

Beginning of Schönberg's 1st String Quartet

Nicht zu rasch.

I. Violine *mf*

II. Violine

Viola *mp*

Cello *mf* *p*

The image displays the first ten measures of the beginning of Arnold Schönberg's 1st String Quartet. The score is written for four instruments: I. Violin, II. Violin, Viola, and Cello. The tempo is marked "Nicht zu rasch." (Not too fast). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The first violin part begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The second violin part is silent in the first two measures. The viola part starts with a half note G3, followed by quarter notes A3, B3, and C4. The cello part begins with a half note G2, followed by quarter notes A2, B2, and C3. The score includes various dynamics such as *mf*, *mp*, *p*, *f*, and *ff*. There are also articulation marks like accents and slurs. The piece concludes with a double bar line at measure 10, marked with a circled "10".

Why Is Schönberg's Music So Difficult To Understand?

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To answer this question one might be inclined to trace the ideas in Schönberg's work, to investigate his works from the point of view of thought. In other words, to do what is frequently done: get to grips with music by means of philosophical, literary or other arguments. That is not my intention! I am concerned solely with what happens musically in Schönberg's works; the compositional mode of expression which, like the language of any work of art (which we have to accept as a premise), must be considered the only one adequate to the object to be represented. To understand this language through and through and grasp it in all its details, i.e. (to express it quite generally) to recognize the beginning, course and ending of all melodies, to hear the sounding-together of the voices not as a chance phenomenon but as harmonies and harmonic progressions, to trace smaller and larger relationships and contrasts as what they are—to put it briefly: to follow a piece of music as one follows the words of a poem in a language that one has mastered through and through means the same—for one who possesses the gift of thinking musically—as understanding the work itself. So the question at the top of this investigation appears answered if we manage to test Schönberg's mode of musical expression with regard to its comprehensibility, and then draw conclusions as to what extent it can be grasped.

I want to do this, knowing that a great deal is achieved if it is demonstrated in the details, on a single example, which is selected at random insofar as there are only a few passages in Schönberg's

works that would not be equally suitable for such an investigation:

Even though these ten bars (they are the first bars of the First String Quartet in D minor) are no longer considered impossible or even difficult to understand, twenty years after they were composed, yet there is still this to say about them: If, at a first hearing, one wishes only to recognize the main voice and follow it through to the end of these ten bars, to feel the whole as a single melody, which is what it is and consequently ought to be just as whistle-able as the beginning of a Beethoven quartet—yes, even if that is all the listener wishes to do, I am afraid he will find himself faced with difficulties of comprehension as early as the third bar. Accustomed to a melodic style whose most important property was symmetry of phrase construction, and adjusted to a type of thematic construction that used only even-numbered bar-relationships—a mode of construction that has dominated all the music, with a few exceptions, of the last 150 years—an ear so one-sidedly preconditioned will doubt the rightness of the first bars of a melody that consists, contrary to all expectation, of phrases of two and a half bars in length (example 30).



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There is nothing new about thematic writing that avoids two-bar and four-bar constructions. Just the opposite. Even Bussler says quite rightly that "it is just the greatest masters of form (he means Mozart and Beethoven) who love free and bold constructions and do not like to be confined within

the gates of even-numbered bar-relationships". But really how seldom such things occur in the classics (Schubert perhaps excepted), and how such practice—so natural and easy in the eighteenth century and earlier—has been lost in the music of Wagner and the Romantics (apart from Brahms' folk song melody-types) and therefore also in the whole new German School! Even the *Heldenleben* theme which seemed so bold at the time is in four- and two-bar phrases throughout, and after the usual sixteen bars—the safest route to being understood—it comes back to a literal repeat of the first phrase. Even the music of Mahler and—to name a master of a quite different style—Debussy hardly ever deviates from melodic formations of an even numbers of bars. And if we consider Reger as the only one (besides Schönberg) who prefers fairly free constructions reminiscent of prose (as he himself puts it) we have to admit that this is the reason why his music is relatively difficult of access. The only reason, I maintain. For neither the other properties of his thematic writing (motivic development of multi-note phrases) nor his harmony—quite apart from his contrapuntal technique—are calculated to make his musical language difficult to understand.

With this state of affairs it is only too easy to see that a music which regards the asymmetrical and free construction of themes as just as available as the constructions with two-, four- and eight-bar phrases—and that is perhaps the most important aspects of Schönberg's way of writing—will not be easily understood, and in the case of his later works, not understood at all.



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And when a theme like this (to come back to our particular case), in the course of the extremely fast development that is in keeping with its impetuous, even stormy character, right in the second repeat of that phrase that has hardly been grasped rhythmically—when this theme acquires the following abbreviated form (example 31) by exercising the right of variation, the listener has lost the thread

well before the first melodic climax is reached two bars later (example 32). This semiquaver motif may well appear to fall from the clouds, whereas in fact it is nothing other than the natural melodic continuation (again obtained by variation) of the main theme. This succession of chromatic side-steps actually presents an almost insuperable obstacle—as is clear in performances of the quartet even today—to the comprehension of the listener, who is accustomed to a slow development of themes or even a development obtained merely by sequences and unvaried repetitions. Generally he is not even able to relate these semiquaver figures to their chordal foundation (which is naturally there) on account of the speed of their succession; and he therefore loses his last possibility of orientation, of evaluating this passage at least on the basis of its cadential function, or of feeling it as a caesura or climax. No, it appears to him as a haphazard concatenation of “cacophonies” (caused by the zig-zagging—to him apparently senseless—of the first violin); and then naturally he cannot make head or tail of the continuation, which presents new (though related) thematic formations and is already rich in motivic work, and leads back to a repeat of the main theme (in E-flat!) only after nineteen bars.



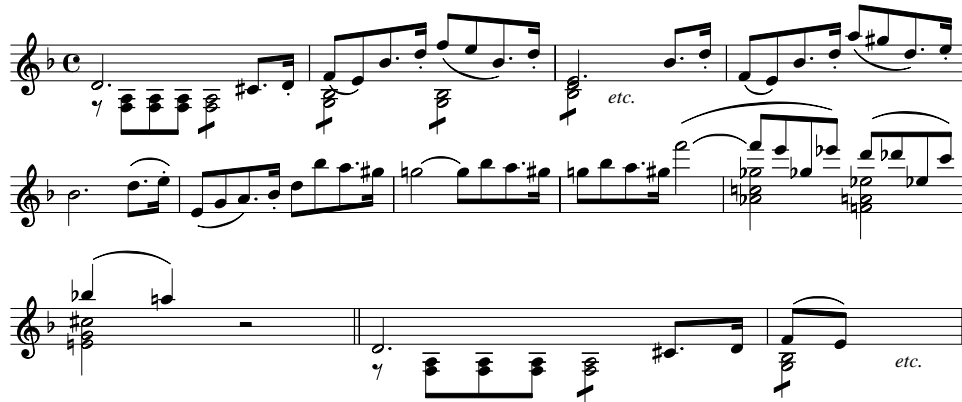
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How much easier it would have been for the listener if all these things that are proving so difficult just did not exist; if the beginning of the quartet—may I be excused this impiety!—had had the following form, which purposely voids such richness of rhythmic design, motivic variation and thematic work, and retains only the number of bars and notes of the unmurderable melodic inspiration (example 33):

This really removes the asymmetry of the original and provides a two-bar structure that will satisfy even the densest listener. The motivic and rhythmic development moves easily and slowly, evading every possibility of variation. Semiquavers, which might represent a stumbling block in the frame-

work of an animated *Alla Breve* movement, are dispensed with entirely, and this removes the last impediment (namely the difficulty of hearing out those sequences of chromatic leaps of a seventh), since here too we do not overstep quaver movement, and even this is harmonized in half-bars. But in case this

mangled theme should still be in danger of not being understood, the immediate and literal repetition in the tonic key offers a degree of general comprehensibility that verges on the popular, and to cap it all, all polyphony is avoided and the simplest imaginable accompaniment is put in its place.



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What a difference when we look at Schönberg! The sketchbooks he used while composing this String Quartet are of enormous importance for anyone interested in penetrating the psychology of his work. No one who has glanced at them will be able to say that Schönberg music is constructed, intellectual or any other of the current catchwords with which people try to protect themselves from the superiority of his over-rich imagination. For: 'Every thematic idea is invented together with all its counterpoints.'

And it all has to be heard! At the beginning of the Quartet, in counterpoint with the first five-bar phrase of the first violin, there is an eloquent melody in the middle voice, built up—as an exception-of one- and two-bar phrases (example 34).



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Even if this melody might escape one without damaging the general impression, it is inconceivable that anyone could grasp even the initial part

of the main idea if they do not hear the expressive song of the bass line. And this can easily happen, since this melody is divided into two phrases, this time of three bars each (example 35). For this not to happen—if one does not feel the beauty of such themes (and of this music in general) with the heart—it requires the hearing faculty at least of an external ear capable of keeping track of all the voices that are so pregnant in their different characters, and of recognizing as such the beginnings and endings (which are all at different points) of all these parts of melodies of different lengths, and of dwelling (with understanding) on their sounding together. And then, besides, it requires the hearing faculty of an ear that is set the most difficult task with regard to the rhythm, which—here and everywhere in Schönberg's music—rises to a hitherto unheard-of pitch of variety and differentiation. Look at the cello part just quoted: how a skipping scale of dotted quavers has been developed as early as the seventh bar out of the long drawn legato phrases. Two bars later we hear in contrast the weighty crotchets of the seven-note theme storming up in alternate fourths and thirds (E-flat, A-flat, C,

F, A, D, F-sharp). Already two important motivic components of the Quartet have been exposed. And the way all these rhythmic forms are brought into contrapuntal relations with the other parts (which develop with quite different note-values and relationships)!



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One would either have to be very deaf or very malicious to describe a music that manifests such richness of rhythms (and in such a concentrated form both successively and simultaneously) as “arhythmic”. If this word is intended to refer to all relations of tempo and note-values that are not directly derivable from mechanical movement (e.g., mill-wheel or railway train) or from bodily movement (e.g., marching, dancing, etc.) then by all means call Schönberg’s music “arhythmic”. But then the word must also be applied to the music of Mozart and all the classical masters except when they purposely aimed at uniform and therefore easily comprehensible rhythms, as in their dances and the movements derived from old dance forms (Scherzo, Rondo, etc.). Or is “arhythmic” intended as the opposite of some “rhythm” that is no longer a musical concept, but a concept—like “ethos”, “cosmos”, “dynamic”, “mentality” and other catchwords of our age—that can be applied “in the last analysis” wherever there is something in motion, whether in art or in sport, philosophy or industry, world history or finance! A concept like this, which no longer stems from the mobile forms of music but is applied to something vague, something indefinable in musical terms, and which enables one to speak of the rhythm of a piece of music in the same way as one might speak of the rhythm of the recent slump—a concept like this is simply and naturally out of the question for anyone who can account for the rhythmic action—springing from the musical details—that extends over a whole work. The fact that such dilution of concepts can become current—even amongst those in whom one might least expect to find it (out of respect for their

position): amongst some composers!—only proves how difficult it is for a music that wants to be measured only with the standards of its art (and not with the standards of some mere “attitude”),—how difficult it is for such music to be understood.

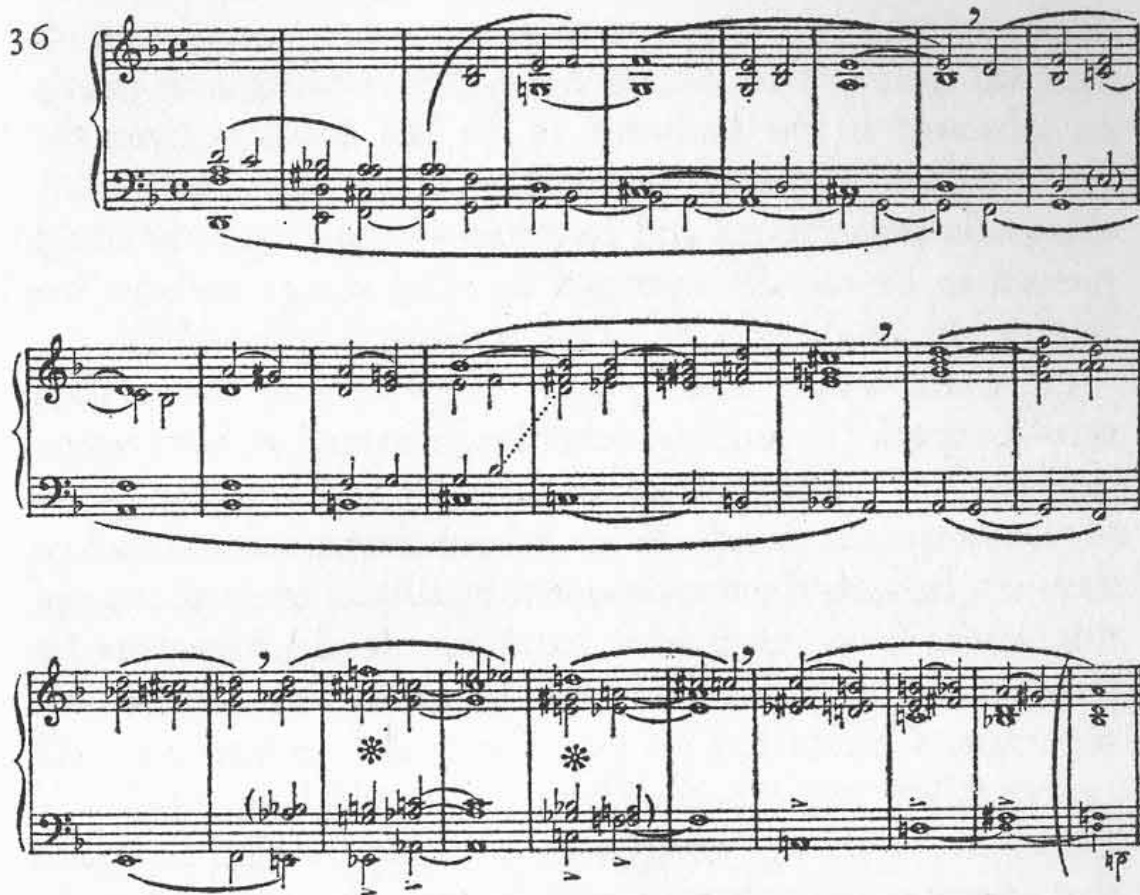
And this brings us back to the real objective of my investigation: the difficulty of understanding Schönberg’s music. The difficulty arises from the music’s richness—as we have seen so far—in beauties thematic, contrapuntal and rhythmic. It only remains to speak of the harmonic richness of this music, of the immeasurable cornucopia of chords and chordal connections that are nothing other than the result of a polyphony (which we must also assess here) that is quite extraordinary in contemporary music. That is, they are the result of a juxtaposition of voices, distinguished by a hitherto unheard-of mobility in the melodic line. And so this excess of harmonic events is just as misunderstood as everything else. And naturally just as wrongly!

This passage (example 36) in Chorale style is not the chordal basis of the far-flung arches of an *Adagio*—which one could well imagine. No; it is merely the harmonic skeleton of the much-discussed beginning of this Quartet.

It seems incomprehensible that something so simple could be not understood—could even appear as an orgy of dissonances to a premiere audience hungry for sensation. And only the fact that such an unusual number and so many different kinds of chords are fitted into the narrow space of ten animated *Alla Breve* bars can explain why an ear—none too spoiled, on account of the relative poverty of other contemporary music—is not equal to the task of digesting a sequence of fifty or more chords in a few seconds, and therefore presumes it “hypertrophied” (another of those sticks for belying this music) where actually it is merely rich to overflowing. For, as the last example is supposed to show, the constitution of the chords and their respective combinations cannot be responsible for the difficulty experienced in understanding them. There is no single sonority, not even on the unaccented semiquavers of these ten quartet bars, that cannot be immediately clear to any ear educated in the harmony of the last century. Even the two whole-tone chords

(marked with asterisks) with their chromatic preparations and resolutions—today nobody could pretend to be morally outraged by such things without

becoming the laughing stock of the whole musical world.



From this we can also see how irrelevant it is—and always was—to speak (in judging Schönberg's music) of how regardless "modern" voice-leading has become, and how it ignores the sonorities that result. What I have shown with regard to these ten bars can be demonstrated equally in every passage of this work. Even the boldest harmonic developments are far from being a playground of uncontrollable, coincidental sonorities.

Chance has no place here, and anyone who still cannot follow may take the blame on himself, having full confidence in the ear of a master who can conceive all these things that appear so difficult to us with the same ease as he solves the most complicated counterpoint problems in front of his pupils'

eyes as though he were conjuring the solution from up his sleeve. Asked once if "he had ever properly heard" a passage in one of his works that was particularly difficult to understand, he answered with a joke that contains a profound truth: "Yes, when I was composing it!"

A way of writing conditioned by such unwavering musicality contains all compositional possibilities, and therefore it can never be completely fathomed. Not even theoretically. The results of my analysis so far (and I would dearly like it to be complete) have by no means exhausted the possibilities of these few bars. For example, we still have to mention that these voices, invented from the start in the relationship of double counterpoint. permit

of manifold variety also from the point of view of polyphonic technique, and this naturally comes to fruition in the various reprises of the main idea. First the melodies of violin and cello change places (since all mechanical repetitions are avoided even in this early work of Schönberg's). Presented graphically: the lines that appear in the first bars of the Quartet in the vertical position

1
2
3

are later introduced (page 5 of the miniature score) in the order

3 (in octaves)
2
1

At their third appearance (page 8) the subsidiary voices are already varied. though the melody notes are strictly preserved. Here the order is

2 (variant in semiquavers)
1 (in octave)
3 (decorated with quaver triplets)

Finally in the last reprise of the main idea (page 53) the main and subsidiary voices—quite apart from the innumerable combinations with other themes in the work—appear in the following order:

3 (variant in quaver triplets. but different from the preceding)
1 (in octaves)
[3 Inversion in quaver "diminution"]

But these first ten bars and their varied repeats represent a very, very small fraction of the work, which lasts about an hour. They can only give a hint of an idea of the harmonic, polyphonic and contrapuntal occurrences (in an excess unheard-of since Bach) that flourish so luxuriantly in the thousands of bars of this music. One can assert this without being guilty of any exaggeration: Every smallest turn of phrase, even accompanimental figuration is

significant for the melodic development of the four voices and their constantly changing rhythm—is, to put it in one word, thematic. And this within the framework of a single large symphonic movement whose colossal architecture it is quite impossible to go into—even superficially—in the space of this investigation.

It is not surprising that an ear accustomed to the music of the last century cannot follow a piece of music where such things are going on. The music of the nineteenth century is almost always homophonic; its themes are built symmetrically in units of two or four bars; its evolutions and developments are for the most part unthinkable without an abundance of repetition and sequences (generally mechanical), and finally this conditions the relative simplicity of the harmonic and rhythmic action. Decades of habituation to these things make the listener of today incapable of understanding music of a different kind.

He is irritated even by such things as a revival of some artistic technique that has become a rarity, or by deviations—even in only one of these musical matters—from what happens to be usual, even if these deviations are perfectly permissible from the point of view of the rules. Now imagine his position when (as in the music of Schönberg) we find—united, occurring simultaneously—all these properties that are otherwise considered the merits of good music, but which generally crop up only singly and well distributed amongst the various musical epochs.

Think of Bach's polyphony; of the structure of the themes—often quite free constructionally and rhythmically, of the classical and preclassical composers, and of their highly skilled treatment of the principle of variation; of the Romantics, with their bold juxtapositions (which are still bold even today) of distantly related keys; of the new chordal formations in Wagner arrived at by chromatic alteration and enharmonic change, and their natural embodiment in tonality; and finally think of Brahms' art of thematic and motivic work, often penetrating into the very smallest details.

It is clear that a music that unites in itself all these possibilities that the masters of the past have

left behind would not only be different from a contemporary music where such a combination is not to be found (as I will show); it also—despite those properties that we recognized as the merits of good music, and despite its excessive richness in all the fields of music, or rather, just because of this—it also manages to be difficult to understand. which indeed Schönberg's music is.

I will be reproached with having proved something in this investigation where no proof was called for: namely the difficulty of the Quartet in D minor, a "tonal" work that stopped being a problem long ago, a work in fact that has on the contrary been generally recognized and hence—understood! Well, even though the validity of that is questionable. I admit that the question at the head of this article would only really be answered if I were to demonstrate what I have shown on the basis of these few minor-key bars with reference to at least one example of so-called 'atonal' music. But it was not only a question of the difficulty but also—as readers of my analysis must have realized—a question of proving that the means of this music, despite the fact that much in it is felt to be particularly difficult to understand, are all right and proper: right and proper, naturally, in connection with the highest art! And it was of course easier to show this with regard to an example rooted in major/minor tonality, which nevertheless—an advantage in this connection—occasioned as much outrage in its day as "atonal" music does today. But having arrived at a point where I regard the latter as just as "existent" as the former (and it does exist, not only thanks to the work of Schönberg, "the father of atonal thought" as he is generally called, but thanks also to the work of a large proportion of the musical world), all I need do is to project everything I said about these ten bars of the Quartet onto any passage in his later and most recent works. Our title question is then equivalently answered by producing evidence that the means of this music are equally right and proper to the highest art. Indeed, it will then become apparent that the difficulty of understanding is not caused so much by the so-called "atonality", which has meanwhile become the mode of expression of so many contemporaries, but here too by the

other aspects of the structure of Schönberg's music, by the plenitude of artistic means applied here and everywhere in this harmonic style too, by the application of all the compositional possibilities provided by centuries of music, to put it briefly: by its immeasurable richness.

Here too we find the same multiplicity in the harmony, the same multi-level definition of the cadence; here too the unsymmetrical and completely free construction of themes, together with their unflagging motivic work; here too the art of variation, affecting both thematic work and harmonization, both counterpoint and rhythm of this music; here too the same polyphony extending over the whole work, and the inimitable contrapuntal technique; here too, finally, the diversity and differentiation of the rhythms, of which we can only say again that besides being subject to their own laws, they are subject also to the laws of variation, thematic development, counterpoint and polyphony. So in this field too, Schönberg attains to an art of construction that proves how wrong it is to speak of a "dissolution of rhythm" in his music.

Considered from such a universal point of view, how basically different is the image of other contemporary composers, even those whose harmonic language has broken with the domination of the triad. The musical means listed above can naturally be demonstrated in their music too. But we never find them, as we do in Schönberg, united in the work of a single personality, but distributed amongst the various groups, schools, generations and nations and their respective representatives.

One composer may prefer a polyphonic style of writing, but reduces this thematic development and the art of variation to a minimum. Another may write a bold harmonic style and not shrink from any combination of tones, but he has room only for melodies that hardly overstep homophony and are further characterized by the use of only two-or four-bar phrases. One composer's "atonality" consists in setting false basses under primitively harmonized periods; others write in two or more (major or minor) keys simultaneously, but the musical procedures within each one often betray a frightening poverty of invention. Music distinguished by

its rich and animated melody and free construction of themes, sickens on the sluggish harmony, the symptoms being: poverty of intervallic movement, long held chords, endless pedal points and harmonic progressions that perpetually recur. Music of this kind—I can almost positively assert this as a general proposition—cannot survive without more or less mechanical repetitions and, often, the most primitive sequential procedure. This is especially clear in the rhythm, bordering on monotony, in which a profusion of shifts and changes of metre conceals the neediness of the music.

The rhythm—now rigid, now hammering, now dancing (and other kinds of animation)—provides more often than one would think the only handhold for a music that is otherwise completely inconsequential. And it is the representatives of this compositional technique who are generally referred to as “strongly rhythmic composers”. Even “atonal” and otherwise “progressively orientated” music manages to be accepted and even become relatively popular thanks to its adherence to such more or less established principles, such exaggerated one-sidedness, and thanks to the fact that it contents itself with being “modern, but not ultra”.

And even if one or more aspects of such music do present the listener with difficult tasks, it adheres so strictly to the conventional in all other respects—often being intentionally “primitive”—that it appeals to the ears of people of moderate musical discernment, just on account of those negative properties. It appeals to them all the more because the

authors of such music, in order to be stylistically pure, have to be aware of the consequences of only their one particular feature of modernity, and are not compelled to draw conclusions from the combination of all these possibilities. The inescapable compulsion which consists (I repeat) in drawing the farthest conclusions from a self-chosen musical universality is to be found in one place only, and that is in Schönberg’s compositions. In saying this, I am, I believe, producing the last and perhaps the strongest reason for the difficulty of understanding it. The circumstance that this noble compulsion is met by a sovereignty worthy of genius justifies me—like everything that I have said about Schönberg’s mastery, unequalled by any of his contemporaries—in supposing—no, it is no supposition, it is a certainty—that here we are dealing with the work of one of the very few masters who will bear the title “classic” for time everlasting—long after the “classicists of our time” have become a thing of the past. Not only has he “drawn the last and boldest conclusions from German musical culture” (as Adolf Weissmann aptly says in his book *Die Musik in der Weltkrise*), he has got further than those who seek new paths blindly and—consciously or unconsciously—more or less negate the art of this musical culture. So today on Schönberg’s fiftieth birthday one can say, without having to be a prophet, that the work that he has presented so far to the world ensures not only the predominance of his personal art, but what is more that of German music for the next fifty years.