

Vestiges of Tonality in a Work of Arnold Schoenberg

ALEX LUBET

Over thirty years after his death, the works of Arnold Schoenberg remain in a kind of musical purgatory. Fervently championed by a small number of devotees, they seem forever barred from entering the standard concert repertoire in the way that the works of his contemporaries Stravinsky and Bartok have. Even his disciples Berg and Webern have fared better. Berg, with his theatrical sense and easily perceived ties with Late- and Post-Romanticism, has at least two works, Wozzeck and the Violin Concerto, which have gained great popularity. One would suspect that in time most or all of his works will follow. Webern has also made a place for himself, different from Berg's, but still a far more comfortable position in history than that of his mentor. In Webern's music one hears complete acceptance of the discoveries of non-tonality and, ultimately, serial technique. He has not only viewed the promised land (of non-tonality) but entered it, because he deploys the new tonal relations with comparably innovative rhythmic, timbral, and articulative organization. It is thus Webern and not Schoenberg who has by and large been adopted as a model by those composers who have followed "the path to the new music." Schoenberg's discomfiting use of the new pitch systems in a largely nineteenth-century rhetorical style has aroused a mixture of criticism and apologetic defense.

For those who believe music capable of expression, no apologies are necessary. The seeming conflict between new

pitches and old rhetoric in Schoenberg's music is one that reflects his own discomfort with his discoveries. It is this most touching pathos of a man so deeply torn between the old and new, so deeply attached to the old tonality that he had to leave it to preserve its purity, that speaks to us so eloquently and profoundly.

That Schoenberg's mixture of seemingly contradictory tonal and rhetorical methods is so disturbing explains both its powerful fascination for his admirers and its lack of acceptance by a large audience. Despite much study of the master's work, it is not well understood. This lack of understanding derives largely from the failure to examine in depth this seeming contradiction between new pitches and old rhetoric.

If Schoenberg's music is little understood despite extensive study, it is because the aspects studied have been too limited. Enormous energy has been devoted to the examination of his serial technique. While this has resulted in an impressive understanding of the technique itself, its value in bringing us closer to an understanding of how we hear the music is limited. Set theory gives only the beginning of an explication of the way pitches are perceived. There is little chance that a retrograde inversion will be identified with its prime, that an aggregate deployed as "chord" will be identified with the same aggregate deployed as "melody," or that an interval will not have a very different effect from its complement, transposition, or compound. Perhaps more important, structural set groupings of twelve notes and subset groupings, usually three, four, or six notes, are often, particularly in Schoenberg's music, not reinforced by phrase, metrical, or motivic groupings. Set theory obviously reveals little about the non-pitch aspects of this music.

This lack of understanding is worse in the enigmatic, pre-serial, "atonal" works, one of which is the subject of this article. Attempts to find set structure in these works have been less than satisfactory. No other analytical method has been widely accepted.

Despite its limitation in illuminating our understanding of our perception of Schoenberg's music, set theory remains the most used analytical technique, no doubt in part because it is comfortable and confidence-inspiring. It provides a mathematical model by which we may account for (almost) every note. Schoenberg's music is, of course, neither comfortable nor confidence-inspiring. It owes its provocative, even threatening character to its disturbing combination of old rhetoric and new pitches. A serious investigation of this relationship is warranted.

The beginning of our investigation must be an understanding of each of the partners in our tonal/rhetorical "odd couple." The pitch problem is more familiar. Stated

simply, the pitches do not conform to the traditional tonal model and it is our task to discover the nature of their coherence.

While addressing the issue of pitch organization, Charles Rosen's contention that, in this music, the importance of pitch has been downgraded in favor of a greater emphasis on timbre, texture, and dynamics, cannot be ignored.¹ Rosen's challenge to the time-honored tradition of constructing theories based mostly upon pitch relations seems reasonable in this context, but its merits must be weighed carefully.

More mysterious is Schoenberg's use of rhetorical devices from tonal music. While it is obvious that his music recalls earlier styles, it is not immediately obvious why this association is so strong. Rosen points to similarities in rhythm, phrase structure, and melodic contour,² all obviously quite true but an incomplete explanation of this strong resemblance.

The strongly felt but not completely understood coherence of Schoenberg's non-tonal music obviously owes a good deal to the aforementioned rhetorical traits which it shares with tonal music. Yet, these features could not bring coherence if the pitches with which they were deployed were totally inappropriate. The rhythms, phrase structure, and melodic contours of tonal music are, like the pitches themselves, intrinsic parts of tonality. Grafted onto a totally alien pitch system without regard for their meaning in tonality, the results would at best be inferior, a collage of old and new devices, unsuited to each other, and having no meaning without reference to the older music, and at worst ludicrous. This music is neither ludicrous nor inferior and one must assume that the rhetorical devices Schoenberg shares with tonal music must have some meaning for the pitches he uses. It is based on this assumption that we begin our search for vestiges of tonality in this non-tonal music.

The previous attempts that I have seen to find tonality in Schoenberg's music have been unsatisfactory to the point of discouraging further work in this area. They have either tried to label every chord with a Roman numeral or identify a focal pitch by reiteration. The Roman numeral method, wholly inadequate even for the tonal music for which it was designed, requires Olympic-class modulatory gymnastics in this music. The reiterative approach, often applied to very early, twentieth century, and non-Western music, is incomplete and even condescending. I know of no music so simpleminded that its focal pitch achieves primacy solely by

¹Charles Rosen, Arnold Schoenberg, (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 49.

²Ibid., p. 45.

virtue of being sounded more often than any other. Neither method can yield very promising results here.

How then do we unearth the tonal muse in Schoenberg's music? The best explanation of tonality in Western music is in the theories of Heinrich Schenker. Schenker's disciples, most notably Felix Salzer, have developed flexible interpretations of Schenkerian concepts that may be applied to musics that Schenker himself did not consider, including the music of 20th century tonal composers such as Stravinsky and Bartok. To identify a tonal presence in the non-tonal music of Schoenberg will require yet another flexible interpretation of Schenkerian concepts.

To arrive at this "Schoenbergian" level of flexibility, it will be useful to first define and distinguish between "common practice" or "Schenkerian" tonality and the tonality of twentieth century composers.

In the (mostly Germanic) music which Schenker considered the only tonal music, the principle of the Ursatz in which harmony and counterpoint are indivisible, combined with the principles of voice leading, governs every structural level. It is because Schenker finds this single, powerful unifying factor pervading all levels of structure in this limited body of works that he applies his theories to these works only, implicitly declaring them the only tonal music.

To expand the utility of Schenkerian concepts to twentieth century tonal music requires acceptance of new voiceleading styles and a variety of modifications of the Ursatz. Among these modifications are reharmonizations (with altered tonics and dominants or substitutions for the dominant), deharmonizations (in which the Ursatz is the primary force in defining tonality, and polyphony is essentially contrapuntal, rather than harmonic), altered Urlinie (variations often as simple as Phrygian, instead of major or minor), and sometimes a wholly new Ursatz.

Our "Schoenbergian" tonality might be termed "non-tonal" tonality. What appears to be a contradiction is precisely that, but it is a contradiction that is in the music. Tonality is no longer a force which controls the entire pitch structure, but it is still an undeniable presence, in spite of contradictory non-tonal elements.

Metaphorically speaking, tonality is dissolved but not destroyed. Clearly perceptible tonal elements are superimposed upon non-tonal elements which contradict but do not negate them.

"Schoenbergian" tonality is a development contemporaneous with the tonality of Stravinsky and Bartok and not a "next phase." Tonality is neither reharmonized nor deharmonized. The elements of a traditional Schenkerian Ursatz are superimposed with other pitches, which only can be considered hostile to the tonal elements and which cannot be considered to combine with them to form altered structural

harmonies, and sometimes occur in uncharacteristic registers. Steeped as he was in classical tonality, it should not be surprising that, even in a non-tonal context, Schoenberg remains more faithful to that tradition than his tonal contemporaries.

My hypothesis is demonstrated upon the third piece of the Opus 19 Six Little Piano Pieces, non-tonal but not serial, and idiosyncratically brief in the manner of many second Viennese school works of the pre-serial period. The somewhat unorthodox reduction which appears in Example 1 (it is assumed that the reader has a copy of the original work to aid his understanding) is not an illustration of any one structural level, but a representation of those elements on all structural levels which support the presence of an E-flat major tonality, omitting the other, "non-tonal" pitches. The spelling of some notes is changed to reflect their role in the tonality.

This piece's tonal presence is the most easily perceived of all the pieces in the set. The elements in the fundamental line and bass always appear together (i.e., one is never present in the background or middleground with the other) and they are usually articulated simultaneously. Their registers are generally appropriate, although in mm. 6-8 the lone E^b is an element of both the fundamental line and the fundamental bass. Elements of the background and middleground, especially the former, receive agogic accents, are articulated in an exposed fashion (i.e., heard over the other pitches or presented without other pitches), and are easily heard.

While the reduction of this brief binary is largely self-explanatory, a few points are worthy of special emphasis. The background level tonic is established at m. 1, beat 2, with the fundamental line in an inner voice. The background level dominant is reached at the cadence ending the A section (m. 4), where the Urlinie is now in the uppermost voice and is given substantial agogic emphasis. The B section arrives at the background tonic in m. 6, through a prolonged bass motion from A^b, beginning in m. 5. This same A^b to E^b bass motion appears with prolongation in m. 7. E^b is finally very firmly established in m. 8.

The strong tonal presence in this work explains the appropriateness of features which would otherwise only be peculiar or interesting. The sectional form is binary. Each section consists of a two-phrase period, each phrase is two measures long, and the last phrase ends with an additional measure of cadential extension. This phrase structure is unorthodox only in that the downbeat of each phrase falls on beat two of the measure. Other stylistic features appropriate to the tonal presence are the octave-doubled bass of the A section, the rising-falling melodic contours of the uppermost line in each phrase, and rhythms characteristic of

Example 1. Pitch Reduction

The musical score for Example 1, Pitch Reduction, consists of two staves. The top staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a series of notes and rests, with a large bracket spanning the first four measures. Below the staff, there are Roman numerals: 'I' under the first measure, 'V' under the second, 'I' under the third, and 'V' under the fourth. The bottom staff begins with a bass clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). It contains a series of notes and rests, with a large bracket spanning the first four measures. Below the staff, there are Roman numerals: 'I' under the first measure, 'V' under the second, 'I' under the third, and 'V' under the fourth. The score is labeled 'Example 1. Pitch Reduction'.

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tonal music.

There is, of course, a good deal not explained by the tonal presence in this work, which does not account for many of the pitches, nor for all of the non-pitch elements. Those pitches which do not contribute to the tonal presence do not submit to a serial of motivic ordering, with or without the tonal elements, and are subject to only the most basic limitations: some degree of pitch dissonance is present in every chord, octave simultaneities between independent contrapuntal lines are avoided, and, as Richard Hoffman has pointed out, there are no minor second simultaneities.³ Beyond these limitations and outside the tonal substructure, the precise non-tonal pitch content is not important, as long as the pitches provide the desired melodic contours, particularly the arched contour of the uppermost voice, and density.

This is not to say that the non-tonal pitches are not chosen sensitively, only that they could be sensitively altered without lessening the value of the work.

This superimposition of tonal and non-tonal elements results in a particular kind of complexity not previously heard in a work this short and restrained. In this phase of tonality in which a tonal presence still functions, but no longer controls all the musical elements, there is a new kind of dissonance-consonance/tension-release relationship.

It is often supposed that the expressive pitch dissonance is not a part of Schoenberg's language, because the pitch constructs he uses that would be dissonant in a tonal work no longer function as dissonances, because they no longer resolve. Rosen suggests that in this music, dissonance-consonance/tension-release is not so much a function of harmonic content, but of rhythm, phrase structure, and the melodic contour of each line.⁴ Pitch has, of course, never been the sole determinant of dissonance and consonance (or, for those who consider those terms appropriate only for pitch, tension and release). While it is true that rhythm, phrase structure, and melodic contour are of great importance here, there is also a new double layering of tensions and releases, whose source is chordal, if not harmonic in the tonal sense.⁵

The first layer of tension and release is the layer inherent to the tonal presence: in the structural progression and its prolongations. they continue to serve, to a considerable degree, their old functions, despite the presence

³Richard Hoffmann, lectures on Schoenberg given at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1976.

⁴Rosen, pp. 45-46.

⁵Rosen suggests this also, in reference to a thirteen note chord in Erwartung. See p. 45.

of non-tonal elements. A hierarchy of tension and release based on structural harmonies and prolongations is still in evidence. Perhaps more important, as in tonality, tonal structure still regulates temporal structure; the construction of sections, phrases, and cadences.

The second layer of tension-release is created by the non-tonal pitches. When superimposed upon the structural pitches of the tonal presence, they lessen, but do not destroy, their sense of repose. When superimposed upon the prolongations of the tonal presence, their sense of motion is increased. Where non-tonal pitches are not present, the greatest levels of stability are attained.

The presence or absence of these non-tonal pitches in the chordal fabric of this work is perceived differently than in tonal music. There are, in fact, places where no non-tonal pitches are heard: on the first beat of m. 3 and, especially important, throughout much of mm. 6-8, where the unaccompanied E^b's represent the strongest points of tonal stability in the piece. There are also points where non-tonal pitches are relatively absent. Relative absence occurs when the only non-tonal pitches present are those sustained from previous chords and only structural tonal pitches are newly articulated, as in m. 1, beat 2 (the first downbeat of the work), and at m. 4, beat 4 (the cadence which closes the A section).

The "tonality" of this work is, of course, insufficient by any previous definition of that pitch system. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the final cadence (mm. 8-9) where, having convincingly established the tonic on the downbeat of m. 8, the subsequent concluding formalities proceed to "unconvince": to ultimately deny a satisfactory tonal conclusion. This most obvious representation of the dilution rather than avoidance of tonal relationships seen in this work embodies the final rejection of the thoroughgoing tonality which was for Schoenberg the only tonality. His active contradiction of tonality (i.e., the presence of both tonal and non-tonal elements in the same work) is a considerable and, for Schoenberg, a totally satisfactory break with the past: a less-than-definitive tonality and thus, a non-tonality.

We should be reminded here of two of the master's well-known dislikes. The first is the term atonality, whose implications of total absence of tonality are clearly not appropriate in this work. The second is his dislike for the new types of tonality of many of his contemporaries. It is significant that much of this music's tonality hinges to an enormous extent upon its final triadic cadence, a confirmation Schoenberg emphatically denies.

While this "Schoenbergian" tonality provides a new set of rich and complex pitch relations, a new continuum of tensions and releases, there is reason to question the need

for this break with tradition. As a system of tensions and releases, this system's conceptual basis is, after all, not so different from that of tonality.

The new system in which the precise pitch content of the non-tonal components is not crucial, is, in fact, necessary to project the newly heightened importance of the non-pitch aspects of the work. These aspects are now structural in themselves and not simply supportive of pitch structure or mere nuance. This high level of importance of rhythm, density, and dynamics only would be associated in a tonal context with reinforcing the pitch structure.

Parallel to the pitch structure of this work are rhythmic and density/dynamic schemes too important to be only pitch-supportive. These schemes can only have full impact because, in this work the use of tonal rhetoric is, like the use of tonality, only a presence and not thoroughgoing. Beneath the symmetry and arched contour of the phrases is a texture whose number of voices varies constantly and whose rhythmic motive (see below) derives not from any one voice or from the aggregate rhythm of the whole. The work is thus perceived as a mass rather than as a sum of the individual voices; a Klangfarbenmelodie, something hard to imagine in tonal music.

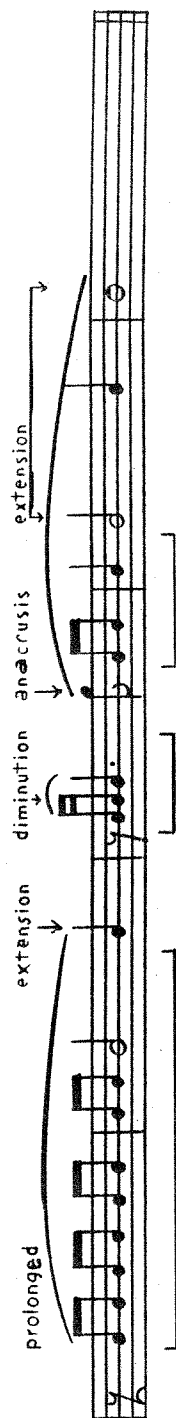
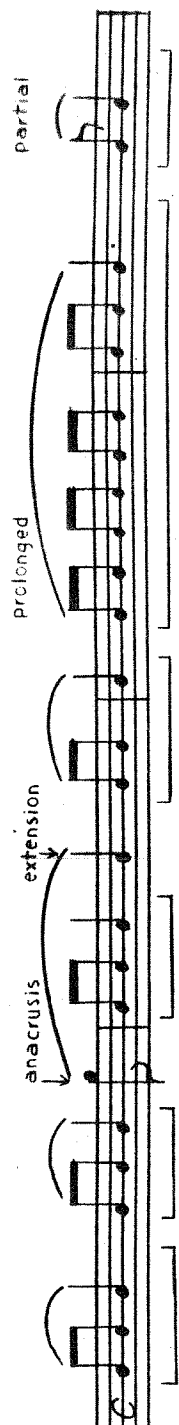
A single rhythmic motive, two eighths and a longer note, usually a quarter, is heard throughout this work (see Example 2). This easily heard motive (and its extensions) comes not from isolated voices, but from the composite rhythm of all the voices. Each note or chord, when newly articulated, is a component of the motivic fabric. The durations of notes or chords, which may sustain after new articulations in other voices, do not affect the motivic structure. Each newly articulated note or chord can be accepted as an event in the motivic structure, regardless of other still-sustaining, pitches, largely because the pitches do not merge into the recognized chords of tonality. There is no harmonic basis for denying the individual identity of each new articulation.

Density and dynamics combine to form yet another structural plan whose basis is a gradual thinning of texture with an appropriate diminuendo. The A section constantly shifts from four to five voices, with the bass in octaves. The first phrase of B begins in that same texture minus the octave doubling, but is reduced to a single voice, supported by three additional voices only at its downbeat and cadence. This reduction of density is supported by (and supports) a general diminuendo.

We have seen, in this brief work of Schoenberg, not only vestiges of tonal rhetoric, but of tonality itself. The tonal presence renders the rhetorical devices appropriate and even essential. Tonal elements are at once retained and contradicted, resulting in a new form of pitch tension and

(Example 2)

Example 2. Rhythmic Motive Development



release and a pitch language which permits the elevation to structural importance of non-pitch aspects of music.

It is clear that even the most thorough examination of a brief movement of a brief work provides more questions than answers. I can confirm that the tonal presence pervades the entire Opus 19. Whether it can be found elsewhere in Schoenberg's and Berg's non-tonal and twelve-tone works or in Webern's, where the rhetorical devices of tonal music are not in evidence, is a matter warranting further investigation. I invite the contributions of my colleagues.