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Schoenberg Quartet #4

Arnold Schoenberg wrote his Fourth Quartet in 1936. At this point he and his family had been living in the United States for three years, and had just decided to move to Los Angeles, which was to be the composer's final place of residence. The quartet was commissioned by the great chamber music patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who also funded Schoenberg's 3rd quartet, Bartok's 5th quartet, and important works by Britten, Ravel, Webern and Stravinsky. Like so many of his mature works, this quartet was written using Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique. This system employs a "tone row", which puts the twelve notes of the chromatic scale in a certain order, and ensures that after a pitch is used, the other eleven pitches have to intervene before that pitch can be used again, the result being a kind of democracy among the twelve pitches. This was Schoenberg's innovative answer to tonal systems, which center their harmonic activity around one pitch, as in "C major".

In its layout, the Fourth Quartet hews to older classical forms, even if its harmonic language is modern. The first movement resembles that of any Beethoven or Brahms chamber work, insofar as it falls along the lines of a narrative sonata form, containing an exposition, development and recapitulation. The vital, energetic opening melody sets the main tone of the movement, but more lyrical episodes make their appearance as well. The second movement has outer sections full of waltz-like, lilting motions; the instruments are muted in many parts, and generally the mood is more subtle and shadowed than the first movement. A more boisterous middle section offers contrasting material, becoming pushy and agitated before subsiding back to the waltz feeling. The third movement opens with a striking declamation stated by the whole quartet in unison, like a recitative; this is followed by various dark musings, Hamlet-like, which seem at once improvised and prone to disintegrate. At length the movement gives way to a more fluent section, rocking, discursive, which carries the music along in a steadier current. Each of these two sections occurs one more time in the movement, giving the sense of a balanced form overall. The last movement opens with a light-hearted, march-like idea. This idea reappears in variation across the movement, alternating with more agitated passages. The music is quite energetic, even frenetic, in places, but in the end the movement runs out of steam, coming to a halt like a wind-up toy.

Note by Misha Amory