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Webern String Quartet, opus 28

Anton von Webern has proved pivotal in the history of Western art music, inspiring composers after him to find new forms of expression and to reach new levels of abstraction. But his music itself is very much an outgrowth of the emotional world of late Romanticism, richly expressive, often passionate. Working in the nascent world of atonality, as inspired by his teacher, Arnold Schoenberg, Webern became a master of compression. Individual gestures in this music take on the expressive weight of extended, sprawling phrases, and there is a sense of distillation. Extremely short, his works tend to feel expressively dense, even when the textures are spare. His music is an examination of the meaning behind gestures: a turn of the head, a hand to the brow, a slightly clenched jaw. We are used to reading great significance into the most minute motions. The short musical units in the Quartet, Op. 28 can call forth emotional resonances far beyond the realm of the commonplace. This is a piece replete with sighs, shouts, whispers, all of which have the power to allude to our most elemental feelings.

Whereas in the earlier quartet works the saturation with late Romantic rhetoric is immediately apparent, in the String Quartet, Op. 28 the music becomes more abstract. It may seem odd to speak of abstraction in music, an art which is never, except in some trivial examples, representational. What does this mean for the listener? Abstraction can suggest something far removed from a sense of immediacy or vibrancy, but in fact it is nothing more than a close engagement with and an intensification of individual elements of an art form. Dissociation with the specific can encourage universality. Perhaps it is best to approach abstraction through the visual arts.

From the painter Lucien Freud:

“The longer you look at an object, the more abstract it becomes, and, ironically, the more real”

Nothing in Webern’s Op. 28 is new in its essence. Webern himself alludes to the ghost of a polka and of a waltz in the second movement, as if the merest impulse toward such dances is being brought to the fore. Abstraction connotes consideration of aspects of the whole; the brief musical elements which the voices imitate and reflect contain the seeds from which works of epic dimensions might germinate. But it is the seeds themselves that are held up for viewing to be appreciated on their own terms.

Edvard Munch:

“As Leonardo da Vinci investigated the depths of the human body and sectioned dead corpses, so I try to section souls.”

One cannot call the paintings of Munch abstract, but they share with Webern’s music a fascination with the details of feelings. The composer gives us the music behind and contained within the music of his recent past. It is a reflection of the soul of late Romanticism, without explicit reference to its surface textures.

Wassily Kandinsky:

“Abstract art places a new world, which on the surface has nothing to do with ‘reality,’ next to the ‘real’ world.”

We see in the evolution of Kandinsky’s painting a move from representation into abstraction. In the midst of this change we find figures just barely managing to hold on to the forms whence they came. This middle ground is an aid in understanding that the energy of the representational paintings is carried over into the abstract. Only the yoke of specific reference has been taken away. Webern, too, becomes more severe over time in stripping music down to its barest essentials, but in the spare soundscape he leaves for us all the energy of late Romantic music is contained.

Francis Bacon:

“The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery.”

In the final analysis Webern’s Op. 28 lives, as does all music, in the imagination and the soul of the listener. Ambiguity allows for great personalization.

Whatever the forms of the music summon in terms of feeling or understanding in the listener, this is what the piece means at the moment of performance.

Note by Mark Steinberg