Schoenberg Is ‘Dead’

To take a stand regarding Schoenberg? To do so is urgently necessary, certainly; it is nonetheless an elusive problem, defying wisdom, perhaps a search without satisfactory result.

It would be vain to deny it: the Schoenberg “case” is irritating, above all because of its freight of flagrant incompatibilities.

Paradoxically, the essential experience is premature in the very direction in which it lacks ambition. That proposition could easily be turned around to say that it manifests the most demanding ambition where the most outdated symptoms appear. In that major ambiguity resides a misunderstanding full of discomfort over the origin of more or less conscious, more or less violent reticences, which one resents in a work of which, despite everything, one feels the necessity.

For with Schoenberg we attend one of the most important revolutions that has ever affected the musical language. The material, properly speaking, certainly does not change: the twelve half-tones. But the structural organization is altered: from tonal organization we pass to serial organization. How did the idea of the series materialize? At what exact moment in Schoenberg’s oeuvre did it occur? From what deductions did it result? It seems that by following that genesis, we shall come very close to uncovering certain irreducible divergences.

Let me say, before anything else, that Schoenberg’s discoveries were essentially morphological. That evolutive progression started from the post-Wagnerian vocabulary and reached “suspension” of the tonal language. One can detect very well defined tendencies even in Verklärte Nacht; the First Quartet, opus 7; and the Kammerphonymie; but it is only in certain passages in the scherzo and the finale of the Second Quartet, opus 10, that one can watch a true attempt at revolution. All the works just mentioned therefore are, in a way, preparations; I believe that today we may be allowed to regard them chiefly from a documentary point of view.

Suspension of the tonal system is achieved effectively in the Three Pieces for Piano, opus 11. Thereafter, the experiments become more and more penetratingly acute and lead to the renowned Pierrot lunaire. I note three remarkable phenomena in the writing of these scores: the principle of constantly efficacious variation, or nonrepetition; the preponderance of “anarchic” intervals—presenting the greatest tension relative to the tonal world—and progressive elimination of the octave, the tonal world par excellence; and a manifest attempt to construct contrapuntally.

These three characteristics already diverge, if they do not contradict. In fact, the principle of variation can be accommodated only badly with rigorous (read: scholastic) contrapuntal writing. One observes a sharp internal contradiction in the exact canons in particular, where the consequent textually reproduces the antecedent—both the sound-figures and the rhythmic figures. When, on the other hand, these canons are produced at the octave, extreme antagonism ensues between a succession of horizontal elements ruled by a principle of abstaining from tonality and vertical control placing the strongest tonal constituent in sharp relief.

Nevertheless, a discipline is outlined which will prove very fecund; let us keep in mind very particularly the possibility, still only embryonic, of a series of intervals passing from the horizontal plane to the vertical and vice versa—the separation...
of the notes of a thematic cell from the rhythmic figure that has given it birth, with that cell thus becoming a series of absolute intervals (using that term in its mathematical significance).

Let me revert to the use of the intervals that I have called "anarchic." In Schoenberg's works of that period we often encounter fourths followed by diminished fifths, major sixths preceding major thirds, and all the reversals and interpolations that one can bring to bear upon those two patterns. Here I observe a preponderance of intervals if the unfolding is horizontal, or of chords if it is coagulated vertically, which are least native to the classic harmony based upon superimposed thirds. On the other hand, I note the great abundance of wide intervals, resulting in a stretching of the register, and thus giving the absolute pitch of each sound an importance never before dreamed for it.

Such an employment of sound-material provoked some esthetitizing explanations that have since been used as an indictment or, at best, as a benevolent defense speech, which has not, however, included any general formulation. Schoenberg himself expounded on this subject in a way that permits us to speak of expressionism: "In the formal elaboration of my first works in the new style, I was guided above all by very strong expressive licences in particular and in general, but also, and not least, by a feeling for the form and logic inherited from the tradition and well developed by application and consciousness."

That citation obviates the need for any gloss, and one can only agree to that first trajectory, in which Schoenberg's manner of musical thinking manifests an interdependence of balance and experiments considered entirely from the formal point of view. To sum up, esthetic, poetic, and technique are in phase, if I may again be permitted a mathematical comparison, a flaw that one can pick out in each of these realms (I deliberately abstain from any consideration of the intrinsic value of post-Wagnerian expressionism.)
regulating instrument, the serial phenomenon itself was not, so
to speak, perceived by Schoenberg.

What, then, was his ambition, once the chromatic synthesis
had been established through the series, or in other words, once
this coefficient of security had been adopted? To construct
works of the same essence as that of those in the sound-univer-
se he had just left behind, works in which the new tech-
nique of writing should "prove its worth." But could that new
technique produce convincing results if one did not take the
trouble to explore the specifically serial domain in the struc-
tures? And I understand the word "structure" as extending
from the generation of the constituent elements to the total
architecture of a work. In short, a logic of engendering be-
tween the serial forms, properly speaking, and the derived
structures was generally absent from Schoenberg's preoccupa-
tions.

And there, it seems, you have what led to the decrepitude of
the larger part of his serial oeuvre. The preclassic or classic
forms ruling most of the architectures have no historic link to
the dodecaphonic discovery; thus an inadmissible hiatus is pro-
duced between infrastructures related to the tonal pheno-
menon and a language in which one again perceives the laws of
organization summarily. Not only does the proposed project
run aground—such a language was not consolidated by such
architectures—but also the opposite happens, which is to say
that those architectures annihilate the possibilities of organiza-
tion inherent in the new language. The two worlds are incom-
patible, and Schoenberg had attempted to justify one by the
other.

One cannot call that procedure valid, and it produced results
that could have been anticipated: the worst sort of misuder-
standing. A warped "romantico-classicism" in which the good
intentions are not the least unattractive element. One certainly
gave no great credit to the serial organization by not allowing
it its own modes of development, but substituting other, appar-
ently surer ones. A reactionary attitude that left the door ajar
for all the more or less disgraceful holdovers.

The persistence of accompanied melody, for example, of
counterpoint based upon a principal part and secondary parts
(Hauptstimme and Nebenstimme). We are in the presence of a
very unhappy heritage owed to scarcely defensible scleroses of
a certain bastard language adopted by romanticism. Nor is it
only in the limited conceptions, but equally in the writing
itself, that I see reminiscences of a dead world. Under Schoen-
berg's pen, in fact, there abounded—not without producing
irritation—the clichés of redoubtably stereotyped writing rep-
resenting, there too, the most ostentatious and obsolete roman-
ticism. I refer to those constant anticipations, with expressive
leaning on the key note; I mean those false appoggiaturas; or,
again, those formulas of arpeggios, of devices, of repetitions,
which sound terribly hollow and deserve to be called what
they are: "Secondary parts." Finally, I indicate the morose,
disagreeable use of a derivively poor—call it ugly—rhythmic,
in which tricks varying the classic rhythm are disconcerting
in their credulity and ineffectuality.

How could we, without weakness, relate ourselves to an
oeuvre manifesting such contradictions? If only it manifested
them within a rigorous technique, the only safeguard! But
what are we to think of Schoenberg's American period, during
which the greatest disarray and most deplorable demagazine
ation appeared? How could we, unless with a supplemen-
tary—and superfluous—measure, judge such lack of com-pre
hension and cohesion, that reevaluation of polarizing functions,
even of tonal functions? Rigorous writing was abandoned in
those works. In them we see appearing again the octave inter-
vals, the false cadences, the exact canons at the octave. Such an
attitude attests to maximum incoherence—a paroxysm in the
absurdity of Schoenberg's incompatibilities. Ought one not to
have pressed forward to a new methodology of the musical
language instead of trying to reconstitute the old one? So
monstrous an uncomprehending deviation leaves us perplexed: in the Schoenberg “case” a ruinous “catastrophe” occurred which doubtless will remain cautionary.

Could it have been otherwise? To answer in the negative now would be naively arrogant. Nevertheless, it is possible to see why Schoenberg’s serial music was destined to defeat. In the first place, his exploration of the serial domain had been carried on unilaterally: it was lacking on the rhythmic level, even on that of sound, properly speaking—the intensities and attacks. Who ever seriously dreamed of reproaching him for that? On the credit side, I put down his very remarkable preoccupation, in timbres, with *Klangfarbenmelodie*, which could lead by generalization to the series of timbres. But the essential cause of his failure resides in his profound misunderstanding of serial functions as such, functions engendered by the very principle of series—without which they remain more embryonic than effective. Here I mean to say that Schoenberg employed the series as a smaller common denominator to assure the semantic unity of the work, but that he organized the language elements thus obtained by a preexisting rhetoric, not a serial one. I believe we can assert that it is there that the troubling lack of clarity of a work without real unity becomes manifest.

Schoenberg’s failure to grasp the serial domain as a whole has caused enough dissatisfactions and prudent flights to make full description of it unnecessary.

No hilarious demonism, but rather the most ordinary common sense, leads me to declare that since the Viennese discovery, every composer outside the serial experiments has been *useless*. Nor can that assertion be answered in the name of a pretended freedom (which could not mean that every composer would be useful in the opposite direction), for that liberty has a strange look of being a surviving servitude. If the Schoenberg failure happened, disregarding it will not aid us in finding a valid solution for the problem that the epiphany of a contemporary language has posed.

At the very beginning, perhaps one should dissociate the serial phenomenon from Schoenberg’s *oeuvre*. The two have been confused with obvious glee, often with poorly dissimulated bad faith. It is easy to forget that a certain Webern also labored; to be sure, one never hears this discussed any more (so dense are the screens of mediocrity!). Perhaps we can say that the series is a logically historical consequence, or—depending upon what one wishes—a historically logical one. Perhaps, like that certain Webern, one could pursue the sound-evidence by trying to derive the structure from the material. Perhaps one could enlarge the serial domain with intervals other than the half-tone: microdistances, irregular intervals, complex sounds. Perhaps one could generalize the serial principle to the four sound-constituents: pitch, duration, intensity and attack, timbre. Perhaps... perhaps... one could demand from a composer some imagination, a certain dosage of asceticism, even a little intelligence, and, finally, a sensibility that will not be toppled by the least breeze.

We must keep ourselves from considering Schoenberg as a sort of Moses who died in view of the Promised Land after having brought down the Tables of the Law from a Sinai that some people obstinately want to confuse with Walhalla. (During that time, the dance before the Golden Calf was in full swing.) We certainly owe him *Pierrot lunaire*... ...and some other very enviable works. This will not give offense to the environing mediocrity that wants, very speciously, to limit the ravages to “Central Europe.”

Nonetheless, it has become indispensable to demolish a misunderstanding that is full of ambiguity and contradictions: it is time to neutralize the setback. That rectification will be accomplished not by any gratuitous bragging, much less by any sanctimonious fatuity, but by rigor free of weakness and compromise. Therefore I do not hesitate to write, not out of any desire to provoke a stupid scandal, but equally without bashful hypocrisy and pointless melancholy:

SCHOENBERG IS DEAD.