Schoenberg and the Habsburg Dilemma

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One of the main traits of musical 'Romanticism' (and I am calling by that name the German side of nineteenth-century music, Dahlhausian 'exegetical' style[1]) is the insistence upon 'organicism.' Defined in short but sufficient terms, organicism (in music) is the ideal of a work being based on a single 'germ,' this latter word serving as the perfect bridge between the natural, biological conception of an organism and the artistic one. A work of art should 'grow' entirely out of a single seed, with no need for exogenous additament or influence.

In this text I want to explore some connotations of this ideal, which in my view contains—ironically—the seeds of a crisis in the realm of (high, 'art') music. This a crisis finds in Schoenberg, the last Romantic, its culminating point. And not by coincidence in Schoenberg, not by coincidence in Vienna at the turn of the century. The later Habsburg empire is the center of the most paradigmatic confrontation, in all spheres of life, between the spirit of Kant (an importation of the more Western atomistic conception of the world inherited from Descartes *via* Hume) and the spirit of Hegel (the more truly German return to idealism, with all the Romantic movement on its back). It is here, in Vienna, that a Wittgenstein will move, or rather drastically jump, from the extreme of atomistic absolutism to the extreme of particularist relativism. And here it is that a Schoenberg has to find his way.

In what follows I first develop to some extent the intended analogy between this, the 'Habsburg dilemma' (as termed by Ernest Gellner), and the crisis to whose encounter music under the Romantic ideals was steadily advancing. I then address the Romanticism of Schoenberg (in terms

[1]Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 9ff.

mainly of idealism and organicism), and finally identify what might be the concrete dilemma and Schoenberg's solution.

WHEN GELLNER DESCRIBES the Cartesian/Humean/Kantian conception of knowledge as quoted below (I could do no better than quoting him), he could very well be speaking of music. The description of this, the 'atomistic' conception of knowledge, seems to be a philosophical basis for the main technical trend of nineteenth-century music, namely the emphasis and the intensification of motivic work (consider especially the last paragraph):

> [t]he bricks of knowledge... are individual, isolable sensations or perceptions or ideas: granular entities of some sort, which accumulate so as to form large, and perhaps massive structures. These, however, for all their possible grandeur, are ultimately composed of cognitive atoms, and owe everything to them. Whatever truth may be affirmed about the larger totalities depends on the truth concerning the constituent elements.
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> The stuff of knowledge begins, as it were, in a disaggregated condition: aggregation or totality is achieved or constructed, but is not there at the start. ... the validity or otherwise of claims concerning [the totality] could only be established by disaggregating it and considering the merits of affirmations about its constituents....
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> Separation, segregation, analysis, and independence are at the hear of this approach. Everything that is separable ought to be separated, at least in thought, if not in reality. Indissoluble, inherent linkages are to be avoided. Alliances and alignments, like those occurring in a free society (of which this vision is both a model and a support and an echo), are contingent and freely chosen: they are not prescribed, obligatory, or rigid.[2]

In due course, this Enlightened view of knowledge (consistent with the whole Enlightened way of life) would generate a reaction—what came to be called Romanticism. The patent downgrading of culture to nothing but a summation of individual human atoms, the perception of the world as a laboratory rather than a home, the rigidity of a same-response-to-same-stimulus as a moral axiom in Kant's imperative—all of this prompted an upheaval in which language, culture, and the traditional endowment of men were hailed as the real sense of human life. (Nationalism, culturalism, populism, particularism, essentialism, and their specific instantiations in algid forms

[2]Ernest Gellner, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowsky and the Habsburg Dilemma* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4.

such as, for example, anti-semitism, must be seen in this light.) Organicism is the opposition to atomism, the elevation of original states and essences—'germs'—to the status of given and untouchable.

And yet, in music, 'everything that is separable ought to be separated,' at least in the development section (if not before, in the transition or even in the exposition of the theme). Separation, segregation, analysis, and independence are at the core of motivic work. The totality of a theme, if admittedly is there at the start, is but a summation of the motives, and should be dismembered once the occasion arises. A quick (or even not so quick) glance at Schoenberg's First String Quartet reveals just these ideals.

The relationship between a dominant chord and its tonic resolution was also a linkage to be dissolved. For example, Mozart used to resolve a dominant deceptively by re-reading into it the German augmented sixth of the minor chord of vii, and Beethoven took the procedure to destroy yet another totality by modulating not to the dominant, but to a chromatic mediant. As is well known, more and more frequently would the traditional referential links be broken in the 19th century.

Eventually, of course, constant modulation, infrequent V–I progressions, and pervasive chromaticism (for also the diatonic set is analyzable and therefore came to be analyzed) would reach a point of no-return. An almost complete segregation of harmony, tonality, and scale, was achieved already by the late Romantics, with Wagner and Liszt on the front.

On the other hand, the *theme* escaped radical dissaggregation through the general leaning toward programmatism (particularly with the notion of *Leitmotiv*), which required a recognizability that extreme handling of themes would endanger. *Form* was also protected by programmatism: it was derived from the program, and therefore in the main outside the dominion of analytical handling. Thus, the program effectively imposed an 'upper boundary' to motivic work.

In fact, it should not be too surprising that the epitome of motivic work would be found in Brahms, a master of 'absolute' music. When Schoenberg called the technique 'developing variation,' furthermore, he was making reference to the pure formalistic music of Bach.

WHEN SCHOENBERG INCORPORATES trends of both Wagner and Brahms, he is actually completing, rounding off, the process of segregation: Wagner was in the way of destroying the 'inherent linkages' of scale and tonic, and Brahms in the way of atomizing the motive; Schoenberg attempted them both, at the same time and more radically. What he rejects from both sides, tonality and formal transparency from Brahms, sequences and respect for the theme from Wagner, is precisely the last totalities that they had left standing. The works of Schoenberg's first period constitute, at the beginning, partial attempts: *Verklärte Nacht* is still programmatic and thus form is not analyzed but taken from the poem; *Pelleas and Mellisande* begins to show the structural problem that the *Leitmotiven* are developed so much that they are lost; finally, tonality in the unfinished *Quartet in* D is comparatively traditional. But later on come the first experiments of complete segregation: the First String Quartet was originally to be a piece of 'absolute music' in which Schoenberg applied extreme dissolution of theme, tonality, *and* form. (We now know that finally he had to appeal to a program to find a guide,[3], but the program was of a 'private' kind, and the piece was to be perceived without its 'hermeneutic' aid.) The 'natural' association of motivic work with such formal concepts as transition and development—an association that had been undergoing a gradual loosening from Beethoven to Zemlinsky—is radically debased here: thematic exposition and development are hardly distinguishable from each other; the clear, unhesitating, recognition of any standard formal scheme is then reduced to simpler contrasts such as scherzo and trio, or grounded only in very broad features like tempo (so that the slow 'movement' is clearly heard as such). Schoenberg's subtle and elaborate formal handling is in general missed out, and in perception the piece approaches formal randomness. The first *Kammersymphonie* features similar problems, and, since it in addition destroys the 'natural' opposition of melody and accompaniment, it is not only the differentiation between exposition and development, but also the ones between counterpoint and harmony and between foreground and background, that are jeopardized.

Schoenberg writings repeatedly reveal his anxiety about this development, which represents a threat to one of his central concerns: 'comprehensibility.' This is the dilemma: extreme atomization is incompatible and irreconcilable with comprehensibility. As we shall see, the twelve-tone

[3]Mark F. Benson, "Schoenberg's Private Program for the String Quartet in D minor, op. 7," *Journal of Musicology* 11 (1993).

method can be regarded as a result of the quest that Schoenberg suddenly found himself in.

THE EVER-INTENSIFYING trend to analyze, separate, rearrange the diverse elements of music is not the only thing Schoenberg inherited from the Romantic, German music tradition. Enlightened atomism found musical manifestation in the development section of Classical sonata form. In a way, the development (a Classical invention) was the place where the optimist spirit of the time celebrated musically the secret of its wisdom and success, the techniques of analysis, the detached manipulation and reordering of nature.

But in the 19th century, atomism would undergo a transformation. With the influence of Beethoven, Goethe, and the nascent Romantic movement, it remained the main technique and the pride of the composer, but because it served a new ideal: organicism. For the Romantic mentality,

> the objects deployed in the construction of a world are not some homogeneous assembly of similar grains... as the individualist/atomic tradition would have it. On the contrary, the constituent elements form a system, whose parts are in intimate and intricate relation with each other. Separation of all separables is not the heart of wisdom, but of folly... The sensitive mind and heart see and feel the totality; they appreciate the connectedness of all its parts and do not seek to break up that unity.[4]

The emphasis on the interconnectedness of all the elements in a piece, their common descent from a single, original source, is a musical (and artistic) version of this outlook. The original source endows the work of art with its unique essence and character. Beethoven composed 9 symphonies—not 104 or 41–and the fact that each of them has a unique, almost personal character, is one of their main features.

The artist has the ethical and almost moral duty of obliging to this core source and sing it. No irruption from outside, unrelated forces, is permissible. Everything that exist in the work should be linked to its essence, and *this* linkage is not subject to dissociation or separation. Cyclical form, for example, ensures that a third movement will not be separated from a first; *ides fixes* and *Leitmotiven* will make, of a succession of sections, a real system and organism; linking movements

[4]Gellner, *Language and Solitude*, p. 6.

together becomes a common device, and a search for the ultimate integration of sonata form and sonata cycle is commenced.

Also characteristic of organicism is the cult for the 'germ,' the seed from which the work (in the hands of the true artist) grows out, the source that gives it its individual character and defines what it is. This cult, almost religious, is seen in the magical rock of the *Kreisleriana*, or in the perfect synthesis of inspiration and masterdom of Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersingern*. But we have it in an especially pure form, pretty much unaffected by any conscious attempt at endowing it with consistence—something that Hoffmann and Wagner had to do to compose their myths—in Schoenberg's writings (in which he uses the word 'idea'):

> . . . almost all musical terminology is vague and most of its terms are used in various meanings. In its most common meaning, the term idea is used a synonym for theme, melody, phrase or motive. I myself consider the totality of the piece as the *idea*: the idea which its creator wanted to present.[5]
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> Of course an idea is not always the product of brain-work. Ideas may invade the mind as unprovoked and perhaps even as undesired as a musical sound reaches the ear or an odour the nose.[6]
>
> . . . the mind of a composer is dominated by every detail of his idea, the consequences of which accordingly will show up involuntarily and unexpectedly. Of course, only a master who is sure of himself, of his sense of form and balance, can renounce conscious control in favour of the dictates of his imagination.[7]
>
> One cannot [penetrate to the most remote consequences of] a swallow idea, but one can, and one can *only*, [do this] with a profound idea—and then one *must*.[8]
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> . . . An idea is born; it must be moulded, formulated, developed, elaborated, carried through and pursued to its very end.[9]

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[5]"New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea [1946]," pages 113–24 of *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, edited by Leonard Stein with translations by Leo Black (New York: St. Martins Press, 1975), p. 123.

[6]*Idem*.

[7]"Brahms the progressive [1947]," pages 398–442 of *Style and Idea*, pp. 423–4.

[8]*Idem*, p. 439.

[9]*"New Music" cit.*, p. 124.

> . . . a transition, a codetta, an elaboration, etc., should not. . . appear at all if it does not develop, modify, intensify, clarify, or throw light or colour on the idea of the piece.[10]
>
> . . . a piece of art-music [as opposed to "nature's piece of music"] can extend in all directions, unfold, develop and work out its ideas.[11]
>
> *An idea can never perish.*[12]

Everything is the idea, and the idea is everything. It is "the totality of the piece," although it is not identical with the piece because it is also its cause, its motive force, its ultimate source. The impossibility of defining it more sharply is, incidentally, an essential component of the notion.

The cult to the germinal idea is the 'diachronic' dimension, so to speak, of organicism. Its most clear implementation in (German, nineteenth-century) music is motivic work; but reducing organicism to the technique of developing an initial motive—which, whatever it can be or mean, is more 'tangible' than the Schoenbergian idea—would actually water the ideal down, drying all the mysticism out of it. It is only when the *other* side of organicism, that could be called its 'synchronic' dimension, is invoked, that its mysticism is fully realized: it is not only the work grows as organisms do, but rather that the work *is* an organism, a system, a totality in which everything is related to everything else. In other words, *everything* in the piece, including contrasting themes or sections, is equally a proper part of the system, equally an expression of the idea. Thus Beethoven's second themes are closely related to first themes, and Schoenberg's finds delight in the discovery of "the hidden relationship between two main themes" of his first *Kammersymphonie*.[13]

The idea generates the piece, including all conflict and all resolution. It is not that the work is the 'biography' of an idea whose fate, to be narrated, includes resistance and opposition in the form of contrasting ideas. Rather, all opposition, all conflict, is a part (and an essential one) of the

[10] *"Brahms the progressive" cit.*, p. 407.

[11] "About Ornaments, Primitive Rhythms, *etc.*, and Bird Song [1922]," pages 298–312 of *Style and Idea*, p. 310.

[12] *"New Music" cit.*, p. 123.

[13] Read this delight in the unconvincing, actually on-the-verge-of-delirium discussions on how the subconscious has come to his aid, and that he deserves no credit for the miracle, in "My evolution [1949]," pages 79–92 of *Style and Idea*, pp. 85–6, and "Composition with Twelve Tones (I) [1941]," pages 214–45 of *Style and Idea*, pp. 222–3. (But, of course, he takes the credit; I have already quoted him about who it is that can renounce conscious control. . .)

organism: contrast it is just one more kind of emanation from the idea. The idea does not undergo any change, it governs it. Any instantiation of it would be only one of the possibilities—no one of them is the idea itself. The idea has no material form that can change. In fact, it *is* the process, the change. It is a constant becoming, a constant re-thinking and re-working of itself. Schoenberg's notion of idea is indeed a musical image of Hegel's Absolute Spirit.

And this is not the only resemblance between Schoenberg and Hegel. History also is an organic unfolding: dialectics explains and defines everything (even, or perhaps especially, contrasts) to be the consistent and coherent carrying out of a growth inherent from the start. This outlook is pervasive to Schoenberg thought: it is seen in his insistence that 'revolution' was not the good term for what he had done, in his feel of necessity for a change, in his construction of a smooth, directed progression out of the history of music, etc. The premise of endogenous and continuous development (codified most rigorously by Hegel, but actually one of the defining characteristic of Modernity, and seen also at the other end of the philosophical spectrum with Lamarck's evolutionism) is expressed by Schoenberg in his perception of history as well as in his music. Organicism in the work of art, evolutionism in the history of art, idealism in the conception of art—this is a in-an-nutshell description of Schoenberg. He is, in general, the paradigmatic Romantic.

WHEN SCHOENBERG DESCRIBES his twelve-tone method, interesting things happen to the notion of 'idea:' it is almost systematically equated to the twelve-tone row (called variously motive, set, order, etc.). All the sudden, it becomes something that is actually graspable, at least intuitively. It becomes *definable*.

However, it keeps its two fundamental, mystical features: being the whole seed of the organism (and providing the organism with its particular character and nature); and being independent of and beyond its successive, dialectical instantiations. He writes:

> [I]n twelve-tone composition we need not ask after the more or less dissonant character of a sound-combination, since the combination as such... is entirely outside the discussion as an element of the process of composition. This combination will not develop, or, better, it is not *it* that develops, but the relationship of the twelve-tones to each other develops, on the basis of

> a particular prescribed-order (motive), determined by the inspiration (the idea!).[14]

> A musical idea... though consisting of melody, rhythm, and harmony, is neither the one nor the other alone, but all three together. The elements of a musical idea are partly incorporated in the horizontal plane of successive sounds, and partly in the vertical plane as simultaneous sounds. The mutual relation of tones regulates the succession of intervals as well as their association into harmonies.... And this explains why... a basic set of twelve tones (BS) can be used in either dimension, as a whole or in parts.[15]

These two quotes also show the two things that Schoenberg tends to insist upon when writing about the twelve-tone method: how dissonance, on the one hand, and the diverse use of the set in different versions (inversions, retrogrades) or organizations (simultaneously or in succession), on the other, are all justified. Why Schoenberg had to insist on the first point is relatively transparent: the acceptance of dissonance by listener was something he had understandably and expectably to strive for.

But the second point, the justification of the diverse uses of the set, deserves closer attention. The fact that the set can be used in any form is a clear threat to recognizability. Even as simple transformation as the retrograde is well known to be very hard to recognize, notwithstanding how characteristic or simple the original is. Furthermore, it is clear—and for a composer as concerned with motive and theme as Schoenberg was it must have been very unsettling—that, with recognizability, also comprehensibility is jeopardized. In fact,

> The relaxation which a satisfied listener experiences when he can follow an idea, its development, and the reasons for such development is closely related, psychologically speaking, to a feeling of beauty. Thus, artistic value demands comprehensibility, not only for intellectual, but also for emotional satisfaction.[16]

However, it is safe to assume that nobody would say that, by itself, the twelve-tone row has a great deal of recognizability, even if presented all the time linearly. With the conundrum of versions of a single twelve-tone row (and this is another aspect Schoenberg takes good care of emphasizing, when responding to criticisms of rigidity), it seems that it is not possible—and in

[14]"Twelve-Tone Composition [1923]," pages 207–8 of *Style and Idea*, p. 208.

[15]*"Composition with 12 Tones" cit.*, p. 220.

[16]*Idem*, p. 215.

any case the effort would certainly render it all but relaxing or satisfying—to 'follow a twelve-tone row, its development, and the reasons for such development.' This is basically the same problem as Schoenberg had already encountered in his 'advanced' tonal works: motivic work is so heavy and dense, originals are so ephemeral and so little above variations, harmony is so fluent and un-referential, that comprehensibility is in danger. And, however, now that Schoenberg is describing (and defending) his 'twelve-tone method,' mysteriously, there is no more problem: everything is OK. In fact, the problem has become justification. Before the twelve-tone method, comprehensibility used to be dubious *in spite* of everything being the same idea (and that is why he looked for an alternative in the first place); now, on the contrary, comprehensibility is ensured *because* of everything being the same 'idea' (i.e., twelve-tone row). What had been an almost religious cult to the 'idea' with no special consequence to the actual composing, became a logical argument for a supposedly logical discussion: Schoenberg uses the ontological preeminence of the idea, and thus he finds a justification for fragmentation and reorganization of the main musical material. The apparent 'concretization' of the idea into the twelve-tone row—for after all the row is something that can be pointed at and showed in an example—is actually a marker for a move that took place in the other direction, from the concrete and empirical to the abstract and mystical: from the rather 'material,' mundane sphere of musical themes and motives, to recognizability and comprehensibility elevated to the more esoteric realm of almost Platonic absolutes: the abstract relationship between intervals, regardless of pitch, texture, rhythm, or anything else, the "relationship of the twelve tones to each other." The twelve-tone row, never fixed but always becoming, thinking itself, and legitimately escaping the narrowness of human recognition, is the purest expression of the idea in its most idealist, Hegelian form.

To say that the row's "comprehensibility as a musical idea is independent of whether its components are made audible one after the other or more or less simultaneously"[17] is not to have found the solution to the problem of comprehensibility—it is a complete re-definition of comprehension. Comprehension has been totally emancipated from recognition, and by this move the problem is automatically dissolved.

[17] Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, p. 208.

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THERE IS ANOTHER PARAGRAPH in Gellner's writings that comes to mind:

> If nothing outside the world, and nothing *about* or in this world, can inspire trust and comfort, one can shift one's confidence either to oneself, or to the unitary totality of things. What is available is either a kind of brave, self-reliant individualism, which trusts nothing and no one outside, but uses its own self as a kind of fixed point or anchorage, a starting point and touchstone; or, alternatively, a kind of pantheism, which abolishes the bifurcation between the sacred and necessary and the profane or contingent. (Already in the seventeenth century, these two alternatives were represented by its two most important thinkers, Descartes and Spinoza.)[18]

In fact, by converting the *spite* into a *because*, by trusting that an all-mighty twelve-tone row would automatically confer comprehensibility, Schoenberg is abolishing the bifurcation between unity and comprehensibility: *any* version of the row, however remote or contingent, is equally sacred. Schoenberg's early problem had been that of a Cartesian mind, a 'Pure Visitor' to the universe, trying to make sense of the chaotic, atomic nature of the world—trying to comprehend the piece. Now, on the contrary, there is no problem, because the quality of being a version of the row, by itself, makes everything pre-explained: there is no chaos to explain, only cosmos to admire. Schoenberg has turned a Spinozistic pantheist. (Hegel, too, had been the sequel of Spinoza in a world where Descartes had dominated.)

The dichotomy Descartes/Spinoza had remained latent in the Enlightenment to be born again in the nineteenth century and play itself in Vienna toward *fin-de-siècle*, in the form of the extreme empiricism of the Vienna Circle of Carnap and the extreme particularism that in due course would degenerate into nazism. In music, too, the received ideals and methods of an Enlightened analyticism, touched and modified by Romanticism, would soon reach a dilemma.

Schoenberg's solution to the dilemma is a rather self-indulgent, but tremendously fruitful way out. It seems like one of those moments of blindness—sleepwalking, Arthur Koestler would say—that genius know how to resort to every once in a while, when there is a problem they cannot solve. In any case, by sailing in search of organicism, Schoenberg had safely and unwittingly arrived at the purest form of atomism. Others would map it with serialism and other 'analytical'

[18] Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 30.

techniques of composition. Schoenberg, on his part, would return to a more comprehensible kind of organicism: he would increasingly recover features from the past he always belonged to.

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