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»Atonal« Motifs and the Presentation of the Musical Idea

Approaching a Historically Sensitive Analysis of

Arnold Schönberg's Works between 1909 and 1912

J. Daniel Jenkins

Nothing has conditioned the English-language analytical discourse about Schönberg's atonal period music more than pitch-class sets. In *Remaking the Past*, Joseph Straus defines the pitch-class set as »a *motive* from which many of the identifying characteristics – register, rhythm, order – have been boiled away«. This understanding of atonal motif, which equates it with pitch-class set, remains widely accepted, intimating a type of »common practice« in Schönberg's atonal music, evidenced by the motivic coherence demonstrated in pitch-class set analyses.

This article proposes a different understanding of motif in atonal period works, based on Schönberg's definition in *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* and *Zusammenhang, Kontrapunkt, Instrumentation, Formenlehre*. In these texts he defines the motif as a »rhythmicized phenomenon«, in which »often a contour or shape is significant«. For Schönberg, the motif is the »germ« of the musical idea«. As the article recounts, Schönberg's writings outline three forms of presentation of the musical idea: *Entwicklung* (development), *Abwicklung* (envelopment) and *Aneinander-Reihung* (juxtaposition). Since either Schönberg or his students referred to each method of presentation in reference to a different stage of the atonal period, an analytical approach that focusses on presentation of the idea not only illuminates something about compositional process, but also assumes that the atonal period was one of great variety and experimentation. The article reveals that pitch-class sets and other analytical hardware can serve as tools of interpretation and criticism, aiding in the periodization and pedagogy of this seminal time in music history.

Scattered throughout Schönberg's writings are his thoughts about what he termed the presentation of the musical idea. Principal among these writings are twelve manuscripts that have come to be known as the *Gedanke* manuscripts. In *Gedanke* manuscript no. 2, Schönberg lists three manners of presentation of the musical idea: *Entwicklung* or *entwickelnde Variation* (»development« or »developing variation«); *Abwicklung* (which has been translated as both »unfolding« and »envelopment«); and *Aneinander-Reihung* or *Juxtaposition* (»stringing together« or »juxtaposition«).¹

Throughout his literary legacy, Schönberg refers to and elaborates on these three methods of presentation. He defines *Entwicklung* (development) as »the style of the Viennese Classicists, the style of homophonic-melodic composition«. ² In this style, every composition »raises a question, puts up a problem, which in the course of the piece has to be answered, resolved, carried through«. ³ *Abwicklung* (unfolding or envel-

1 Schoenberg, *The Musical Idea*, p. 379. See also Neff, *Schoenberg as Theorist*, pp. 55–84.

2 Schoenberg, *New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea*, p. 115.

3 Auner, *A Schoenberg Reader*, pp. 326f.

opment) »does not produce its material by development, but by a procedure rather to be called *unraveling*. That is, a basic configuration or combination taken asunder and reassembled in a different order contains everything which will later produce a different sound than that of the original formulation«. ⁴ In the third form of presentation, *Juxtaposition* (juxtaposition), »the segments do not need much of a connective; they can be added by juxtaposition«. ⁵

In the *Gedanke* manuscripts, Schönberg draws his examples primarily from music of the standard repertoire. However, in the op. 22 Radio Address and in other sources, some of which will be mentioned below, he explicitly or implicitly argues that the three methods of presentation also govern compositions in the so-called »atonal« period. ⁶ Therefore, this article considers how the presentation of the musical idea might serve as an analytically profitable context for atonal period music.

In Schönberg's *Formenlehre*, motivic transformation takes place within the context of one of the three methods of presentation of the musical idea. »Everything within a closed composition can be accounted for as originating, derived, and developed from a *basic motive*.« ⁷ »Inasmuch as almost every figure within a piece reveals some relationship to it, the basic motive is often considered the »germ« of the idea.« ⁸ The determination of a motif within a composition is fundamental to understanding its presentation, and thus its form.

The motif is often a short stretch of music, even as seemingly insignificant as a single interval with a characteristic rhythm. »Since the motive [...] is of very short duration, the question arises as to how a piece of music gains extension, how it is to be continued, how further spun out.« ⁹ To create subsequent motif-forms, the motif is repeated. Schönberg reiterates this point: »*The most important characteristic of a motive is its repetition.*« ¹⁰

In *Zusammenhang, Kontrapunkt, Instrumentation, Formenlehre* (hereafter *Zusammenhang*) Schönberg divides motivic repetition into two categories: *exact* and *inexact*.

A motive can be repeated *exactly*

- 1)
 - a) starting from the same tone
 - b) starting from a different tone
 - c) with identical intervals
 - d) with almost the same intervals
 - e) with changed intervals (major, minor, etc.)
- 2)
 - a) in the same rhythm
 - b) in augmentation
 - c) in diminution

4 Schoenberg, *Bach*, p. 397.

5 Schoenberg, *Folkloristic Symphonies*, p. 164

6 Although Schönberg himself rejected »atonal« as a descriptor of his music, it remains a convenient term for Schönberg's compositions that are neither tonal nor twelve-tone serial. This article more or less adopts the definition of the atonal period found in Haimo, *Atonality, Analysis, and the Intentional Fallacy*, p. 167, which includes op. 11, op. 15–22, the last movement of op. 10, and the *Three Pieces for Chamber Orchestra*.

7 Schoenberg, *The Musical Idea*, pp. 134f.

8 Schoenberg, *Fundamentals*, p. 8.

9 Schoenberg, *The Musical Idea*, pp. 152f.

10 Schoenberg, *Zusammenhang*, pp. 30f.

d) in altered rhythm (ornaments, etc.)

A motive can be repeated *not exactly*

- 1) *by chance*
 - a) in free imitation of the intervals (possibly inversion of the whole or of individual parts)
 - b) in free imitation of the rhythms
- 2) variations (formal)
- 3) developing variations.¹¹

Schönberg's dualistic categorization of motivic repetition as either *exact* or *inexact* is borne out in his distinction between *Entwicklung* and *Abwicklung*:

Repetition and motivic variation, leading to the creation of new motif forms which admit of connexion, produce the material of homophonic music. For this reason I call this style the style of *developing variation*. In contrapuntal composition, on the other hand, motivic variation appears but rarely, and then its purpose is never that of producing new motivic forms. The types of motivic variation which are admissible here, such as the *comes* in the fugue, and augmentation, diminution and inversion, do not aim at development but only at producing variety of sound by the changing mutual relationships.¹²

Just as Schönberg distinguishes between *Entwicklung* and *Abwicklung* in terms of motivic repetition, he also makes a clear distinction about how these relate to homophony and polyphony: »The principle of homophonic music is ›*developing variation*‹, that of contrapuntal music is ›*unfolding*‹.¹³ For Schönberg, the difference is bound up with the relationship among the voices of a composition. »In homophonic-harmonic music, the essential content is concentrated in one voice, the principal voice, which implies an inherent harmony.«¹⁴

The contrapuntal idea is distinguished from the homophonic idea by its predisposition toward a different kind of *image production*. In homophonic (main- or upper-voiced) music *images* arise through ›*developing variations*‹, whereby the variation, even if it alters the harmony, still affects the main (or upper) voice almost exclusively. The contrapuntal idea provides images that must differ greatly from one another in the total sound [...] but differ very little from one another in thematic content.¹⁵

»Counterpoint means an ›opposing point‹ whose *combination with the original point* is needed if the idea is to exist.«¹⁶ Therefore, an analysis of developing variation should focus on inexact forms of motivic elaboration in a principal, melodic voice; harmonic voices are considered subsidiary and reactive. Analysis of contrapuntal music, on the other hand, should focus on exact forms of repetition within and between at least two voices of equal weight.

In Schönberg's *Formenlehre*, the distinction between homophony and polyphony – thus between *Entwicklung* (developing variation) and *Abwicklung* (unfolding) – is inexact.

11 Ibid., pp. 36f.

12 Schoenberg, *Preliminary Exercises*, p. 155.

13 Schoenberg, *The Musical Idea*, pp. 136f.

14 Schoenberg, *Fundamentals*, p. 3.

15 Schoenberg, *The Musical Idea*, pp. 110f.

16 Schoenberg, *Linear Counterpoint*, p. 289.

trically bound up with his conception of music history: »[W]hile Bach still was living a new musical style came into being out of which there later grew the style of the Viennese Classicists, the style of homophonic-melodic composition, or, as I call it, the style of Developing Variation.«¹⁷ He explains the change from unfolding to developing variation thus:

If, in a given period, each participating voice had been elaborated with respect to its content, its formal balance and its relation to other voices, as part of a contrapuntal combination, its share of melodic eloquence would be less than if it were the main voice. Again, there might then arise in younger composers a longing to get rid of all these complexities. They then might refuse to deal with combinations and elaborations of subordinate voices. Thus the desire to elaborate only one voice and reduce the accompaniment to that minimum required by comprehensibility would again be the ruling fashion.¹⁸

Schönberg's own writings include relatively little about the specifics of pitch treatment in the atonal period. One exception is the op. 22 Radio Address in which he describes how an initial motive of a minor third and minor second undergoes transformation of order, contour and other changes to produce subsequent motif statements.¹⁹ Because the discussion here implies developed repetition, many scholars have evoked the authority of Schönberg's comments to suggest that developing variation provides an analytical framework for motivic transformation in atonal period works in general.²⁰

In his book *Remaking the Past*, Joseph Straus focusses on Schönberg's phrase »fixed motivic unit«²¹ from the op. 22 Radio Address. Straus determines that even as a motif develops, something about it remains the same, and he provides an analytical approach that can account for both the »fixed« and the »variable« facets of a motif. He asserts that a pitch-class set is »a motive from which many of the identifying characteristics – register, rhythm, order – have been boiled away. In this more general sense pitch-class set analysis *is* motivic analysis«.²² He demonstrates the application of this idea to the analysis of the opening of Schönberg's op. 11,1 (Fig. 1).²³ Straus finds that set class 3-3 [014] occurs in many configurations on the surface of this excerpt: [B,G#,G], the first three notes in the melody; [F,E,D^b], the three notes on the treble clef staff in m. 3; and [A,B^b,D^b], the chord on the second beat of m. 3. Although these three-note groupings may not appear to have any relation to each other, they are each a member of set class 3-3 [014], revealing, in Straus's view, some »concealed« connection among them. In other words, although they are inexact repetitions on the surface of the music, their set-class designation remains consistent.

17 Schönberg, *New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea*, p. 115.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 115f.

19 Schönberg, *Analysis of the Four Orchestral Songs*.

20 See, for example, Haimo, *Atonality, Analysis, and the Intentional Fallacy* and Boss, *Schoenberg's Op. 22 Radio Talk*.

21 The original German notion is »ständige, motivartige Figur«.

22 Straus, *Remaking the Past*, p. 24.

23 All musical figures are used by the kind permission of Mr. Lawrence Schoenberg.



Figure 1: Schönberg, *Drei Klavierstücke* op. 11,1, mm. 1-3.

One of Schönberg's atonal period compositions where pitch-class set equivalence appears to model motivic transformation quite obviously is *Nacht* from *Pierrot Lunaire*. Figure 2 shows a typical passage from this movement, the piano part of mm. 19-20.1. Like the excerpt of op.11,1 shown in Figure 1, the surface of *Nacht* includes many statements of set class 3-3: in fact, any three contiguous pitches in Figure 2 form a statement of this set class.



Figure 2: Schönberg, *Pierrot Lunaire* op. 21, no. 8: *Nacht*, mm. 19-20.1, piano part.

In contrast to the motif in op. 11,1 which repeats *inexactly*, the motive statements in *Nacht* emerge from *exact* forms of repetition, such as those found in Schönberg's examples of *exact* repetition from *Fundamentals* (Fig. 3). In unordered pitch-class space, there is no distinction between the members of set class 3-3 in op. 11,1 and *Nacht*. With order and register under consideration, however, it becomes clear that the motifs from *Nacht* involve specific versions of set class 3-3: the interval sequence $\langle +3, -4 \rangle$ (left hand) and its retrograde inversion $\langle -4, +3 \rangle$ (right hand).²⁴ Since the relationship between any motif statement and any other is either transposition or retrograde inversion in pitch space, the passage features *exact* forms of repetition exclusively.

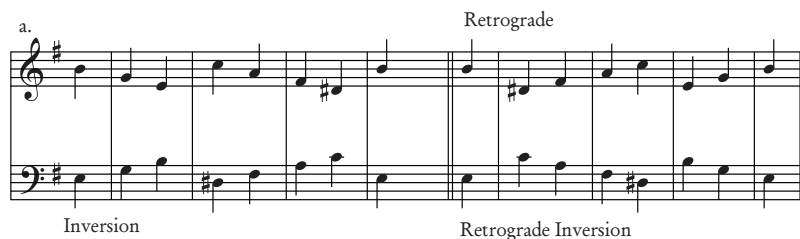


Figure 3: Schönberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, Example 14, p. 11.

²⁴ The pitches that result from the interval sequence $\langle +3, -4 \rangle$ form a retrograde inversion of the pitches that result from the interval sequence $\langle -4, +3 \rangle$.

In his essay *The Young and I*, Schönberg referred to *Nacht* as a contrapuntal study.²⁵ The excerpt in Figure 2 exemplifies the contrapuntal nature of *Nacht* because each statement of the motif is counterpointed with an exact repetition of itself. Therefore, the proliferation of *exact* forms of repetition prove less than incidental: they are in keeping with Schönberg's conception of *Abwicklung* (unfolding), just as the *inexact* forms of repetition in op. 11,1 are in keeping with his conception of *Entwicklung* (developing variation).

While pitch-class set theory still provides an invaluable, systematic categorization of the twelve-tone universe, the focus on unordered pitch-class sets glosses over the important differences between the members of set class 3-3 in these two examples. Incorporating pitch space and order allows the analyst to make distinctions between *exact* and *inexact* motivic repetition when necessary. Or, put another way, the method of presentation at work within a given musical composition requires nuanced analytical decisions.

For all of their differences, developing variation and unfolding both embrace motivic connectedness. Such is not the case in regards to the third method of presentation, juxtaposition. Juxtaposition eschews the logical flow of musical material that Schönberg so highly valued in developing variation and unfolding.²⁶ Motivic units are simply »strung together«. Although scholars have placed most of their analytical focus on developing variation, Schönberg explicitly evokes juxtaposition in his own discussions of atonal period music.

Although I did not dwell very long in this style, it taught me two things: first, to formulate ideas in an aphoristic manner, which did not require continuations out of formal reasons; secondly, to link ideas together without the use of formal connective, merely by juxtaposition.²⁷

Analyses of op. 11,1 and *Nacht* and the methodologies that analysts employ often focus on motivic cohesion. There are fewer analyses of pieces such as op. 11,3, op. 16,5 and *Erwartung*. Perhaps it is because these works evidence juxtaposition as a means of presentation that they resist methodologies that value motivic consistency or logical motivic transformation. Whatever methodologies we employ in the analysis of atonal period music, if we seek for our analyses to model motivic treatment, we must consider all three forms of presentation as possible contexts that serve to inform and condition our methodological choices.

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25 Schönberg, *The Young and I*, p. 94.

26 See Schönberg's analysis of *The Merry Widow Waltz* in *The Musical Idea*, p. 306.

27 Schönberg, *A Self-Analysis*, p. 78.

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