

Schoenberg: *Angst un Hoffen* Analysis

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November, 2003

It is curious that most of—if not all—the pieces that are deemed great steps toward atonality (i.e., Liszt’s *Faust*, Wagner’s *Tristan*, Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* or his *First Quartet*) are instances of so-called program music. It should be clear—although it is not always—that when the formal conventions of tonality are weakened, the program is a heuristic tool that helps, even allows, the composer to find his way. It is not surprising that Schoenberg, when he decided consciously to “free music from the shackles of tonality” turned almost exclusively to music with a program (be it a general plot or the text of a poem). At least when analyzing from the technical standpoint, it seems relatively more important to inquire, rather than how Schoenberg used his masterful technique to convey his reading of the poem, how the program gave Schoenberg his constructive ideas—almost how the program used Schoenberg to become music.

I start with this caveat because when I say in the following pages that Schoenberg assigned a chord to *Angst* and another chord to *Hoffen*, I do not mean that Schoenberg searched in his bag of techniques for a way to depict the words, but rather that he looked for some words in order to start filling this bag in the first place. The fact that the chords are assigned to the words is intended here as a contention about the *poietic*, not just the *neutral*, level of the composition. The contention seems more plausible when we attribute the depiction of the words not to Schoenberg’s choice, but to the fact that he had no choice: he (or anybody else, of course) did not know how to compose atonal music.

1 The two chords

Thus my analysis starts by assigning the augmented chord to *Angst* (film and TV scoring have since learned that the augmented chord has an anxious character to it), and a chord formed by a perfect fourth stacked on top of a tritone (TT-P4) to *Hoffen*. The significance, for the piece, of the word *wechselnd* ('alternatively') is clear in that the alternation of the two chords is a prominent constructive factor (see below).

Modern parlance would have the *Hoffen* chord, which we will identify by \oplus , collapsed into the set [0,1,6] (C-D \flat -G \flat). This seems not to be completely true to the chord and its treatment in this piece. All block occurrences of it show the two fourths (perfect and augmented) stacked; in other words, the minor second is never a central feature of it. There are three horizontal instantiations \oplus where the minor second has a place: under the syllables 'in Suef-zer' (m. 2), '-stü-mes Seh-' (6), and 'mein La-ger' (9). But they seem to arise contingently—on the one hand, minor seconds are all over the voice part, so that any fourth or fifth is likely to generate the intervallic contents of the chord; on the other, in the first of these cases the soprano is repeating the piano's movement, and in the third case it is inverting the second. When, on the contrary, \oplus arises independently (for example, 4 times in the piano between mm. 9 and 11), it is always in the form of two successive fourths.

It is perhaps more interesting to speculate about the extent to which Schoenberg had in mind any kind of 'chromatic completion' (central to much of his music, and of course an essential element of the twelve-tone technique) when composing the piece. The fate of the augmented chord is suggestive to this respect. Let us call the augmented chord on B \flat 'A₁' (only because it is the first one to appear in the piece); the other three augmented chords are 'A₂' on B \natural , 'A₃' on C, and 'A₄' on C \sharp . With this classification a pattern becomes apparent in the piece: after the first augmented chord, A₁ (the only such chord in the first line of the score), A₃ is featured three times between mm. 3 and 5 (the first two as a repetition, the third one in the first beat of the piano's $\frac{6}{8}$), and then m. 8 contains an A₄. After that, we enter the **Langsamer**, where only two augmented chords (or one, which is then repeated) are played: A₂. The chromatic scale is thus completed. A₂ appears nowhere else in the

piece, and thus it could be called a ‘herald’ of the **Langsamer**.

And yet there are things that result hard to explain if this pattern is accepted as intentional on Schoenberg’s part. Why, after the middle A_2 section (the **Langsamer**), A_1 and A_3 , but not A_4 , are restated? Why do the major-third intervals in the voice (also unique to the **Langsamer**) are not systematically selected, but come from A_2 , A_1 , and A_4 (for ‘Rast und’, ‘Schlaf nicht’, and ‘je-de’, respectively)?

On the whole, it does not really seem that Schoenberg is applying the kind of control over the pitch dimension (that kind of precompositional control based on symmetries, complement, non-repetition, etc.) that he will eventually with the twelve-tone method. There are other kinds of relationship that, as we shall see, have a better case for the description of *Angst und Hoffen*.

2 The conflict

The piece can be divided into three parts: **Nicht zu rasch** (mm. 1–6), **Langsamer** (7–13), and **Sehr langsam** (14–19). The second section is perceivable as such because, in addition to the change in tempo, the piano plays the fairly characteristic motive with which the voice opens the piece (to which it has arrived after a directed ascent). That there is a third part is also clearly perceivable, because the music has just faded away when the piano plays the first of a series of block chords that are clearly understood as something new. There is a ‘formal overlap’ here: the piano is in the third section while the last notes of the second still ring in the voice part.

The first measure states the two main chords with their assigned words: if we call the second chord (TT-P4) ‘ \oplus ,’ here we have the unit $A\oplus$ —the ‘alternation of angst and hope’—which has a central, almost thematic, role in the piece.

The piano then plays a stream of parallel thirds that is actually the only other ‘thematic’ element of the first part. In fact the first part is almost systematically made of alternations of the unit $A\oplus$ and the parallel thirds. Refining the description so as to include variations of the chords (\otimes is the inversion of \oplus , with the tritone on top of the fourth), Figure 1 is

$$\underbrace{A_1 \oplus}_3 \underbrace{A_3 \otimes}_3 \underbrace{A_3 \otimes}_3 \underbrace{A_3 \otimes}_3 \underbrace{A_4 \otimes}_3$$

Figure 1: Chords and gestures in the six measures of the first section

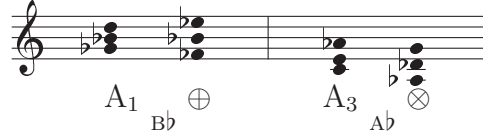


Figure 2: Two versions of the ‘alternation’ and the conflict between $B\flat$ and $A\flat$

a summary of the six measures of the first part. The first two measures are structurally separated from the rest: they present a version of the chords that is not to be used anywhere else in the first section. The next 4 measures, through other versions, expand and develop those chords.

But, as it happens, this development also presents a *conflict* that is structural to the whole piece: $A_1 \oplus$ contrasted by $A_3 \otimes$ is actually $B\flat$ against $A\flat$ (see Figure 2). The two versions of the TT-P4 chord, \oplus and \otimes , are associated with $B\flat$ and $A\flat$ respectively.

In the second section, mm. 7–13, the behavior changes radically. The piano plays the opening motive (quarter-note tied to the first of two sixteenth-notes) and then embarks in a flow of sixteenth-notes (mm. 9–13) only punctuated twice by \oplus .



Figure 3: Measures 9–11 and the TT-P4 chord

The sixteenth-notes in mm. 9–10 all outline \oplus (Figure 3), except for the low $B\flat$ and the punctuations on \otimes . But, in the present version, the latter also contain $B\flat$ (although \otimes is associated with $A\flat$). Thus we see that, in the second such \otimes , m. 10, the $A\sharp$ literally *resolving* into $A\flat$, both in the piano and in the voice. This is the loudest moment in the piece, the rhythm stops transitorily, and the climactic character is confirmed afterwards by the dissolution of the music throughout the remainder of the second section. In the piano, this

dissolution is built around $A\flat$; the voice arrives at a $B\flat$ in m. 13, but leaves it with all the feeling of a (dissonant) appoggiatura. Locating the resolution of the conflict at this precise moment agrees with the poem and with the way Schoenberg has set it: right after *Tränen* ('tears'), the only melisma in the song.

The third part recapitulates. All the chord-versions in conflict (A_1 , A_3 , \oplus , and both kinds of \otimes , one containing $B\flat$, the other $A\flat$) are played over and over again. After all, A_4 and A_2 have no apparent structural role, and the fact that they would complete the twelve pitches does not seem to call Schoenberg's attention. It is the conflict between $B\flat$ and $A\flat$ that seems to unfold in the piece. In fact: $B\flat$ is the only note not sung by the voice in the first measure (the presentation of A and \oplus); but $A\flat$ is the lowest sound in the piece, and the highest in the voice part.