

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Anton Webern

Born December 2, 1883, Vienna, Austria.

Died September 15, 1945, Mittersill, near Salzburg, Austria.

Passacaglia for Orchestra, Op. 1

Webern composed his Passacaglia in 1908 and conducted the first performance in Vienna that year. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, triangle, tam-tam, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately eleven minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Webern's Passacaglia were given at Orchestra Hall on February 10 and 11, 1944, with Désiré Defauw conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on November 25, 26, and 27, 1994, with Pierre Boulez conducting. The Orchestra first performed this work at the Ravinia Festival on July 28, 1990, with Gianluigi Gelmetti conducting, and most recently on July 22, 2000, with Bernhard Klee conducting.

Op. 1 is a composer's calling card—the earliest music that he officially sends out into the world. For every composer like Franz Schubert, whose first published work (the song *Der Erlkönig*) is a masterpiece that he will often equal but seldom surpass, there are countless others for whom op. 1 scarcely conveys what later years will bring. Orchestral music bearing op. 1 has seldom stayed in the repertory; it usually is followed by music which is better, more popular, and more characteristic—who today hears Stravinsky's Symphony in E-flat, Richard Strauss's *Festmarsch*, or Shostakovich's Scherzo in F-sharp?

Anton Webern's op. 1, the Passacaglia for Orchestra, is his first truly original statement, marking his independence from four years' study with Arnold Schoenberg, and the last music of its kind to come from his pen. And because none of his subsequent compositions were to the public's liking, op. 1 has remained Webern's most played and most easily understood work, despite the real advances of his later music.

The year 1908 marked a turning point for Webern. He had begun composition lessons with Arnold Schoenberg in the autumn of 1904 (probably at the suggestion of Gustav Mahler). Their student-teacher relationship lasted only four years, their equally important friendship a lifetime. Like any intense and decisive association, it was complicated. Schoenberg regularly spoke of Webern with the highest of praise—"a real genius as a composer," he said in 1937, for example—and yet after Webern's death, he privately grumbled that Webern had used "everything I do, plan, or say," often getting to the finish line before his teacher.

A quick look at Webern's progress under Schoenberg proves the value of these lessons. Both the 1905 String Quartet and the 1907 String Quintet are highly accomplished works, and if they tell us more about influence than about Webern himself, they mark a great advance over his modest pre-Schoenberg efforts. The 1908 Passacaglia, the first music Webern was willing to acknowledge, was, in effect, his graduation thesis. It predicts great things, though not necessarily the extraordinary direction Webern's music would take.

This important first step is also Webern's last piece for standard orchestra used in a conventional way. Like the contemporary works of Mahler, which Webern admired and conducted with considerable authority, it is chamber music written for a large orchestra. Schoenberg's presence is felt, too—the Schoenberg of *Transfigured Night* and *Pelleas and Melisande*, not of the later atonal pieces. The formal

structure reminds us that the passacaglia finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony (scarcely twenty years old in 1908) was often performed and discussed and obviously influential. There are fleeting moments that recall the unlikely world of Bayreuth, the Wagnerian festival Webern attended as a present on graduation from the Klagenfurt Gymnasium in 1902. The Passacaglia is the work that brings them all together.

It is also music of remarkable individuality, suggesting but not yet exploiting those qualities by which Webern's subsequent work is known: clarity, brevity, economy of materials, dynamic restraint, the "active" use of silence, the scrupulous placement of each note—as if the composer had only been allotted so many to use during his lifetime and therefore regretfully relinquished every one.

Like all Webern's music, the Passacaglia is orderly and exquisitely crafted. Webern often placed his new thoughts in old forms. For his op. 1, he chose the seventeenth-century passacaglia, a dance in triple meter (for Webern it is neither) over a repeated bass line. Webern first presents his bass line—moving from D and back in eight notes and follows it with twenty-three variations, grouped in three paragraphs, and a coda as long as several variations. As the music progresses, the theme disappears into the orchestral fabric.

Each paragraph (variations 1-11, 12-15, and 16-23) is shaped like an arch, speeding up and growing louder to a midpoint, and then backing off in tempo and dynamic. The very first variation (pianissimo) for flute, trumpet, harp, violas, and cellos, would not seem out of place in the austere and crystalline world of Webern's later work. The middle group, variations 12-15, with its calm tempo and quiet voice—mostly *pp* and *ppp*—suggests a slow "movement" within the larger framework. (Webern knew the finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony, a large passacaglia with subdivisions.) The coda begins quietly and slowly, building in volume, tempo, and activity and then ending "*ppp* decrescendo," as Webern stretches our understanding of dynamics.

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

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