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Two Metrical Problems in Webern's String Quartet Op. 28

ABSTRACT

Background

Meter in Anton's Webern music has been the object of much speculation. In particular, analysts have been intrigued by cases where the notated meter is strict, but the musical surface is impervious to it — what David Lewin, in an attempt to account for this discrepancy, describes as a 'metrical problem' (Lewin 1962; Lewin 1993). As Kathryn Bailey (1995) has shown with respect to his later works, Webern himself was preoccupied with the metrical disposition of his works. The several existing metrical analyses of Webern's music — most famously those that examine the Op. 27 *Variations* (Cone 1960; Lewin 1962; Westergaard 1962; Westergaard 1963; Jones 1968; Lewin 1993) — yield at best mixed results, however: some go to implausible lengths to demonstrate its validity (Lewin 1962; Lewin 1993), some are forced to focus on only small portions of the piece in question (Jones 1968; Hasty 1997), and some are resigned to denying the meaningfulness of meter outright (Bailey 1995; Rochberg 2004).

Aims and Repertoire Studied

In this investigation, I examine the first two movements of Webern's Op. 28 String Quartet. This piece is unique for investigating meter in Webern's works, as we possess comments from the composer regarding metrical aspects in it. Here, I identify two different 'problems', one in the first movement and the other in the second. In both cases, Webern's comments suggest a handling of meter difficult to reconcile with the characteristics specific to the movement in question. Through this and other evidence, I seek to explain the discrepancy between the musical surface and the notated meter in these two movements, and, more broadly, to understand the composer's operative notions of meter, which may in turn be generalized to other of his works for which we lack such evidence.

Methods

My point of departure for this investigation is the most direct evidence we have of Webern's conceptions of meter in this piece, which metrical analysts have to date ignored: first, an analysis the composer sent to Erwin Stein in summer of 1939 that constitutes his 'longest known essay on one of his works' (Roman 1978) — in which, moreover, metrical aspects figure significantly (Webern 1978) —; and second, a letter in which he comments on the piece's metrical character (Moldenhauer 1978). In the first of these, Webern describes how the sixteenth bar of every variation 'plays a different [metrical] role each time', usually as an upbeat, but often more than this. In my analysis, I examine this sixteenth bar in every variation for patterns in duration, onsets, and pitch organization to discover in what way these bars may perform the metrical roles Webern ascribes to them.

In the second piece of evidence, a letter to violinist Rudolph Kolish, he describes the second movement as '[a] 3/8 in contrast to a 2/4 — like a slow *waltz* to a *quite unhurried polka*' (Moldenhauer 1978). I compare this with Kathryn Bailey's (1995) account of Webern's sketches, according to which, while the composer had a clear idea of the pitches and rhythms he would employ, he deliberated significantly over their metrical disposition. Since the metrical profile of the musical surface seems wholly ambiguous, and thus the reasons for the composer's deliberations obscure, I ask what his underlying conceptions of meter must have been.

Given the absence of any explication by Webern of this, I turn to three ancillary sources. First, I invoke Webern's view of a tone row as elucidated by Anne Shreffler (1994; see also Webern 1963), according to which a tone row was not merely a compositional tool, but a metaphysical, unifying force for a piece. I then observe that many of the features of a tone row that come to bear here are shared by meter, and, if we substitute 'meter' for 'tone row', many of the effects Webern attributes can plausibly be attributed with equal sense to meter. Absent any express indication of such a view for meter on Webern's part, I then compare this view to the metrical theory of Webern's former teacher, Arnold Schoenberg, which articulates a view of meter that performs these functions. In his treatise *Coherence, Counterpoint, Instrumentation, Instruction in Form* (also known as *ZKIF*; 1994), Schoenberg describes meter, when kept uniform throughout a piece, as 'a binding principle of form' through which a piece acquires a certain character. In his treatise *The Musical Idea* (1995), he describes what he calls 'metrical unity', likewise the result of a uniform notated meter.

Implications

There are several noteworthy implications of my findings. Regarding the problem in the first movement, I reveal first, that metrical play is an important element of this work, and second, an example of the mechanics of this metrical play. This example, in turn, demonstrates Webern's careful handling of pitch and rhythmic elements to complement each other and, with it, a more specific account of meter in Webern than has to date been elaborated. Regarding the problem in the second movement, I build a conception of meter, this one pertaining to the relation between notated meter and a musical surface, that combines a number of advantages: it accounts for Webern's otherwise confusing statements, it exhibits close parallels to his views on twelve-tone organization, it resolves the 'problems' in question while preserving their oddness, and it sheds light on his broader aesthetic.

Keywords

Webern, Rhythm and Meter, Metrical Theory, Music Analysis, Second Viennese School, Temporality.

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