Upon its completion in 1908, Arnold Schoenberg’s Second String Quartet in F-sharp minor was a departure from all other chamber music that had come before it. The piece featured a pair of watershed ideas that would become common practice in twentieth-century composition: it was the first string quartet to include a soprano part (starting a tradition of unique chamber orchestration that continues today), and the fourth movement was written without a key signature, completely eschewing tonality as Vienna and its audiences would have known it. Unfortunately for Schoenberg, neither of these concepts were welcomed by critics nor the concert-goers of Vienna, and when combined with his sordid reputation as the city’s most radical composer, the sum of these circumstances amounted to a torrent of public outrage, ridicule, and scorn. The reason the piece remains so relevant today is rather conversely thanks to its acceptance and praise from the relative few of the time (painter Wassily Kandinsky, Vienna Philharmonic Concertmaster Arnold Rosé), whose promotion helped push the work into the musical lexicon of Vienna and–in due time–the world.

The Norton Critical Scores series endeavours to be a comprehensive and singular source for a number of monumental works, including everything from Palestrina’s *Pope Marcellus Mass* to Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*. This edition, in which editor Severine Neff examines
Schoenberg's aforementioned tenth opus, teems with primary sources, analysis and contextualization of the piece. The aim of the book is to compile in a single paperback an updated score with a complete understanding of the work's creation, presentation, reception, and historical impact. While it is certainly fit for a scholarly audience (its three hundred and forty pages abound with primary sources and theoretical minutiae), it is also suitable for serious appreciators of music or performers of the work, seeking further context about it.

As one might guess from the title of the series—Norton Critical Scores—the centerpiece of the book is a miniature score of the work itself, newly compiled for this edition. The score is largely based on Christian Martin Schmidt’s complete edition score, which used both Schoenberg’s autograph score (now housed in the Library of Congress in Washington DC) and the Universal and Philharmonia editions of 1925. These were only the main contributors, however, as great pains were obviously made by the editor to survey all possible autographs, published scores, parts, and arrangements in creating the new publication. The autograph manuscript of the first printing of the Second String Quartet was lost, and since the work had a history of being edited and reedited by the composer, several discrepancies exist between versions. The newly revised score is a carefully constructed attempt at organizing Schoenberg’s vision, listing changes made and errata accounted for.

The revised miniature score is the book’s raison d’être and its strongest component. By listing in great detail the versions consulted and the possible problematic nature of each, their place in the timeline, the errors perceived, and the revisions made, Neff has truly done due diligence to the work and its complicated publication history. The score is also impeccably clear, even in its miniature form, and it should serve as a wonderful listening companion and subject of formal analysis for many a music theorist and student alike.

The second part of the book is titled “Background and Analysis,” and situates the quartet historically and theoretically for the reader. The first chapter provides insight into the personal turmoil Schoenberg experienced while writing the quartet, cataloging the events of his wife Mathilde’s affair with his neighbour, friend, and painting teacher, Richard Gerstl. This section also provides context for the premiere of the work and a recounting of the infamous riot that ensued. The second chapter is Neff’s theoretical analysis of the work, and the only section of the book that might be over the head of the non-academic reader.

The section titled “Historical Contexts” provides the reader with plenty, and for a work to have been written at such a turbulent time in an artist’s life its context cannot be overstated. It should be noted, however, that Adorno wrote of Schoenberg “preserving a distance between himself and the material,” with his Second String Quartet specifically having the coldness of “one who has run away.”¹ This certainly disputes Neff’s assertion that in

examining the quartet, one is “confronted with evidence of a personal crisis.” One of the triumphs of this book is the wealth of primary sources it contains, and this section is rather effective at deploying them without inundating the reader. This way, it is easy to grasp the dire circumstances surrounding the affairs of Schoenberg’s wife, the disastrous premiere, and the motivation of the work’s antagonists. Having said this, it is necessary to point out the repetitious manner in which the book conducts its use of these sources, as excerpts from the writings of Paul Stefan, Richard Sprecht, and many others appear in this section only to reappear in their entirety later in the book.

This presents a problem for anyone wishing to read the book from cover to cover: Is it necessary to read through all the primary sources of Part Three if they have already been scoured, picked clean, and placed in context in the earlier chapters? Does this not turn the wealth of primary sources into a long appendix of sorts? It seems in this respect, Severine Neff is caught between making her book an accessible read and an exhausting one, and she seems to have chosen to exercise both options simultaneously.

Fortunately, this first section ends with one of the more unique features the book has to offer, an analysis of “Visual Responses to the Quartet”. In this section, Neff singles out and interprets a self-portrait Schoenberg completed mere days after the Second Quartet’s completion, another painting he titled Critic I, finished after his struggles with the Viennese critics Hans Liebstöckl and Ludwig Karpath, and Wassily Kandinsky’s Impression III (Concert) that the artist painted after hearing the quartet for the first time. These serve to contribute to the accessible nature of the book, giving the reader a concise reference to a facet of Schoenberg’s world other than his music.

The book’s second chapter “Presenting the Quartet’s Idea,” gives a theoretical analysis of the quartet, and continues along the line of succinct and informative writing. When contrasted with a more traditionally academic theoretical analysis such as Dale’s, this analysis holds water while not leaving the less serious reader grasping at straws. For instance, both authors write at length about the allusion to sonata form in the first movement of Opus 10 and, while Dale’s interpretations are far more detailed, Neff is able to say essentially the same thing in a manner less dry and more economical for the reader. Interestingly, neither Neff nor Dale make mention of the tempi of the quartet’s first movement as a formal device, as

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4 Neff, Second String Quartet, 128-140, 98-104

Critical Voices: The University of Guelph Book Review Project is part of the curriculum at the School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.
Brinkmann astutely notes. Suffice it to say, no matter how much is dissected in Schoenberg’s music there will always be a stone each author leaves unturned. This is why, for the purposes of the makers of the Norton Critical Scores series, the approach they have taken suits their needs best. It provides the reader with an abundance of information on the invaluable concept of the *Gedanke*, a wealth of analysis on the inclusion of the folk song *Augustin* in the second movement, and has page after page showcasing Schoenberg’s evasion of tonality.

The third and final part of the book is a compilation of primary sources about the quartet, written by Schoenberg himself, his students, and his contemporaries. This is the text’s largest section, and includes writings and correspondences from an exhaustively wide swath of musicians, composers and writers of the composer’s inner circle. The writing runs the gamut from theoretical analysis to commentary on the social implications of the riotous premiere to personal letters between the composer and his faithful few. None of the writings in this last section are critical in the least, however, and make for an oddly uncontested qualification of the work.

“Commentary by the Composer, his Students, and Contemporaries” is a vast amount of source material, but its one-hundred and twenty pages are left unedited to conclude the book. This raises the question of just what the book is and is not: Is it a one-stop destination for all source material pertaining to the composition of Schoenberg’s *Second String Quartet*? Or should there be a hope that the author of a book intended for concise consumption should omit the reproduction of source material for inclusion’s sake? The most interesting thing about this final section as a whole is its unspecific nature: it is a collection of writings standing alone, waiting for the reader to draw their own conclusions.

None of the writings in Chapter Three come from today’s scholars, and all of them were written by people who in some way knew the composer and—for the most part—support his work and intentions. While this is somewhat properly juxtaposed by including the criticisms of Liebstöckl and Karpath in the book’s first chapter, it makes Neff appear somewhat reluctant to find fault in the composition at all, theoretically, compositionally, contextually or otherwise. This in a sense is expected, since the Norton Critical Scores series only compiles editions on “major musical works.” But in a book that has a fourth chapter entitled “Analysis and Criticism,” should we not have other sides of the argument? Where are the thoughts of Schenker (whose “overwrought and unjust polemics against modern artists had hurt [Schoenberg] deeply”) or Stravinsky (who was “trying merely to please the

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6 As claimed on the back cover of the book.
customers”), two of Schoenberg’s truly outspoken detractors?  

The other large question mark concerning this book is why there are no articles or writings from after the composer’s death. Evidently, this is an intentional decision by the editor, though the reader is left unaware as to why. It is even more bizarre that the book’s list of sources definitely uses recent writings on the subject of the Second Quartet. Should the reader not have the luxury of recent perspectives on the work in this supposedly comprehensive edition? If one looks past the articles written by the composer himself, the most recent publication date of any primary source in the section is 1934. For a book compiled in 2006, this seems extremely limiting, even if the editor was attempting to have a quarantined depiction of the work’s immediate impact and no mention of its more recent past, its present or its future.

The other glaring editorial omission is the lack of reference to the Second String Quartet’s legacy. As Adorno asserts, if “the new chords” of the quartet had not “sought the expressionless, it would scarcely have been possible for [the new harmony] to be transformed into the twelve-tone technique.” Since it is commonly understood that the fourth movement was a watershed moment in eschewing tonality (which Neff spends several pages proving), then why not examine its influence on later works of Schoenberg? Both the Three Piano Pieces of Opus 11 and Two Songs of Opus 14 are described by the composer himself as confronting the same dilemma as the Second String Quartet: “the multitude of dissonances cannot be counterbalanced by occasional returns to such tonal triads as represent a key.” While the tenth opus is truly a historical high water mark in the breaking of new harmonic ground, why not examine how Schoenberg stretched the rules even further in subsequent compositions, and how it could never have happened without that first step?

A special mention should be made to one of the book’s appendices: a list of all documented and confirmed performances of the Second String Quartet in F-sharp minor from its premiere until the composer’s death. It is rather surprising that for such a historically infamous quartet, only fifty-one performances were given by a total of nineteen different chamber ensembles in only nine different countries. If the work was as structurally sound and as magnificent a breakthrough as is described by the primary sources in the book, why was it so underperformed?


Clearly, the Norton Critical Series treatment of Schoenberg’s *Second String Quartet* serves as a wonderful score companion, an appropriate guide to the piece and its context. Regrettably, the book does not wish the reader to be privy to more recent analysis, criticism, and cultural context. Had the book been compiled in 1934, it would certainly be more of a comprehensive document than the one this reviewer believes the twenty-first century deserves. Neff’s goals of guiding the reader through the history of the work’s creation and reception, analyzing the score movement by movement, and providing a surplus of primary sources are very effectively realized in this edition, which will be useful source for scholars and music lovers for some time to come.

**For Further Reading**


