

Zachary Bernstein*¹

*Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, United States of America

¹zbernstein@esm.rochester.edu

Is the Twelve-Tone System Inherently Organicist? Some Reflections on Conflicting Perspectives with Notes on Analysis

ABSTRACT

Background

Organicism was central to the approach of Schoenberg and his successors, with organic metaphors appearing again and again in their writings on the twelve-tone system. It is also an analytical methodology that has received widespread criticism for at least the past thirty years. What is a modern analyst to do with the organicist claims of Schoenberg and his successors?

Aims and Repertoire Studied

This study investigates organicism in historical accounts of twelve-tone music in order to evaluate its usefulness in modern analysis. The repertoire to be considered is the twelve-tone music of Schoenberg, Webern, and Babbitt, with a few comparative comments on post-war European serialists, particularly Boulez.

Methods

The organicism of source texts will be re-evaluated by comparison with three recent studies. The first, and most important, is philosopher Kendall Walton's theory of 'prop-oriented make believe'. In this account, metaphors serve a heuristic function: they illuminate something about a real-world 'prop' under consideration. Thus, one of the functions of organicism in the writings of twelve-tone composers is as a heuristic for comprehensibility. Organicism provides a shorthand for the conditions under which listeners can apprehend twelve-tone music. The second is Scott Burnham's account of pedagogical organicism in the writings of Adolf Bernhard Marx. Twelve-tone organicism, similarly, might be taken as a representation of the process of coming to understand that piece. The third is Daniel Harrison's account of Hindemith's acoustic derivation of Series 1 as a 'creation myth': something generically obligatory from the perspective of early 20th century speculative German music theory that had to be undertaken for the remainder of Hindemith's composition manual to be accepted. Similarly, organicism was a practically obligatory component of fin-de-siècle Viennese language on music — it was a mark of seriousness and high-mindedness.

Given these three models, I suggest that we primarily consider the organicism the Schoenberg circle attributes to twelve-tone music as an instance of prop-oriented make believe, focusing on the ways in which organicism serves as a heuristic for comprehension, while recognizing that language may also serve pedagogical and social functions. In this light, organicism retains relevance: modern analysts, too, seek to understand and describe how listeners comprehend music, and organicism can be a useful aid. And what sort of comprehension does organicism serve? Basically, Schoenbergian organi-

cism is motivated by a logic of association: to make sense of musical events is to make sense of them in relation to each other. Babbitt's organicism adds a hierarchical element: he uses the metaphor of organic growth to describe a recursive hierarchy. This, too, is for the sake of describing the conditions of comprehension: Babbitt draws from cognitive science the lesson that hierarchy facilitates memory. Organicism assists in the conceptualization of this process.

Two modern, non-organicist accounts of twelve-tone music, by Joseph Dubiel and Dora Hanninen, are also considered and compared with the heuristic model of organicism. I will discuss how, despite their distance from organicist ideology, these accounts are consistent with a heuristic understanding of twelve-tone organicism.

Implications

Organicism has been dismissed as old-fashioned, ideological, limited, and distant from experience. While acknowledging these critiques, this paper argues for that it retains value as a heuristic for the analysis of twelve-tone music. Of the part-part and part-whole relationships central to organicism, associative (part-part) relationships are shown to be more broadly applicable. A further implication is the recognition that a heuristic view of organicism appears in the prose of composers such as Schoenberg, Webern, and Babbitt.

Keywords

Organicism, Twelve-Tone Music, Schoenberg, Webern, Babbitt, Boulez, Kendall Walton, Metaphor, History of Theory.

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