

Schoenberg Is Dead¹

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 That proposition could easily be turned around to say that it manifests the most demanding ambition where the most outdated symptoms appear.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 discov-

¹ The present translation differs considerably—most notably in its greater length—from the version of this essay which appeared in *Score* (London) for May 1951.—TRANS.

eries 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 *Kammersymphonie*; 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

Pierre Boulez - from "Notes of an Apprenticeship" (New York, A. A. Knopf, 1968)

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 esotericizing 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.)

It even seems that in the sequences of Schoenberg's creations that began with the Serenade, opus 24, he found himself outridden by his own discovery; the no man's land of rigor can be located in the Five Pieces for piano, opus 23.

The last point of equilibrium, opus 23 clearly is the inauguration of serial writing, into which the fifth piece—a waltz—introduces us: each of us may be permitted to meditate on that very "expressionistic" meeting of the first dodecaphonic composition with a type-product of German romanticism ("Prepare oneself for it by serious immobilities," Satie might have said).

And there we are, in the presence of a new organization of the sound-world. A still-rudimentary organization that will be codified with the Suite for Piano, opus 25, and the Wind Quintet, opus 26, and will attain conscious-schematization in the Variations for Orchestra, opus 31.

That exploration of the dodecaphonic realm may be bitterly held against Schoenberg, for it went off in the wrong direction so persistently that it would be hard to find an equally mistaken perspective in the entire history of music.

I do not make this assertion gratuitously. Why?

I do not forget that establishment of the series came, with Schoenberg, from ultrathematization in which, as I said above, thematic intervals could be considered absolute intervals released from all rhythmic or expressive obligation. (The third piece of opus 23, developing on a succession of five notes, is particularly significant in this respect.)

It behooves me to acknowledge that this ultrathematization remains the underlying idea of the series, which is only its purified outcome. In Schoenberg's serial works, furthermore, the confusion between theme and series is explicit enough to show his impotence to foresee the sound-world that the series demands. Dodecaphonism, then, consists of only a rigorous law for controlling chromatic writing; playing only the role of

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-universe he had just left behind, works in which the new technique 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 structures? 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 between the serial forms, properly speaking, and the derived structures was generally absent from Schoenberg's preoccupations.

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 produced between infrastructures related to the tonal phenomenon 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 organization inherent in the new language. The two worlds are incompatible, 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 misunderstanding. A warped "romantic-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 *Nebstimme*). 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 Schoenberg's pen, in fact, there abounded—not without producing irritation—the clichés of redoubtably stereotyped writing representing, there too, the most ostentatious and obsolete romanticism. 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 derisively poor—call it ugly—rhythmic, in which tricks varying the classic rhythmic 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 demagnetization appeared? How could we, unless with a supplementary—and superfluous—measure, judge such lack of comprehension 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 intervals, 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 disaffections 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 *œuvre*. 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 Walthalla. (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 com-

promise. 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.

Incipit

As for Webern, the epiphany can be pinpointed by wiping clean the face of ignorance, the privilege of a discrete but effective curse. Although he seems to be the sharpest criterion of contemporary music, his *oeuvre* carries with it risks that it is difficult—or impossible—to conceal.

On the road to communication, that *oeuvre* has met with two bristling obstacles. The first is paradoxical, being its technical perfection; the second is more banal, being the novelty of the transmissible message. As a result, the reproach, a very gratuitous defensive reflex of exacerbated cerebralism: the eternal trial always lost by those who attempt it, but which is always essayed nonetheless.

One is only beginning to perceive the novelty of the perspectives that Webern's *oeuvre* has opened out in the realm of contemporary music—to perceive it with a certain stupefaction, given the work accomplished. That *oeuvre* has become the threshold despite all the confusion with respect to what was too quickly called "Schoenberg and his two disciples."

Whence Webern's privileged position among the three Viennese?

Whereas Schoenberg and Berg allied themselves to the decadence of the great German romantic stream and terminated it with works like *Pierrot lunaire* and *Wozzeck* in the most luxuriantly flamboyant style, Webern—by way of Debussy, one could say—reacted in the direction of rehabilitating the power of sound and against all inherited rhetoric.

In fact, only Debussy can be compared to Webern as having

a like tendency to destroy the idea of preexisting formal organization for a work, a like recourse to the beauty of sound for its own sake, a like elliptical pulverization of the language. And though one could assert that in a certain sense—oh, Mallarmé—Webern was obsessed with formal purity to the point of silence, he carried that obsession to a degree of tension which music had not previously known.

Again, one could reproach Webern for an excess of scholasticism: a reproach that would be justified if precisely that scholasticism had not been the means for investigating newly discovered domains. One should note a lack of ambition in the sense in which that word has generally been understood: no large works or important formations or big forms; but that lack of ambition was his most ascetic courage. And even if one thinks that his cerebralism excluded all sensibility, it will be good to see that his sensibility was so abruptly new that its appearance ran all the risks of appearing cerebral.

As I have mentioned Webern's silence, let me add that there lies one of the most irritating scandals of his work. One of the most difficult truths to make clear is that music is not merely "the art of sound," that it could be defined much better as a counterpoint of sound and silence. The only, but unique, innovation that Webern brought to the field of rhythm, that conception in which sound is linked to silence in a precise organization for an exhaustive efficacy of the auditive power. The sound-tension is enriched by real breathing, comparable only to what Mallarmé brought to the poem.

In the presence of a magnetic field of such attraction, faced with so sharp a poetic force, it is difficult to see any but the immediate consequences. The confrontation with Webern is an exalting danger, even in the sense that it can be a dangerous exaltation. He was the third person of the Viennese Trinity; may we nonetheless keep ourselves from assimilating him to the famous tongues of fire: comprehension is never that surreptitiously swift.

Some Éclairs

I have said that Webern is the threshold: let us have the clairvoyance to consider him as such. Let us accept that anonymity of power destroyed and impossibilities abolished. Henceforth we shall cover his face, for he is not at all required to give himself up to hypnosis. Nevertheless, music is not ready to immerse that face in oblivion.