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Webern Six Bagatelles

Webern's Six Bagatelles, Op. 9 seems like a stylistic hybrid of the spare, evocative elegance of a haiku and the saturation of emotional detail typical of Proust. The music manages to compress immense expressivity into wisps of sound which become symbolic of more sprawling gestures. These exceedingly brief pieces suspend a moment just long enough for it to penetrate our consciousness; Proust's concept of "involuntary memory" is perhaps apropos. Several times in *In Search of Lost Time* a single sensory impression becomes the portal to recollection of and full appreciation for a period in the past relived through memory. Proust speaks of the instantaneous flowering of vivid understanding as making "it possible for my being to secure, to isolate, to immobilize - for a moment brief as a flash of lightening - what normally it never apprehends: a fragment of time in the pure state." And like Proust, his contemporary, Webern illuminates a world of difficulty, of all-consuming uncertainty. When biographer Edmund White speaks of Proust as a writer who "describe[s] the permanent instability of our times" he could well have been discussing Anton von Webern. These briefest of musical thoughts each have the feeling of a recaptured emotional memory. And each has the promise, through its internal resonance in the sensitive listener, of unlocking a Proustian world of self-understanding. For as Proust says of the relationship between art and life: "In reality, every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self...And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its veracity."

Note by Mark Steinberg