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| Anton Webern (1883−1945) |
| Friedrich Wilhelm von Webern |
| Webern was one of the three principal composers of the Second Viennese School. Probably Arnold Schoenberg’s first private pupil and a devoted lifelong friend, he was one of the founders in 1918, along with Schoenberg and Alban Berg, of the Society for Private Musical Performances in Vienna, a society dedicated to the furtherance of the understanding of contemporary music whose concerts were attended by invitation only. He was also an immediate convert to Schoenberg’s twelve-note technique, which was announced in 1923; in fact it is clear that Webern was experimenting with ideas of this sort already in 1911. Webern was destined to become a model in the 1950s to composers such as Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen and other integral serialists of the Darmstadt school, who eagerly seized upon his strict adherence to twelve-note rows (from 1926 onwards) and his careful organisation of rhythm and dynamics, which led to an total serialism in the 1950s and 1960s of which he would almost certainly have despaired. He was also a conductor of considerable merit, though the Second World War more or less put an end to both his conducting career and the performance of his music. |
| Anton von Webern was born in Vienna but spent most of his childhood years in Carinthia, returning to Vienna in 1902 to enter university, where he received a doctorate in musicology in 1906. The most important instruction of his life, however, began in the autumn of 1904, when he became a pupil of Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg and the pupils in his composition class would become important figures in the artistic upheaval that took place in Vienna in the early twentieth century. Along with many other artists of the time they tended to see themselves − and this was particularly true of Webern − as islands of truth surrounded by mediocrity and hostility.  Although a large number of very early tonal works exist in manuscript, only two of Webern’s works that he felt to be deserving of opus numbers were composed during the years that he was Schoenberg’s pupil, the op. 1 Passacaglia and the *a cappella* chorus *Entflieht auf leichten Kähnen*, op. 2, both written in 1908 and both still anchored in tonality. The form that his compositions took changed three times: in 1908, when he abandoned tonality altogether and began to write the very brief atonal, pointillistically disposed aphorisms of opp. 3−11, probably the music for which he is best remembered; in 1914, when he turned to song-writing; and in 1926, when he became secure in the twelve-note technique and for the first time began to compose successfully in extended instrumental forms. His musical style, however, changed very little in spite of these changes of approach structurally. Two identifying features of his early music that might be singled out as particularly characteristic of his later style as well are his special fondness for the interval of a semitone and its inversion and the various octave expansions of both, and his pointillistic scoring, with its resultant kaleidoscopic textures. Lines are angular and disjunct, using extremes of both register and dynamics in close proximity. Rhythm and metre are never prominent, the one tending to be complex and the other often almost completely obscured. A multiplicity of instrumental effects − harmonics, pizzicato, spiccato, non-vibrato, col legno, *am Griffbrett* and *am Steg* in the string parts; fluttertongue in the flutes; mutes used liberally in all parts − results in an eerie sound world in which timbre frequently predominates over pitch, and silence assumes a place on a par with both.  The pieces of opp. 7−11 (1910−1914) represent the extreme of Webern’s aphoristic period, with many of the movements lasting for only eight or nine bars. The fourth piece of op. 10 consists of only twenty-eight notes, two of which are expressed as a trill. The dynamics of op. 7 no. 3 never rise above ***ppp***. In the third piece of op. 11, which is played entirely at ***ppp*** and ***pp***, the cello has eight notes and the piano only a three-note melody and three chords, all in or below the bass clef. The three tiny movements of this opus, thirty-two bars long in total, take approximately two minutes to perform.  The small number of notes in some of these pieces is probably their most striking feature when compared to the music of other composers of the time, and can be seen as a direct manifestation of the crisis that the Viennese triumvirate created for themselves in abandoning tonality. Webern said later of his experience when composing the op. 9 Bagatelles (six little pieces of ten, eight, nine, eight, thirteen and nine bars’ length): ‘I had the feeling that when all twelve notes had gone by the piece was finished . . . . In my sketchbook I wrote out the chromatic scale and crossed off the individual notes’.  The next six works with opus numbers, written over the years 1914−1926, represent another change of direction: all are songs, in which text is used as a way of expanding once again a style that had reached its optimum brevity with op. 11.  Schoenberg formally introduced his new technique of composition in the early 1920s. Webern began experimenting with this way of writing in the eight songs of opp. 17−19 (1924−1926); his first fully developed twelve-note piece was the op. 20 Trio for Strings (1928), which also represented a return to instrumental writing after thirteen years in which the only works he had felt to be worthy of opus numbers and publication were songs.  All the instrumental movements from op. 20 onwards make reference to traditional forms: binary and ternary forms, sonata, rondo, variations, and on occasion some combination of two or more of these.  Two things that consistently shape Webern’s twelve-note writing are his propensity for canon and his fascination with symmetry. The op. 21 Symphony represents a convergence of these two preoccupations, being a brilliant display of simultaneous horizontal and vertical symmetries (palindromes and mirror inversions) unfolding through a series of double canons. Imitation in Webern is seldom direct: it is usually in inversion, sometimes in retrograde, both of which result in symmetry.  With the Anschluss came a list of ‘degenerate art’ that included Webern’s name; from 1938 the publication and performance of his music was banned in Germany and Austria, though performances continued in America, Britain and Switzerland. Of his last four works only the op. 28 Quartet was published during his lifetime, by Boosey and Hawkes in London.  At the end of March 1945 Webern and his wife, with their eldest daughter, Amalie, and her children, fled their home in Mödling on foot to join their other two daughters, in Mittersill, in the mountains near Salzburg, to get away from the constant bombings in Vienna; Mödling fell to the Russians six days later. The final irony came when Webern was shot dead while smoking a cigar after dinner on the veranda of his daughter Christine’s house four months after the war had ended, the victim indirectly of his son-in-law’s black-market activities. Published Original Works op. 1 Passacaglia, 1908  2 *Entflieht auf leichten Kähnen* (Stefan George), SATB, 1908  3 Five Songs from *Der siebente Ring* (Stefan George), voice and piano, 1908−9  4 Five Songs on Poems of Stefan George, voice and piano, 1908−9  5 Five Movements for String Quartet, 1909; arr. for str. orch., 1928; rev. 1929  6 Six Pieces for Large Orchestra, 1909  7 Four Pieces for Violin and Piano, 1910 [1914]  8 Two Songs on Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, voice, clar. (+b. clar.), hn, tpt, celeste, hp, vln, vla, vlc., 1910, rev. [n.d.], 1921, 1925  9 Six Bagatelles for String Quartet, 1911, 1913  10 Five Pieces for Orchestra, 1911−13  11 Three Little Pieces for Violoncello and Piano, 1914  12 Four Songs for Voice and Piano, 1915−17 (folk song, Li Tai Po, Strindberg, Goethe)  13 Four Songs for Voice and Orchestra, voice, fl. (+picc), clar., b. clar., hn, tpt, trbn, celeste, glock., hp, vln, vla, vlc., cb., 1914−18 (Karl Kraus, Wang Seng Yu, Li Tai Po, Georg Trakl); arr. for voice and piano, 1924  14 Six Songs on Poems of Georg Trakl, voice, clar. (E, B, b. clar.),vln, vlc., 1917−21  15 Five Sacred Songs, voice, fl., clar. (+b. clar.), tpt, hp, vln (+vla), 1917−22 (anon., *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, anon., anon.)  16 Five Canons on Latin Texts, voice, clar., b. clar., 1923−4 (Maundy Thursday gradual, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, Good Friday hymn, Psalm 50, Good Friday antiphon)  17 Three Traditional Rhymes, voice, clar., b. clar., vln (+vla), 1924−5 (anon.)  18 Three Songs, voice, E clar., guitar, 1925 (folk song, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, Marian antiphon)  19 Two Songs (Goethe), SATB, clar., b. clar., celeste, guitar, vln, 1925; vocal score, 1928  20 String Trio, 1926−7  21 Symphony, 1928  22 Quartet, clar., ten. sax., vln, piano, 1928−30  23 Three Songs from *Viae inviae* (Hildegard Jone), voice and piano, 1933−4  24 Concerto for Nine Instruments, fl., ob., clar., hn, tpt, trbn, piano, vln, vla, 1931−4  25 Three Songs (Hildegard Jone), voice and piano, 1934  26 *Das Augenlicht* (Hildegard Jone), SATB, orch., 1935  27 Variations for Piano, 1935−6  28 String Quartet, 1936−8  29 First Cantata (Hildegard Jone), solo sop., SATB, orch, 1938−9; vocal score, 1944  30 Variations for Orchestra, 1940  31 Second Cantata (Hildegard Jone), solo sop., solo bass, SATB, orch, 1941−3; vocal score, 1944 Works Published Posthumously by Hans Moldenhauer Two Pieces, vlc., piano, 1899 (publ. 1975)  Three Poems for Voice and Piano, 1899−1903 (publ. 1965)   Eight Early Songs, 1901−4 (publ. 1965)   Three Songs after Poems by Ferdinand Avenarius, 1903−4 (publ. 1965)  *Im Sommerwind*, idyl for large orchestra after a poem by Bruno Wille, 1904 (publ. 1966)  Slow Movement for string quartet, 1905 (publ. 1965)  String Quartet, 1905 (publ. l965)  Movement for Piano, 1906 (publ. 1970)  Sonata Movement (Rondo) for Piano, 1906 (publ. 1969)  Rondo, str qt, 1906 (publ. 1979)  Five Songs after Poems by Richard Dehmel, 1906−8 (publ. 1966)   Four Stefan George Songs, 1908−9 (publ. 1970)  Five Pieces for Orchestra (1913) (publ. 1971)   Three Orchestral Songs (1913/14), voice, fl. (+picc.), ob., cor anglais, clar., b. clar., hn, tpt, 2 trbns, harmonium, celeste, hp, mandolin, guitar, timp., percussion, vln, vla, vlc., 2 cb. (CF, 1968)  Cello Sonata, 1914 (publ. 1970)  Kinderstück for piano, 1924 (publ. 1967)  Piano Piece, 1925 (publ. 1966)  Movement for String Trio, 1925 (publ. 1966) Published Arrangements of Works by Other Composers  F. Schubert, *Deutsche Tänze* D820, orchestra, 1931  A. Schoenberg, Six Songs op. 8, voice and piano, 1910; Five Pieces op. 16, 2 pianos 4 hands, 1912; Chamber Symphony op.9, fl/vn, cl/va, pf, vn, vc, 1922−3  J. S. Bach, Fuga (Ricercata) a 6 voci (from *The Musical Offering*), small orch, 1934−5  R. Wagner-Régeny: *Johanna Balk*, voice and piano, 1939  O. Schoeck: *Das Schloss Dürande*, voice and piano, 1941−2 |
| Further reading:  (Bailey, The Twelve-note Music of Anton Webern. Old Forms in New Language)  (Bailey, Rhythm and Metre in Webern's Late Works)  (Bailey, Coming of Age)  (Bailey, Webern's Nemesis: Symmetrical Construction and the First Movement of the Concerto, Op. 24)  (Bailey, The Life of Webern)  (Bailey, Webern, Anton von)  (Bailey, Webern Studies) articles by Susanne Rode-Breyman, Derrick Puffett, Allen Forte, Robert W. Wason, Felix Meyer and Anne Shreffler, Kathryn Bailey, Christopher Wintle and Arnold Whittall, and a bibliography by Neil Boynton  (Forte)  (Griffiths)  (Hoffmann)  (Johnson)  (Kolneder)  (H. Moldenhauer, The Death of Anton Webern: A Drama in Documents)  (Moldenhauer and Moldenhauer, Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of His Life and Work)  (H. Moldenhauer)  (Moldenhauer and Irvine, Anton von Webern Perspectives)  (Reich)  (Zoltan)  (Searle)  (Shreffler)  (Simms)  (Smith)  (Webern, Der Weg zur Neuen Musik)  (Webern, The Path to the New Music)  (Webern, Letters to Hildegard Jone and Josef Humplik)  (Wildgans) |