

# **“PITFALLS AND RISKS” IN SCHÖNBERG’S SERIALISM\***

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## **ABSTRACT**

The term “intra-musical communication” can refer to relationships and references between compositions, or, in other words, to the communication between composers through their own works. Thus, the term can designate what in the context of structuralism is described as “intertextuality”. The term can also refer to the relations between musical parameters. In this sense, i.e. in terms of the interaction between parameters, Schönberg's twelve-tone technique will be discussed in the light of the concept of “intra-musical communication”. The European music has established, at least since the period of the “Viennese Classicism”, a network of relationships between melody, harmony, periodicity and morphogenesis that was designed, developed and perceived as “coherence”. Schönberg also appealed explicitly to this tradition, although with his method the network lost its coherence.

**Keywords:** intra-musical communication, parameters, dodecaphony, coherence.

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The term “intra-musical communication”, used in the title of this symposium, is a recent addition to musicological literature, at least insofar as it is reflected in RILMT<sup>95</sup>. In the particular case of internal intertextuality in music, it can be used in two directions:

a) To refer to the relationships between musical parameters, their interdependence and thus the internal musical processes in a broad sense, which can further be described as a communication between these parameters. In this case, the relationship between the musical text (intra-musical) and a program of some sort (title of work, literary topic, extra-musical images) cannot be comprised in the expression “intramusical communication”.

b) To refer to the various references among compositions – quotations, allusions, special colours, techniques etc., in other words the level of communication between compositions or composers. This process does not necessarily require the presence of an outside observer.<sup>96</sup> Under the sign of postmodernism, these procedures reached such ubiquity that the term “intertextuality” was transferred from linguistics to musicology.<sup>97</sup>

In what follows below, the term “intra-musical communication” will be applied to Arnold Schönberg’s dodecaphony, in order to highlight a distinctive internal contradiction in music. In the meantime, a vast body of literature has developed devoted to Schönberg, to his compositional system and to his works. So far, his inherent contradiction put forward for discussion in this paper has only been thematized in the context of his disassociation from Claude Debussy.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> *Recherche internationale de littérature musicale* – This database contains hundreds of hits for “intra-musical”, but none for “intra-musical communication”.

<sup>96</sup> A first example of intra-musical communication are the so-called *Parodiemessen* of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>97</sup> See for Example: Michael L. Klein, *Intertextuality in Western art music* [5] and Christian Utz, *Neue Musik und Interkulturalität. Von John Cage bis Tan Dun* [10].

<sup>98</sup> See Ton de Leeuw, *Die Sprache der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert*, [2] original Dutch edition 1991; Marius Flothuis, *Claude Debussys Neuerungen und ihre historischen Hintergründe*, [3, pp. 211-225].

## 1. Theory

In the summer of 1921, Schönberg announced his friend Josef Rufer that he had “made a discovery which will ensure the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years” [8, p. 26]. Dodecaphony appears here as a breakthrough in the context of a cultural competition among nations. Schönberg made this assertion while working on his *Klaviersuite* Op. 25, the first piece composed entirely by the rules of dodecaphony. In 1935 he was so advanced in this technique that he presented it in the extensive essay *Composition with Twelve Tones* [*Komposition mit Tonen Zwölf*] [9, pp. 72-96]. The text begins with a reference to the first book of Moses, “Let there be light”. Schönberg was interested in the act of creation, which according to him would bring “light” through the dodecaphonic technique. “Form in the arts [...] aims primarily at comprehensibility [...]. Composition with twelve tones has no other aim than comprehensibility” [9, p. 72f]. This process comes as a “necessity”, as a consequence of the “emancipation of dissonance” [9, p. 73], due to the chromatic expansion of harmony. By taking the path of dodecaphony, Schönberg followed the flow of history and thus reached the height of progress. His prediction shows how strong his teleological thinking was: “The time will come when the ability to draw thematic material from a basic set of twelve tones will be an unconditional prerequisite for obtaining admission to the composition class of a conservatory” [9, p. 81].

Schönberg's attention was focused exclusively on harmony. He also made references to the form building process, without, however, going further in that direction. Formerly, harmony had served “as a means of distinguishing the features of the form”, and later, during his period of free atonality, he discovered “how to construct larger forms by following a text or a poem” [9, p. 74]. “Formerly, the use of fundamental harmony [...] had grown into a subconsciously functioning sense of form” [9, p. 75]. Further on, he states that through the method of composition with twelve tones related to one another he “laid the foundations for a new procedure in musical construction which seemed fitted to replace those structural differentiations provided formerly by tonal harmonies” [9, p. 75].

Schönberg's theoretical reflection clearly illustrates that his method came as a reaction to the historical status of harmony, more exactly to the

Tristan harmony.<sup>99</sup> As is well known, his procedure organizes the pitch of the sound (melody), the thematic material (the use of the series as a theme) and synchronicity (harmony); it does not, however, in any way organize form. In this case, the relationship between series and form cannot be justified logically and musically. This obviously explains why Schönberg never made any concrete references to the construction of form.

## 2. Works

Once he decided to embark on the new “method”, Schönberg turned to the musical forms of the 18th century. Meanwhile, there were several other composers like Igor Stravinsky and his French fellow composers, or Paul Hindemith in Germany, who also explored the 18<sup>th</sup> century musical styles to then integrate them within a neoclassical framework. The *Suite* (Op. 25) with the movements *Präludium*, *Gavotte*, *Intermezzo*, *Menuett with Trio*, *Gigue*, the *Wind Quintet Op. 26* with the movements *Schwungvoll. Anmutig und heiter; Scherzando*, *Etwas langsam (poco Adagio)* and *Rondo*, the *String Quintet Op. 30* with the movements *Moderato*, *Adagio*, *Intermezzo: Allegro moderato*, *Rondo. Molto moderato*, up to the *Violin Concerto Op. 36*, completed during the time of his emigration, with the movements *Poco allegro*, *Andante grazioso*, *Finale. Allegro* – all these dodecaphonic instrumental works composed by Schönberg borrowed not only the genres and titles from the period of tonal music, but also their forms: the sonata form, the so-called lied form, menuett, scherzo with trio, rondo and theme with variations. Given this return to the Classical forms, Willi Reich called Schönberg a “revolutionary conservative” [7].

In the first one of these works, i.e. the *Piano Suite*, we can clearly notice that the cadence, viewed as a “form-creating force”, is still active in the background, the characteristic fall of a fifth being replaced here with a tritone. It is integrated in the structure of the series so as to participate in the construction of form. In the later works, this form-building process is based solely on the basic set, on its derivatives and transpositions, and on the formulas derived from it. This means that the form and the

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<sup>99</sup> See Ernst Kurth, *Romantische Harmonik und ihre Krise in Wagners „Tristan“*, [6]. The book went through several editions in a short period of time.

“material” are here unrelated or only slightly related to each other; form is reduced to a matrix. The classical forms used by Schönberg are the expression of a network of relationships between melody, harmony, rhythm, periodicity, formal construction and context, in which the harmonic hierarchies (“the harmonics of the fundamental”) have a central role in terms of form and meaning.

A contradiction arises between the conventional form building process and tonality, the new melody and the new harmony. Being closely linked, form and tonality become the so-called “tonal forms”. The abandonment of this hierarchical principle has consequences at all other levels of form. Therefore, and to return to the basic concept of the symposium, if this relationship ceases to exist, the “intra-musical communication” is interrupted.

It is for this reason that Ernst Ansermet argued against the abandonment of tonality, providing psychological arguments to support his position [1]<sup>100</sup>, while Ton de Leeuw and Marius Flothuis proclaimed Debussy (and not Schönberg) as the most consistent musical language innovator of 20<sup>th</sup> century music, because in Debussy, harmony, melody, form and instrumentation are structurally related.<sup>101</sup> Meanwhile, Alban Berg and Anton Webern, Schönberg's most famous students, also acknowledged the problem and reacted in consequence – Berg, by combining dodecaphony and tonality, and Webern, by working with micro-series in order to generate form.

### 3. Criticism by Adorno

The first person who became acutely aware of this problem of dodecaphony was Theodor W. Adorno. In his *Philosophie der neuen Musik*<sup>102</sup>, in which he assimilates Stravinsky to “restoration” and Schönberg to “progress”, he points out the pitfalls that the “twelve-tone method of composition” might lead to. These pitfalls are grouped by parameters, as follows:

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<sup>100</sup> See also Max Gottschlich, *Auf der Suche nach dem Logos der Musik: eine Kritik der Tonalitätsbegründung bei Ansermet* [4].

<sup>101</sup> See Note 4.

<sup>102</sup> First edition: Tübingen, 1949.

- Melody and form: “With each new tone, the selection of the remaining tones becomes smaller, and when the last tone is reached, there is no longer any choice left. The constraint in this is unmistakable [...] But the constraint is also crippling. The unity of the melody narrows it too tightly. Every twelve-tone theme, to hyperbolize, has something of the quality of a theme in a rondo, of a refrain. It is significant that in his twelve-tone compositions, Schönberg so fondly cites, literally or in spirit, the ancient, non-dynamic rondo form and utilizes an essentially related, intentionally harmless *alla breve* character. The melody is too complete; and although the inherently concluding power of the twelfth tone can be overcome through the verve of the rhythm, this is hardly possible through the gravitation of the intervals themselves. The commemoration of the traditional rondo functions as a stopgap to the immanent flux that has been severed.”<sup>103</sup>
- Intervallic and rhythmic structure: “All the intervallic relations are once and for all fixed by the basic row and its derivatives. There is nothing new in the progression of the intervals, and the omnipresence of the rows makes the row itself unfit for the production of temporal coherence [...] Distinct, consistently recurring rhythmical configurations take on the role of themes [...] Hence, what is specifically melodic is voided by the rhythm. In traditional music, even a minimal intervallic modulation could be decisive [...] for the meaningfulness of the form of an entire composition. In twelve-tone music, by contrast, utter coarsening and impoverishment have intervened [...] The melodic detail sinks powerlessly to a mere consequence of the total construction, powerless over it in any regard. It becomes an image of that kind of technical progress that pervades the world”.<sup>104</sup>
- Harmony: „The triads at the end of Pierrot once shockingly confronted the dissonances with their unreachable aim [...]. In the theme of the slow movement of the Third String Quartet,

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<sup>103</sup> *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, see by Digital Library, Volume 97: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 10086f. (see *Collected Writings*, vol. 12, p. 72f.)

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10088-10090 (see *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, p. 74-76).

consonances and dissonances stand indifferently adjacent to each other. They no longer even sound impure".<sup>105</sup>

- Compositional technique and counterpoint: "The loss of the specifically harmonic as a form-building element becomes so alarmingly palpable that pure twelve-note counterpoint fails as such to suffice as organizational compensation. The principle of contrast collapses. One voice never joins another in a truly free fashion, but always simply as its derivation".<sup>106</sup> "If tonality is no longer binding, then fundamental categories of the fugue such as the distinction between *dux* and *comes* – and, in particular, the element of reprise in the fugue, which serves the return of the principal key, become functionless and technically false".<sup>107</sup>

Together with Adorno and in the light of "intra-musical communication" we may conclude as follows:

1. Western music and, perhaps, any music, implies the existence of a hierarchy – of the sounds, of their pitch, of the chords, of the segments of form. If sounds and their pitches are no longer governed by a hierarchical system, if they are equal in the strict sense, then the relationship system between harmony and the segments of form also disappears, they become random and are no longer legitimized by the context in which they appear.

2. Specifically in Western music, harmony was the decisive factor, both in the construction of the themes and as a structuring principle in micro and macro forms. Once this force no longer exists, or is replaced by another system that cannot fulfil this polyvalent function, then both themes and form-building, insofar as they are based on the common principles, lose their meaning.

3. Dodecaphony designates a systematic organization of pitches. It is therefore considered non-logical, as it controls only one parameter, and that at the expense of the others. A possible answer was given by serial music, as Adorno virtually anticipated in his *Philosophie der neuen Musik*. If consistently applied, this serial music leads to total control over the musical material. A way out of this blind alley came when John Cage started experimenting with aleatory music, Iannis Xenakis with

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p. 10105f. (see *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, p. 84f).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. p. 10115 (see *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, p. 91).

<sup>107</sup> *Ästhetische Theorie*, see by Digital Library, Volume 97, p. 4211 (see *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 298).

stochastic music and György Ligeti with micro-polyphony, or when Witold Lutosławski developed the technique of limited aleatorism and the Romanian and Baltic composers began writing music with repetitive structures. In today's age of postmodernism and musical globalization, the answer lies in the acceptance and tolerance of the most diverse hierarchies, with each being specific to the reference systems of a work.

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