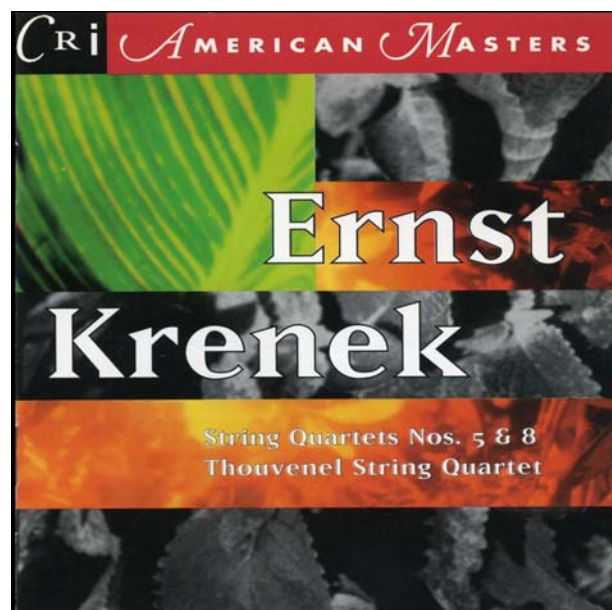


NWCR678

# Ernst Krenek

## String Quartets Nos. 5 & 8



- String Quartet No. 5, Op. 65 (1930) ..... (37:55)
1. I. Sonate ..... (9:02)
  2. II. Thema und Variationen ..... (16:37)
  3. III. Phantasie ..... (12:16)
4. String Quartet No. 8, Op. 233 (1981) ..... (22:53)  
Thouvenel String Quartet: Eugene Purdue,  
violin; Edmund Stein, violin; Sally Chisholm,  
viola; Jeffrey Levenson, cello

Total playing time: 60:58

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## Notes

**Ernst Krenek's** physical life spanned the twentieth century, and his creative life reflected its turmoil. Born August 23, 1900 in Vienna, Austria, he died December 22, 1991 in Palm Springs, California. As a composer, his mode of musical expression changed many times: from the post-impressionism of his teacher Franz Schreker, to a dissonant, motoric style influenced by Béla Bartók, to a Schubertian neo-romanticism, to a dissonance based upon the twelve-tone technique that employed serial and electronic mediums, to an atonalism incorporating elements of the twelve-tone technique. These changes of style have often confused listeners and critics alike, for as he progressed, Krenek did not always adhere strictly to the stylistic techniques he was currently employing.

“Looking back over the evolution of my musical style, I am not astonished that even benevolent observers became confused and vacillating in their faith. Whenever they thought I had comfortably settled down in some stylistic district, I was not at the expected place the next time, and the business of classifying had to start all over again. ...I have been striving for an ever-freer and more incisive articulation of musical thought.” (Krenek, “The Composer Speaks” in *The Book of Modern Composers*, edited by David Ewen. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942, pp. 345–55.) Yet even through all his changes, Krenek always displayed a strong interest in instrumental color and sonority, which he presented in an ever-musical context. Although the Fifth and Eighth String Quartets are dramatically different in style, they still speak with Krenek’s distinctive voice, for the quartet was a genre he turned to throughout his life.

Krenek was born to Emanuela Cizek and Ernst Krenek. (The family name was originally spelled with a hacek over the “r” in the Czech style and was pronounced “Kschrennek.” After Krenek’s immigration to America, he dropped the hacek.) His

parents were of predominately Austrian stock from Czechoslovakia, and his father was an officer in the Austrian Quartermaster Corps. Ernst Krenek began school in 1906, the same year he began piano studies. His interest in composing music was evident early; some pieces dating from 1907 are preserved in the collection of the Vienna Gesellschaft für Musikfreunde. By 1916, Krenek began to take composition seriously and he embarked on six years of study with Franz Schreker, a popular composer of lushly romantic operas whom he followed to Berlin in 1920.

During the years immediately following the First World War, Berlin was a city in artistic ferment and economic chaos. At this time, Krenek met many musicians whose friendships provided him with stimulation and encouragement throughout his career. As a result of his experiences in Berlin, Krenek’s compositional aesthetic, which up to this time was strongly influenced by Schreker, swerved away from his teacher’s tonally extended style to free atonality. His first substantial composition, the First String Quartet, Op. 6 from 1921, created a sensation because of its stark dissonances and vigorous rhythms influenced by Bartók. Krenek’s string quartets are signposts in the development of his musical style, and the first three, written between 1921 and 1923, all reflect his rejection of Schreker.

Krenek’s change in style toward a neo-romanticism influenced by the music of Franz Schubert is exemplified by his Fourth String Quartet, Op. 24, and solidified when, at the end of 1924, he traveled to Paris where he was impressed by the neo-classical approach then predominant in France, and especially by Igor Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella*. In 1925, Krenek joined the staff of the Opera house in Kassel. As a result of his duties and because the Kassel Opera was one of the most technically modern houses, Krenek became thoroughly

immersed in opera production. Between February and June of 1926, he wrote the first major work in his new neo-romantic style, the opera *Jonny spielt auf*, Op. 45. The work received its premiere at the Leipzig Opera in January of 1927 and was an immediate success. During the next season it was produced in forty-five German opera houses for 421 performances.

With the advent of financial security in 1928, Krenek returned to Vienna where he devoted himself to the creation of his musical and literary works. The move to Vienna, however, was more a retreat from active musical life than a direct confrontation with it. Vienna during this century had been an artistically conservative city, and it did not provide Krenek with many opportunities. Most of the music he wrote during this period received its first performance outside Vienna. Krenek during this time achieved the culmination of his romantic style in his Fifth String Quartet, Op. 65, which was written in just two weeks from April 20 to May 3, 1930 and received its first performance by the Kolisch Quartet on September 20, 1930. Thoroughly grounded in conventional tonality and reflecting Krenek's strong interest in Schubert, it stands as the final boundary in Krenek's neo-romantic style. Soon after, in 1930 he began work on his first twelve-tone composition, the opera *Karl V*, Op. 73.

Krenek began his experimentation with twelve-tone music because he felt that he had thoroughly explored the resources of tonality. Although he was a good friend of Alban Berg and Anton Webern at this time, he never discussed the twelve-tone technique with them; instead, he learned about it through studying their works. The Sixth String Quartet, Op. 78 reflects Krenek's early twelve-tone style. The composition was written for the Kolisch Quartet, who considered it too difficult to play. As a result, it did not receive its first performance until 1953. Krenek considered the Sixth String Quartet to be among his most important works.

Krenek's arrival in America in 1938 began a very different kind of existence for him. He arrived at a time when many American musicians were becoming hostile to the flood of European émigrés taking jobs away from them, and his options for supporting himself were very sparse. The only jobs available to him were in teaching, so he set about finding himself an appropriate position. At the end of 1938 and during the first half of 1939, Krenek traveled around the United States giving lecture recitals. During the summer, he taught at the University of Michigan; in the fall, he began teaching at Vassar College. After a rather unhappy three years at Vassar, in 1942 he was appointed head of the Music Department and dean of the School of Fine Arts at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. He composed his Seventh String Quartet, Op. 96 in 1943–44, using a rotation technique to the twelve-tone row with which he was experimenting at the time. In 1950, he settled permanently in the Los Angeles area, and resumed contacts with Europe after an absence of thirteen years. While he had continued to write twelve-tone music and had explored methods of extending its technique, he believed that the artistic isolation he felt in America hampered his growth as a composer.

Krenek's Eighth String Quartet, Op. 233 is his last and was written thirty-six years after his Seventh String Quartet. He composed it between July 11, 1980 and January 1, 1981 under the sponsorship of a National Endowment for the Arts grant

for the Thouvenel Quartet, which first performed it on June 7, 1981 in New York. The piece reflects an eclectic combination of freely composed elements with twelve-tone and serial elements. This short one-movement work is a summary of the composer's string quartet writing, for it contains references, some quite subtle, to his other string quartets. Like all of Krenek's string quartets, the Eighth demarcates a transition in style, for though it surveys his other quartets, the composition's mixture of free atonality with the twelve-tone technique is characteristic of his last, great works.

—Garrett H. Bowles

Curator, Krenek Archive

University of California, San Diego

Comments by Ernst Krenek:

String Quartet No. 5

Written in 1930, the work is still oriented toward the Schubert atmosphere although in many details of voice leading and pitch combinations, a different outlook announces itself. The first movement follows the traditional outline of the sonata form (even with repetition of the exposition). The second, a set of ten variations on a rather unusual thematic material, shows a more independent type of invention. The last movement, an extended, rambling fantasy, opens with a presumably intentional quotation from Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna*.

String Quartet No. 8

The work (total length about twenty-six minutes) is played straight through without a break. About ten or so sections can be distinguished in some way. The first (twenty-one measures) consists of a twelve-tone series that is imitated in its inversion. The series has something of the character of a theme but is not treated as such, and the allusions to it are never more than sporadic. Movement predominates in sections 2, 4, 6, and 9, and the last of these is somewhat turbulent and chaotic. In general, sections 3 (this one containing canonic imitation), 7, and 8 are slow. The remaining units have a certain transitional character and display a controlled sort of movement with even beats; tone groups with shifting accents are played simultaneously, and fragmentary isolated elements make their appearance. Section 10 is section 1 in retrograde form. The musical idiom of the work may be described as free atonality that occasionally takes the shape of twelve-tone figures. The composition of the work was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (USA).

#### **Thouvenel String Quartet**

First prize winners of the Vienna International String Quartet Competition, featured performers on NBC's *Today Show* and "Musicians of the Month" in *Musical America*, the Thouvenel String Quartet was the only quartet to work with Ernst Krenek on all eight of his string quartets. Known internationally for commissioning and championing of such works as the Elliott Carter Quartet No. 4, the Milton Babbitt Quartet No. 5, the Mel Powell Quartet, and the Krenek Quartet No. 8 that was dedicated to them, they performed in many of the world's major musical centers. Its members on this recording are Eugene Purdue and Edmund Stein, violins; Sally Chisholm, viola; and Jeffrey Levenson, cello.

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## Production Notes

Produced by Dub Taylor.

Recorded by Douglas Botnick at Evergreen Studios, Burbank California in July 1983. Digitally edited by Stewart Botnick.

String Quartet No.5, op.65 published by Universal Edition, Vienna, Austria. Originally released on CRI SD 522.String Quartet No.8, Op.233 published by Bärenreiter Verlag, Kassel, Germany.

All works: BMI (America/Canada). GEMA (Germany/International).