MUSIC IN THE 20TH CENTURY

THE TWELVE-NOTE MUSIC OF ANTON WEBERN

KATHRYN BAILEY

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Old forms in a new language

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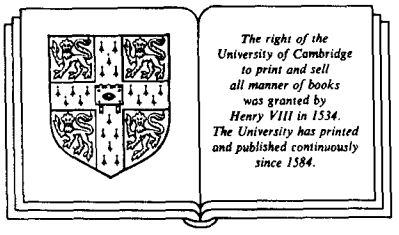

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to Derrick, in gratitude

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Conventions in the text

It has been my wish to produce a study of Webern's twelve-note music that will be intelligible to anyone who is musically literate, not to music theorists alone. I have avoided as much as possible the very technical language of recent music theory; such theoretical terms as I have found it necessary to use appear in a glossary at the end of the book. When describing intervals I have preferred conventional terminology to the language of interval classes because I believe this is familiar to more people. In the context of twelve-note composition, which assumes equal temperament, however, the qualifying *major* and *minor* take on their literal meanings: *large* and *small*. Since the sound of an interval is not affected by its spelling, the necessity for the terms *augmented* and *diminished* disappears. Therefore, although the familiar names are used, these refer to absolute size: any interval comprising four semitones is identified as a major third, regardless of spelling, and so on. (The German manner, and therefore Webern's, of identifying intervals – *kleine Terz, große Terz* and so on – avoids the tonal/modal association of the English names.) Similarly, I make frequent references to tonic analogues, because in most of his twelve-note music Webern consciously adhered in one way or another to the requirements of the conventional tonal structures into which he moulded his work. This is clear from statements such as the following by Webern, quoted by Willi Reich in *The Path to the New Music* (p. 54): 'The original form and pitch of the row occupy a position akin to that of the "main key" in earlier music; the recapitulation will naturally return to it. We end "in the same key!" This analogy with earlier formal construction is quite consciously fostered ...' He always manages this in an abstract fashion, however; whenever I speak of a tonic analogue, or perhaps simply of a tonic, I do not intend to imply that I believe these to be tonal works. *Analogue* is the critical word; certain levels of transposition or certain combinations of rows are used in ways that are in some sense parallel to the conventional use of tonic and dominant, but tonal centres do not result.

In an attempt to reduce the visual complexity of the scores, which, as everyone knows, is considerable, I have omitted natural signs altogether whenever these are cited. In reading the musical examples, therefore, it must

be understood that any note not directly preceded by an accidental is natural. This policy has necessitated the insertion of a few accidentals in the case of directly repeated coloured notes; in this situation Webern normally did not repeat the sign. I have followed his practice of omission only when the notes are tied. The sketches are reproduced as they appear, with naturals, except where otherwise indicated. To the same end all parts of all the examples are written at sounding pitch, except for the tenor part in choral works, which is notated in the usual way (one octave higher than it sounds). All transcriptions of the sketches are my own. Most letter names in the text refer either to pitch classes or to pitches that are easily identified (the only C in the bar, for example); these are in upper case. When it has seemed necessary to designate specific pitches, I have used Helmholtz notation, in which c is in the bass clef and C an octave below, middle C is represented as c^1, the note an octave higher as c^2, and so on.

Because I call the four row forms Prime, Retrograde, Inversion and Retrograde Inversion, they are represented by the letters P, R, I and RI respectively; the level of transposition of each row form is given in a subscript following the identifying letter. The untransposed Prime and Inversion begin on the same pitch; the exact retrogrades of these are the untransposed Retrograde and Retrograde Inversion. After the manner of the serialists I call this level 0 and label successive ascending semitone transpositions 1–11. To the twelve notes of the row I assign the numbers 1–12. (This is unlike the practice of the serialists, who for the most part use order numbers 0–11.)

Contents

Introduction

> The primary task of analysis is to show the functions of the individual sections: the thematic side is secondary.[1]

In the autumn of 1924, at the age of forty, Anton Webern wrote a piano piece of seventeen bars based on a twelve-note row[2] and in so doing unconsciously launched what was to become one of the most contentious movements of this century. Although Webern is not credited with the formulation of twelve-note technique, it was his style rather than Schoenberg's that the later serialists saw as suggesting the intense organization that characterized their music of the 1950s and 60s. As the result of the unsolicited but outspoken admiration of composers like Boulez and Stockhausen, Webern himself, after his death, came to be associated in the public consciousness with the most progressive aspects of integral serialism. Whether he would have welcomed this role is not clear. His comments about himself and his music, as transmitted by Willi Reich and others, show an unswerving commitment to tradition, to the idea that in contributing to the 'New Music' he was also upholding values of the past. This recognition of the essentially traditional aspect of his twelve-note music forms the basis of the present study.

The period under consideration spans the years from 1924 to 1943 and embraces both instrumental and vocal music. The accompanied solo songs (four sets in all) were written in two short periods separated by nearly a decade. Six songs composed mainly between July and the end of October of 1925 (only the first was written earlier, in the autumn of 1924), on anonymous traditional, folk and liturgical texts, became Webern's Opp. 17 and 18; another group of six, on texts by his friend Hildegard Jone, were written between February 1933 and June 1934 and designated Opp. 23 and 25.[3] (From this time onwards, Webern would set only Jone texts in his works for voices.) On both occasions the composition of solo songs was followed directly by a work for voices and instrumental ensemble, these works thereby occupying similarly spaced positions in his career: the two songs, Op. 19, on texts by Goethe, were written in 1925–6, the one-

movement cantata, *Das Augenlicht* (Op. 26), in 1935. The two more ambitious works in this vein – the cantatas for solo voices, choir and orchestra, Opp. 29 and 31 – come from the last years of Webern's life: the first was written between 1 July 1938 and the end of November 1939, the second from June 1941 until November 1943. The remaining works from these years are instrumental. Only one is for a solo instrument: the Op. 27 Variations for Piano, begun in October 1935 and finished in November 1936. Four chamber works span all but the extreme ends of the twelve-note years: the Op. 20 String Trio of 1926–7; the Op. 22 Quartet for clarinet, violin, saxophone and piano, which followed immediately, in 1928–30; the Op. 24 Concerto for nine instruments, which was written intermittently and apparently with great difficulty over a period of nearly four years from January 1931 to September 1934, during which time work was interrupted periodically for the composition of the six songs, Opp. 23 and 25; and the Op. 28 String Quartet, written between November 1936 and March 1938. There are two works for orchestra, one dating from the beginning of the twelve-note period, the other from the end: the Symphony, Op. 21, composed in 1927–8 and the Variations for Orchestra, Op. 30, of 1940.

Anyone analysing unfamiliar music is predisposed to see as more significant either those features that are idiosyncratic or those that show evidence of the continuation of tradition. The analyst who concentrates on the idiosyncrasies of a work will judge it to be unconventional or even revolutionary, while one who sees familiar axioms behind the innovations will perceive the same work within a traditional context. Not all music, of course, allows both interpretations. An examination of any one of several Haydn rondos will reveal few features that make it notably different from others of the same period, while the most careful study of Boulez's *Structures* will produce little that can be explained in traditional terms. But because most Western music lends itself to both perceptions, individual bias is a significant factor in the determination of historical opinion. Ideally, a work should be seen from both perspectives. Analysis is a human activity, however, and an analyst's predisposition in this respect is surely of the same nature as a preference for gin or whisky, the chief difference being that most people are aware of their taste preferences, whereas aesthetic bias seems to be in many cases unconscious. The failure to recognize its existence leads to the too easy acceptance of one's own analysis or that of someone else with a similar bias as conclusive. In my opinion the world's view of Webern has been flawed by an accumulation of work from like-minded and mutually supportive analysts.

All the movements of Webern's twelve-note instrumental music follow traditional models. Webern was, after all, the product of a formal European musical education, and it is not surprising that the works of his mature

period should be cast in those forms upon which his musical awakening had been based. His return to the forms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries after the aphoristic, non-traditional forms of his middle years indicates his faith in the validity of a manner of organization that some of his more radical contemporaries (though not his immediate colleagues in Vienna) were simultaneously rejecting. It is my intention to examine the ways in which he preserves these forms and their essential arguments within a system whose imperatives would seem, on the face of things, inimical in many respects to those of tradition. This aspect of his composition has been largely neglected in the literature devoted to his twelve-note music.

At first, with the discovery of Webern at Darmstadt and the subsequent extension of his techniques by Stockhausen and Boulez, analysis tended to concentrate on the nature and properties of his rows and on the perceived serial organization of parameters other than pitch. More recently, with the vastly expanded interest in analysis on both sides of the Atlantic (but especially in the United States), interest has focused on the smallest details of pitch organization, with Allen Forte's set-theoretical approach to analysis, originally conceived as a means of analysing atonal music (i.e., non-tonal music written outside the restraints of twelve-note composition), being turned to the analysis of twelve-note works by such younger writers as Martha M. Hyde and Christopher F. Hasty. I see in both these attitudes – the search for signs of integral serialism and the preoccupation with relationships of pitch – a major oversight; while I am not indifferent to Webern's originality, I consider his reinterpretation of familiar formal structures to have been one of his most significant contributions to the history of atonal music.

Webern's allure as a model for the serialists was enhanced by his asceticism, the spartan sound that seemed to match their own aspirations; Berg and Schoenberg were much less congenial to them. What excited them particularly, however (and what was probably easier to write about), was his interest in mathematics and numerical relationships, together with a predilection for symmetry. (It is ironic that the only formally educated historian of the Vienna triumvirate should have been the one to whom the following generation of intensely serial – and anti-traditional – composers looked as their mentor.) The first articles on Webern were almost exclusively preoccupied with statistics. Conspicuous among early publications was *Die Reihe*, Vol. 2,[4] containing such articles as Armin Klammer's stultifyingly thorough statistical survey of the third movement of Op. 27 ('our investigation will not take in the thematic structure of the piece, since that is something quite foreign to serial thought, and has nothing to do with Webern's personal achievement'),[5] Herbert Eimert's study of the first movement of the Op. 28 Quartet ('one may analyse only what is in the score and manifest as sound; concepts introduced from outside help little, and are none the better for

being taken from the golden treasury of fugue and sonata')[6] and Stockhausen's analysis of the second movement of the same work in terms of information and experiential time.[7]

In subsequent analyses from the 1960s and early 70s, one begins to encounter the specialized language that seems to have become more or less *de rigueur* in the world of music theorists. We are told, for example, about Op. 22 that

> The set is not symmetric in design. Interval content equivalence as a result of larger than dyadic partitioning pertains only to the first two trichords.

And that

> Multiple presentation of set forms does not rely on combinatorial relations, but in some instances set choice can be traced to particular degrees of relatedness of the forms, depending on the compositional intent.[8]

The latter is an unnecessarily periphrastic way of saying that while rows to be used together were not chosen because they are combinatorial they do not appear to have been selected at random (a fairly unremarkable observation, in spite of its apparent complexity). When reading articles that progress in this manner, one feels like a ferret burrowing after a particularly elusive rodent, which may or may not turn out to be a filling meal. Another author describes an unusual aspect of the row of Op. 30 in the following way:

> Set instances related by t_2 combine in a unique manner...The order nos. 5–11 of Pt_0 combined with order nos. 0–6 of Pt_{10} form a minimum aggregate. The order of this minimum aggregate is the set instance related by t_5.[9]

The relationship being described here is simply this: in any two rows related as P_0–P_{10}, the last two notes of the first are the first two of the second; and in rows related as P_0–P_5 the last seven notes of the first are the same as the first seven of the second ($P_0/11–12 = P_{10}/1–2$; $P_0/6–12 = P_5/1–7$).

In his love affair with jargon, the contemporary theorist often seems to ignore the parallel existence of ordinary English. This leads to results such as Brian Fennelly's unhappy reference to row elision as 'terminal coupling'[10] (copulation with the gravest consequences?). Finally, the didactic zeal of the modern writer seems to have superseded any aspirations he may have had to literary style or even basic grammar. (How often, for example, we are told about what is occurring 'on the largest level'!) The insistence on a highly specialized language and the concomitant neglect of literary style have restricted the readership of the essay in music analysis. This is particularly unfortunate in an age when the complexities of the music itself have already caused the composer and his creation to be isolated from the educated listening public. I prefer to describe the music of Webern in conventional

terms, using the English equivalent of the language that was current at the end of the nineteenth century and that Webern himself used, both in his scores and sketches and in the analysis and description of his works. This is the language used by Tovey, Rosen, Cone and others who write in English about music rather than theory, and a language that most readers will find familiar.

The substance of the book is contained in Parts II and III, comprising a series of analytical chapters on specific works. These chapters cannot stand alone, however; any attempt to rationalize formal structure without a knowledge of the row and its properties and of the way in which it is used is specious, since the two aspects of any twelve-note work are interdependent. Arnold Whittall has called this one-dimensional sort of analysis 'analysis in spite of serialism', whose 'worst fault is that it completely fails to consider the music as deriving from a particular set with particular properties'.[11] Thus the need for the first two chapters of Part I, which comprise a preamble to what I consider to be the main body of the work. These deal with the rows, or sets, themselves and with what I call 'row topography': the manner in which they are combined. The third chapter of Part I is devoted to another of Webern's favourite techniques, canon. Parts II and III present the analyses. Here it seemed to me that my purpose was best served by organizing the material by topic rather than by opus, even though this resulted in the physical separation, not only of the examination of the several movements of a single work, but of the discussion of various aspects of the same movement as well. In order to minimize the difficulties arising from this fragmentation, the index at the end of the book gives the location of all references to each work. In using this format, I have tried to emphasize the continuity at the heart of Webern's use of specific formal models and to make evident the progression to be seen in his handling of certain techniques – canon, in particular.

Although the study will, I hope, be seen to be thorough within the limits I have set, it is not intended to be comprehensive. The initial limitation is that only published twelve-note works are considered; the row technique of all of these is discussed in Part I. Within this field, my purpose is to examine Webern's use of canon and his atonal adaptation of instrumental tonal structures. Obviously, some works have more to contribute than others in one or other of these respects; a few are thereby eliminated from consideration altogether. The works prior to Op. 20, and the songs Opp. 23 and 25, fall in this latter category and therefore do not reappear after Chapters 1 and 2. This is by no means intended to imply that they are in any way inferior; they simply are not organized in the same way as the instrumental music and therefore offer little insight into Webern's attitudes towards traditional forms. Their construction has much more in common with the continuously developing variation of the pre-twelve-note works than with that of their

immediate neighbours. Naturally I have not attempted to deal with all the music in the same way; the nature of each movement has dictated the particular emphasis in its analysis. It is expected that the reader will have scores available; although musical examples are provided, in some cases the analysis will be properly understood only if the score of the entire movement can be consulted.

I have not recounted the circumstances surrounding the composition of the works under consideration or attempted to supply any sort of thorough chronology, because this information is already available; the reader is referred particularly to Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer's book, *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of His Life and Work*,[12] and Roger Smalley's three-part article on Webern's sketches, which deals with aspects of the composition of Opp. 24, 22 and 20 respectively.[13] Neither is the present work intended as a study of the manuscripts and sketches, though I have examined these in the course of its preparation.[14] It has been my intention to present a detailed analysis of each of the twelve-note works, Opp. 20–31 (with the exception of Opp. 23 and 25, as noted earlier), with three types of structure in mind: row structure, canonic structure and formal structure. I do not know of another book with this objective.

Although there are several books in English that deal in a historical and anecdotal way with Webern's creative output – the most familiar is Kolneder[15] – none analyses the twelve-note works on anything beyond a superficial level. The most thorough of the analytical works published in German is Heinrich Deppert's *Studien zur Kompositionstechnik im instrumentalen Spätwerk Anton Weberns*,[16] but, as the title indicates, the works with voices are not included. Moreover, Deppert is not concerned with traditional structural models. The complement to Deppert's work is Dorothea Beckmann's *Sprache und Musik im Vokalwerk Anton Weberns: Die Konstruktion des Ausdrucks*,[17] but, again as the title indicates, Beckmann is more concerned with various aspects of text setting and expression than with canon and formal structure. Two quite lengthy studies – Friedhelm Döhl's *Weberns Beitrag zur Stilwende der neuen Musik*[18] and Wolfgang Martin Stroh's *Historische Legitimation als kompositorisches Problem*[19] – are, in general, of a more philosophical than analytical nature, even though Döhl, in the course of his study, presents a discussion of the nature of Webern's rows,[20] thorough analyses of selected works (Opp. 21, 22/i, 24/i, 27)[21] and an examination of specific aspects of Opp. 28/i and 30.[22] I will allow Stroh to speak for himself:

> Circumstances from Webern's life, his position toward facism [*sic*], the labor movement and Schoenberg's elite thinking together with aspects from Ortega y Gasset's theory of elites, Engel's [*sic*] historical materialism, and Freud's psychoanalysis can explain why to Webern history had to appear as a strange, uncontrollable power and why estrangement of his

> professional activity has to turn into 'inner necessity'. Thus the social function of Webern's music can be seen: to feedback the ideology of the ruling class in the capitalistic system, to act as a stabilizer of the class-society, and to do all this with the assistance of musicology, which attests the quality and greatness of his music.[23]

There are monographs in German devoted to Opp. 21,[24] 27[25] and 31.[26] There are no monographs on any Webern work in English. Most of the important articles on the works under consideration will be discussed at the appropriate times.