

**MUSIC TEACHERS.CO.UK**  
...the internet service for practical musicians.

**A comparison of the approaches of Schoenberg, Berg and  
Webern to serialism in their music**

by

**Rebecca Taylor**

© 2002 MusicTeachers.co.uk

## A comparison of the approaches of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern to serialism in their music

The three composers, Arnold Schoenberg, Anton von Webern and Alban Berg, who we know as members of the second Viennese School, are often regarded as the dominant figures in Austrian music in the first half of the twentieth century. Their revolutionary atonal and twelve-tone compositions marked the abolition of the traditional tonal functions and heralded an entirely new treatment of dissonance, and the musical public, establishment and press regarded the composers themselves as a radical and fanatical group. Despite all three composers' use of twelve-tone rows as a basis for musical composition, each composer individualized the use of the row(s) in their own way to produce often very different musical results. It is these contrasting approaches to the serial method, and the results achieved thereby, which form the subject for this discussion.

For Arnold Schoenberg, the years immediately following the First World War were a period of review and consolidation. He had reached a point of no longer having confidence in the largely intuitive character of his pre-war music, and emerged from the war years fostering a desire to re-establish solid and more conscious links to the older, Western tradition. But for a composer so deeply committed to the historical irreversibility of music's evolution towards total chromaticism, this could not take the form of a diatonicism or a new kind of tonality. What was needed was a system capable of incorporating the new dissonant melodic and chordal structures of twentieth century music within a more consciously conceived and systematically ordered framework. In 1921, Schoenberg confided to one of his pupils that he had made a discovery that would 'ensure the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years.' This was the twelve-tone system, which he thought would allow the furtherance of traditional musical values in a way consistent with the path already crossed by nineteenth century musical evolution. Schoenberg said that he had formed the method out of a want for a more conscious control over the new chromatic materials he had up until now used only instinctively. He said:

'As in a dream...strongly convincing as this dream may have been, the conviction that these new sounds obey the laws of nature and of our manner of thinking – the conviction that order, logic, comprehensibility and form cannot be present without obedience to such laws – forces the composer along the road to exploration. He must find, if not laws or rules, at least ways to justify the dissonant character of these harmonies and their successions.'

Thus, despite the fundamental differences that disallow such an analogy, it would seem that, for Schoenberg, the twelve-tone system was ultimately a way of providing, if not substituting, the structural differentiations previously supplied by tonality.

It is in the Suite Op.29 that Rognoni believes Schoenberg shows an 'absolute mastery of the serial technique.' It is interesting to note how symmetrical equilibrium is evident in the choice of instruments, which are divided into three homogenous groups; clarinets on one side and strings on the other, bridged by a piano in the centre. The series itself is unusual for Schoenberg, being arranged in such a way as to allow the use of thirds and sixths, thereby placing consonance along with dissonance. It is due to this row that Schoenberg is able to insert dance figures, and even quotations from folk songs, effortlessly into the context of the series, without disrupting the unity of the dodecaphonic construction.

Schoenberg himself appears to have imagined of his row as a kind of pre-compositional source for motivic possibilities, and he stressed that he thought of it in fundamentally thematic terms. In his Wind Quintet Op.26, the row is handled in an essentially linear manner, with all the melodic and accompanimental material derived from the series and its transformations. The polyphonic construction reveals close links with the highly motivic structure of such earlier compositions as the first String Quartet, in which all thematic material is derived from a small number of motives stated near the beginning.

Whereas Schoenberg thought then of his system mainly as an aid for organizing chromatic pitch relationships within a formal context that kept strong traditional ties, his pupil, Anton von Webern, accepted it as the basis for an essentially new way of thinking about musical structure. Like Schoenberg, Webern rapidly transformed his style from the rich language of

post-romanticism to the more sparing world of atonality and twelve-tone writing. However, in contrast to the approach of Schoenberg, he took the principal elements of the style, the brevity and the focus on individual sounds, to their extremes. All of his works are short; his entire output, some thirty pieces, totals only about three hours worth of music, his symphony being ten minutes in length, and various movements from works lasting less than thirty seconds each. Because of this, each separate note, dynamic and timber takes on a new significance – a characteristic reinforced by the pointillist texture in which Webern writes. Like Schoenberg, Webern found his individual voice in the twelve-tone technique. For Webern, this meant a concentrated contrapuntal style in which all the elements formed complex relationships. This fascination with the virtuosic possibilities of counterpoint is fully in line with his scholarly interest in the deeply contrapuntal forms of Isaac's sacred music. Of the three composers works, Webern is frequently found to be the most challenging to approach.

The first big step forward in the advancement of Webern's twelve-tone technique came with the String Trio Op.20, written in 1927, his first instrumental composition in thirteen years. The impact of Schoenberg, who had only just finished his classically orientated wind quintet, is apparent: the trio's movements adhere to conventional formal types, being a rondo and sonata form. But distinctively typical of Webern is the close relationship between each movement's formal structure and its row structure. This can be seen in the Rondo for example, where the formal links between sections are not defined by constantly recurring thematic material, as in a traditional rondo (and also in the Finale of Schoenberg's quintet, but by the use of the same sequence of row forms. In this way, although the row structure of all the ritornello passages is the same, the musical realization of these rows is changed each time. The trio reveals two distinguishing characteristics of Webern's music. The first of these is that the formal structure is perceived primarily in terms of the underlying serial structure rather than of concrete musical materials such as recurring themes. The second is that the row tends to retain a highly abstract character, independent of a specific motivic or thematic presentation. In both these respects, Webern pursued a course significantly different from that of Schoenberg's.

The course of Webern's later style became fully apparent in the Symphony Op.21 of 1928, which exploits the composer's incredibly distinctive and wholly inventive use of register. Every pitch in the series is allocated to a single octave in which it always occurs, with just one exception, Eb/D#, which appears in two different positions an octave apart. Consequently, the recurrent fixed pitch pairings are easily distinguishable, particularly when they occur in close proximity. These repetitions emerge from the carefully ordered canonic sub-structure to form quasi-motivic fragments, which give the work a noticeable surface coherence.

Webern can be said to have rethought and changed traditional formal assumptions more than any other composer of his time. As we have seen, Schoenberg thought of his rows largely in thematic terms, employing them to construct large-scale forms by means of thematic exposition and motivic development still very much related to those of tonal music. Webern thought of the row in a more abstract sense, and developed his formal structures as far as possible out of the row he was using. To him, the form and row structure of a work seemed practically the same, whereas, in Schoenberg, the two were to a certain extent independent. Webern once remarked: "The twelve-tone row is, as a rule, not a 'theme'. But I can also work without thematicism – that is to say much more freely, because of the unity that's now been achieved on another way; the row ensures unity." This point can be illustrated with reference to Webern's Concerto for Nine Instruments Op.24 written in 1934, where the row is derived from serial transformations of its first three notes. In the row, the second trichord is a retrograde inversion of the first, the third a retrograde, and the fourth an inversion. Rows with highly structured internal relationships such as this became an almost constant feature of Webern's later music. This structural feature is articulated at the opening of the piece by assigning different instruments, durations and articulations to each of the four groups.

One of the most striking characteristics of Webern's music, which we have already briefly touched upon, is the extreme brevity of his compositions. His inclination in his early works to do away with all superfluous elaboration is still apparent in his twelve-tone compositions. Despite the traditional titles of many of his instrumental works between 1920-30, these

compositions have little of the temporal scope or the dynamic developmental quality usually associated with these genres.

Like Webern, it was under Schoenberg's guidance that his second pupil, Alban Berg, progressed towards a more consciously controlled compositional method over the course of his first three works. Indeed, Berg's music has been said by many people to demonstrate better than any other the individual expressive qualities possible within the highly structured style developed by the composers of the Second Viennese School. Even when writing in a twelve-tone style, Berg seems to employ a lyrical and harmonic language that looks back to the late romantic style of composers such as Mahler. For this reason, he is frequently considered to be the most easily approached composer of this style.

The Lyric Suite for string quartet is often said to be one of Berg's most beautiful works and is the first large scale composition to employ the twelve tone method. Even here, however, only the first and sixth movements use the technique throughout. The third movement is twelve-tone aside from its central trio, the fifth movement only in its two trios. The outstanding movements, second and fourth, include no consistently twelve-tone periods, although rows from the twelve-tone movements are cited in each. Indeed, it was Berg's talent of combining twelve-tone and non twelve-tone music in a solitary work, which distinguished him from the other two members of the Second Viennese School. Unlike Webern, whose style experienced major transformations under the force of the twelve-tone system, Berg kept the essential characteristics of his earlier work. Furthermore, as is already evident in twelve-tone passages of the Lyric Suite, Berg's view of the method was significantly freer and much more open than Schoenberg's or Webern's. For example, whereas the latter generally restricted themselves to a single row within one composition, Berg transformed the row of the Lyric Suite from movement to movement, substituting certain of its pitches. He once stated that whilst these changes did not radically transform the overall line of the row, they did alter its character. The row, thus 'submitted to fate' as he put it, experiencing changes as it progressed through, and was influenced by, the specific course of the composition. Berg had a much less abstract conception of the row than Schoenberg or Webern. For him, it corresponded to actual 'musical material', not merely an unchanging source for such material; it could be worked on and developed, just as the themes and motives of a composition are varied.

Even within the Lyric Suite's first movement, ample evidence of Berg's individual approach to the twelve-tone method can be found. The basic row of this movement can be divided into two six-note groups, the second a retrograde inversion of the first. Each half contains six of the seven notes of a diatonic scale segment, and Berg also reorders the six note groups to produce two derived rows: the first with the groups in scalar form, and the second as a sequence of perfect fifths. This diatonic aspect of the Lyric Suite row is particularly characteristic of Berg, permitting him to maintain his long-established procedure of suggesting tonal associations in his non-tonal music, which distinguishes his compositions from much of the music of Schoenberg and all of Webern.

Despite the relatively small size of Berg's output in comparison to Schoenberg's and Webern's, his works stand amongst the twentieth century's most significant musical accomplishments, and of the three members of the second Viennese School, his musical compositions are almost certainly the most popular today. Due to his ability to reconcile contemporary practices with stylistic characteristics of nineteenth century Romanticism, he was able to follow a continuous yet stylistically unbroken evolution, unique among the major figures of his generation. Berg said: "If it became known how much friendship, love and a world of human and spiritual references I have smuggled into my music, the adherents of programme music, should there be any left, would go mad with joy..."

The work of the three composers of the Second Viennese School can, without doubt, be said to differ greatly in style whilst, at the same time, sharing many similarities. All three composers have had a significant effect upon the music composed in the remainder of the twentieth century, with Webern's music in particular proving to be of great historical importance. In the years following World War II, all of this music was to have a profound effect on some of the most important younger composers, helping to generate a second musical

revolution as fundamental in its way as that which these three composers had participated in shortly after the turn of the century.