

Some Formal Devices in Expressionistic Works

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One of the main aims of musicological research is to arrive at clear and unequivocal definitions of styles. The difficulties, however, arise from several directions. One of them is inherent in the problem itself, inasmuch as one can not grasp in verbal idioms what is properly expressed only in the idiom of musical sounds. All that one can hope for is to circumscribe a style to the extent that other styles are excluded by the formulations. Other difficulties arise from the handling of the problem rather than from the problem itself, i.e. from the way the question is put. For instance, the indiscriminate transfer of conceptions from other fields of spiritual activity to the field of music is very likely to cause inadequacy and confusion, if the parallellism is carried too far. The term Baroque originates in painting and architecture, the term Romanticism in literature. When terms like these are going to be applied in the field of musical styles one should take into careful consideration how far the parallellism thus presupposed and implied actually goes.

One of the most badly treated of styles is the so-called expressionistic style – also this term is borrowed from “outside”. Few authors have dared to attack it from an analytical point of view, and those who have, show more concern with enumerating what it is not than with stating what it is, which of course is a most dissatisfying means towards an analytical approach.

Two of the most thorough-going attempts at arriving at a definition of the expressionistic style of music, known to me, are the article *Expressionismus* in MGG by Wörner, Mannzen and Hofmann, and the American doctoral dissertation *Expressionism in Music* by R. Wiedman. It is beyond the scope of this study to go into a detailed criticism of these texts; however, a feature that has struck me in both is the abundance of negative determinations, stating what expressionism is not. Especially the word “distortion” plays a large role. Of course it is highly negative and dependant on conceptions not applicable to expressionism: something must have been whole, before it was distorted. Everything is claimed to be distorted; the melodic lines, the harmonic functions, the dynamic grades, the rhythmical flow, the continuity of sound, and – most suspicious of all – the form. Distorted, apparently, in relation to the way in which these elements were functioning in music prior to expressionism. What one obtains by such a statement is, first, to say next to nothing about expressionism. Secondly, one introduces – willingly or not – an aesthetic evaluation in disfavour of the music, by implying that it is en-

Denne artikel er det let omarbejdede manuskript til en forelæsning holdt på *University of California Los Angeles* d. 7. april 1959.

tirely different from the good old music which we love so much; and therefore, in the third place, one cuts off any idea of developmental connection between expressionism and previous styles, which is basically incorrect.

A more useful conception appears if expressionism is considered as an intense development of tendencies inherent in German and Austrian music since the days of Beethoven, tendencies which perhaps could be summed up by the term *espressivo-tendenza*. It is even not difficult to follow and describe the growing acuity of *espressivo* which takes place during the 19th century, and finally leads to the abolition of functional harmony, a step which, with some reservation, may be looked upon as a kind of threshold to expressionism, at any rate the kind of expressionism found in the Vienna school of this century.

A salient feature in this music, i.e. the atonal, non-dodecaphonic works by Schoenberg, Webern, Berg and others, is the suspicious shortness of the musical forms, especially those which must "stand on their own feet" without the support of a text. But even this shortness is explicable from the view-point of an acute poignancy of *espressivo*. It is part of the aesthetic code of this style that any statement loses some of its freshness and startling poignancy when it is repeated. Therefore, in order to maintain the level of incandescent *espressivo*, any kind of repetition must be avoided, even the slightest and least recognizable one. Here I am consciously leaving out the expressiveness of the *ostinato*, leading towards extacy, which of course would have to be thoroughly considered in a fuller discussion of the *espressivo-tendenza*.

Supposing that the slightest reminder of repetition has to be avoided if the utmost poignancy of *espressivo* has to be maintained, it is obvious that a whole set of commonly used formal devices vanishes from the reach of the composer. Thus a problem of form arises. Form in the traditional sense mainly rests on recognition of something previously heard; and if now everything that happens in melody, harmony, pitch range, dynamics, sound, rhythm etc. has to display the same startling freshness all the time, it seems that formal organization has become impossible.

Such considerations can be taken as a possible explanation of the remarkable shortness of the instrumental pieces under consideration. A musical course which is so short that one can take one comprehensive view of the whole of it seemingly does not need subdivision into units constituting a formal organization. For a closer examination, however, such an explanation seems hardly satisfactory. First, it must be questioned whether any music however short and condensed, can exist and create tension in the minds of listeners, if it is entirely amorphous. Secondly, it would suppose a complete break to take place on the transition from atonal expressionism to dodecaphony, which is so highly organized, a break of conception that is contradicted by the stepwise developments of the three composers, Schoenberg, Webern and Berg.

A study of the inner structure of atonal expressionistic pieces of music seems to reveal a closer connection between these and the later dodecaphonic works than generally assumed. In order to support this view, and in order to get some insight into the particularities of the suspicious shortness of the forms governing those pieces some remarks shall be made on Webern's Bagatelle for string quartet op. 9 no. 4 and on Schoenberg's piano piece op. 19 no. 1. They are among the shortest and most condensed pieces of music existing, the textures are consistently atonal, and if any music conforms with our concepts of expressionism this music does.

What put me on the track was an article in the second issue of *die Reihe* (Universal, Wien, 1955), the first comprehensive monograph of Webern. Whatever one may think of the tendency of this monograph the very fact that it was the first one, and that it goes deeply into analytical details bestows upon it a specific importance which will not fade, even when other, perhaps more equanimous, monographs about this exciting composer will have been written. In his article "Weberns organische Chromatik" the Belgian composer *Henry Pousseur* makes some very interesting observations concerning the structural elements in Webern's musical texture as a whole, and especially in the first of the bagatelles op. 9. His problem, in short, is this: there is an extraordinarily poignant personal-stylistic stamp in all of Webern's music, whether it is vocal or instrumental, whether dodecaphonic or non-dodecaphonic. Therefore one can not satisfactorily define Webern's musical style in terms of dodecaphony. But what is it then that makes it so distinctive? The main part of his answer to this question is contained in what he calls Webern's "organische Chromatik", his organic chromaticism. One aspect of this phenomenon, which he demonstrates by way of analysing the first of the Six Bagatelles, happened to strike me as important, not only with regard to Webern, but with regard to the Viennese expressionism as a whole.

Pousseur states that the music is truly atonal, in the sense that it is actually based upon the well-tempered chromatic scale. Consequently the minor second is the most important interval; but its cardinal importance has nothing in common with the leading-tone quality of the minor second in music governed by the principles of functional harmony. Whether the half-tone step is diatonic or chromatic is of no importance, whether at the distance of a second, a seventh, a ninth, a fourteenth or more is of minor importance; what matters is the direct or indirect relationship of closeness in the half-tone interval which serves as a structural tie by way of establishing coherence horizontally as well as vertically. And he endeavours to show how op. 9 no. 1 can be analyzed on basis of this conception of the half-tone relationship, how the tones of the whole piece are joined together and separated by the functioning of this relationship. Whether Pousseur's viewpoint can afford a method for an all-over analysis I shall not say for sure; but it struck me as a fresh and inspiring one when I started to look deeper into the organization of the Webern pieces.

As for the fourth piece, one of the most salient features is the separation, or *differentiation*, of elements, so characteristic of Webern's technique of composition. In this case it especially affects rhythm and sound-quality. Although all four instruments are muted they are distinctly separated in sound. In the first three bars the *nel modo ordinario* of the leading melody of the II violin is set against *am Steg*, *pizz* and *am Griffbrett* in the three other instruments. In the middle section no melody is heard, and nobody plays *ordinario*; but a new sound quality, the *harmonic*, is introduced by the viola; and the two *pizzicatos*, the low one in the 'cello and the high one in the II violin, represent different sound qualities. In the last section the harmonic is applied for melody playing, thus replacing the *ordinario* of the first section; *am Steg* and *pizz* are now in II violin and viola, and a new sound quality is introduced by the 'cello playing short harmonics staccato *an der Spitze*. Thus the piece starts out with four different sound qualities, each section adds a new one, and any sound quality is only played by one of the four instruments at a time.

Rhythmically the same differentiation can be observed. In the first section the sustained note of the II violin stands out against sixteenths, sixteenth-triplets and dotted sixteenths in the other instruments. The middle section introduces a new aspect of the triple rhythm, undisturbed but for one short chord set against it in the middle of the section. And the last section introduces the new thirty-second beat in the 'cello, set against the sixteenths and sixteenth-triplets of viola and II violin, and the more freely designed rhythm of the I violin which is, however, dominated by the dotted sixteenths of the first section. At the end of the section the rhythmical designs are dissolved, thus forming a cadential effect very common to expressionistic music. Furthermore one notices that the middle section is differentiated from the outer ones by way of its own meter, $\frac{2}{8}$. It is clear that the piece represents a lied-form A – B – A1. What is predominant in the first section is suppressed in the second, and recapitulated in a new way in the third section.

But still, the cohesion of the music has not yet been explained. All this differentiation rather confirms than does away with the assumption that distortion is the right word to be used and is the common denominator of this kind of music. As a formal device of cohesion one might point out the half-tone interval in the way Pousseur applied it in his analysis. However it seems to me that the basic structure of the piece is rather a compound of two intervals, viz. perfect fourth and major seventh. The three first notes that are heard, B flat – E flat – A, form this structure; the B flat in II violin forms the same structure together with the two first notes of the viola part, E – B, and furthermore the E of the viola plus the E flat and A of the I violin forms the same structure. The three notes of the viola, E – B – C, produce another aspect of the perfect fourth/major seventh structure; the same is heard in the retrograde inversion in the three first notes of the 'cello part, D – C sharp – F sharp; a third aspect is displayed by the C sharp – F sharp – F of the 'cello; and again the C sharp – F sharp plus G of the II violin form a fourth aspect of the interval-structure.

The two intervals can be combined vertically in only four ways. If the fourth remains constant and the position of the seventh is changed the combinations will be like fig. 1 a. If the opposite procedure is preferred the combinations of fig. 1 b



will be the result. But of course the two sets of combinations are congruent. Horizontally the four combinations can be spread out in six different ways, which makes 24 horizontal three-tone groups. But this number is reduced by the fact that they turn out to consist of six basic formulas plus their mirror derivations in inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion. In this analysis, however, this consideration of the horizontal shall be left out, since it adds only details and nothing substantially new to the analysis.

Fig. 2 shows an attempt at demonstrating the structural functions of the perfect fourth/major seventh structure. It is seen that each note is tied to two neighbouring notes, in the same part or in another, by at least one of the four combinations; but most notes are tied by two or three combinations, and a few even by four. Everything is closely knit together by structural ties that can hardly be

regarded as weaker or less significant than the ties previously furnished by the structural functions of tonal harmony.

Fig. 2.

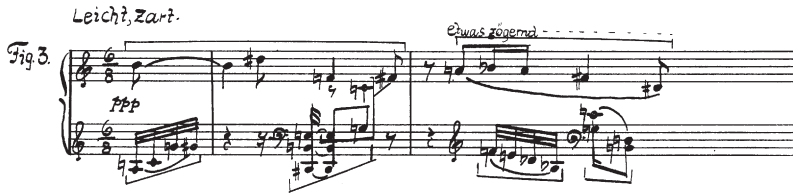
Sehr langsam $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 60$

It is evident that this type of organization foretells a good deal about the ten years later to come dodecaphony. Therefore, the next step will naturally be to look into the works of the creator of dodecaphony, Arnold Schoenberg, for similar procedures.

In 1911, two years before Webern wrote his Bagatelles for string quartet, Schoenberg composed his Six Short Pieces for Piano op. 19. In the first of them one can clearly observe the same kind of formal device as in the Webern piece just analyzed, although there is quite a difference in the application of it in the works of the two distinctly different composers. The basic structure seems to be the initial figure in the left hand, A – C – G – G sharp, a compound of minor third, perfect fifth, and minor second. The structure consisting of three intervals, instead of two, complicates the formal aspects considerably. In this case there are not four, but 32 vertical combinations, not to speak of the horizontal ones. I am not going to enumerate all of them, but I shall point out some of the most obvious applications of the basic structure.

It is found in the right hand melody of the first bar, B – D sharp – F – F sharp, and in the left hand accompaniment, D sharp – B – E – G. The C introduced together with the G combines the two hands, forming the basic structure together

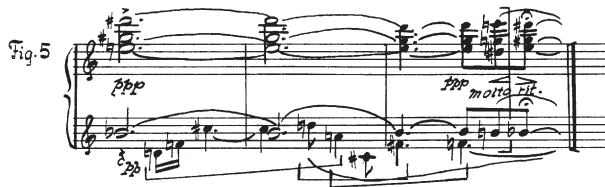
with the G, the preceding E, and the following F sharp in the right hand. In the second bar the right hand melody as well as the thirty-second note figure and the following figure in the left hand all form aspects of the same structure (fig. 3).



Especially interesting is the right hand figure of bar 8 (fig. 4). Aspects of the



basic structure are formed by notes 1–4, 2–5, 3–6, and by notes 5–8 irrespective of which note is considered the final one, F or B. However, there are parts of this composition where the basic structure is not applied in any strict manner, where rather one or two of the intervals are selected and played with in a fantasia-like manner. It is also worth noticing that the cadential chord, B flat – E – G sharp – D sharp, introduced in bar 15 and kept throughout, deviates from the basic structure, whereas the chord next to the last in bar 17 does form the structure, moreover in a way which almost suggests what was formerly known as a dominant chord with quadruple leading-tone.



It appears that the basic structure in this case is to be interpreted as a dynamic element of tension which promotes and agitates the musical process with varying intensity throughout the piece, and is finally resolved in an almost cadential manner. But it is not a resolution into a state of relaxation, rather is it into a state of indecision. So we have encountered two strikingly different applications of the same basic principle in the two works by Schoenberg and Webern, inasmuch as in the case of Webern the basic structure was not applied as a dynamic element of form, but obviously as a static one. This comparison of the application of the formal devices in the two works explains satisfactorily and on a purely technical level a good deal of the great difference between the two composers, which is so easily felt, but so difficult to define. And it neatly corresponds to the two composers' different approaches to the later twelve-tone technique.

The way of analysis applied in this study does not pretend to represent the only analytical approach to this music, but it does pretend to represent one useful way of approach. It may contribute to doing away with the old misconception that expressionistic music is inaccessible to analysis on a purely technical level; and it may help to clarify certain aesthetic aspects as well.

It is inherent in the spiritual attitude of expressionism that formal devices should not be clearly recognizable from the sounding surface of the music; for expressionism is to a large extent an adventure into the subconscious. This is seemingly unpredictable, but behind the fantastic and confusing appearances of subconscious forces are rules as strict as any, governing minutely every procedure. If expressionistic music is somnambulistic and traumatic it must also bear the characteristics of dream and trauma, which is cast-iron compulsion – the more so the more unbridled the outward appearance seems to be. It may, nay it must be difficult to detect, just because it is hidden, and be difficult to realize, because formal devices working on this deeper level have other functions to fulfill than formal devices on the upper level, on the surface.

There is hardly any doubt that a careful study of the structural forces in the expressionistic, pre-dodecaphonic music can be highly instrumental in casting a new and brighter light on the dodecaphonic technique, how it came, how it functions, and which possibilities it implicates. Moreover, it may well be that a serious approach to the problems presented by this music could furnish the inspiration to a creatively fruitful appreciation of other music as well.