

SCHOENBERG'S PIANO SONATA

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Arnold Schoenberg, of course, did not write a piano sonata. At any rate, none of his works for piano bears this title. As I have suggested elsewhere, however, sonata form was much in his thoughts as he wrote the piano pieces of opus 23,¹ and one of his last two pieces for solo piano, written five years later, is a sonata movement which should stand as a model of the integration of twelve-note technique and classical form. When Pierre Boulez, in 1952, famously condemned Schoenberg for using the old forms instead of inventing new ones that were derived entirely from serialism, he might have taken just a moment to consider the ways in which the old form is articulated in opus 33a and been ever so slightly more charitable, for in this sonata movement, as in certain pieces of op. 23, themes and sections are defined and distinguished from each other in ways that have meaning only in relation to the twelve-note technique: though the form is an old one, the several parts are defined by reference to possibilities offered by the new method.

The structure of the opus 33 movement is very top-heavy; in this one is reminded of the second piece of opus 23, in which the second theme, which is repeated in the exposition, is missing altogether from the reprise, though the earlier piece has a long coda which compensates for the compression of the recapitulation. Here in opus 33a, all the exposition materials are touched upon, though briefly, in the recapitulation, and the coda consists of only two bars in which two of the four 'tonic' row forms (the prime and the inversion a fourth above) are given one last time, as a cadence.

The length of the exposition is partly owing to a leisurely presentation of the first theme, in which the theme is suggested, then built up through a series of variations over a period of nine bars, reaching its definitive form only in bars 10 and 11, where all four of the 'tonic' row forms are presented – as will happen again in the recapitulation, where the preamble is omitted. (Dramatically it must be omitted, for the same reason presumably that composers beginning with Beethoven increasingly omitted the development–recapitulation repeat: directed dramatic action, whether the development of conflicts inherent in the exposition to a point of climax and its resolution, or the building up of an idea from its bare bones into a fully-fledged theme, works only once.) There are two further themes in this short sonata movement (40 bars, less than two minutes), and these are also presented at some length in the exposition and given a curtailed and businesslike treatment when they return. None of the three themes is presented in a completely straightforward way first time round.

In character the three themes bear the classical relationship to each other. The piece opens *piano*, but when the first theme finally reaches its definitive form, the dynamic has reached *mezzo forte*, the range and density are quite extended, and the music is vigorously articulated

¹ Kathryn Bailey, 'Composing with Tones': A Musical Analysis of Schoenberg's Op. 23 Pieces for Piano (London: RMA Monograph, 2001).

(*tenuto-staccato* [always a somewhat puzzling indication] and heavily accented *staccato*), making this an appropriately dramatic theme. The second theme, which begins at bar 14, is the customary lyric theme – to be played *piano* and *cantabile*, with a melody in the left hand accompanied by a murmuring, mostly static right hand – and, as expected, offers considerable contrast to the first. The third theme provides any energy and drama that may have been felt missing in the first: it is marked 'heftiger' and is to be played *forte* and *martellato*. At bar 19 this theme crashes violently in to the second theme, of which we have heard only one phrase, interrupting and dislodging it. After two bars of this new theme, however, the second theme in turn interrupts the interruption and finishes: we hear its second phrase (bars 21–23²), in which the roles of the two hands are reversed, and a long liquidation (bars 22³–25¹), during which the theme dissolves and comes to a cadence. Once the second theme has played itself out, the third theme, the end of which was pre-empted by the return of the second, surfaces once again and reaches its own conclusion. The alternation of second and third themes is somewhat reminiscent of Brahms, who occasionally allowed slow movement and scherzo to alternate in a single movement.

The exposition, in spite of its brevity (it has taken just 26 bars), contains a large amount of material, and, because of the ways in which the themes are presented (the first evolving, the other two alternating), one has the impression of length in all of them. The reprise, which dispenses with both the evolution of theme 1 and the interruptions and alternation of themes 2 and 3, takes just under seven bars.

Opus 33a is built on a hexachordally combinatorial row and is surely a model of what Schoenberg intended combinatoriality to be. Its untransposed prime row is combinatorial with I_5 , and only the four rows at this level (P_0 , I_5 , R_0 and RI_5) are used in the outer sections. Other transpositions and incomplete rows are used only in the development section, where traditionally modulation and fragmentation would be expected to occur. There is no attempt to mimic the classical tonic–dominant conflict between first and second themes through the use of different row transpositions; all themes are built from the same four rows.

The themes are distinguished from each other, however, not only in character but also in another way, which is peculiar to twelve-note writing, and I see this as a significant aspect of the piece. A particular segmentation of the row is specific to each of the themes. In the first theme the rows are always divided into tetrachords. The opening of the piece, which has attracted much attention because of its symmetry,² and the fully-developed first theme in bars 10–11, are the most obvious examples of this division, consisting, as they do, of series of four-note chords (two series, overlapping, in bars 10–11); see Ex. 1. But all the (developing) variations in between (in bars 3–5, 6^{1-4a} , 6^{4b} –7, 8–9) segment the row in the same way, tetrachords being isolated in some way in each (by the last note of a group of four being lengthened or followed by a rest, as Milton Babbitt would do many years later in the first of his *Three Compositions for Piano* of 1947–8). This first-theme segmentation is particularly interesting because, since the row is hexachordally combinatorial, presenting it as a group of four-note chords compromises the effect of the combinatoriality. (When two rows are played at the same time we do not hear twelve discrete pitches and then the same again; there is a muddle at the centre.) In general Op.33a

² See Edward T. Cone, 'Beyond analysis', *Perspectives of New Music* (1967), repr. in Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone, *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory* (New York: Norton, 1972), pp. 72–90.

can be seen as a textbook example of hexachordal combinatoriality, yet the idea of distinguishing themes through differing segmentation was obviously sufficiently important to Schoenberg that he was willing to sacrifice the effect of the combinatoriality to a degree.

Example 1

The second theme takes full advantage of the row's particular combinatoriality: this theme progresses in hexachords, many note-repetitions occurring within each hexachord but no note from the first hexachord of either row recurring once the second hexachord has been reached. The first phrase – the music that is heard before the interruption – goes through one complete row in the right hand (P_0) and another in the left (I_5); see Ex. 2. The second phrase, which interrupts the third theme at bar 21, presents the same two rows again, but with their hexachords in reverse order (notes 7–12 followed by 1–6), again with repetitions that do not violate hexachordal boundaries. At the recapitulation of this theme (in bars 35 and 36), we hear two short phrases of only one bar each, the melody in the right hand in the first and in the left hand in the second. Here the other two tonic rows – R_0 and R_5 – are used, the reverse of the original two. Perhaps this can be seen as a passing nod to the classical requirement that the second theme should not reappear in the same key in the recapitulation, though the reason for the difference of course does not hold, since first and second themes use the same rows in the exposition.

Example 2

The energetic third theme which breaks in upon the *cantabile* theme halfway through uses, appropriately, trichordal segmentation, presenting the rows (R_0 and RI_5) in a combination of three-note chords and groups of three notes in which one is played alone and the other two follow together, or vice versa; see Ex. 3. The type of segmentation used by each of the three themes is particularly apt to that theme: the lyrical theme divides the row in to the longest segments, while the disjunct third theme uses the shortest segments. The first theme falls somewhere between these two, both in character and in the way in which the row is used.

Example 3

R_0

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9

(11 and 12 of both rows are delayed until reappearance of this theme in bar 25)

10 →

heftiger

f martellato

poco rit.

RI_5

2	5	2
3	4	3
1	6	1
5	7	9
4	8	
6		

10 - - - *

The development ingeniously combines many aspects of the exposition, as a well-behaved development should. It begins with several independent hexachords – independent in so far as each represents the first half of a row of which there is no second half, but not truly independent, as each is heard against the first hexachord of the row with which it is combinatorially related, this providing the six notes of the missing second hexachord. The first of these is hexachord *a* of I_7 ; hexachord *a* of P_2 appears immediately, above and overlapping with it. The next pair is transpositionally, though not combinatorially, related to these two: hexachords *a* of P_7 and I_0 . (Since this row is combinatorial at only one level [it is composed from a semi-combinatorial set], the combinatorial chain must be broken in order for ‘modulation’ to occur.) Once these four single *a* hexachords have been presented, Schoenberg goes back over the same territory, giving whole rows: I_7 and P_2 , followed by I_0 and P_7 , this latter pair twice and then in reverse (RI_0 and R_7). This takes him to the fermata which marks the end of the development.

As is often the case in Schoenberg, this development seems to have tonal resonances. Since the combinatorial chain had to be broken at the development, the choice of rows at transpositions 0, 2 and 7 was not inevitable (as the choice of rows elsewhere in the piece was, if combinatoriality was to be maintained). Why did Schoenberg choose these particular levels? These transpositions outline (in theory only) the I-II-V progression that underlies the end of so many tonal developments, and the possibility that this might have been in Schoenberg’s mind is lent some support by the bass progression F-F-F-B flat in bars 23–32 (though the C that would suggest II appears only at the top of the texture in the two appearances of P_2 , never in the bass). This tonal argument, however, has no validity within a wider perspective: though the recapitulation begins on an exposed B flat, B flat is not used as a tonic note for the piece as a whole. (B flat is hidden in the middle of the

texture at both the beginning and end of the movement, and its most prominent role is as the pedal note sustained throughout the first two bars of the second theme, where the tonic should not appear.) However tenuous the connexion with tonal progression may be in this instance, the fact that such considerations were still a part of Schoenberg's way of thinking (and composing) is clear in his description to Zemlinsky of the opening of the first movement of his op. 29 Suite. 'The first movement of my Suite begins thus: four six-note chords, I-IV-V-I.'³ These four chords all have the same intervallic content; when the last three are compared with the first, they represent transpositions 2, 4 and 9. However, Schoenberg has distributed the notes within them differently so that the bass notes describe the progression E flat-A flat-B flat-E flat.

The materials of Op.33a's three themes can be recognized in the development by the ways in which the rows are segmented. The single hexachords at the beginning are all presented as pairs of trichords – again, as in theme 3, as either three-note chords or single notes and dyads. This carries on in the right hand to the middle of bar 29, while the left hand, though still playing in the accented and clipped style of theme 3, and also playing chords of three notes, confuses the issue by separating its three such chords with, respectively, a single note and a dyad. Both hands take up the tetrachordal division of the first theme halfway through bar 29, where whole rows return, and this is continued until the end of the development. There is no hexachordal division in the development, as there is no trace of the *cantabile* character or the singing melodies of the second theme. The only hints of the second theme are two small palindromes in bar 30 – which will surely remind the listener of one of the features that the very different themes 2 and 3 had in common in the exposition⁴ – and the emphasis on the intervals of the fourth and fifth (chords in fourths occur throughout the development and there are fifths in the left hand in bars 29, 30 and 32).

The first theme, when it returns in bars 32–34, is very changed in character, but the segmentation is resolutely tetrachordal, and the rows are those used in bars 10–11. The material heard where one expects the recapitulation of theme 3 is particularly interesting, as it is an example of a sort of deception that Schoenberg practises frequently (I have pointed out several other instances in my monograph on opus 23). These two bars (37 and 38) sound quite different from the third theme in the exposition – as the first theme in the recapitulation sounded unlike the original – but they will be easily recognized as theme 3 because of their apparent trichordal segmentation: we are made to hear very definite three-note groups in both hands. But in fact this emphasis on groups of three notes is purely aural and deftly hides the fact that the segmentation is tetrachordal in these bars, with one note of each tetrachord picked out, by first the right hand and then the left, with the notes thus isolated made into three-note melodic figures accompanied by the single-note-plus-dyad figures that are so familiar from theme 3: see Ex.4. We are deceived into hearing something that in fact is not happening. The coda returns to recognizable four-note groups in a final reference to theme 1 and the opening bars.

³ Letter of 17 June 1925, no. 280 in *Zemlinsky's Briefwechsel mit Schönberg, Webern, Berg und Schreker*, ed. Horst Weber as Vol. 1 of *Briefwechsel der Wiener Schule* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), pp. 267–8 (facsimile on 269).

⁴ The other figure shared by the two themes is the repeated note, though these are much more rapid in theme 3 than in theme 2.

steigernd

37 *p cresc.*

1 5 9 4 5 9 3 4 6 8 11 12 2 4 6 8 12
 3 7 11 1 6 10 2 7 10 3 7 11
 2 4 6 8 10 12 2 3 7 8 11 12 1 5 9 1 5 9

P_0 RI_5 I_5 R_0

Example 4

It only remains perhaps to take another quick look at the variations through which the first theme evolves, in bars 3–9, as these are more than simply stages in the growth of a theme. In the first nine bars of the piece we are given a preview of the exposition in a nutshell. The first two bars are a skeletal version of theme 1. Although the segmentation in the following seven bars is always the tetrachord division peculiar to the first theme, the variations in these bars hint at, respectively, the first- to second-theme transition (compare the rising melodic figures in the right hand in bars 3–5 with those in bars 12–13), theme 2 (compare the staccato repeated quavers in bars 6–8^{1a} with the second-theme accompaniment in 14–15, and consider the importance of the intervals of a fourth and a fifth in both places) and theme 3 (compare the repeated notes, the rhythm and the articulation in bars 8–9 with the same in bars 20 and 26).

Schoenberg's works for solo piano are particularly important, because they articulated the periods of his compositional life, in two instances coming at the end of a style period and introducing the next – think of the gulf between the first two pieces and the third of opus 11, the first and the fifth pieces of opus 23. However, though his style would change at least once more after the pieces of opus 33, he was never to write for solo piano again. Although he had surely found the way to write a convincing twelve-note piano sonata, the discovery apparently corresponded with his loss of interest in the genre. But his one example of the form should be remembered for more than its peculiar symmetrical opening and its determined use of combinatoriality; it is perhaps even more significant in its articulation of a classical form in a way that is specific to the workings of the twelve-note technique.