

Chamber Symphony No. 1, Op. 9b

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG

B. September 13, 1874, Vienna

D. July 13, 1951, Los Angeles

The original version, for 15 instruments, was premiered on February 8, 1907 by the Rose Quartet and members of the Vienna Philharmonic; Opus 9b, a revision for full orchestra, was first performed in December 1935 in Los Angeles, with the composer conducting.

Scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, clarinet, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, and strings. (approx. 22 mins.)

Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony No. 1 is generally seen as a transitional work, one that shows the composer's deep connections to the past as well as his ambitions for a future style. Although largely self-taught as a composer, by the end of the 19th century Schoenberg had developed an intense knowledge of the Austro-German tradition - the tradition from which he came, and which he was determined to develop and ensure the continuation of in the future. Schoenberg's experimentations with pushing tonality to its limits blossomed in the Chamber Symphony. In this work we hear a juxtaposition of styles: the post-Romantic aesthetic that dominated his earlier works, tempered by an angular, tonally ambiguous, decidedly modern sound - achieved through instrumentation and novel manipulation of tone color, harmony, and form.

Written at a time when the symphonic genre was generally associated with huge orchestras, often with chorus, composing a symphony for 15 musicians must have struck audiences as odd. But as the tonal moorings of his music began to weaken, Schoenberg was increasingly concerned with transparency and clarity as a means to communicate form. Thus, the solo instrumentation (one player on each part) allowed for maximum clarity of each line in this otherwise often densely polyphonic web.

Although the Chamber Symphony is technically a single movement, it is subdivided into five closely related sections. The overall form is a kind of hybrid, simultaneously echoing that of a multi-movement symphony and a single sonata-form movement: Exposition – Scherzo – Development/Elaboration – Adagio – Finale. They are held together by common thematic elements (the Finale is noted in the score, for example, as a “Recapitulation of the themes from I, in different sequence”). The work is fundamentally based on the interval of the fourth, which plays a prominent role throughout, saturating both the ‘vertical’ (harmonic) and ‘horizontal’ (melodic) structures. We hear both kinds of presentations clearly in the initial measures of the piece: a thick stack of fourths resolves unexpectedly into F major; followed by a horn-call based on a rising series of fourths. The fourth is a primary interval of tonality (characterizing the motion of dominant to tonic), yet stacked fourths quickly take music out of traditional harmony as diatonic space can never encapsulate more than two fourths in succession. According to Schoenberg, the fourths “place their stamp on everything that happens,” illustrating one of the principles to which the composer would return in later

compositions when challenged with creating unity and structure in the absence of tonal organization.

The character of the original composition is considerably changed in the revision for full orchestra that we hear tonight. Schoenberg completed this version less than two years after fleeing Europe in light of Hitler's rise to power and arriving in the United States. It was a rather curious time in Schoenberg's musical output: three of Schoenberg's major compositions from that year were somewhat neo-classical and tonal in nature, based on forms and pieces from the 18th century. Perhaps Schoenberg's glances to the past encouraged him to revisit his own earlier work. If the ascetic, angular chamber version pointed toward Schoenberg's modernist future, this orchestral version, which draws out the work's lush post-Romanticism, points to his past.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony No. 1 on Jan. 26, 1961, with Eleazar de Carvalho conducting.

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