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# Schoenberg as rhythmic innovator

The parameters of a musical composition are separable only in the mind of the analyst: what we hear is a relation of parameters. Although it may be revealing to analyse a certain musical dimension in isolation, we must avoid a betrayal of the fact by considering also the interaction of musical elements - a reciprocal process variously operative in historical evolution and in our immediate, aural experience of music.

While the parameters of pitch and duration can operate independently at one level - the vertical relationship of pitches and rhythmic pattern *per se* - at another level they are always interdependent: the horizontal relationship of pitches involves their organisation in time. For this reason the rhythmic, metric and phrase style of any one piece is strongly conditioned by the nature of the pitch system it uses. In tracing the evolution of rhythm and periodisation from the regularity of the eighteenth century to the complexity and freedom of the twentieth, it is therefore illuminating to consider parallel developments in the use of pitch. Techniques which are now common - the free, inexact rhythmic notation of works such as Berio's Circles, the use of tempo and texture as structural articulates and the fragmentation of "linear" musical time - are preceded by certain tendencies in Schoenberg's first non-tonal works of 1909 - 1911. That the simultaneous appearance of radically new concepts in the parameters of both pitch and time is not merely coincidental will become apparent when we consider the disappearance of harmony's structural power, the dispensability of a permanent harmonic dimension, and the rhythmic freedom which results from the absence of harmonic rhythm.

The structure of classical music was founded on the co-ordination of tonal statement with the temporal continuum in which it took place. Harmony articulated both tonality and, by its rhythm of harmonic change, the primary unit of temporal organisation - metre. The tonal statement of each harmonic phrase constituted a finite metrical pattern, usually symmetrical in proportion, which was multiplied into larger symmetrical periods, thereby creating the architectonic structure of a movement. It might be said that the harmonic, homophonic emphasis of classical music, because its structure of differentiated keys was built on a single, linear time continuum, demanded that basic metrical units of considerable structural potential (that is, symmetrical units) be clearly audible as vertical events in an unbroken, horizontal narration.

This harmonic periodisation continued through the nineteenth century until, in Schoenberg's music, the combined factors of chromaticism and counterpoint began to threaten traditional harmonic procedure. The structural function of harmony made possible by the diatonic-triadic system was destroyed by chromaticism with the result that, in the absence of any systematic control, the area of vertical pitch coincidence lost much of its compositional status: harmony was no longer structural, the constitution of simultaneities was entirely arbitrary and, with the disappearance of a permanent, functional harmonic dimension, homophonic control of texture became unnecessary.

At the same time Schoenberg was attempting to construct his music on a more thoroughly contrapuntal basis, increasing the melodic importance of each part. Schoenberg related this to the new harmonic freedom:

"You know what I think of contrapuntal combinations and that they can scarcely amount to anything of any real merit in dissonant non-tonal harmony."(1)

It is the validity of the "combinations" which is being questioned, as is made clear by another statement:

"there are many sections in which the individual parts proceed regardless of whether or not their meeting results in codified harmonies."(2)

Such a conception of musical texture differs fundamentally from that of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The role of pitch simultaneity is now colorative, carrying no expectations of harmonic structural function but operating more in the manner of melody. The "perfect amalgamation of melody with harmony . . . to form a unity"(3) can now be effected by building both melodic and simultaneous configurations out of a single intervallic cell, as in the first of the Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11 (1909).

The choice between homophonic and polyphonic texture could now be made without regard for the restraints of harmony. Schoenberg freely indulges his contrapuntal ambitions in the Five Orchestral Pieces, Op. 16 (also 1909) - although there is still a place for the homophonic style purely as a means of textural contrast (Op. 16, No. 2 at Fig. 3, for example). In the absence of a structural harmonic language, simultaneities contribute more freely to colorative and textural interest. Op. 11, No. 2 and Op. 16, Nos. 2 and 3 all make full use of the new harmonic colours of atonality and, texturally, Op. 16 is striking for its profusion of long pedal chords (see the bassoon parts of the first piece) and ostinato figures - static configurations which could not be easily accommodated into the motional harmonic style of tonal music.

The significance of the new textural freedom for musical periodisation becomes obvious when we contrast the rhythmic presentation of harmony with that of melody. In tonal music the term "rhythm of harmonic change" is perhaps less truthful than "metre of harmonic change", for the moments of chord succession, organised in a necessarily uncomplicated way, very often define a series of identical pulse groupings otherwise known as metre. Similarly, harmonic cadence points define phrases whose length can be measured as an exact number of bars: thus, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the concepts of metre and metrical phrase-length were largely harmonic phenomena. The rhythm of a melody was infinitely more subtle than that of harmonic change, but structurally its role was elaborative rather than basic. Because it had to co-exist with harmony, sharing the same metrical basis and often aligning its phrase-lengths to the harmonic-metrical ones, melody became a subordinate rather than a controlling element in the area of periodisation.

In discovering itself to be without harmonic rhythm Schoenberg's music of 1909 - 1911 was free to exploit the rhythmic subtlety of melody with complete disregard for metrical periodisation. Although chords still existed, their purely colorative role - no longer suggestive of a permanent, structural dimension - demanded no more rigid a control than that of melodic figuration. The metrical concept of identical groups of pulses - and even pulse itself - became strictly unnecessary.

Before proceeding to a more specific view of Schoenberg's music, it must be emphasised that the above discussions represent only a theoretical explanation of certain phenomena in twentieth century music and why they should find some precedent in Schoenberg. His music does not revolutionise rhythm and periodisation in one fell swoop, but merely suggests - and that only in the pre-serial atonal works - that this might be possible.

It has been mentioned that the structures used to organise the parameter of duration have a two-fold consequence: first as they relate to the pitch parameter, and second simply as a means of organising rhythm and periodisation per se - as an absolute, self-contained formation. Because metrical concepts may become unnecessary in the first case it does not mean that the composer must abandon them as an intrinsic means of control in the temporal sphere. If Schoenberg does preserve conventional metre and pulse in his non-tonal music, it is in consideration of the second consequence, and not the first.

The works of 1909 - 1911 are most striking for their refusal to preserve consistent periodisation, tempo, figuration and texture throughout a movement. The "sonata" works of a few years before - the First String Quartet and the First Chamber Symphony - had used a high-powered, onward-moving rhythmic style to preserve continuity

within the advanced chromatic idiom. This is now discarded and musical line fragments into segments of differing pace and internal periodisation - a process already apparent in Op. 11. Schoenberg prefers collections of pieces to any of the classical genres, and tends more and more towards brevity, concise motivic material, local contrast and fragmentation. The diverse rhythmic figuration of a single piece often flaunts consistent symmetrical periodisation, and pulse is sometimes obscured to the point of complete negation.

These works often give the impression that Schoenberg is deliberately toying with our apprehension of time. In the second piece of Op. 16, three bars after Fig. 6, he presents a ten-bar episode whose progressively diverse cross-rhythms eventually cancel out all sense of pulse and metre, making time at once static and purely linear, absolutely without division.

A sense of varying pace and motion is fundamental to the structure of the music. Time is experienced in multiplicity: two or more planes of motion may be contrasted successively or simultaneously, as for instance in the opening bars of Op. 16, No. 4. Again, the fragmentary introduction to Op. 16, No. 1 communicates very little sense of pulse or metre - the cello entry at Fig. 4 does establish a certain pace but avoids any suggestion of metrical regularity.

In Op. 11, No. 1 we find the dualism of opposing time-planes operating as one of the primary elements of structure. The contrasts presented in this piece involve pitch much less than pace and density of texture: in Ex. 1 Motive c, extreme in its contrast with Motives a and b, enters at bar 12, marked to be played "much faster". Although notated in the existing  $3/4$ , its basic unit is that of a quaver or even semiquaver. The two different tempos and their contrasting figurations are juxtaposed and combined during the course of the piece: the proliferation of notes of shorter duration communicates the insinuation of "character II" - that is, Motive c and the separate time-plane on which it exists. In Ex. 2 (see page 8) the gravitation of time-plane I towards the area of time-plane II and vice versa is thus a representation of textural density.

The idea of varying tempo is carried into the very syntax of compositional language: apprehension grows in certain places as the music on time-plane I seems in danger of losing its hold on a metrical norm. Time-plane II has been described as faster than the basic moderato  $3/4$ . But rather than establishing an alternative tempo, it seems almost to exist in the absence of tempo. This sensation arises from the extreme rapidity of the figuration and from a complexity of internal periodisation so acute as to cancel out any sense of pulse. Bar 13, for example, combines rhythms of triple and quadruple (syncopated) metres (see Ex. 3).

Ex. 1

b. 1. *Möbian*

MOTIVE a MOTIVE b

langsam b. 9.

viel schneller b. 12.

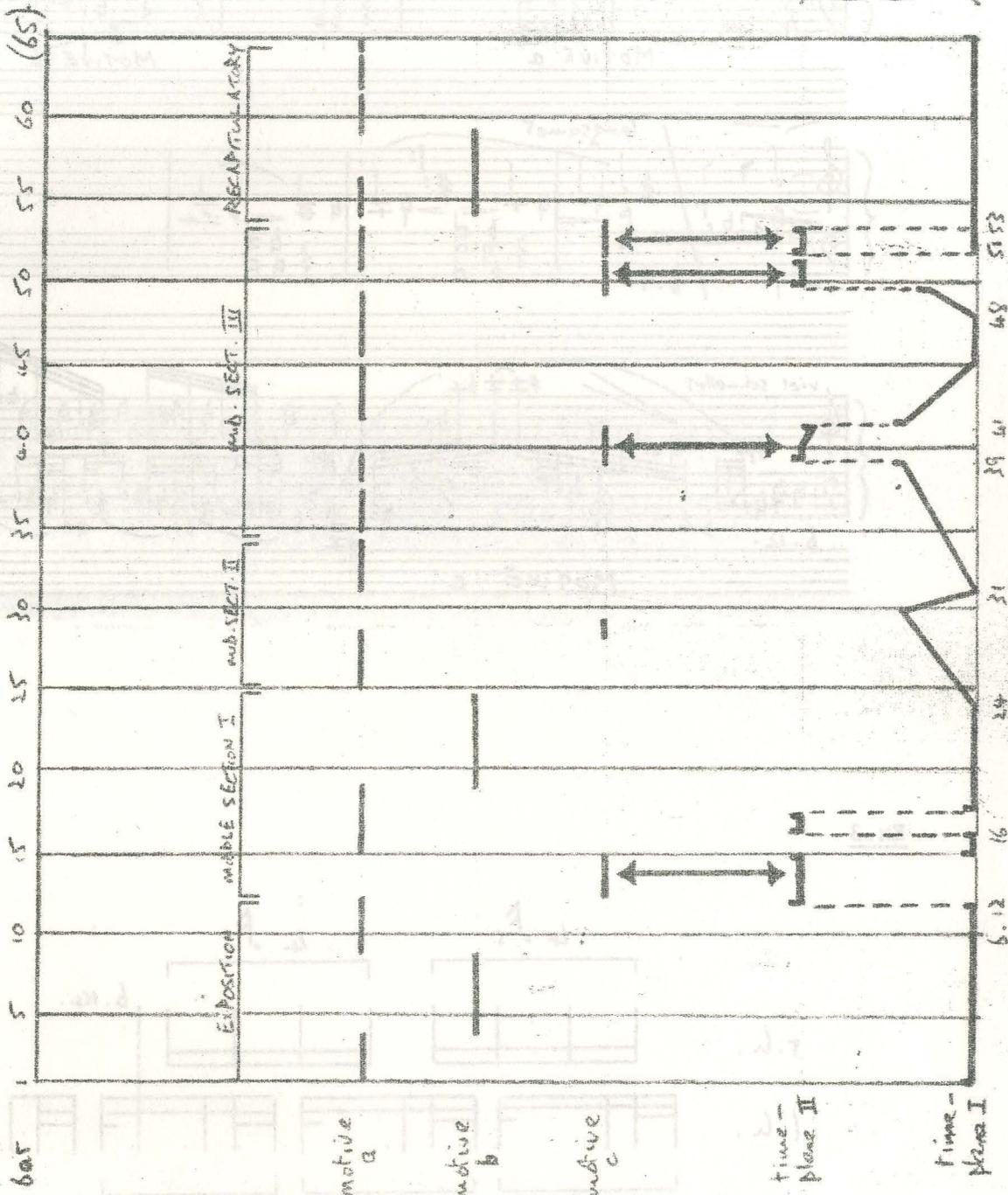
MOTIVE c

Ex. 3

r.h. 4. A<sub>s</sub> 4. A<sub>s</sub> b. 14.

l.h. 3. A<sub>s</sub> 3. A<sub>s</sub> 3. A<sub>s</sub>

Ex. 2



Generally the composition follows the plan

- i) individual establishment of time-planes I and II in the exposition and middle section I
- ii) erosion of time-plane I by time-plane II in the central sections II and III
- iii) combination and resultant stasis in the final section.

The basic moderato develops a brittle quality in bars 25 - 38 as a result of proliferating short note-values. It collapses at bar 39 where the music slips on to time-plane II. Static qualities develop in bars 55 - 58 where pedal notes and repeated chords bring the music to a halt. The combination of Motives a, b and c has naturally resulted in a neutralisation of the metrical-motional qualities of Motive a.

Obviously a much more systematic and thorough analysis of Schoenberg's atonal works is possible with regard to their rhythmic organisation. Such a survey is beyond the scope of this article, the principal aim of which has been to relate temporal phenomena to their tonal - or non-tonal - context.

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#### Notes

- (1) Part of letter 222 from Arnold Schoenberg. Letters (selected and edited by Erwin Stein, translated by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, London, 1964).
- (2) From a reference to the first and second movements of his Second String Quartet, Op. 10, in the essay My Evolution, published in Musical Quarterly, October 1952 as an English translation by Schoenberg of the 1949 original which was in Spanish.
- (3) Schoenberg's view of his First Chamber Symphony, Op. 9, as quoted in Willi Reich's Schoenberg: a Critical Biography (London, 1971), p. 23.

(The music example from Schoenberg's Op. 11, No. 1 is reprinted by kind permission of Universal Edition.)