

Alexander von Zemlinsky (1871-1942)

Two Movements for String Quartet

Introduzione: Andante con moto; Vivace: ♩ = Presto

Adagio, misterioso; Tempo di menuetto

In the Bruce Beresford's 2001 film, *Bride of the Wind*, Alexander von Zemlinsky is portrayed attempting to seduce Alma Mahler during an apparent lesson in composition and piano, both fields of Zemlinsky's expertise. Although later in the film, Mahler's infamous wife brags about her studies with Zemlinsky, she is also quoted elsewhere as having described Zemlinsky as "a horrid little gnome – chinless, toothless and stinking of coffee houses." Such contrasting reactions seem central to Zemlinsky's problems as a composer. Although he died a forgotten man in America after fleeing Nazi oppression in 1938, his place in the complex world of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna was impressive. One could get lost in the great cast of artistic characters of that period: Mahler, Schoenberg, Webern, Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele, Gropius, Werfel, and even Alma Mahler herself. Yet Zemlinsky triumphed both as pianist and composer and as a kind of consolidator of the troubled times. In the Wagner vs. Brahms dispute that divided Vienna, both sides admired Zemlinsky. Brahms championed his Clarinet Trio and Mahler his operas. He founded a musical organization for young professionals and amateurs, Polyhymnia, where he met and befriended Arnold Schoenberg who would say of Zemlinsky, "I owe almost everything I know about composing and its problems to Alexander Zemlinsky...I always thought he was a great composer."

Despite such testimony, Zemlinsky fell down a certain proverbial crack probably because he was too radical for the conservative Viennese who favored the waning Romanticism of the 1890's and not radical enough for the emerging Second Viennese School as led by Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg. Still, he was instrumental with Schoenberg in founding the famous Society for Private Musical Performances, which fostered new music and led to the establishment of other such organizations as the International Society for Contemporary Music and the International Composer's Guild of New York.

The *Two Movements for String Quartet* remains an unfinished work in Zemlinsky's canon of four string quartets. The reasons for its incompleteness are uncertain except that it came in troubled times. His sister Mathilde had just deserted Arnold Schoenberg for the painter Richard Gerstl. While the marriage was reconciled, Gerstl committed suicide. And Zemlinsky himself was suffering a domestic crisis over his love for Louise, an art student he would marry after his wife died of leukemia. Whatever the reasons, Zemlinsky left the *Two Movements* of 1927 unfinished and moved on to write his sardonic fourth quartet in 1936.

The first of the *Two Movements* was written as a salute to American friends, explaining the curious "Yankee Doodle" theme that winds its way through it. This, however, is a dark "Yankee Doodle" that grows even more ominous as the movement develops. A kind of dissonant melancholy pervades the second movement. Here Zemlinsky seems ahead of his time with a suggestion of Minimalism in the growing tension of the repeated notes and subtle harmonic changes.

Zemlinsky's work could be described as lushly Romantic with a sharp modern edge. Once the furor of Modernism died down, it was probably this combination of the best of both worlds that led to the recent and positive reassessment of Zemlinsky's music.