

Quartet op.22 Webern

Background Information and Performance Circumstances

Anton Webern (1883-1945), together with Schoenberg and Berg, was one of a group of Viennese pioneers of an early 20th Century style. From 1904 both Berg and Webern had studied with Schoenberg, the acknowledged leader of the group, which has become known as the **Second Viennese School**. The first 'School' had consisted of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and their 19th Century successors.

Like Schoenberg, Webern wrote in **atonal** style before following the example of his teacher and writing **serial** music from the early 1920s. Webern was also an admirer of Mahler, whose music had taken traditional tonality to chromatic extremes. Atonality, or abandonment of tonality, was the logical progression from chromaticism.

A problem the composers came upon was that abandoning tonality meant that the structural support it provided was no longer available to them. One solution was to write such short pieces that structure was hardly relevant. The fourth of Webern's *Five Pieces for Orchestra op.10* contains only 28 notes. His songs *op.3* are all between 10 and 16 bars long.

It became clear that some new structural device was necessary to replace tonality. *Serialism* was the answer that Schoenberg devised and Webern and Berg quickly adopted it (see the sections on tonality and melody below).

Webern was the most extreme in his adoption of the technique. Whereas Berg allowed himself to repeat notes and phrases and even use notes from outside the series, Webern was very rigid in keeping to the precise order, whether in 'prime' (i.e. original) order, inversion, retrograde or retrograde inversion.

To many listeners present at the rare occasions in these early years that the music of the Second Viennese School composers was performed, the style seemed almost impossibly alien. This was also the case, even in pre-serialist days. In 1913 at a concert of their music there was a riot and the performance came to a premature conclusion. When the Nazis annexed Austria before the 2nd World War, Webern's music was banned as being 'degenerate'.

The main characteristics of the music of the *Second Viennese School* are:

- atonality
 - dissonance
 - use of serialism from the early 1920s onwards
 - extreme brevity in the case of Webern
 - angular melodies with wide leaps
 - an interest in *pointillist* writing (see melody section)
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The music in the anthology is the first movement of a two-movement work, completed in 1930. The work requires highly skilled players.

Performing Forces and their Handling

- Webern was interested in achieving the **widest range of timbre from a small number of players**, so in this quartet there is a:
 - string instrument (violin)
 - standard woodwind instrument (clarinet)
 - saxophone (which has characteristics of both woodwind and brass families)
 - piano.
- Players use a **wide variety of techniques** to produce the maximum variation of tone colour.
 - The violin is directed to play with **mute** (*mit Dämpfer*) up to bar 17, where the direction is *Dämpfer ab* (mute off).
 - The first two violin notes are played with the **bow** (*arco*), then the third is marked to be plucked (**pizzicato**) before reverting to *arco* again. Sometimes the player has to **alternate** the two techniques very **rapidly** (bars 22-3).
 - The piano part has arrows showing the direction of **spread chords** (only ever two notes at a time), sometimes the more common **rising** spread chord (l.h. bar 14) and sometimes the **descending** version (same bar, right hand). The direction of the arrow also indicates the order of the notes of the series.
- The players exploit a **large pitch range**. The violin rises to a **top C** at the climax of the movement (bar 22).
- There are many other **performance directions**: **tenuto** markings, **staccato**, **slurs**.
- **Dynamic range is wide**. Webern was particularly fond of writing **quiet music**. Half of his songs from op.3 and op.4 use a dynamic range from *ppp* to *p*. In this movement most of the music is quiet apart from *forte* markings for individual notes and **accent** markings. The music rises to a **fortissimo** climax at bar 22, before subsiding to **pianissimo** for the end.

Texture

- The texture is extremely **thin**. Even at the climax, where all five musical lines are playing (the piano part is essentially two lines of music), rests prevent more than three parts playing together simultaneously.
 - The music is often *almost* **monophonic**. Only occasionally in the five bar introduction do two parts sound together.
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- The music is, though, fundamentally **polyphonic**. There are **five parts** (separate horizontal lines of music for the four instruments).
- Webern delighted in the use of **canon** (precise imitation). In this piece he writes **mirror canons** at the beginning and elsewhere. In mirror canons, the standard version of a phrase is imitated by the inversion (upside down version) of the same music. At the beginning Webern actually does the reverse – the inversion in the tenor saxophone is imitated by the violin, playing a transposed version of the row.

Structure

Although the tonal aspect of traditional structure was replaced by serial technique, Webern was keen to introduce Classical forms on top of the serialist base. All of his instrumental pieces of around this time and later, employ such forms, including binary, ternary, rondo and variation form. This piece could be regarded as being in ternary form (with introduction or coda) or even sonata form, though it is certainly difficult for the listener to hear this, and there are none of the key relationships associated with the form. The structure is as follows.

Bars 1-5	Introduction – mirror canons. Begins with I0 (inversion un-transposed) in tenor saxophone, imitated by P10 (prime row transposed up 10 semitones) in violin.
Bars 6-15	Exposition – with main serial theme (prime row) in un-transposed form on the saxophone (bars 6-10). The exposition is then repeated , exactly as in a Classical piece.
Bars 16-23	Development section – begins with I9 in the violin and P1 in the clarinet. Rises to a climax at the top C in the violin part, bar 22, which immediately leads to a retrograde (backwards) version of the music immediately preceding it (but with the notes distributed differently among the instrumental parts). Effectively, this is a palindrome .
Bars 24-27	Link
Bars 28-39	Recapitulation – begins with the same notes as the exposition (C#-E). The row now appears in <i>Klangfarbenmelodie</i> (see below) with the notes moving around the instrumental parts, instead of remaining in the saxophone as it had in the exposition.
Bars 39-43	Coda – basically the introduction in a complex reverse version – ending with the first note of the movement C# - the enharmonic equivalent of Db.

Tonality

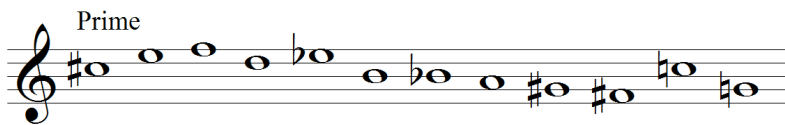
The music is both **atonal** (in that there is no key) and **serial**. Serialism is the arrangement of a series of notes in a fixed order. The order remained the same, except that the series could be inverted (intervals turned upside down), played in **retrograde** (backwards), or in **retrograde inversion**. Each of the four versions of the series could be transposed up or down by up to 11 semitones. This gives 48 possible versions of the row.

Harmony

- Notes tend to occur individually, so frequently there is no harmony.
- When there are two or more notes sounding together, the effect is frequently **dissonant**.
- The first 'chord' at the beginning of the second bar produces a clashing **major 2nd** interval.
- On one of the few occasions when three notes sound simultaneously, in bar 20, a C# clashes against a D and E flat.

Melody

The **tone row** on which the music is based is reproduced below.



- There are 5 **semitones** (a favourite interval of Webern's).
- The individual notes could always be **transposed up or down one or more octaves**, so these semitones often became **7^{ths}** or **9^{ths}** as shown in the tenor saxophone version of the theme at bar 6.



- **Wide, angular** intervals are a feature throughout the movement.
- The interval of the **tritone** (diminished 5th – or augmented 4th) occurs between the 10th and 11th notes of the series. This was another favourite interval, which helped to detract from any sense of key.
- The melodic lines are **fragmentary** (interspersed with rests).
- The technique of dividing notes between instruments, using a wide variety of instrumental techniques was called **Klangfarbenmelodie** - from the German words *Klang* (tone), *Farben* (colours), *Melodie*. This is heard right from the start, where the 10th transposition of the prime row moves around from violin (*pizzicato* and *arco*) to piano (left hand), then violin, clarinet and finally piano (left hand).
- The idea of making a melody from little splashes of varying instrumental colour was called **pointillist** (after the technique used by some French Impressionist painters who built up pictures from a multitude of small dots of colour).

Rhythm and Metre

- Webern's movement is mainly in **triple time**, though it is not easy to hear a real sense of triple metre
- especially as the **time signatures change** frequently, as early as bars 3 and 4 where it moves to **quintuple**, then **quadruple metre** and back.
- Frequent **rests** make the music sound very **fragmentary**.
- The music sounds **more continuous** as it reaches the climax in bar 20.
- There are three recurring rhythmic groupings:
 - semiquaver-quaver-semiquaver rest-quaver (as in the first three saxophone notes)
 - three semiquavers (piano in bar 3) and
 - two semiquavers (violin, bars 3-4).
- The rhythm is very precisely notated (all part of the tone colour melody idea). This is enhanced by the use of **tenuto** and **staccato** markings.
- A **pause** mark is used just before the recapitulation.
- The speed is **slow**. The marking at the beginning *sehr mässig* means 'very moderate'.

There are **frequent changes of tempo**. *Ritardando* – *a tempo* markings are used at the beginning of sections. Near the end there is a **calando** marking – a combination of getting quieter and slower.