

When one discusses modernist composers of the twentieth century, few have exerted the level of profound impact as that of serialist pioneer, Arnold Schoenberg. As the leader of the *Second Viennese School*, Schoenberg raised the realm of composition to new technical heights, while at the same time, aggressively pushed the tolerated boundaries of dissonance to unprecedented levels. While a controversial figure in many regards, few would dare to discount his influence as a prominent figure within the realm of twentieth century modernism. The following discussion will attempt to illuminate the *Second Viennese School* through the work of Arnold Schoenberg, and examine the work of the serialist composer within the realm of this period's musical landscape.

Prior to delving into the specifics of work of Schoenberg, it seems appropriate to briefly outline serial music as a compositional form. While defining the term "serialism" can often prove troublesome (due to varying interpretations), the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* describes serial music in the most basic sense as a:

"...general term describing 20th-century compositions in which the traditional rules and conventions governing all aspects of music-tonality, melody, harmony, rhythm, etc.-are discarded, to be replaced by various new rules and principals. The most general such principal, which radically distinguishes serial music from traditional tonality, is the distribution of structural importance over many (possibly all) elements of musical development, and, as a result, the multiplication of structural characters through their reciprocal "revitalization" (and, at the same time, limitation and illumination).<sup>1</sup>

As Schoenberg evolved as a composer, his serialist practice would incorporate the twelve-tone technique which he developed. This concept would entail a series of attributes to facilitate control over various musical elements with an ordered twelve-tone chromatic scale that

would form a series or row that would serve to underpin a work's melodic and harmonic material, as well as its structural progressions and variations. While the series of octaves (tone-rows) may be exercised in any order by the composer, no single tone may be used twice before all eleven of its counterparts have been utilized within the work. It should be noted that while the order of the series progresses unchanged throughout the composition, there are the certain permissible modifications which may take place. These "modifications" include a flexibility to alter the octave position of any of tones of the series. The series in question may also be executed in inverted form, along with retrograde and retrograde inversion form (in addition to original form). All four of the mentioned forms are also capable of being utilized in transposition to any step of the chromatic scale at hand. Therefore, forty-eight modifications are capable of being conducted through this method.<sup>2</sup>

The grounds for the radical departure of serialism could be traced back to 1910, when an increasing number of composers began practicing with a heightened desire for experimentation with various innovations. While these innovations often differed in nature, they were most often unified by a questioning of certain fundamental aspects of the musical language of the West that would serve as fertile grounds for Schoenberg's development of serialist technique.<sup>3</sup> This notion of challenging the preconceived notions of the West would become very much deeply embedded within Schoenberg's artistic output and development, with the tonal structure of harmony at the heart of his desire for radical departure.<sup>4</sup> For Schoenberg, his innovation would entail a steady increase in post-Romantic music that expressed dissonances in a manner previously deemed much less acceptable within a traditional compositional framework. This dissonant aesthetic would also be executed more frequently with a piece utilizing the use of several successive dissonances related to one-another in a chromatic context. This new musical form of

composition through Schoenberg would also strive for a revival of contrapuntal writing that carried out its thematic figures in a state of constant variation that would ultimately produce and control the totality of the work's sonorous textures; raising the value of elements that would have otherwise been considered secondary within the framework of more traditional composition practices.<sup>5</sup>

Upon examination, Schoenberg's works which span from *Opus 10* through *Opus 22* exhibit many of the applications of atonality that the composer's name would become synonymous with. Through these particular works, Schoenberg suspended traditional harmonic function through systematic avoidance, while at the same, reached an unparalleled height of dissonance for this period.<sup>6</sup> To fortify this new medium of tonal organization, the compositions discussed would eliminate previously commonplace elements such as the inclusion of any tonally polarizing attributes through consonant chords and octaves, while the most radical works such as *Opus 16* and *Erwartung* would demonstrate an elimination of prolonged rhythmic periodicities, structures of constant polyphonic density, and motif material expressing strength in relation to a coefficient of repetition.<sup>7</sup> With all of the practices in motion, Schoenberg would incorporate a theoretical concept known as generalized nonrepetition. When utilized to its extremities, this concept would essentially generate what could be described as "sound events"; materials viewed as discontinuous, nonformalized, and as "concrete" as possible (some musicologists have also contended that in relation to semiotics, these practices disrupt the poet's communicative end; producing material that omits discernible traces of symbolic form).<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that while Schoenberg's twelve-tone was dissonant and musically jarring to many listeners; he actually intended the system as a means to bring order out of the

“chaos” that he had generated.<sup>9</sup> As this technique gained notoriety, he would establish himself as the leader of the *Second Viennese School* that would include his followers Alban Berg and Anton Webern. While each composer of this particular school would exercise their own aesthetic and artistic traditions, Schoenberg had a number of definite goals that he set forth to emphasize through his twelve-tone composition. Since this compositional form was atonal, Schoenberg essentially managed to abolish any sense of tonic in the vein of classical harmony; generating a musical form in which any sense of hierarchy was abandoned, with every tone of the octave given equal importance amongst each other. This notion of equality also had social correlations for Schoenberg, who envisioned the fashioning of a new, universal modernist art form through reason that could be communicated without placing any notion of priority or hierarchy toward social class, religion, or ethnic group.<sup>10</sup> With this said, Schoenberg and his supporters believed that his processes embodied a type of purification or refinement that transported the art of composition to pre-Romantic, classical values.

While Anton Webern and Alban Berg were largely viewed as Schoenberg’s protégés in this movement, it should be pointed out that their practices of the twelve-tone technique were in no way carbon copies of their mentor. According to the musicologist H. Wiley Hitchcock, Webern would explore the implications of serial technique in a more conscious manner as he stated “In a work like Webern’s *Symphony, Op. 21* (1928), the structure of the pitch row affects aspects of rhythm, dynamics, phrase-structure, counterpoint, orchestration, and over-all form; in the second movement, even the choice of row-transpositions used in each variation derives from the shape of the pitch row itself”.<sup>11</sup> With this said, unlike Schoenberg, he neither denied nor ignored the polarizing fortitude of intervals, and a number of scholars and composers viewed Webern as the logical extension of the serial technique that garnered him (as opposed to

Schoenberg) a type of hero-like status amongst a successive post-World War II generation of composers. These “post-Webernites” of the 1950’s were led by avant-garde composers such as Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Boulez, and Karlheinz Stockhausen.<sup>12</sup>

When examining Alban Berg’s adoption of the twelve-tone technique, one might say it could be described as intermittent as he frequently combined it with methods rooted in tonality. His compositions were somewhat more Romantic or even melodic in nature,<sup>13</sup> and examples such as his opera *Wozzeck* appear to express a greater range of emotion than that of his mentor Schoenberg’s pieces.<sup>14</sup> To cite an example, Berg’s *Lyrical Suite for String Quartet* demonstrates his flexibility with the twelve-tone technique as only the first and sixth movements utilize this idiom throughout. The third movement uses this technique, but omits it during its central trio portion, and the fifth movement only uses twelve-tone applications in its two trios. While the second and fourth movements of the work do have rows, they do not express a twelve-tone aesthetic in any consistency. With this in mind, Berg’s music evolved with Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique, but did not exude the same level of radical evolution that shifted the output of his two colleagues. It could be argued that Berg executed a much looser method of twelve-tone practice, especially as he did not restrict himself to using a single tone row per composition (as Schoenberg and Webern typically did). Berg’s *Lyrical Suite* utilizes the transformation of tone rows from movement to movement with pitch substitutions, illuminating a taste far less abstract, and arguably more “musical” in nature than of Schoenberg’s practices.<sup>15</sup> Both Webern and Berg held great promise for the future of the twelve-tone technique, but in an unfortunate twist of fate, both of Schoenberg’s most-regarded pupils would succumb to untimely deaths; leaving their mentor as the last surviving member of the trio.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the widespread influence of his protégés, it would be incorrect to assert that Schoenberg himself did not still exert a profound influence upon those who embraced the serialist twelve-tone form after him. It could be argued that the mathematician composer Milton Babbitt followed more along the linear path of Schoenberg than either Berg or Webern,<sup>17</sup> and in Babbitt's case, he would take Schoenberg's concept of serialism to its most extreme implications; further than any of his contemporaries.<sup>18</sup> Babbitt advanced a principal of Schoenberg that referred to as "combinatoriality"; the combining of various forms of a set without note-duplication occurring between simultaneous hexachords (half-rows). This concept was also described as twelve-tone aggregates.<sup>19</sup> Babbitt would further Schoenberg's concepts to develop methods of constructing pitch-sets that could be described as "semi-combinatorial" and "all-combinatorial". A "semi-combinatorial" set would be generated so that one of its transformations (other than its retrograde) would be capable of transposition, allowing the first hexachord to include the same names as the last hexachord of the original set. This allowed it to be combined with the transposed version without the destruction of the ideal of total chromaticism. The "all-combinatorial" set would be generated so that all of its transformations and one or more of its transpositions would be capable of achieving the same end result.<sup>20</sup> By applying these sets, many possibilities in relation to contrapuntal technique would be created that still reside within the realm of total chromaticism. It should be noted that Babbitt was essentially the ultimate rationalist composer, refusing to adhere to notions of music's ability to communicate upon an emotional level.<sup>21</sup> While Babbitt would take Schoenberg's serialism to new levels of unprecedented complexity, his name (and to some extent, his genre) would become synonymous with an article he wrote for *High Fidelity* magazine. Originally titled *The Composer as Specialist*, the article was renamed by the editors to *Who Cares if You listen*, and essentially

called for the composer's withdrawal from the public realm as compositional forms such as serialism had essentially advanced beyond the grasp or comprehension of the lay person.<sup>22</sup>

It is quite fascinating to compare the stark contrasts between the *Second Viennese School* and the *New York School* led by John Cage; both of which were influential movements in the realm of twentieth century modernism. While Cage spent much of his career attempting to loosen the grip of the composer from the act of composition, Schoenberg and his colleagues were essentially aiming for the opposite goal. With this in mind, if one compares Schoenberg's dodecaphonic technique to that of Cage's aleatoric methods, two polarizing views of the composer's role in the musical landscape begin to emerge. For example, while it was noted earlier in this discussion that Schoenberg desired to bring order out of chaos, Cage simply described the creation of music (or any artistic endeavor for that matter) as "purposeless play", yet at the same time, an affirmation of life. Unlike Schoenberg, Cage did not desire to attempt to bring order out of chaos, or instill any sense of improvement upon creation, but rather in his words, merely "wake up to the very life we're living".<sup>23</sup> The Cagean notions of chance and indeterminacy derived from the *New York School* definitely illuminate a deep contrast with Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique which allowed for a theoretically unlimited number of composer-articulated preferences such as the selection of the twelve-tone series, options pertaining to the set-form (derived from forty-eight possibilities), along with the interactive capability to establish one's own procedures for combining differing set-forms and row verticalization.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the attitude of Schoenberg toward composition was best exemplified when he generated his first twelve-tone row in 1921, which led him to declare "Today I have discovered something that will ensure the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years".<sup>25</sup> Such a remark is quite interesting to note as it draws some rather contradictory notions

with the composer's desire for music of a universal language discussed previously. Such an ego-driven ideology toward composition would have been quite foreign to the ambitions of Cage, and this attitude of Schoenberg not only illuminates the contrast between the *New York* and *Second Viennese* schools in relation to control, but also depicts a very clear divergence of the pathways these two innovators were forging. It is quite fascinating that despite Cage being a dedicated pupil of Schoenberg,<sup>26</sup> their modernist philosophies and methodologies towards composition could not have been further apart.

Any in-depth examination of Schoenberg and his music would not be adequate without also examining the reactions toward his revolutionary innovations. While it could be argued that much of the field of contemporary musicology holds Schoenberg in high regard, it should be mentioned that during his time, such ground breaking practices were often not readily accepted, or even appreciated. While some detractors such as Walter Wiora claimed that Schoenberg (along with Orff, Cage, Schaffer and Stockhausen) have transcended the boundaries of "musical" art,<sup>27</sup> Schoenberg faced truly violent opposition from those in the Third Reich. During the *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition, his work was considered a prime exhibit.<sup>28</sup> Yet even outside of this particular incident, David Ewen claimed that throughout Schoenberg's life, he was subjected to some of the most viscous and venomous attacks any composer has known, Wagner not excluded.<sup>29</sup> These attacks were also broad-based, emerging from not only diehard reactionaries that feared progress, but in many instances, also from those deemed progressive-minded. Schoenberg's early performances in the first decade of the twentieth century were met with riots and even outlandish lawsuits from attendees claiming to have developed psychoneurotic conditions as a result of his concert performances.<sup>30</sup> Ridicule and insulting attitudes also resonated from numerous high-profile figures such as more traditionally-minded



composers like Richard Strauss, who said of Schoenberg “Anybody can be a composer who is not interested in producing music”.<sup>31</sup> Igor Stravinsky was also at times quite dismissive of Schoenberg’s work, referring to him as “Little Herr Modernsky”, and brushing aside his works as if they were deemed rubbish.<sup>32</sup> Critics throughout Schoenberg’s career were also violently critical in many similar regards. The German critic Ludwig Karpath claimed “Schoenberg’s tone poem is not just filled with wrong notes. It is a fifty-minute long protracted wrong note. One deals here with a man either devoid of all sense or who takes his listeners as fools”,<sup>33</sup> while another Otto Taubman, who was considered highly respected, declared upon hearing *Pierrot Lunaire* “If this is music, then I pray my Creator not let me hear music again”.<sup>34</sup> Even in his later years when the composer was becoming recognized for his contributions in, he was still denied a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1944.<sup>35</sup>

Like many innovative artists, however, Schoenberg had a number of critics who would later become converts. In his later years, Stravinsky rejected neo-classicism to exclusively embrace dodecaphony and exuded a great appreciation of Schoenberg’s body of work.<sup>36</sup> Other prominent figures in American music such as Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein also found valuable applications for the twelve-tone technique, while the noted conductor Nicholas Slonimsky went as far to proclaim “No living composer has escaped Schoenberg’s attraction. His twelve-tone system is now universally acknowledged as the most potent musical doctrine of the century”<sup>37</sup>. Perhaps the boldest statement surrounding Schoenberg’s contribution to composition comes from David Ewen who stated “one might even go a step further than Slonimsky by suggesting that Schoenberg’s musical doctrine has exerted possibly the greatest influence of any system in music history since when, centuries ago, the church modes were

discarded in favor of the major and minor scales, or since the time when homophony replaced polyphony.<sup>38</sup>

In context, one would undoubtedly describe Arnold Schoenberg as a controversial figure within the musical landscape of the twentieth century; however, his contributions and influence have been paralleled by few either before or after his time. By breaking new ground through the applications of serialism with his twelve-tone technique, Schoenberg was able to devise a system of seemingly infinite possibilities as well as infuse new artistic life into a period that was in need of inspiration. Whether one wholly or partially embraces the twelve-tone technique, or merely surveys its concept and form for educational purposes, it is definitely an innovation among the most fascinating developments of twentieth century modernist music.

## Endnotes

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