

Anton WEBERN (1883-1945)

Passacaglia in D Minor, Op. 1 [1908]

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Arnold Schoenberg, the composer famous for developing serial music, found two very loyal students in Anton Webern and Alban Berg. Both began composition lessons with him in 1904, and even after ceasing lessons (Webern in 1908 and Berg in 1911), they remained devoted to Schoenberg, copying out parts, making piano reductions, and even raising money to keep him solvent.

Webern in particular had a close friendship with - and high esteem for - Schoenberg. 'You are set up in my heart as my highest ideal whom I love more and more, to whom I am more and more devoted,' Webern wrote to Schoenberg in 1914. Webern turned down various conducting positions in order to follow Schoenberg around Austria, on one occasion relocating to Vienna within a week of Schoenberg's move.

Schoenberg introduced his newly-perfected serial music - a method of composition where all 12 notes of the chromatic scale are treated equally - to Webern and Berg in the early 1920s. While all three composers used this technique in their later compositions, only Webern did so exclusively; his quick adoption of serialism is not only a reflection of his devotion to Schoenberg, but also of his enthusiasm for formal design and pre-compositional paradigms.

This leaning towards pre-set compositional structures is evident from Webern's Opus 1, Passacaglia for Orchestra. The work takes its title and form from the Baroque musical structure, in which a repeated bass line (ground bass) underlies the music.

A student work written some 20 years before Webern's first strictly serial orchestral work, the language of the Passacaglia has its roots in the late Romanticism of Brahms and Wagner. Its formal structure is disguised through continual tempo changes, rich harmonies and exploration of tone colour. The eight-note ground bass is sedately established by pizzicato strings before being passed to the trumpet, and orchestral layers begin to steadily build, both rhythmically and colouristically. The chromatic music swells throughout, passing through various tonalities, before concluding solemnly in its original key. Although only his Opus 1, Webern's Passacaglia foreshadows the structural discipline of his later works while still maintaining an accessible musical language.

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