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Temporal dimensions and expressive processes in *Pierrot Lunaire* of Arnold Schoenberg

At the time of the composition of his *Pierrot Luna*ire in the first half of 1912, Schoenberg, back in Berlin for his second stay, was almost at the end of his expressionist period, that famous period of atonality that generated many innovative and amazing masterworks. The work that Albertine Zehme, a singer and actress, was going to commission, this work that would become a masterpiece of the twentieth century, presents a paradox which seems to be important as regards expression. Indeed, *Pierrot Lunaire* brings together all the experiences of the musical expressionism of the previous years; yet it is no longer exactly an expressionist work. One might even say that, in a sense, it represents the end of this period in Schoenberg's compositional output.

It is probable that Schoenberg had measured the benefits and disadvantages of composition with free atonality. In *Pierrot Lunaire*, he developed a precise direction, a mode of writing which is a mixture of, on one hand, free composition, and on the other, the use of already constituted materials, forms, and processes inherited from the past. What is interesting in this case is the fact that the category of expression is transformed by the presence of several interwoven temporalities.

1. Temporal dimensions related to the poems

The first temporal dimension consists of two subtypes, both relating to the poems themselves. First, the very subject matter of *Pierrot Lunaire* has temporal implications. Schoenberg, when he read the poems, probably quickly realized how the historical and cultural dimensions of Pierrot were both complex and ambivalent, and was able to combine and fully deploy these particular dimensions. Indeed, the origin of the character of Pierrot goes back to the Italian *Commedia dell' Arte* of the fifteenth century, a tradition of improvisation on a popular story in which Pierrot is a comic and slightly naive valet. Later, when the actors of

the *Commedia dell'arte* arrived in France in the 17th century, the figure of Pierrot changed into a white character, both lunar and nostalgic.

The 19th century gradually transformed Pierrot into an end-of-the-century dandy, decadent and obsessed with the moon. The thin and white character depicted by Antoine Watteau in the previous century was still present, but during the 19th century, he gradually also became a dark and disquieting figure. This was his triumphant period on stage in Paris, during which he was reinvented by the mime Jean Baptiste Deburau and his pupils. This new decadent and whimsical character of Pierrot was picked up by many poets, including Charles Baudelaire, Théodore de Banville, Théophile Gautier, Paul Verlaine, and Jules Laforgue; at this time, the gestures and mime of the silent Pierrot represented an allegory of the suffering and isolation of the modern artist for these writers. So, on the one hand, there was a lunar, white Pierrot – pale, transparent, narcissistic, androgynous; and on the other, a crazy, black Pierrot, the Pierrot designed by Adolphe Willette, an evil spirit obsessed with seduction, grotesque, a hallucinogenic maniac, tormented by fear and guilt.

It is important to emphasize that both the white and black Pierrots are present in *Pierrot Lunaire*, the cycle of poems written by the Belgian Symbolist poet Albert Giraud in 1884. Otto Hartleben in turn translated the fifty poems of the cycle over a period of six years. According to Richard Kurth[1] and other critics, Hartleben seems to have intensified the images and sounds of the poems, making them more vivid and closer to the original gestures of the silent pantomime.

This historical and cultural dimension is directly seen in the choices made by Schoenberg and in the way he associated the different poems; in fact, the cycle of twenty-one selected poems presents a symptomatic distribution of the topics. The cycle is divided into three very characteristic parts: in the first part, the symbolism of the moon in relation to the poet is preponderent; the central part is dominated by a black, violent, and cruel Pierrot; and the last part returns to the history of the Italian Pierrot, with burlesque situations, but also with an emphasis on his fantasized return to Bergamo. We can see that, throughout the cycle, the narrativity and the general pattern of expression are inextricably linked with the complex and multivarious ›meanings‹ of Pierrot throughout history.

A second subtype of the first temporal dimension, one that is more specifically rhythmic than the first, derives from the regular structure of Giraud's poems,

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1 Kurth 2010.

a structure that was preserved by Hartleben. All the poems have the same characteristic structure of roundels: a first stanza with four verses; then a second stanza, also with four verses; and finally, a third stanza with five verses. In all the poems, the first two lines of the first stanza are repeated to form the second part of the second stanza. In addition, the first verse is repeated again for the conclusion of the third stanza. So, in each poem, the first and second lines have a strong impact, an impact that is semantic, expressive and rhythmic. The text, differently each time, seems to revolve around the first and second verses; this constraint, like all singular and creative constraints, can become a stimulus for writing for the artist. This was undoubtedly the case for Giraud and for Hartleben, but it was also the case for Schoenberg, who had to take at least two elements into account: first, the strophic structure of the text that he had to set to music, and second, the fact that he had to set the same words to music two or three times.

One can observe that in most cases, Schoenberg's musical settings respect the three-stanza structure of the text. However, in the case of *Galgenlied*, the shortest melodrama, the movement unfolds in a single section without any breaks. This results in an inexorable rhythmic progression, conveying well the central image of the poem (the rope around the neck). In other cases, musical form does not correspond to the three stanzas of the poems, and the music is organized in two parts instead of three. For example, in *Madonna* (No. 6), the first part consists of the first two stanzas, and is in a slow tempo, painful but quiet. The second part, corresponding to the third stanza, is faster and much more tense; it is the part in which the Madonna shows her dead son.

Even when Schoenberg chooses to project the three-stanza structure of the poems in his musical settings, he does so in very different ways: he may articulate the stanzas with or without instrumental transitions; he may build a contrasting progression or play with similar sequences; or he may compose melodramas with the same material or a mix of different elements. In any case, it seems that in working with the cyclic temporality of the text, Schoenberg saw an opportunity to develop the expressive dimension of his musical setting.

Likewise, the repetition of verses one and two later within each of the poems gives rise to a remarkable invention; at no point in the entire cycle are the same verses musically written in the same way. It seems that the art of variation, one of the characteristics of Schoenberg's writing, is met in *Pierrot* with a resistance in the form of these textual repetitions, a resistance that allowed the composer to play on the hinge between meaning and expression. The case of *Gebet an Pierrot*, the first melodrama written, is emblematic: here for instance, we can see that the

word *lachen* (laughter) is written three times with interesting differences related to the position within the poem.

2. Layers related to forms, processes, types and materials of the past

A second temporal dimension of *Pierrot Lunaire* is only indirectly related to the text, and it is one of the most famous features of this work. After having composed a dozen works in a completely free writing style (with *Erwartung* as the extreme limit of this category), Schoenberg now turns towards the past for *Pierrot*, drawing on a number of elements from his western music heritage. This dimension of the past directly influences the expressive character of the work; we can distinguish two different ways in which this influence is integrated, from the more local to the more general.

First, we observe a resurgence of materials of the past in some specific details of the melodramas. The most famous example is the presence of D and E major triads in No. 21, *O alter Duft*; these harmonies, gently posed by the piano within an atonal tissue, are sensitive evocations of perfumes of the past. In the very first melodrama, *Mondestrunken*, the design of the opening motif in the piano – a motif that runs throughout the cycle and that has been called ›Pierrot's motif‹ – incorporates several elements from the past. First, its first five pitches are taken from the whole tone scale, a scale that, in the early twentieth century, evokes an exoticism that is already out of date. Second, the rhythmic morphology of the motif – a sixteenth rest followed by seven sixteenths – is very close to the starting motif of a Schumann song that Schoenberg knew (*Mondnacht* from *Liederkreis*, op. 39), a song that similarly had as its theme the night and the moon. Finally, the supple, curving contour of this motif, written as a quasi ostinato throughout the first melodrama, develops into an arabesque that seems reminiscent of the wavy lines of the *Jugendstil*, a decorative style from the very recent past. The three elements, of course, are superimposed to create the special atmosphere, rich in evocations, of the beginning of the cycle. Another example is the obsessive motif of No. 8, *Nacht*, which Schoenberg identifies as a passacaglia in the score. For this passacaglia, the composer has written a very specific theme; most importantly, the second part of the theme is a long descending chromatic line that obviously refers to the chaconne bass, evoking the world of suffering and pain.

More generally, we might say that examples of figuralism are common in the cycle, and that Schoenberg here continues a strong tradition coming down from the Italian madrigal via the cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach; in the first melodrama that he composed, *Gebet an Pierrot*, Schoenberg writes a kind of laugh motif for the clarinet, that immediately echoes the first line (»Pierrot, mein Lachen!«). Similarly, in *Der Dandy* (No. 3), we can see a rapid motif played by the winds, recalling the brilliance of the moonlight on crystal flasks.

The second way in which Schoenberg borrows from musical tradition in *Pierrot Lunaire* is in his use of stylized forms or types inherited from the past, through which he realizes a new and personal reading of the writing of the past. This use of forms or types, sometimes very clearly employed, is one of the characteristic features of *Pierrot Lunaire*, a feature that can be described as a process of distanciation. Here we should remember that, during his expressionist period, Schoenberg had strongly advocated for an immediate transcription of unconscious phenomena; this new emphasis on the use of distancing devices therefore marks a major shift in attitude. This characteristic has led some critics to talk of a form of neo-classicism, although that term is not really appropriate for such a composer. What is certain is that we can easily identify a certain number of traditional forms: for instance, the *Pierrot* cycle includes two slow waltzes, a barcarolle whose rhythm is quite recognizable, and also a serenade (No. 19). Perhaps the most surprising example is No. 6, *Madonna*, in which the evocation of a holy personage is modified in an unexpected manner: Schoenberg bases his model on certain elements of the Baroque style, most notably the imitation in the cello part of a basso continuo, which he skillfully destabilizes as the piece progresses.

Generally speaking, we observe that this second historical approach differs from the first in that the poetic sense is here treated in a comprehensive way. It is no longer a question of borrowing musical figures from the past; instead the composer uses a formal device or stylistic feature that musically corresponds to the poetic idea. This is again the case with the fugue in No. 18, *Mondfleck*. Of course, we must add that the treatment of the form or type that serves as a model is always carried out in an extravagant manner, because Schoenberg is adding a series of violent contortions to the model; we can say that these forms are in each case broken or disjointed at one moment of the melodrama. In all these pieces it seems that Schoenberg was equally interested in the constructive moment of the evocation of the model and in the destructive moment when the device of imitation is put into crisis.

Schoenberg integrates his references to traditional forms with his own compositional aesthetic, which generates the whole sound texture according to the

principle of *proliferation*. Such proliferation generates great dynamic and dramatic intensity, and this musical process is always conceived by the composer as capturing the poetic strengths of the text; this is perhaps what is most impressive. The two most famous examples of this approach are No. 8 (*Nacht*) and No. 18 (*Mondfleck*).

In *Nacht*, the text develops the idea of an obsession that the first verse of the poem makes clear: »Finstre, schwarze Riesenfalter«. The transference of the poetic idea into music occurs at three levels: first, obsession, figured through the use of a single motivic idea; second, the depressive character manifested by the choice of a passacaglia form that evokes a funeral meditation; and finally, the fall, since in the three stanzas, the musical movement creates a very noticeable descent. The starting material, as we have seen, already corresponds to the idiom of the chaconne bass, which is designed as a slow chromatic descent. We must add that the sonority, very grave and mysterious, participates in the construction of the sound poetry.

In *Mondfleck*, a strange paradox is at the origin of the generative process. The moonshine makes a stain on Pierrot's back. Pierrot, seeing the stain, brushes his clothes desperately until morning, thinking that this is a plaster stain. From this spatial paradox (Pierrot sees the stain on his back and turns around), Schoenberg introduces a different process, a metamorphosis into a temporal paradox: the composition is a triple fugue, one of whose layers is two times slower than the others. The paradox in its musical ›transcription‹ becomes obviously temporal; from the center of the rapid fugues, the voices are reversed, running back to the beginning, while the slow part (at the piano), continues in the same direction to finish its text.

In the first case (*Nacht*) as in the second (*Mondfleck*), the instrumental parts are never illustrative; it is truly in the construction of the sound itself, in its generative and dynamic aspects, that the poetic sense is led to a musical materialization. One could of course give other examples of these processes, such as the ostinato in No. 1 for the wine flowing, or the *Klangfarbenmelodie* for the pale light of the moon in No. 4.

3. Dimensions related to Schoenberg's unique compositional style

A third category of temporal dimension is essential to the composition of *Pierrot Lunaire*: these are the singular characteristics of Schoenberg's writing, and more precisely the characteristics developed during the atonal period that immediately

precedes *Pierrot*. I shall first illustrate the general features of Schoenberg's compositions during that time, focusing on three general factors.

The first factor is the rapid evolution of musical elements. This compositional feature can be seen as early as the *First Chamber Symphony*, op. 9, and it accounts for why this work was so incomprehensible to a large part of the public. The musical time of Schoenberg's writing is a fast and dense time, in both the horizontal and the vertical dimensions.

The second element is the fact that Schoenberg's music has no place for repetition and makes constant use of variation. In traditional composition, the distribution of moments of repetition and moments of variation contributes to build a time that has fixed reference points, between which a dynamic time is deployed – that is, a time of variation, of development, and of fragmentation or tension. In Schoenberg's atonal period, everything is always important and close to the center, yet at the same time everything is always in motion, in variation.

The third element is the extreme attention that Schoenberg pays to musical syntax, that is to say, to the articulation of the segments, phrases, sequences, and sections in the development of the musical discourse. One can place all these concerns under the generic term employed by Schoenberg: the idea of musical prose. Indeed, the music of Schoenberg is extremely articulated: on one hand, it inherits the categories of traditional language, but on the other hand, it implicitly critiques these categories by employing them according to new expressive requirements. In one sense, we could say that expression and musical time are very much affected by the fact that the traditional constitution and articulation of the phrases are at the same time conserved and transformed by the spirit of expressionism.

To this first set of characteristics must be added all the determinations corresponding to the category of the »musical idea«, a fundamental dimension for Schoenberg's writing. As Carl Dahlhaus has shown, the musical idea in Schoenberg's thinking cannot be identified with a motif, even if the motif occupies an important position in his way of composing: »There is no fixed, recurrent characteristic«, writes Dahlhaus, »which would be common to all forms of what Schoenberg called the musical idea.« [2] Dahlhaus adds that the musical idea must correspond to two obligations: »the requirement of a compelling expressivity at all moments and a seamless consistency of the musical event.« That is to say that, while being completely linked to the necessity of expression, the musical idea

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2 Dahlhaus 1997, p. 170.

also implies formal consequences for the whole piece of music; the musical idea therefore does not exhaust itself in a solely local effect, but is heavily implicated in the construction of the musical work's unity. It is important to add that this is not an abstract unity, but rather one that is dynamic and energetic.

In this sense, this unity constitutes a temporal dimension because time, as an active deployment of the music, is involved here in its very texture. The internal energy of motifs and the energy that projects the musical figures forward are completely linked and inseparable in Schoenberg's writing; this is undoubtedly one key to understanding the invention of dodecaphonism. This is what we can see in several of the numbers from *Pierrot Lunaire*, for instance *Mondfleck*, *Galgenlied*, or *Raub*: a dynamic movement which, on one hand, fully converges with the local images of the text, and on the other hand, presents itself as a dynamic unit that is much more than the simple succession of moments.

Finally, it is necessary to talk about polyphony and the temporal independence of voices in *Pierrot Lunaire*. Musical time is, in Schoenberg's compositions, strongly affected by the density and quality of contrapuntal writing; it is not for nothing that in works of the Second Viennese School, signs for the *Hauptstimme* and *Nebenstimme* are necessary to help the clarity of interpretation. Moreover, it is known that Schoenberg was particularly attentive to relations between the voices. During the atonal period (and even later), the fact that a musical element is called a ›secondary voice‹ does not mean that it is less important, but that its function, its role, is designated in this way.

In 1923, listening to *Pierrot Lunaire*, Boris de Schloezer understood the role of counterpoint in the dynamic texture of this work and its importance for expression. In his description of his listening experience, Schloezer emphasizes that the instrumental parts are not at all an accompaniment of the voice, noting that »the independence of each of the instrumental parts is extreme and seems to be at the limits of anarchy.« But he adds that »the first surprise passes, it is very quickly possible to understand the close relationship between these parts: it is indeed a polyphonic web woven with great dexterity.«[3] By noticing this, Schloezer emphasizes one of the essential qualities of *Pierrot Lunaire*. Schloezer specifies that its extraordinary sound richness, its originality, and its disconcerting diversity of sounds, are the result of the application of the principle of independence of each instrumental part, the fact that each part has its own meaning. The unity of the work seems to result from the free concurrence of the lines, from their free cooperation.

3 De Schloezer 1922.

This contrapuntal, temporal dimension is important because it constitutes both the thickness and the complexion of the music: it has a direct impact on the construction of the sound's color, which is so important in *Pierrot Lunaire*; it actively affects the expressive metamorphoses, constantly renewed within the twenty-one melodramas; and it energizes the unfolding of musical sequences by creating a permanent tension.

To reach more consistent conclusions, we would need to take time to show analytical examples throughout the work; but, at this point, we can formulate the hypothesis that expression, following the expressionist years, acquires a higher degree of eloquence in *Pierrot Lunaire* thanks to the superimposition and interweaving of the multiple temporal dimensions that I have described in this essay. Alban Berg, a pupil of Schoenberg, would follow this direction, especially in writing his two operas. If *Pierrot Lunaire* did not really have a direct descendant, composers as different as Bernd Alois Zimmermann or Elliot Carter would continue this creative reflection on the relations between expression and a multiple temporality.

References

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