

## The Story of Krenek's Opus 20 from Donaueschingen to New York

What does it mean to follow a string quartet wherever it went? (And, indeed, why would anyone do this?) In my recently published [dissertation](#), I tried doing just that. "The Movement of a Musical Work: Ernst Krenek's Opus 20 in the Interwar Years" follows Krenek's "Third string quartet", op. 20 from its creation until Krenek's arrival in the U.S.

My purpose was to study the musical "work concept" through this single composition. It turned out to be an intriguing window into Krenek's life and into European and American contemporary interwar music. Through Op. 20 I had access to many of the people, ideas, aesthetics, political economy, social life, and business aspects that populated this fascinating world. These were all involved in shaping the idea of what a musical work "is" and how an ephemeral and ambiguous piece of music could be made to represent the same object, Op. 20, time and time again.

Krenek's "Third string quartet" recently turned 100 years. Readers probably know that it began as a gift promised to Paul Hindemith in late July 1922. It was the result of an informal agreement between these two young personalities of "Neue Musik" as they met at a party in the secluded music haven of Donaueschingen. At first, it was definitely not on top of Krenek's to-do list; he was probably more busy collaborating with Oskar Kokoschka on "Orpheus und Eurydike" and writing "Der Sprung über den Schatten" at this time. He only finished Op. 20 in May 1923 after composing most of it on a hectic train ride. Soon the quartet enjoyed its first performance in Salzburg on 3 August at the first festival of the ISCM, which recently celebrated 100 years. The interpreters were no other than Hindemith's own Amar Quartet. Critics from all over Europe and the U.S. would report on the event. Op. 20 was met with both positive and negative criticism: "A fall into 'musical hell'", reported the deutsch-national "Salzburger Chronik"; Adolf Weißmann wrote that Krenek had discovered "rhythm as saviour", "The Sackbut" called it "positively terrifying." The Amar Quartet would go on to perform it in 13 different concerts between 1923 and 1927.

The background story of any musical work may be interesting, exciting, and unexpected, but it was not my intention to stay with the early phase of Op. 20's story. What I really focus on is the aftermath, the "everyday life" of this contemporary piece of music after the glamour of the premiere had gone. By following the music rather than its creator, we may more clearly see the often surprising mix of people and objects that were all taking turns in supporting this piece of music into becoming more than a temporary event. It also shows us how much of that piece really stays the same when it travels between media formats, individuals, groups, and countries.

Any piece of music needs to be re-performed to remain recognised and relevant to people, either through concert performances, different media (including paper and print), or at least by being talked about. It also needs for one or more particular people to truly care about it. Without any of this, oblivion may quickly claim the piece. Although Krenek did not seem to care very much for it in the beginning, Op. 20 was rather lucky to have other kinds of support. After being published by Universal Edition on 21 May 1924 (conveniently almost a year after its completion!), Op. 20 went on to be interpreted by ensembles in the Soviet Union, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and the U.S. Part of it was recorded on nonelectric gramophone (Polydor-66201) and it was broadcast on radio as early as 1925. However, besides Hindemith, who kept the original manuscript throughout his life, no one seems to have cared very deeply for it beyond the occasional listening or reading experience. Most ensembles who played it seem to have been satisfied with only one or a handful of interpretations. The gramophone recording did not do well and was soon withdrawn from the market. Krenek, who heard it in Cologne, made a short remark: “very bad.”

One possible reason for Op. 20’s ambivalent career was its unclear structure and aesthetics. Some would label it an expressionist work, others would say neo-classical, perhaps even bordering “Neue Sachlichkeit”. Most would certainly agree that it was an atonal work, but to confuse things the 1924 Wiener Philharmonischer Verlag edition claimed that it was in E<sup>b</sup> major. Such a claim would not go unnoticed; critics such as Alfred Einstein and Willi Schuh would write this off as a “mistake” or “joke.” Few people could agree on the number of movements within the quartet, or whether it was only really one whole movement consisting of “parts.” Only in the interwar years, there were countless misunderstandings of when it was composed, whether it was published or not, which aesthetic school and which national heritage it belonged to. Op. 20 was first categorised as “Czech,” then as “German,” later as “Austrian,” and after 1938 possibly even “American.” It also went from being “contemporary” and “new” to being “almost new” or “established.”

The reason why I am stressing this is that it shows clearly that what Op. 20 “was” – and what it “was not” – mattered. Though not necessarily anyone’s favourite piece of music, it was still an object of knowledge that needed to be continuously defined. Through Op. 20, we can see the emergence of a modern, complex knowledge culture in the field of music.

By the end of the “Golden Twenties,” ensembles had grown tired of performing the string quartet, at least in public. Op. 20 was, it seems, not performed at all between 1929 and 1937. Yet it was never truly forgotten. It always remained part of the informal canon of contemporary music societies, not least the ISCM, because it had a given role in their historical legacy. (This is probably still the case, by the way.) While the 1930s were certainly difficult for Op. 20, as well as for “Neue Musik” in general, there were so many

traces of the string quartet moving around in the world that it was impossible to overlook completely. The “work” Op. 20 was represented in the countless organisations, publishers, musicians, and listeners who had been involved with it, and the many scores, reviews, catalogues, records, and concert programmes through which it had been documented.

When Krenek left Europe in 1938 after the “Anschluss”, the string quartet migrated with him. At that point, many pieces of music such as Op. 20 were in danger in Europe. To “survive,” they needed to be made relevant elsewhere. Already after a few months in his new country, Krenek was invited to a private chamber music evening in Boston where Op. 20 was performed. Being disappointed with the interpretation that evening, he started wondering whether he could make another performance happen. This desire came true in March 1940 at the Carnegie Hall in New York by the trusted Galimir Quartet. It was organised by Roger Sessions, Eduard Steuermann, and Mark Brunswick and involved many Austrians in exile such as Lotte Hammerschlag, Rudolf Kolisch, and Félix Galimir. My investigation ends with Krenek’s heartfelt self-review of this concert in his diary. Perhaps for the first time since 1923, perhaps for the first time ever, Krenek felt a profound sense of affinity with this string quartet (quote from Krenek’s American diaries, edited by Prof. Dr. Claudia Maurer Zenck):

*“Heard my 3. String Quartet again and with great pleasure, especially since it has none of this paleness that you often hear from compositions from [the early 1920s], which makes you wonder what was so special about that time. It is still ‘new’ and has nothing of those Hindemith-ish joker-characteristics or neo-classic bad habits. [...] In any case, the relative timelessness of this music was very calming for me. It leaves me with the hope that its worth will really be acknowledgeable at some point in the future.”*

So ends my study of this inspiring, eclectic, and intense string quartet. Although Op. 20’s history goes on after the war, that history remains to be further explored.