

Alban Berg (1885-1935) Vier Stücke Op 5 (clarinet & piano) (1913)

Alban Berg was born into an affluent Viennese family. All four children were taught piano, and following the death of his father in 1900, which caused severe financial difficulties for the family, the young Alban began to compose piano duets and a large number of songs for family music making. He was hopeless at school, fathered a child with a kitchen maid, and on leaving school could only find unpaid work as a civil servant. He was saved by his brother and sister bringing his compositions to the attention of Schoenberg who in 1904 took him on as a composition pupil. In 1906 thanks to an inheritance, he was able to relinquish his job and concentrate on music, also studying under Zemlinsky. Schoenberg recognised Berg's abilities and initial shortcomings: *'Alban Berg is an extraordinarily gifted composer, but the state he was in when he came to me was such that his imagination apparently could not work on anything but lieder. Even the piano accompaniments to them were songlike. He was absolutely incapable of writing an instrumental movement or inventing an instrumental theme'*. Under Schoenberg, Berg's style developed rapidly, influenced by Schoenberg's own development of atonal forms, but maintaining Berg's emotional expressivity. After Schoenberg moved to Berlin in 1911, he still expected Berg to carry out musical and domestic chores for him, and Berg needed his ex-teacher's approval.

In 1913, however, Berg asserted his musical independence with the composition of the Five Altenberg Lieder Op 4 for soprano and orchestra (whose performance caused a riot at the concert hall) followed by tonight's Four Pieces Op 5 for clarinet and piano. Schoenberg, perhaps feeling threatened by the talented pupil now composing outside his guidance, gave Berg, who was visiting him in Berlin, a blistering criticism of the 'insignificance and worthlessness of his recent compositions'. Berg's confidence was shattered and he moved away from this miniature style, starting work on the opera *Wozzeck* the following year.