

FREE ATONALISM IN THE EXPRESSIONIST COMPOSERS' WORKS

Author: *Professor Ph.D. Floricica Irena RADULESCU*

Ovidius University of Constanta
Faculty of Arts

Abstract:

Atonalism - involves, by definition, the possibility of independent compositional procedures applicable in general. The opera can be seen as a kind of microscopic set with fixed content of intervals, expressed either as sound or as a melodic figure or a combination of both.

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Free atonality¹which precedes dodecaphony implies by definition the possibility of a declaration of independent composition procedures and generally applicable. A referential complex of sounds can be restricted to a single level of frequency²within a play, freely transposed into another and totally avoided in a third, even when these are different moves of a single opus. "The correctness" of a certain note does not depend on its possible framing into a preestablished harmonious unity, as in the case of tonality, but it depends on larger factors of composition whose meaning should be discovered in that play. Thus, an unprecedented degree of ambiguity gets generally attached to the individual progress and it rhythmically runs parallel to the external flexibility of a rhythm which does not serve as support for the functional harmonious elements.

A main issue, that of defining the "thematic" material and of differing it between the secondary and transitional ones without getting benefits from the articulated procedures of tonality, is uniquely presented and solved in every atonal play. Sometimes only some of the features of the initially declared pattern withhold enough individuality to function in a referential way. Generally, the atonal "theme" comes forward only during the composition and it does not appear as main model at the beginning of the play, as we see in the tonal music.

The constitutive element is often a little cell of interval which can be expanded by the permutation of its components or by the free combination of its different transpositions or by the association with independent details. The play can be seen as a microscopic set of content constant in intervals, easily expressed as a sound or a melodic character or as a combination of the two. Its components can be fixed as regard for order but, in any case, for example, the twelve-sound arrangement can be used in its

¹ Ewen David, *The World of twentieth-century Music*, Prentice Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968

² "Level of frequency"- refers to the settlement within the semitonal scale regardless of the octave position

literally transformations: primary, inversion, demoting and demoted inversion³. (When it is specified as simultaneity, the order is not generally defined and “theme” and “inversion” are important terms.) The individual notes can function as basic elements in order to allow the juxtaposition of the declarations of a basic cell or the similitude of two or more basic cells.

In example 1 (taken from *Funf Klavierstucke*, No.1, by Schoenberg), the initial theme of three notes in middle voice (*ab-g-bb*) is followed by its inversion in retrograde at bar 3 (*a-c-b*) and accompanied by two “declarations” of inversion in retrograde in bass (*a-c-b* and *b-d-c#*). The content of the initial accord⁴ (*ab-a-f#*) consists of the inversion of the content for the same reason. In bar 2 a transposition of the original theme appears in the upper part (*eb-d-f*), which by its association with the previous *f#* creates a new cell (*f#-eb-d*). The last one is transposed and turned in the upper part (*d#-e-g*), inverted in retrograde at bar 3 at middle voice (*c-b-g#*) and vertically stopped, transposed, at the beginning of bar 4 (*d#-c-b*). Each of the two basic cells contain the same intervals, a tertiary minor and a secondary minor, but the new juxtaposition of these intervals into the second cell increases the total duration with a semitone.

Ex. 1



In example 2, from the earlier atonal opus of Schoenberg, *Drei Klavierstucke*, No.1, the interval cell creates a significantly bigger pattern, thematically speaking.

Ex.2

The rhythm, the form, the melodic intervals and the content of the resonance level are considered as separable components of the theme (ex. 2 and 3).

³ Except for the cases when it gets another definition, we define “inversion” as the complementary procedure described above, p.3

⁴ Accord (harmony)

The material that accompanies the theme in example 3c is entirely formed of different transpositions of the inverted form of the initial cell. In example 3d, a non-literal imitation of the original melodic pattern is transposed on a resonance level which restores the original notes but in a new permutation, a review of the original content of the resonance level, functioning as a kind of return to the “home key” and offering a certain approach for the final accord.

Ex.3

The musical score for Example 3 consists of four systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 25-28) is marked *p* and includes a reference to 'Ibid.' at measure 28. The second system (measures 29-31) is marked *pp* and includes a reference to 'cf. ex. 9, x' above measure 64. The third system (measures 47-49) is marked *pp* and includes a reference to 'Ibid.' above measure 49. The fourth system (measures 59-61) is marked *sf* and *dim.*, and includes a reference to 'Ibid.' above measure 61. The score is written in a key with one flat and a 3/4 time signature.

The final accord of the play (ex.3d, bar 64) is a vertical segment of another thematic element (ex.4, at x), used along the play at different levels of resonance but declared in the end in its original “key”. When it first appeared (ex.4) this theme was preceded by an horizontal pause of the initial interval cell, transposed, a character which is chromatically expanded in the following measure (left hand).

Ex.4

The musical score for Example 4 consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 12-13) is marked *ppp* and includes a reference to 'Ibid.' above measure 13. The second system (measure 14) is also marked *ppp*. The score is written in a key with one flat and a 3/4 time signature.

The original level of resonance of the basic cell (ex.2) receives a formal significance in the second theme of the play (ex.5), the elements of cadence of this theme formed of two intervals, b-g and g#-b, which together form the content of the level of resonance of the initial pause of the basic cell.

Ex.5

A new version of the second theme begins with the three harmonious elements (ex.6, at x,y and z) where the first is a vertical pause of the transposed basic cell, the second is its inversion and the third is an “augmented triad”.

Ex. 6

This final element had few small appearances earlier. The primary structural detail of a bigger part of the section emerges now. The important character of 5 notes of the second theme (see the part left-hand in ex.5 and the part right-hand in ex.6) is permuted in bars 23-24, exposing a transposition of the same accord (ex.6, starting with bar 24, the part right-hand). Now associated with the development of the second theme, “the augmented triad” follows (ex.7) being involved in the development of the first theme and the thematic elements shown in example 3 (at x).

Ex.7

One has to remember the fact that the specific features that derive from the uni-interval structure of the “augmented triad” – its restraint to the same content of the resonance level at three different transpositions of the thematic elements in example 7. The same principle, in review, restores the figure of left-hand of the second theme in its original “key” (ex. 5 with ex. 8). All four non-equivalent transpositions of the “augmented triad” appear in the tenth and the ninth measure in the end, starting with db-a-f in the lower beat of the previous one.

Ex.8

The melodic accords and patterns formed of operations on a single interval cell are used especially in forming the unification procedures, with regard to both immediate contexts and to the play as a whole. In No.4 from *Fünf satze* for quartet of string instruments by Anton Webern, entirely presented (ex. 10, a minimal, semitonal detail is first combined with its transposition to “perfect fourth” and then with its transposition to third, thus creating the primary elements of the movement (ex. 9, x and y). The second accord is just a chromatic expansion of the first, a progression that produces a single new note. The important melodic detail, e-f#, consists of the only notes that are not common to x and y.

Ex.9

This melodic detail initially appears at the first violin, bars 1-2. Subsequently, it receives new structural associations in relation to other elements. It turns up as an independent theme in bar 2 at viola, as a component of a melodic pattern bigger in bars 6 and 10 and as a component of ostinato figure for viola and cello at bars 7-9.

In measure 3 a melodic pause at y is present at the first violin. At the same time, the common notes for both structures, b-f-c, are counterpointed associated with e, the remained component of x, at viola. From the end of measure 3 to the beginning of measure 6, x and y are transposed and vertically and horizontally reformulated, with mutual superposed and used elements as means of modulation.

The literal transposition in bar 10 of the theme of the sixteenth note (bar 6) restores all the notes in bar 1 and 2 but in a new permutation associated with a new element, a. This new pause of the theme (bar 10) initiates some kind of abbreviated review (bar 5, including the previous upper beat, with bars 11-12).

Ex.10

Sehr langsam (♩ ca. 58) zögernd tempo Webern, Op. 5, No. 4 (1909)

am Steg am Steg am Steg am Steg

mit Dämpfer pizz. arco am Steg

1 2 3 4 5

rit. rit. rit. rit.

6 7 8

tempo so zart als möglich

äußerst ruhig am Steg ppp

ppp ppp ppp

pizz. arco ppp

9 10 11 12 13

rit. tempo rit. tempo

verklingend am Steg am Steg

arco ppp ppp ppp

äußerst ruhig am Steg am Steg

ppp ppp ppp

flüchtig ppp ppp

ppp ppp ppp

The linear progress d-c# at the first violin at the end of bar 5 and at cells at bar 6 is vertically rendered at bar 12 (as part of the pizzicato accord) and it brings about the remaining elements in y but in a so remote “key” that the structure does not have anymore notes in common with those in y within the initial resonance level. The new level of y causes the level of resonance of a final literal transposition of the special theme at bar 6, a transposition that unexpectedly restores, as a final note of the movement, an important firm element of the beginning, f#, played sul ponticello at first violin in bars 2 and 3. The direction sul ponticello applies to the special theme of bars 6, 10 and 13 just in the final appearance, as a way of associating this f# final with f# that appeared in the same octave at the beginning of the movement.

The utilization of ontensely individualized timbres, of spatial relations and rhythmic and dynamic details is characteristic to Webern and it generally expresses, as in the analyiat opera, in formulating and defining the associations within a idiom where the harmonious and melodic homogeneity has the tendency to destroy the differences. A single sonic detail can operate as referential element as, for example, the pizzicato accord in the penultimate bar in example 10, which reminds us of the second bar and underlines the recapitulative feature of bars 11-12. Specific notes are placed strategically within a phrase –either as the highest or as the lowest, initials and finals – because of some roles especially articulated that were attributed to it. Thus, during the present movement, a single note, *eb* at cello for bar 1 receives special importance as the lowest element and it is in oblique relation to the highest element (sound0, *f#*, in the following bar. The same oblique relation takes place in bars 2-3. In bars 10-11 *eb* is the final note of the phrase, *f#* is the beginning note of the following. In the end, the two are directly juxtaposed as final elements of the movement. Similarly, *e* and *b* at cello and second violin in bars 7-10 are sustained with a purpose that transcends the immediate moment. Their meaning becomes clear in bar 9 where pizzicato ostinato at viola splits while the first violin culminates in a *c* sustained. The accord *e-b-c* is thus exposed, being formed in three of four notes that create *x* in “home key”. The fourth note, *f*, follows at viola while the initial element of the special transposed theme, whose new level of resonance is, at the same time, specially predetermined by the biggest formal necessities, as it was explained above. Again, the unexpected regrouping of the elements at the first violin is part of bar 9 – the unclear pronunciation of *g#* with *c* instead of the previous *b* as in bar 8 – anticipates the first two notes of the final transposition of the theme of the sixteenth note at the end of the movement.

In example 11, from *Erwartung* by Schoenberg, the basic cell is combined with independent details. The repeating structures of content of the resonance level, which repeat in the example, have a temporary and local importance within this play and they usually act as short ostinatti in combination with free elements. We can notice short sequence passages, including componentsnof the primary pattern unequally transposed so that the harmonious structure be changed at every repeating of the pattern (ex.12).

Ex.11

Mässige $\text{♩} = 48$ Schoenberg, Op. 17 (1909) FRAU (zögernd)

The image shows a musical score for two parts: 'Mässige' (Op. 17, 1909) and 'FRAU (zögernd)'. The 'Mässige' part is for piano, featuring a complex texture with multiple staves and dynamic markings such as *p*, *ppp*, and *pp*. The 'FRAU' part is a vocal line with lyrics: 'Hier... hie-ein? Man sieht den Weg nicht'. The score includes various musical notations like notes, rests, and dynamic markings, along with some handwritten annotations and circled sections.

Ex.12

No.18 of Pierrot Lunaire is an extraordinary complex play in its linear relations. The movement is written for piccolo, clarinet, violin, cello, Sprechstimme and piano. A fugue formed of three parts is developed during the piano part, a traditional fugue by the thematic but exceptional elaboration seen from the extent covered by each voice, which intersects freely and by occasional appearances with secondary lines and accords.

Although the fugue is an independent component of the play, its first voices, in order of appearance, form exact canons in order to highlight the clarinet and the piccolo. At the same time, a third canon, between violin and cello, works as accompaniment to fugue and for the other two canons, because it does not exploit the essential thematic elements of the other parts. At the middle of the movement, the clarinet and the piccolo, reaching that point where the other voices of the fugue will enter at the end of the movement, reverses its direction so that they form a reduction of the two voices of the fugue. At this moment, the independent canon of the violin and cello is also reversed. Except the occasional imitations of the fugue theme, the vocal part is free.

18. Der Mondfleck.