

# contact

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ARNOLD SCHOENBERG

In Scholes' Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music there is the following definition for the term "Expressionism":- "A term borrowed from the vocabulary of a group of painters who began to come into notice about 1912. These professed to record in paint not impressions of the outer world but their "inner experiences". In music the idea of Expressionism seems to be the casting off of rules of every kind, so leaving untrammelled the recording of the "inner experiences". Schoenberg is regarded as the leading exponent of this theory - which seems a little strange in view of the very formal character of some of his music (his use of the Note-row....etc.)." The author very neatly sums up the apparent contradiction that lies in the understanding of Schoenberg's music. In fact there is no such contradiction; indeed, one would have to look far to find a more singleminded and consistent composer than Schoenberg.

Richard Specht, the Viennese musical journalist, is probably most to blame for spreading the idea that Schoenberg's music was "Expressionist". Although he was a firm supporter of Schoenberg during the difficult early years of this century and one who constantly defended and tried to promote Schoenberg's works, it is sad to have to say that Specht probably did more harm than good to the understanding of his music. In his many articles, which appeared in the Viennese periodical "Der Merker" and in "Die Musik", which was published in Berlin, Specht, confronted with the difficulty of understanding Schoenberg's music, could only speak instead of Schoenberg's response to his texts and of his emotions. Also, since he knew that Schoenberg was a friend of many of the Viennese Expressionist painters and that he himself painted in the Expressionist manner, exhibiting his paintings in the Blau Reiter salon, it is not surprising that he linked Schoenberg's music with "Expressionism". Schoenberg himself, in his article entitled "The Relationship to the Text" in "Style and Idea", sums up the musical journalist's dilemma:-

"There are relatively few people who are capable of understanding, purely in terms of music, what music has to say..... The capacity of pure perception is extremely rare and only to be met with in men of high calibre. This explains why professional arbiters become embarrassed by certain difficulties. That our scores become harder and harder to read, that the relatively few performances pass by so quickly, that often, even the most sensitive, purest man can perceive only fleeting impressions - all this makes it impossible for the critic, who must report and judge, but who is usually incapable of imagining alive a musical score, to do his duty even with that degree of honesty he might perhaps decide on, if it would do him no harm. Absolutely helpless, he stands in the face of purely musical effect and therefore he prefers to write about music which is somehow connected with a text: about programme music, songs, operas etc..

One could almost excuse him for it when one observes that operatic conductors, from whom one would like to find out something about the music of a new opera, prattle almost exclusively about the libretto, the theatrical effectiveness and the performers".

For the Expressionist painter the painting is only a means, but for Schoenberg music was always the "end". The sudden rise of Expressionism may explain the sudden appearance of a hitherto unprecedented movement of pictorial art in imperial Germany and Austria but it cannot explain the continuation of Germanic musical art, a tradition which had been strong for centuries. Faced with the difficulty of understanding Schoenberg's music, the musical journalists tried to explain it by linking the music with Expressionism, but in doing so they do not explain why the music is difficult to understand and they throw no light on Schoenberg's approach to composition.

Schoenberg's music becomes more and more difficult during the first ten years of this century because he is using sounds which are unfamiliar to the listener brought up on the classics. That is, the vertical sounds, the harmonies, become more varied and more dissonant in terms of tonal harmony. The process of development is clearly shown in Schoenberg's music. "Verklarte Nacht" is intelligible to anyone familiar with Wagner and so too is the first string quartet. Both are extremely chromatic and constantly modulating, but yet remain basically diatonic. The first real break with diatonic harmony occurs in the Chamber Symphony OP. 9. It opens by introducing a new sound to music, the chord built up of fourths:-



Although Mahler in his seventh symphony and Strauss in "Salome" had used melodic ideas of upbuilt fourths, Schoenberg's use of fourths is so important because it is the first real instance of the use of non-triadic harmony. The significance of this is staggering. For as long as man could remember composers had always used triadic, diatonic harmony. All the vertical sounds in every piece of European music had been almost the same - either a major or minor triad, all dissonance being conditioned by these triads. The triad had always provided a fundamental degree of similarity to music, a basic sense of unity, since all vertical sounds were practically the same.

In his article "Composition with twelve notes" Schoenberg himself describes the developments in harmony; "Richard Wagner's harmony had promoted a change in the logic and constructive power of harmony. One of its consequences was the so-called impressionist use of harmonies, especially practised by Debussy. His harmonies, without constructive meaning, often served the colouristic purpose of expressing moods and pictures. Moods and pictures, though extra-musical, thus become constructive elements incorporated in the musical functions; they produced a sort of emotional comprehensibility. In this way tonality was already dethroned in practice if not in theory. This alone would perhaps not have caused a radical change in compositional technique. However such a change became necessary when there occurred simultaneously a development which ended in what I call the "emancipation of the dissonance"."

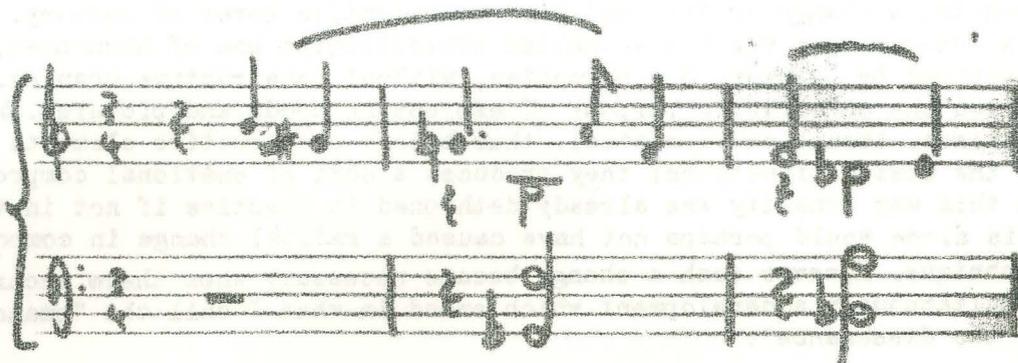
Since the composer is no longer using diatonic harmony, his harmonies are no longer dissonant in respect to diatonic harmony. There will always be in music a sense of dissonance and consonance, but in non-diatonic music this sense is determined by the musical context in which the harmonies are set. Thus consider the famous 'atonal' passage from the last movement of the second string quartet:-



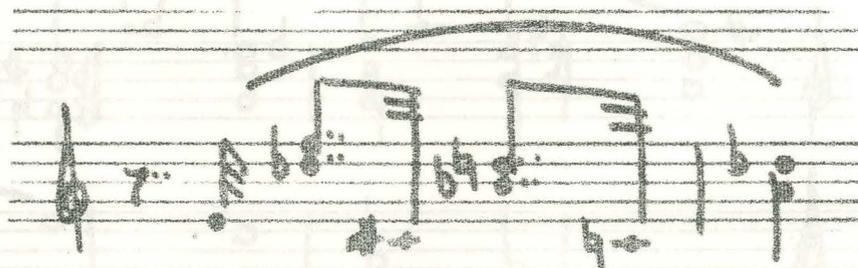
The chord of fourths in this passage becomes consonant with respect to the more dissonant chords surrounding it. When a composer uses a more varied non-triadic harmony he loses the sense of similarity of his harmonies. He must therefore replace this in order to bind his music together. Notice in the example from the second quartet how smooth the part writing is; were it not so the change in harmony would be abrupt and crude, but the smoothness of the individual parts prevents this from being so, and also helps bind the music together. But the principal way of achieving this is by replacing the similarity of harmony with a similarity of melody. Thus Schoenberg limits the variety of his melodic material and makes much use of small motifs which pervade the texture of his music.

The piano pieces Op. 11 are Schoenberg's first completely 'atonal'

works. From the opening of the first piece:-



we see Schoenberg's rich new 'atonal' harmony. On looking further into the piece the degree of motivic similarity is evident. The three note motif of the opening melody can be seen throughout the piece and Schoenberg makes considerable use of this motif either in its original form or with the order of the notes altered. The motif is transformed into an entirely new idea by being turned into consecutive major thirds.



Thus one small motif accounts for the thematic structure of the bulk of the piece. Set contrapuntal forms which perform the two-fold task of providing smooth part writing and strictly controlled melody come more and more into use in the works of Schoenberg's so-called 'free atonality' period. In 'Pierrot Lunaire' he uses a passacaglia (No. 3 'Nacht'.) The passacaglia controls the harmony to make it consistent; in the first section it is based on thirds, and the use of the passacaglia motif controls the more dissonant intervals so that the greater dissonance occurs regularly on the strong beats of the bar. In the second part a different harmony is used over the passacaglia theme, but the first three-note motif is never absent from the music.

In No. 18 from 'Pierrot', 'Der Mondfleck', a combination of strict counterpoint and fugue is used. The canon between the piccolo and clarinet is not strict, although its retrograde from the centre is strict. The

sections of the canon are divided into short sections; the spacing between the parts varies. A three part fugue is carried by the piano, using the material of the piccolo and clarinet parts by adding harmonies to them. In this piece the counterpoint serves to drive the music forward as well as regulate the harmony. There is nothing 'Expressionistic' about the music of 'Pierrot'.

In his book 'Serial Composition and Atonality' George Perle says "The assertion, frequently made, that the vertical dimension in atonal music is merely a resultant of linear detail is an evasion of the problem and, in any case, an overstatement. In atonal works not based upon rigorous contrapuntal procedures there is in general a total interpenetration of harmonic and melodic elements rather than a partial interpenetration of functionally differentiated planes, as in tonal music."

Perle does not entirely cope with the concept of harmony within 'atonal' music; he is too much concerned with the contrapuntal working of the 'linear elements'. The fact of the matter is, that it is the harmony which dictates the use of counterpoint. So rather than the 'linear elements' being 'verticalised' to form chords, it is the chords themselves which are used melodically, almost as arpeggios. I find it difficult to imagine Schoenberg, a composer brought up on the rich chromatic harmonies of the late 19th century, should suddenly, for no apparent reason, begin to write rigorous counterpoint in 1909. The movement towards non-triadic 'dissonance-emancipated' harmonies, could not possibly happen without the most far-reaching consequences. Music is a fusion of elements of diversity and unity into a satisfactory whole. This fusion works at various levels of consciousness. Before 1900 nobody was aware that the most basic method of giving unity to music, i.e. the use of consistently similar harmonies, functioned at all. It was inconceivable to use non-triadic, non-diatonic harmony.

During the years of 'free atonality', Schoenberg believed that he was being destructive, that he was destroying the harmonic foundation of music. But he himself only dimly perceived that with each step towards greater harmonic freedom, he was replacing this by tight and even more rigorous control of the melodic aspect of his music. Thus by the time he wrote 'Pierrot Lunaire' this development had gone so far that he was now using rigorous set contrapuntal techniques to bind his music together. The idea that 'the vertical dimension in atonal music is merely a resultant of linear detail' could not be further from the truth. As Igor Stravinsky said, music is heard vertically, as a series of chords. The composer before 1900 who used basically similar harmonies had to seek melodic diversity; the atonal composer, who uses a variety of chords, must seek greater melodic unity.

The factors that drove Schoenberg forward - his respect for tradition and his commitment to the development and propagation of German musical art - were the same factors which caused so much opposition from a less advanced, though similarly committed, audience. They considered that Schoenberg was destroying music as they knew it - on the contrary, he was continuing it. This realization that Schoenberg was a traditionalist has led contemporary critics to assert that Schoenberg represents the end of a tradition, not the beginning of a new approach to composition. The tradition of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler and Schoenberg knows no 'beginnings' or 'ends'; the tradition itself is that of a constantly evolving, constantly striving forward, approach to music. It is true that Schoenberg's music marks the end of tonal music, but in destroying tonality he necessarily created the factors that will bind together the music of the future.

LAURENCE WILLIAMSON

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