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Source: *Tempo*, New Series, No. 109 (Jun., 1974), pp. 16-25

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/944097>

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# SCHOENBERG'S 'ATONAL' MUSIC

*Jim Samson*

SCHOENBERG'S 'atonal' (*i.e.* nontonal, pre-serial) music continues to offer stubborn resistance to analysis. The co-existence within the *oeuvre* of widely diverging, even conflicting, 'linguistic' directions has resulted in a theoretical literature inclined to illuminate the individual work or specific technical feature rather than to lay the foundations for useful analytical generalizations.

An exception is Allen Forte's 'theory of set complexes',<sup>1-4</sup> a theory which radically challenges previous concepts of 'atonality' by proposing a self-consistent 'grammar' of compositional procedure for the 'atonal' works. Yet even the 'theory of set complexes' directs itself to only one of the important questions about 'atonality': how have the pitches been organized? Or, more precisely, to what extent has the choice of pitches been determined by a pre-compositional system? Professor Forte demonstrates, moreover, a reluctance to relate this question to his aural experience of the music itself. He rejects, for example, Roy Travis's characterization of the final bar of op 19 no.2 as a 'tonic sonority' on the grounds that 'the triad C-E-G is a non-set'.<sup>3,5</sup> This is symptomatic of his tendency to substitute note-count for analysis, ruthlessly excluding the possibility of significant, and even intentional, relationships which create friction with the set structure. An analytical approach to 'atonality' should begin rather by accepting a wide range of interacting functions in an *oeuvre* where tradition and innovation are inextricably interwoven and where emphasis lies as much on the *exploration* of new resources as on their organization.

It is often more profitable to examine those features which an 'atonal' work shares with its tonal ancestry than to underline the differences. Such an investigation should distinguish between residual features—in which coherence depends upon analogy with the tonal past—and recreative features in which traditional procedures have been invested with new form-giving significance. In an examination of 'tonal' elements, where the distinction is perhaps least obvious, indications of both features may often be discerned within a single composition. In several of the George songs op.15, for example, the local harmonic working suggests a

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background of diatonic procedure, while invariant pitch formations behave as referential sonorities without diatonic function.

The opening phrase of the third song (Ex. 1) has been shaped tonally through a correspondence of harmonic change and measured rhythmic stress:

Ex. 1

Mässig (♩ = ca. 60)

Als Neu-ling trat ich ein in dein Ge-he-ge; kein

This results in a 'classical' harmonic rhythm which strengthens the tonal pull of the bass progression and encourages us to interpret the part-movement tonally. Such vestigial tonal elements, in which a background of diatonic procedure is confirmed by a supporting rhythmic structure, inform the individual events of several 'atonal' compositions without in any way implying an overall tonal framework. Even in works which do not readily permit a tonal interpretation of the pitch content, the phraseology of the music may well forge strong links with tonal procedure. In the final bars of op. 19 no. 1—

Ex. 2

(mit Ton)

*mf* *p* *molto rit.* *ppp* *ppp*

*molto rit.*

—such links are already suggested by the explicit textural differentiation between 'melody' and chordal 'accompaniment'. They are strengthened by the stepwise, predominantly semitonal, part-movement of the harmony (by no means wholly divorced from a triadic background) and by the cadential 'appoggiaturas' in the principal melody and subsidiary voices. They are further strengthened by a regular rhythmic pulse and, for the last four bars, a stable metric pattern, which is perceptible despite the *ritardando*. In Schoenberg's 'atonal' and serial music a traditional phraseological and rhythmic structure, although no longer tied to traditionally functioning harmony, can play a salient part in shaping the more dynamic features of the form and in propelling the phrase towards its cadence. In the scherzo from the transitional Second String Quartet, Schoenberg had already shown how an unorthodox harmonic language could be explained by a traditional rhythmic surface of Beethovenian energy and drive, resulting in a sound-world surprisingly close at times to the much later Fourth String Quartet.

An examination of the larger paragraphing of op. 15 no. 3 suggests that tonal procedure may have more than local significance in at least some of the 'atonal' works. The interaction of harmonic and rhythmic structures has here been projected onto a larger scale, to create an interaction of tonal and phrase structures, as expressed through the cadence. When the opening material is restated in a new tonal area, for example, the tonality is defined (Ex. 3) by means of a cadence or 'structural downbeat' (to use Edward T. Cone's useful term) in which the

articulation of the phrase structure is achieved through a coincidence of tonal clarification and rhythmic emphasis.

Ex.3

rit. - - - - -  
 cresc. - - - - - pesante p cresc. - - - - -

The overall tonal framework might be summarized as in Ex.4 (i), an interpretation supported by the directional bass movement in the latter part of the song, culminating in an extended emphasis on the three pitches of the opening progression.

Ex.4 (i)

(i) (ii) (a) (b) (x) (a) (a) (b)

Suppressed tonal structures\* of this kind can be discerned in other 'atonal' works, notably the second of the Five Orchestral Pieces op.16 (the recurring harmony here is familiar from *Pelleas und Melisande* and 'Entrückung'), the second of the op.19 Piano Pieces and several movements from *Pierrot Lunaire* (*pace* Allen Forte who suspects that the tonal allusions at the beginning of 'O Alter Duft' may have been 'intended to baffle some unsuspecting critic'!).<sup>3</sup>

There seems little justification for ignoring such evidence of tonal thinking in analysis, though its interpretation often proves problematical. Difficulties lie not so much in the interpretation of tonal relationships which may have multiple meanings†, as in determining the extent to which the role of, and structural emphasis on, 'tonal' elements changes as other form-giving procedures assume new prominence. Clearly a basic aim would be to distinguish between the tonal centre which shapes and influences the melodic/harmonic material of a work as a whole and the pitch centre which functions referentially. There is already some indication in op.15 no.3 of a structural use of referential sonorities in the recurrence of Fig. (x) at its original pitch (Ex.4ii). The formation is strongly characterized registrally, while the rhythmic dislocation of its components serves to emphasize their removal from diatonic function. The second of the op.11 Piano Pieces presents a more elaborate network of such recurring formations,

\* Webern's suggestion of an underlying G major tonality for op.15 no.2 lends support to this type of investigation.

† Many of us, for instance, would hear the C-E in the final bar of op.19 no.2 as a subdominant rather than a tonic sonority. cf.<sup>5</sup>

whose dialogue with more freely developing material forms the structural basis of the piece. A recurring bass ostinato figure underpins the structure, establishing three distinct tonal areas before returning to its original pitch. The formal outlines of the piece are to some extent demarcated by this skeletal tonal framework, and Reinhold Brinkmann has shown in some detail<sup>6</sup> how further tonal relationships arise from the juxtaposition of the ostinati with other recurring formations. Yet a tonal structure which results from the collision of invariant pitch formations has little in common with the generative processes of classical tonality. The ostinato in op.11 no.2, like other ostinati in 'atonal' Schoenberg (in op.16 no.1, op.18, and the third of the unfinished orchestral pieces of 1910), offers no opportunity for tonal progression in the traditional sense. It is rather an epitome of the piece's central dialectical relationship between the static and the dynamic, the constant and the variable.

In other 'atonal' works, such as the fourth of the op.16 Orchestral Pieces, invariant pitch formations have been more clearly separated from residual tonal centres, assuming primary importance in Schoenberg's concern to *organize* 'atonality'. Here the emphasis has shifted decisively from analogy with traditional procedure to its creative reinterpretation. In 'Der Kreuze' from *Pierrot Lunaire*, a single emphasized pitch forms a stable point of orientation in a context which suggests none of the broader relationships of tonality. One can profit from some of David Lewin's observations about pitch centricity in 'Der Kreuze' without accepting all the ramifications of his involved 'explanation' of the piece's pitch organization.<sup>7</sup> Certainly Schoenberg's tendency to 'close in' on a pitch centre via its semitonal neighbour notes is not confined to this work. It appears also in op.11 no.2, op.21 no.7 and op.21 no.10. (It is a feature, too, of the early works of Berg, viz. op.2 no.1, op.3 (second movement) and op.5 no.3.)

The changing role of pitch centricity in Schoenberg's music is indicative of a close relationship between his need to organize 'atonality'—to achieve 'conscious control of the new means and forms'—and his respect for tradition. Other unifying features in the 'atonal' works are similarly rooted in traditional procedure, and similarly concerned to avoid slavish imitation of it. The fundamental link between op.10 and op.11 no.1 is thematicism—the repetition and development, by means of contrapuntal and variation techniques, of recognizable thematic material. In the early tonal works, the development towards 'total thematicism', whether expressed through contrapuntal density or through elaborate motivic interrelationships which influence every detail of the texture, was inseparable from the decline of traditionally functioning tonal-harmonic relationships, weakening and at the same time *replacing* such relationships.\* Although thematicism was seriously threatened in a number of the 'atonal' works, it remains the constructive basis of others. Its continuing, and ultimate, importance in Schoenberg's work is made clear in his serial music.

Schoenberg regarded 'continuous variation' as the central principle to emerge from the more progressive tendencies of an evolving 19th-century thematic process. The principle—later to be formalized by serialism—underlies many of the subtler types of organization found in the 'atonal' works. In the First String Quartet the thematic elements are thoroughly interrelated through an

\* Structures based on symmetry or, more broadly, on the equality of notes, were also of importance in op.9 and op.10 as a means of weakening, by temporarily suspending, the tonal argument; but they play a subsidiary role in 'atonality'.

intensive motive working which affects even accompanimental detail: an extension of Brahmsian preoccupations and techniques, which significantly anticipates developments in the 'atonal' music. In op. 11 no. 1, for example, a continuous process of motivic development cuts across the still discernible outlines of a sonata-form,\* and underlies the work's thematic 'surface' (a surface which does not exclude sequential repetition). It assumes primary responsibility for unity. The total integration of thematic and harmonic elements, towards which much of this motive working seems to be striving, significantly foreshadows the serial method.

The opening bars of op. 11 no. 1 have indeed proved an inexhaustible mine for analytical speculators. There has, however, been remarkable disagreement between them concerning the interpretation of residual tonal characteristics and the nature of their motivic and intervallic organization.† Though often penetrating, Reinhold Brinkmann's motivic analysis<sup>6</sup> of op. 11 no. 1 suffers from the sheer all-inclusiveness of its approach, its wealth of 'relationships' tending to confuse as much as to clarify. George Perle's isolation of an intervallic cell which influences both thematic and harmonic elements is, on the other hand, a useful insight, the more so as it has a wider application for 'atonality'.<sup>8</sup> The unifying force of intervallic invariance is clearly intensified when it is allied to a closely argued motivic integration of material—as in op. 11 no. 1, op. 16 no. 1 and several of the op. 15 songs—but it plays a part, too, in works where there has been no apparent attempt to establish thematic or motivic identity. Ex. 5, a partial analysis of the opening section of op. 19 no. 5, indicates some of the features which can contribute to coherence in an 'atonal', 'athematic' work, though the cohesive influence of these should not be over-emphasized.

Ex. 5 (i)

(ii)

The image contains two musical examples, (i) and (ii), from the opening section of op. 19 no. 5. Example (i) shows momentary connections based on pitch identity, with lines connecting notes across staves. Example (ii) shows intervallic integration through various permutations of a 3-note cell, with lines connecting notes across staves.

The momentary connexions based on pitch identity (i) are less significant here than the indications of intervallic integration through various permutations of a 3-note cell combining the intervals of minor third and minor second (ii). A similar intervallic integration of otherwise differentiated material can be detected in the second of the 1910 Orchestral Pieces and in several movements from *Pierrot Lunaire*. (In 'Columbine' the emphasis on the third and seventh has a symbolic as well as a musical meaning). From this point of view, the tonal structure of op. 19 no. 2 might indeed be regarded as subsidiary to the piece's exploration of the constructive possibilities of a single intervallic cell.

\* The background of sonata-form in op. 11 no. 1 and op. 16 no. 2 is distinct from the *renewal* of the form which became possible with the discovery of serialism.

† More recently, the passage has been probed in accordance with set theory.<sup>3</sup>

Other constructive methods in 'atonality' result from an increased emphasis on counterpoint. The importance of a growing contrapuntal independence in breaking down the firm lines of tonal harmony has often been noted, and not only in early Schoenberg. In the op.9 Chamber Symphony, the tension between a strengthening contrapuntal 'logic' and a weakening tonal-harmonic foundation is expressed at times in particularly acute form: parts of the work foreshadow the linear freedom of 'atonality'. Yet even in *Pierrot Lunaire*, where the counterpoint is no longer subject to the constraints of tonal harmony and the part movement tends to be clearly differentiated by rhythm and colour, the vertical result is by no means arbitrary. Close examination will reveal that the counterpoint is still strongly influenced by vertical considerations, though these have not been formalized, and vary from movement to movement or within a single movement. There is an obstinate persistence of traditional notions of consonance and dissonance; a desire for harmonic homogeneity; and, perhaps most important, a concern to integrate vertical and horizontal elements.\* Nonetheless, in such works as the first and fourth of the Five Orchestral Pieces op.16, Schoenberg took advantage of the relative linear freedom of 'atonality' to organize his material through a rigorous contrapuntal combination of basic motifs, while in exceptional (and often-cited) instances, elaborate canonic devices are the primary form-giving feature. In 'Nacht' from *Pierrot Lunaire*, the exhaustive deployment of a single three-note shape in prime, retrograde and retrograde inversion forms has an obvious connection with later twelve-note practice.

In retrospect, we can regard serialism as a result of several organizing directions in 'atonality', while recognizing that other developments within the *oeuvre* were pulling in contrary directions. Allen Forte has, however, proposed compositional procedures for 'atonality' based on set theory, which are as systematic as 'the method', and stand in a clear conceptual relationship to it. According to Forte, Schoenberg developed these procedures consciously, probably in a very short time in the latter half of 1908. The real challenge in the theory lies not in Forte's refusal to admit the constructive significance of tonal elements (there for all to hear) nor in his contradiction of organizing methods such as the intervallic cell, but in his rejection of the concept of 'independent details', formerly (and, we may hope, *still*) a fundamental part of our thinking about 'atonality'. For the moment† I must be content to disbelieve rather than to refute; but I find it difficult indeed to reconcile set theory with Schoenberg's assurance that the 'laws' governing 'atonality' became clear to him only after the process of composition, a process which he himself described as 'trusting his hand'.

Forte's theory apart, there remain aspects of 'atonality' which cannot be channelled into the categories of analysis so far outlined—analogy with tonal procedure and progress towards 'new' constructive methods. Where one 'atonal work' will rely heavily for its coherence upon a phraseology which is clearly a product of tonal functions, another will demonstrate a radical reshaping of the basic elements of composition, made possible only by the rejection of those functions. Where tonal decline will be met in one work by rigorous compensatory disciplines and rigid structural control, another will appear to explore

\* The vertical dimension in 'atonality' remains largely unexplored in the detailed analytical studies.

† At the time of writing (January 1974), I have not yet had an opportunity to examine Professor Forte's book<sup>4</sup> which presumably presents his theory in a definitive form. [See pp. 41 - 43 for a review—Ed.]

fully the freedom from 'every restriction of a bygone aesthetic'. Schoenberg himself wrote that

intoxicated by the enthusiasm of having freed music from the shackles of tonality, I had sought to find further liberty of expression. In fact, I . . . believed that now music could renounce motivic features and remain coherent and comprehensible nonetheless.<sup>9</sup>

This radical (and temporary) standpoint affected a number of works written in 1909-10.\* The concept of a 'law of feeling', an *Expressionslogik*, would seem to have particular relevance to these works, though it should not be taken to imply an untrammelled outpouring from the 'dark embryo'. Schoenberg's notion of 'liberty of expression' may be tempered by Webern's description of 'constant testing' and Berg's reference to 'severe aural checking by the inner ear'. It amounts in effect to another form of discipline, albeit one in which the 'rightness' of an event is determined to an unprecedented degree by the composer's intuitive process, a process which had formerly been closely allied to pre-existing formal principles and generally applicable 'linguistic' procedures.

Analytical commentators on the 'athematic' works should resist the temptation to discuss momentary connexions at the expense of total form, and to over-emphasize the structural significance of unifying features whose chief attraction is their familiarity. In attempting to elucidate total form, the analyst may conclude that, in the absence of more thoroughgoing unifying relationships, the role of an event is determined more by the general characteristics of its components than by their precise pitch-content. In such a case he would hope to define the musical 'gesture' in relation to its immediate and overall context. In op. 16 no. 5, for example, the 'hidden' motivic connexions in subsidiary voices play a minor unifying role, as does the recurring emphasis on specific pitches in the *Hauptstimme* at climactic points. The persistence of characteristic harmonic areas, already familiar from the first piece, is of more significance, but even this remains subsidiary to the much broader relationships which determine the work's overall form. Such relationships can perhaps best be examined on a pitch-duration graph, which may help us to apprehend some of the features whose interaction generates the graded tensions and relaxations constituting the piece's larger movement—the varying densities, the overall registral 'shape', the purposeful contouring of the *Hauptstimme*, with its close link between compass and duration. Such an approach to the pitch content would be complemented by a discussion of constraining influences on the choice of pitches, such as the avoidance of octave doubling and the persistence of a tonally-derived view of intervallic quality.

It has been remarked elsewhere<sup>10</sup> that the intransigence of the pitch content of op. 16 no. 5 is partly offset by its traditional rhythmic phraseology. In other works Schoenberg explored the unprecedented rhythmic flexibility which became possible only when rhythm was no longer required to support harmonic progression. In a perceptive article (to which I am indebted) about Schoenberg's rhythmic procedures, Philip Friedheim has indicated how a structural relationship can be traced in several 'atonal' works on the basis of greater or lesser rhythmic stability.<sup>10</sup> The rhythmic curve on which such a relationship might be plotted would range from a clearly-defined metre, through a clearly-defined pulse but ambiguous metre, to an ambiguity of pulse and (therefore) metre. Viewed in

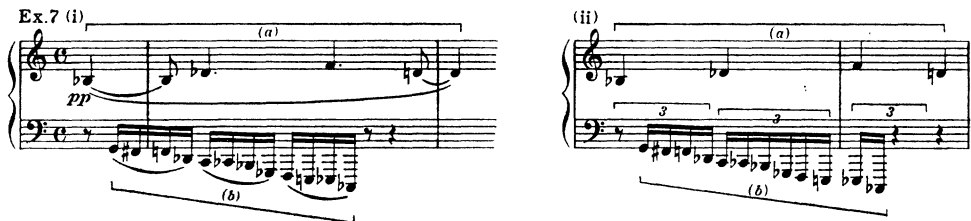
\* In order of composition these are op. 11 no. 3, op. 16 no. 5, op. 17, the unfinished orchestral pieces (1910), op. 19 and op. 20.



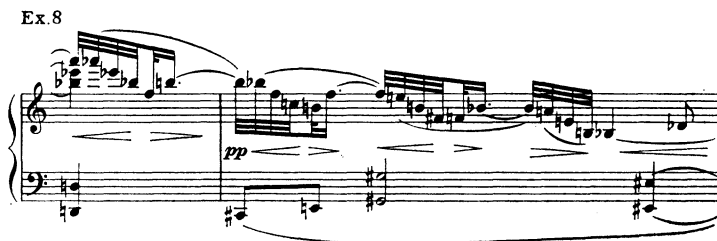
such terms, the final bars of op. 19 no. 1 (Ex. 2) assume special significance in the context of the piece as a whole. They achieve the rhythmic stability and simplicity for which the opening seemed to be searching, but which was obscured by the initial tied quaver (sounding like a downbeat because of the accompaniment figure) and the rhythmically disruptive chord in the first complete bar:



In op. 15 no. 11 a similar relationship between stable and unstable rhythmic elements can be detected, despite the slow tempo. The opening idea (Ex. 7 (i)) presents a regular pulse whose larger grouping remains ambiguous, figs. (a) and (b) each suggesting a different metric unit. The innocent ear is likely to shift the bar lines and re-interpret the note values as in Ex. 7(ii).



From this point until the entry of the voice, rhythmic regularity disintegrates and the recitative-like vocal line does little to re-establish a stable pulse. It is only with the rhythmic (and melodic) sequences of bars 13-15 that a coherent metrical pattern is established (Ex. 8); and when fig. (b) returns in bar 20, the underlying metric unit has been clarified.



The changing constructive significance of rhythm in 'atonality' is part of a much wider re-focussing of the internal relationships between parameters of sound which resulted from the rejection of tonal harmony. In the absence of the pitch hierarchies which had distinguished tonal forms, other 'non-essential' parameters could assume structural functions, could become 'essence'. Schoenberg may not have placed so much emphasis as Webern on the constructive possibilities of *timbre*, but his theoretical notion of a 'timbre structure' (*Harmonielehre*) was realised fully in op. 16 no. 3, and partially in op. 16 no. 5. A clear differentiation of registral and dynamic levels can also assume new structural significance in an athematic work. The formal balance of op. 19 no. 5, for example, is to a large extent dependent on a complementary relationship between melodic material which is confined within a narrow compass over an extended time span, and

material which covers a wide compass within a short time span—a relationship which is supported by contrasting dynamic levels.

Similarly, the formal components of op. 11 no. 3 are characterized almost entirely by texture, rhythm and dynamics, motivic or intervallic relationships playing a minor role. The outer, relatively extended, sections of the piece have a clear directional movement, resulting in the first section from the rhythmic momentum of the bass, and in the final section from a build-up and release of tension. These outer sections serve to complement and stabilize the short, static episodes, sharply contrasting in character, which are juxtaposed to form a middle section. In this piece the thematic and tonal contrasts of the traditional sonata movement have been replaced by extreme contrasts of texture, rhythm and dynamics, expressed in a severely compressed form. Connexions may be traced through rhythmic motifs (bars 6 and 8), melodic contour (bars 8-9 and 12-13) and sequence of dynamic levels (bars 15-18 and 19-23); but the fundamental principle of form and progression is contrast. Textural complexity engenders (and enhances) melodic simplicity, rhythmic definition gives way to rhythmic instability, maximal dynamics are succeeded by minimal dynamics.

The value of much recent analytical speculation about Schoenberg's 'atonal' music (a sizeable literature has been building up in American periodicals) will be greatly enhanced, I believe, if we can refer it to a broadly-based framework for analysis, capable of correcting tendencies towards imbalance. Such a framework would recognize the usefulness and the limitations of an approach which emphasized an 'atonal' work's relationship to its tonal 'background'. It would recognize equally the usefulness and the limitations of an investigation which focussed primarily on methods of pitch organization which might replace tonal functions. It would recognize, too, that the rejection of tonal pitch hierarchies may necessitate an examination of structural functions other than those determined by pitch, and an approach to pitch content other than that determined by thematic, motivic or even intervallic identity. Each of the three broad analytical approaches outlined in this study has an application for every 'atonal' work, though their relative importance will clearly vary greatly from work to work. In the absence of a single unifying principle to which all the events of an 'atonal' work will relate, a balanced analytical study would draw support from each of them. It would seek to clarify the whole through a series of complementary partial insights and it would direct itself as much to the aural experience of the analyst (which should have much in common with that of other listeners) as to his understanding of the process of composition. We should not expect a straightforward correlation of the two.

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