

Arnold Schoenberg, String Quartet No. 2, Op. 10

Schoenberg composed his second string quartet in 1907. He had abandoned his former super-chromatic, post-Wagnerian idiom and was searching for a style that would be more concisely expressive and less reminiscent of earlier styles. The quartet traces a progression from tonality to atonality. The first movement is clearly in F# minor, the second in D-minor, but more dissonant and less secure in its key. The third movement begins and ends in Eb minor, but few of the harmonies in between have any functional relation to Eb. The fourth movement is in no key at all for most of its duration. In movements three and four Schoenberg adds a soprano to the string quartet, singing texts by Stefan George, a modernist poet and contemporary of Schoenberg. The text and translation of “Rapture,” the poem set in the fourth movement is given below.

The opening bars of the first movement give an indication of what is to come. It opens with a melody that is solidly in F# minor for two measures. But with the F-natural in m.3 the tune seems to dissolve melodically, rhythmically, and harmonically. The melody reasserts itself in bar 8, now in A-minor, only to dissolve again. In m.12 comes a second theme, which is so chromatic that it’s hard to say what key it might be in. On the first page, then, all the elements of traditional melody, harmony and form are present, and they are perceived clearly by the listener as a point of departure, but they refuse to behave as they should. At intervals during the movement, Schoenberg begins again with previously heard materials in this or that key, often in F# minor, but each time he leads them in a new and unexpected direction. Only on the last two pages (mm. 202 and following) is F# minor firmly established – and then the movement is over.

The harmonies of the fourth movement are inspired by the text that Schoenberg sets: “I feel a breeze from another planet . . . “ Schoenberg in a program note he later wrote for this quartet said: “The fourth movement, *Entrückung*, begins with an introduction, depicting the departure from earth to another planet. The visionary poet here foretold sensations, which perhaps soon will be affirmed. Becoming relieved from gravitation – passing through clouds into thinner and thinner air, forgetting all the troubles of life on earth – that is what I attempted to illustrate in this introduction.” These opening measures consist of rising augmented chords and falling half steps (mm 1-2), without any sense of key center or tonal hierarchy. Chains of falling fifths (m.3, m.6) only make the harmonies more elusive. The harmonic elusiveness is abetted by the texture: rapid, fluttering arpeggios in muted pianissimo. Measure 10 introduces a new texture, static alternation in the viola and cello, and a new harmony of fifths and tritones. The vocal entrance in m.21 brings yet another texture and harmony: the strings play chords of fifths and tritones, while the singer seems to evoke the “breeze from another planet” in a white-key diatonic mode. The harmonies are not in the least dissonant – if anything they are sweet. But unexpected half steps (m.25) and whole steps (m.32) keep the music from settling into anything like a key. This sweet evasiveness continues to the end of the poem and into the instrumental coda at the end of the movement (m. 120 ff.) But in m. 128 a triad begins to make itself heard (C#-E#-G#), and another (m.134, C-E-G). Moving lines recall themes from earlier in the movement, over a series of triads. Three measures from the end an F# minor triad is heard – the key of the first movement – then in the last two bars F# major.

Schoenberg was rather proud of the fact that in this last movement he had managed to write music without key center or tonal hierarchy. He commented later that,

"it seemed wrong to force a movement into . . . a tonality without supporting it by harmonic progressions that pertain to it. This dilemma was my concern, and it should have occupied the minds of all my contemporaries also. That I was the first to venture the decisive step will not be considered universally a merit -- a fact that I regret but have to ignore."

Entrückung

Ich fühle luft von anderem
planeten.

Mir blassen durch das
dunkel die gesichter
Die freundlich eben noch
sich zu mir drehen.

Und bäum und wege die
ich liebte fahlen

Dass ich sie kaum mehr
kenne und du lichter
Geliebter schatten--rufer
meiner qualen--

Bist nun erloschen ganz in
tiefern gluten

Um nach dem taumel
streitenden getobes
Mit einem frommen
schauer anzumuten.

Ich löse mich in tönen,
kreisend, webend,
Ungründigen danks und
unbenamten lobes

Dem grossen atem
wunschlos mich ergebend.

Mich überfährt ein
ungestümes wehen

Im rausch der weihe wo
inbrünstige schreie
In staub geworfner
beterinnen flehen:

Dann seh ich wie sich
duftige nebel lüpfen
In einer sonnerfüllten
klaren freie

Die nur umfängt auf
fernsten bergesschlüpfen.

Rapture

I feel a breeze from
another planet.

Through the darkness
faces fade that
Used to look my way
in friendship.

And trees and paths I
loved grow faint

So I scarcely recognize
them and you bright
Beloved shadow—who
caused my anguish—

Are now extinguished
like a glowing ember
That after the tumult of
conflict and confusion
Beckons with a pious
shiver.

I dissolve in tones,
circling, weaving,
With deep thanks and
unspoken praise

I happily surrender to
the great breath.

An uneasy wind passes
over me

A rustle of
consecration where
ardent cries
Of praying women
disturb the dust.

Then I see a filmy mist
rising

In a sun-filled, open
expanse
That reaches to the

Der boden schüffert weiss
und weich wie molke.
Ich steige über schluchten
ungeheuer.
Ich fühle wie ich über
letzter wolke
In einem meer kristallinen
glanzes schwimme--
Ich bin ein funke nur vom
heiligen feuer
Ich bin ein dröhnen nur
der heiligen stimme.

farthest mountain
passes.
The land looks white
and smooth like whey,
I climb over enormous
canyons.
I feel as if above the
last cloud
Swimming in a sea of
crystal radiance--
I am only a spark of
the holy fire
I am only a whisper of
the holy voice.