berg, he feared, was setting off on the wrong track. Perhaps Schoenberg was stunned by the impressive strides his pupil had taken without him, or by the way he and his little songs had stolen, if only temporarily, the limelight. Perhaps Schoenberg simply could not relinquish his role as teacher and critic (and part father). In any event, the two men parted coldly.

Back in Vienna, Berg wrote to him: "But I must thank you for your censure just as much as for everything you ever gave me, in the full knowledge that it is meant well—and for my own good." But for several months, Berg wrote little music. Then, in 1914, he began the orchestral pieces he planned to dedicate to Schoenberg—"because I've owed him, as my teacher, the dedication of a big work for a long time." In September, Berg sent Schoenberg the manuscript of the first and

third pieces (he had hoped to complete all three for Schoenberg's fortieth birthday on September 13). "He was their inspiration, too," Berg told his wife. Berg had gone to Amsterdam that spring to hear Schoenberg conduct his Five Pieces for Orchestra. "Mine don't resemble his at all in feeling," he said, while he was fast at work, "they will even be fundamentally different!"

That they are, although the question Berg himself later posed about his own teacher in his essay "Why is Schoenberg's Music so Difficult to Understand?" has often been asked of Berg's music as well, particularly in works as dense and complicated as these pieces. They are remarkably challenging, not only to the listener, but also to the conductor and performers, for Berg's score is unusually complex and exhaustive in its demands (there are seventy-five tempo changes in the March alone). None of Berg's other printed scores is so densely laden with expression markings, or so blackened by the sheer complexity of its texture (only the opera *Wozzeck* calls for an orchestra of comparable size).

Yet, for all its technical polish and analytical precision, Berg's music is deeply, almost overwhelmingly, expressive. Listeners often search in vain for some kind of narrative continuity in abstract music, but Berg's music sounds as if it does indeed have a story to tell, even if that story turns out to be only the very gripping drama of music unfolding, changing, and reinventing itself.

Mahler's influence is everywhere—from the sweeping melodic lines to the brilliant yet scrupulous orchestration—even though his presence is fleeting, ghostly, and often virtually unnoticeable. A prominent, halting rhythmic figure near the beginning of the Prelude bears a striking resemblance to the opening of Mahler's Ninth Symphony, which Berg heard shortly before he began this score and often played through at the piano. ("The first movement is the most glorious he ever wrote," he told his wife.) The hushed percussion sonorities at the outset of the Prelude recall Berg's admiration for the "magnificent mountain atmosphere and cowbells" of Mahler's Sixth Symphony. (Despite Beethoven's *Pastoral*, Berg claimed, "there is still only one Sixth.")

The Prelude is designed as a large arch, opening and closing with unpitched percussion—accelerating at the start, slowing down at the close—and reaching, at the center, a massive climax of activity. A surging theme, for violins and bassoons, recalls the main melody of the first movement of Mahler's Ninth.

Berg once suggested that the Three Pieces might almost be thought of as a symphony, with the central Round Dance serving as both scherzo and slow movement, in that order (the switch from 3/4 to 4/4 marks the dividing line). It is filled with the most extraordinary effects, including a passage Stravinsky called “one of the most remarkable noises [Berg] ever imagined.” In a particularly beautiful section just before the end, a series of slow trills engulfs the whole orchestra as they converge on a single, eleven-note chord, which stops abruptly, allowing us to hear a fanfare from the distance.

The concluding March is as long as the other two pieces together, and more feverishly active than either. It was written after the assassination at Sarajevo that triggered World War I, and George Perle, our finest Berg scholar, suggests that it captures the impending sense of doom:

Fragmentary rhythmic and melodic figures typical of an orthodox military march repeatedly coalesce into polyphonic episodes of incredible density that surge to frenzied climax, then fall apart. It is not a march, but music *about* a march, or rather about *the* march, just as Ravel's *La valse* is music in which *the* waltz is similarly reduced to its minimum characteristic elements.

Berg also pays tribute to Mahler's great symphonic marches, and his use of hammer blows vividly recalls the finale of Mahler's Sixth Symphony. Throughout this piece, the music is ever-changing, continually unfolding—a kaleidoscope of colors, chords, textures, and reminiscences of the two earlier pieces. Technically, very little of the material is new—it is really all development and recapitulation—and yet so much happens so quickly that we must work to take it all in, as if it were totally unfamiliar territory. Near the very end, Berg anticipates the procession of rising chords from the drowning scene in *Wozzeck* (Berg attended the Vienna premiere of Büchner's play in May 1914, knowing “at once,” as he later recalled, that he would eventually set it to music). Igor Stravinsky, a great admirer of these pieces, made a long list of the correspondences he noticed between this score and *Wozzeck*, Berg's next work and one of the true pivotal works of our time. The final devastating crash—coming at the last possible moment, on the final note of the concluding measure—is like a door slamming shut on the past.

### **For the Record**

A 1997 Chicago Symphony Orchestra performance of Berg's Three Pieces for Orchestra conducted by Daniel Barenboim is included on *From the Archives*, vol. 20: *A Tribute to Daniel Barenboim*.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

---

© by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may not be reproduced; brief excerpts may be quoted if due acknowledgment is given to the author and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs and artists subject to change without notice.