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on Webern, Symphony, Vancouver

When I appeared on one of these programs earlier this year, I commented <sup>upon</sup> one of the longest pieces of the symphonic literature. The Ninth Symphony by Gustav Mahler takes about ninety minutes to play. Today I should like to discuss one of the shortest specimens of the kind. Anton Webern's Symphony lasts hardly nine minutes.

The term symphony does not of itself require any specific dimensions of a composition so designated. Originally, that is in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, any kind of piece written for an ensemble of instruments might be called "Sinfonia", even if it was perhaps only an interlude of a few bars between the stanzas of an operatic aria.

Antiromantic tendencies in our own time which have led to a revival of preclassical and Baroque concepts also prompted using the term "Symphony" in this ancient, non-descript way. The Five Symphonies by Darius Milhaud, for instance, some of which may even be shorter than the Webern example, <sup>are playful little pieces,</sup> obviously called "Symphonies" in order to contradict the solemnity traditionally attached to this title.

Webern who never partook of any of the neoclassicistic masquerades undoubtedly would not have used the title "Symphony" had he not been convinced that his piece in spite of its miniature size had the characteristics which we associate with the idea of the symphonic form ever since the Vienna classics gave this form a specific definition. One of the objectives of our study will be finding out to what extent and in which sense Webern's work fits the definition.

The unusual and unaccustomed sounds of which Webern's music consists make it advisable to hear the piece more than once. Its brevity makes this happily possible. I therefore propose at this point listening to the piece in its entirety without any comment so that we may form some mental picture of the object we want to study. I will then analyse the work and repeat its integral performance at the end of this period. You will now hear the Symphony opus 21 by Anton Webern as played by an ensemble of musicians of Los Angeles conducted by Robert Craft. The only comment at this time is that the piece has two movements, and that it was written in 1928.

( play the whole symphony )

Our first impression is that this work is not only much shorter than most symphonies, but also smaller in volume of sound. Instead of the imposing array of instrumental choirs which in the 19th century were held indispensable in the symphonic style, Webern's symphony is scored for Clarinet, Bass-clarinet, two French Horns, Harp and a limited group of strings, without double Basses. The term "Chamber-Symphony" would be quite appropriate to the work.

Although definitions and descriptions of musical forms are by necessity flexible and open to interpretation by both composers and critics, we agree in general that the typical symphonic form is characterized by the presence of at least two contrasting themes which are subjected to the processes of development before being more or less completely restated. If we understand this statement to mean rather a general principle than a rigid precept, it will indeed cover nearly all items of the symphonic literature. Ever since Beethoven expanded the symphonic form to that monumental dimension which has become its most prominent landmark, we know that frequently the

contrasting themes are actually compound blocks of musical ideas, richly articulated and full of local contrast . We also know that especially in the more recent phases of symphonic writing , as for instance in Mahler's works, the developmental activity is frequently not confined to a specified area of the composition, neatly separated from the areas of statement and recapitulation, but invades the thematic statement as soon as it is made.. Whatever such special conditions may be, we can nearly always observe at work the idea of contrasting subject matters and development thereof.

Let us now see how this principle applies to Webern's work. Looking at the score we notice that the first movement has in bar 25 a double-bar line with a repetition sign, such as is always found in the classical symphonies up to the early Romantics. Tradition required that the ~~the~~ first section , the so-called exposition , be repeated literally before going on to the development. In modern symphonies , this has ~~never~~ <sup>hardly ever</sup> been done. In fact, in the performances of even the classics this repetition is nowadays frequently left out. Since this section in Webern covers about one third of the whole movement, it could indeed be an exposition , the other two thirds possibly being assigned to development and recapitulation. Let us then hear these first 25 bars to find out whether we can discover anything like contrasting thematical material.

( play m.1- 25a )

It would seem far fetched to call any configuration in this section a first or second theme, since no precise thematic shape is clearly in evidence. The only change which can be identified is a very subtle one . About two thirds through this section in bar 17 and

19, there is a slight slowing down of the speed. Approximately in this region the movement of the music changes if ever so slightly in that the longer tones which prevailed in the beginning now recede into the background and give way to groupings of shorter tones. Let us hear this section once more and focus our attention on that slight change in texture which occurs at the point of the little slowdown.

( play same )

If such a minute change is of any significance, we may conclude that in comparison to the effects prevailing in traditional styles musical processes were reduced by Webern to a sort of microscopic scale. In fact, much of his uniqueness as a composer may be understood by realizing that he was bent upon reducing the substance of music to that minimum of sound which would make the musical process just audible to a very attentive ear.

Such extraordinary attention will be necessary if we now investigate what actually goes on in this section which we tentatively have equalled to the exposition of a symphonic form. Let us try to listen carefully to the first  $5\frac{1}{2}$  bars and focus our attention on the sustained tones which are played by the two French Horns. The first Horn has a phrase consisting of four tones, the second of which is repeated. The second Horn enters after the first has played its third tone which is reached by a skip of nearly two octaves down. When the second Horn plays its last tone, the clarinet enters above it. This is the beginning of a new phrase and we shall for the time being not pay any attention to it. Here now is the opening phrase.

( play 1-  $5\frac{1}{2}$  )

You may have noticed that the second Horn begins its phrase on the same tone on which the first Horn started the whole piece. But instead of going up as the first did, the second Horn goes down exactly as far as the first went up. It repeats this low tone just as the first Horn did, with its high second tone. Then the second Horn skips just as far up-nearly two octaves- as the first went down. The last interval between the third and fourth tones again is the same in both Horns, the first going up, the second down. Let us hear this excerpt again.

( play 1- 5 $\frac{1}{2}$  )

What goes on here, is known as a **canonic <sup>imi</sup> imitation** by inversion, that is to say, that <sup>the</sup> two Horns play exactly the same thing, but in opposite directions. What goes up in the first, goes down in the second, and vice versa. The two statements are symmetrical in relation to a horizontal line drawn through the pitch level which they have in common, namely their first tones.

Once we have realized this, we have grasped one of the essential principles by which Webern's Symphony, and indeed most of his later music moves **along** and is held together. It is the principle of symmetry. Of course, the term symmetry has been used in theoretical discussions of musical design long before. In classical music we speak of "symmetrical periods", and by that we mean structures of the type which I shall illustrate with the **wellknown** Haydn-example:

( Haydn )

What is symmetrical about these phrases? They obviously correspond in regard to their rhythmic organisation: six **short** units plus one long. But since these units follow each other always

in the same order, there is strictly speaking no symmetry if we understand by symmetry an arrangement of elements on two sides of a given axis whereby the corresponding elements are equidistant from that axis. Haydn's periods are not really symmetrical, but rather parallel, like verses which have the same number of feet and end in rhyming syllables. Webern's phrases are really symmetrical, as we have seen, since they are related to each other like the image of a mountain to its mirror reflection in the horizontal surface of a lake. This relationship, technically known as inversion, has been used a great deal in polyphonic music, but rarely with such unique persistence, as in Webern's later music where it is one of the most important structural devices.

We shall now take up the section following the repeat sign up to which we have listened so far. If we have tentatively called it a development section in analogy to that part of the symphonic form which traditionally follows the exposition, we will now have to revise this notion since the first section has hardly exposed anything that could have been identified with the traditional concept of a theme. Let us then see what the subsequent part is like.

( play 25b- 45 )

The first thing to be noticed here is another change in the movement of the music, that is a different arrangement of time values. The opening section of the work consisted of sustained tones which were mainly half-notes, and shorter ones, which were quarter-notes, the latter, as we have pointed out, accumulated toward the end of the fragment. In the section which we have just heard we encounter for the first time still shorter time values, namely eighth-notes. These

appear always in pairs , usually attached to a relatively long sustained note of the length of six quarters. Let us verify this by listening to the first five bars of this section.

( play 25b-29 )

You could hear this characteristic grouping twice in the top voice played by the Clarinet, and twice in the bottom part , played by cello and then by the Viola.

( repeat )

By this time you will have realized that this music requires a sort of microscopic inspection if one wishes to penetrate its inner workings, Therefore we must not lose our patience if we look at some details again and again, each time focussing another aspect. If I let you **h**ear these five bars once more , I invite you now to watch only the top voice, the clarinet. You will observe that it consists of two phrases of three tones each- the long tone plus the two eighth-notes previously discussed. Now **i**f you watch the melodic motion of these phrases , you will **u**notice that they again are symmetrical. Again they have the first , sustained tone in common. In the first phrase the two eighth-notes move down, in the second they move up to the same **exten**s.

( repeat )

Now we must hear these bars **o**nce more , this time watching the bottom voice, and we will again notice the same kind of symmetry.

( repeat )

But we are not through yet. When we now play these five bars <sup>once</sup> (more, we shall attach to them immediately five bars from the end of ~~the~~ section now under examination. Listen carefully:

( play 25b-29, 40-44 )

If you did listen carefully, you could observe that here a different type of symmetry is represented. The second set of five bars contains exactly ~~the same musical process~~ as the first, only in reverse order. The two eighth-notes now come before the sustained tone. If in the case of inversion we could imagine the musical process being reflected in a horizontal mirror, we would now have to assume the existence of a vertical mirror in which what was going forward is reflected as retracing ~~its steps, running backwards~~. Let us hear this once more.

( repeat )

One more detail, before we go on. You may remember that there was a complete standstill in the middle of this section - a long silence in the center of which a few hazy, shadowy tones could be heard before the music took up its flow again. Let us inspect this shadowy speck.

( play 34-35 )

The cello has one very short and a long tone, the harp has four short notes, hardly distinguishable, and the cello returns with a short and a long tone. Again the eighth tones are arranged symmetrically in two groups of four, but here the retrograde mirror-image follows the original immediately. The conspicuous place



assigned to this configuration in the center of dead silence suggests that it has a special function . In fact, it is the turning point of this whole section, and all that follows it, is an exact **retrogression** of everything that **went** before . If we had plenty of time and could inspect the score while listening to the music , we could easily verify that there are many more correspondences of this kind , that many more elements of the whole composition are related to each other in terms of inversion, or retrogression . It would become clear that in Webern's work these principles of design prevail over, or even replace , the traditional ways of creating structural context. Before pondering the implications of this state of affairs, let us become **acquainted with a few more details of our Symphony.**

If the formal articulation of the first movement so far was mainly carried out by changes of motion, we may see that Webern has stuck to this idea to the very end of the movement. Here are the last 6 bars of it.

( play 61 - 66b )

For the first time the short eighth-notes now appear in groups of more than two. Obviously the structural idea of the movement is speeding up the musical process from one section to the other by introducing shorter rhythmic values and increasing their number.

The most important feature of the constructive aspect of this work is revealed in the first 11 measures of the second movement. This movement is called Variations , and consists of a theme and seven variations to which a brief concluding section is attached. The articulation of the form is extremely clear in that the variations are most ostensibly set ~~set~~ off one against the other. Paradoxical as it seems, we must say that Webern's music, although it sounds to many as

strange as they might imagine the music of the Martians to be, is much clearer and simpler in its constructive aspect than most twelve-tone music ever written.

By using the term Twelve-tone music I have anticipated what I shall now try to demonstrate analysing the Theme of the Variations, which comprises the first 11 measures of the movement. Let us hear it now.

( play II, 1-11 )

This theme consists of a melodic line played by the Clarinet which is very discretely accompanied by a few tones in the two French Horns and Harp. If you try to count the different pitches played by the Clarinet, you will realize that there are twelve. Some of the tones are repeated, but the sum total of the different tones to be heard is twelve. Let us hear it again.

( repeat )

Now, according to our microscopic procedure, we shall focus another aspect of this **sequence of tones**. In terms of time values, it consists of tones of nearly equal length, except for two ~~short~~ short notes which occur in the middle of this sequence. It is at this point that the harp plays four short notes against the leading clarinet part. Let us try to verify this.

( repeat )

*If you now*  
~~If you now~~ will listen once more very carefully, you might realize that these two short notes again are a turning point such as we have examined earlier. Everything that happens after it is a retrogression of what went before. This applies not only to the clarinet

part, but also to the accompaniment. Please listen to it once more.

( repeat )

Since we have realized that the entire melody of the clarinet consists of twelve different tones, it follows that this sequence of twelve tones was set up in such a way that its second half would be identical with a retrogression of its first half, shifted of course to a different pitch level so that none of the first six tones would be repeated in the second half, or else we would not obtain a complete twelve-tone row.

Here is revealed another principle, and one of the most important of those which govern Webern's later works, that is the employment of twelve-tone rows in the construction of musical entities. ~~the~~. The twelve-tone row which we have discovered in the theme of our Variation movement occurs not only at this place, but indeed the whole Symphony consists exclusively of countless appearances of this tone-row. There is not a single note in the whole work which could not be <sup>ac</sup> counted for as a member of this tone-row.

If we did not attempt to trace it in the excerpts of the first movement, it is due to the fact that there the tone-row is constantly superimposed unto itself, appearing in canonic imitations at different pitch levels at the same time, frequently combined with its own inversion, as for instance in the passage for the two French Horns at the very beginning of the work. It would not have been possible there to detect the function of the tone-row without taking apart the musical fabric and inspect the single threads of which it is made up, a procedure which in these broadcasts is not available. Fortunately the texture of the Theme of our Variations is so simple and clear that the all-important twelve-tone row stands out in bold relief and may

be identified **without** difficulty . Let us now hear this theme again.

( repeat )

The ensuing variations do not require **elaborate** comment. They are set off against each other with **exemplary** clarity , **each** of them having its own characteristic tempo, rhythmic movement , and orchestration. Each variation covers eleven bars exactly like the theme , and in at least three of them the turning point at which the musical process reverses itself is drastically brought out by a complete standstill, much like the analogous detail which we have examined in the first movement.

In spite of the fact that everything in Webern's music points to utmost clarity of articulation and simplicity of texture, this music was, during the composer's life time , considered the most bewildering phenomenon within the realm of so-called new music, even more inaccessible than Schoenberg's most daring innovations. Superficially one might be inclined to ascribe this reaction to the character of the sounds which prevail in Webern's music. They are extremely dissonant , according to the traditional **discrimination** between consonant, **that** is agreeable, sweet, harmonious, and dissonant, namely unpleasant, harsh, disturbing sounds. However this is hardly the true cause of the **alarm** that was <sup>generated</sup> ~~caused~~ by Webern's music far **beyond** the uneasiness usually engendered by modern music, for the dissonant combinations which he uses are not much different from what we have been accustomed to hear ~~ever~~ since the beginning of the century in Strauss and Mahler, not to speak of Schoenberg, **Stravinsky** and Bartok.

To us it seems that it was rather the unprecedented degree of concentration so manifest in Webern's music that caused the general

public as well as ~~most~~<sup>most</sup> musicians to recoil in hatred or despair. There is no composer known to us whose entire life's work can be heard in less than three hours although it comprises the fruits of thirty-five years of labor. Only one of Webern's works- his last- takes more than ten minutes to play, and even this is only thirty seconds longer than ten minutes. Such brevity is the consequence of extraordinary concentration. Even to me, who has been acquainted with Webern's work for many years, listening to a five minute composition of his seems like having heard a half hour of music.

One of the tangible technical means by which musical significance is crowded into a minimum of duration is reducing continuous utterance of any musical thought to the smallest possible number of tones. The Theme of the Variations which enabled us to discover the twelve-tone row on which the whole work is constructed is an exceptional case in that here one instrument is allowed to carry a thematic statement for as much as eleven bars. Nearly everywhere else the continuity of phrases is limited to sequences of less than four tones. In many cases the individual instruments play only two tones or even just one tone, before, after shorter or longer silences, they enter the process again. The result is a seeming absence of continuity apt to disturb and tire listeners conditioned to the permanent roaring of late romantic music. The German composer and critic Herbert Eimert has very aptly called Webern's procedure "Punktmusik", that is "point-music", since it condenses the musical process ~~so to speak~~ into disconnected points rather than stressing a continuity which would carry the listener along over breaks and *gaps.*

Frequently one has heard the opinion that Webern's jagged and broken-up style of writing was the effect of his embracing the twelve-tone method of composition, in other words, that the compulsion ~~as to~~ which he submitted of using pre-set twelve-tone patterns as the basic

material of his work forced him into compositional procedures which he otherwise would not have employed, and that he might have written in a more fluent, more accessible style if he had not put on the strait-jacket of the twelve-tone technique. That this was not the case can easily be seen if we take a brief look at one of his earlier works, The look may, and must, be brief since this work- Six Bagatelles for String Quartet- takes only three minutes and thirty seconds. It was written in 1913.

( play "Six Bagatelles " )

In these pieces we clearly observe the characteristic features of "point-music": the jagged outline, the brief, disjointed phrases, the sudden silences which seem to nip in the bud any feeling of continuity. But in the String quartet pieces this manner of writing may be interpreted as the result of the desire to express emotional qualities with utmost intensity. If there is any formal organizing principle at work, it certainly is not obvious. These pieces have many of the characteristics of the recitative, that is, their phrases seem to follow each other in the manner of an improvisation, dictated by nothing but the swiftly changing sequence of emotional impulses which we understand to be <sup>the</sup> motivation of the whole work. In other words, the rhetorical element in this music is very strong, and we perceive the sudden changes, interruptions, contrasts as outbursts of high-pitched emotions, much as if we would listen to impassionate speech. In this respect the string quartet pieces belong to that phase of new music which was correctly associated with the idea of expressionism.

While the Symphony retains the external characteristics of the expressionistic style, they now appear to be the result of ruthless

constructive discipline. Determined exploitation of the quasi-geometrical properties of the chosen twelve-tone row, of the internal correspondences of its various segments in terms of inversion and retrogression, seems to overshadow any other motivation that could be thought of as relevant in the process of the music's coming into existence. Problems and projects of design are of paramount significance, everything else takes on the character of a byproduct.

Anton Webern has not left many utterances of a theoretical or analytical nature. A letter which he addressed to a Swiss music critic in 1941 shows <sup>to what</sup> extent he was preoccupied with the constructive aspects of his music. Let me read to you a few lines from this letter concerning his last orchestral work, the Variations **opus** 30, as quoted by Robert Craft in his introductory notes to the recorded edition of Webern's complete works: " <sup>quote</sup> Isn't it true, that when you first see this score you want to say, well, what is in it? - nothing! This is because you do not see the multitude of notes which most music has accustomed you to see.... Everything in this piece is derived from the two ideas stated in the first two measures.... The second form of the idea is in retrograde: the second two tones are the retrograde movement of the first but are doubled in rhythmic length;.. By changing the center of gravitation within the two row forms by augmentation and diminution the character and meter of the piece itself is constantly changing.... The entire development of the piece is already present in the row of the first few bars: Pre-formed." <sup>unquote</sup>

The <sup>is</sup> word "pre-formed" is the clue which explains the almost miraculous influence exerted by Webern's music over the present young generation of composers from Australia to the northern-most recesses of Lappland. Robert Craft says correctly: "How were we to

know that...our age would be characterized by a majority of the youngest Western European musicians as the age of Webern? "

Certainly nothing in Webern's lifetime pointed to such a development. Anton Webern, descended ~~of~~ from an ancient Austrian family in Tyrol, was born in Vienna in 1883. It is interesting to notice that before turning in earnest to composition he was trained in musicology at the University of Vienna where he received his Ph D degree for a thesis on mediaeval music. Undoubtedly this was a case of selective affinity, for the most intricate aspects of Webern's later music have much in common with the rhythmic and polyphonic complexities of the music of the Middle Ages. The decisive event of his life was his association with Arnold Schoenberg in 1906. He became and remained Schoenberg's disciple and devoted friend to the end of ~~his~~ his life. This life, uneventful as it was in terms of ostensible crisis and drama, was full of frustration and disappointment. In his homeland to which he was desperately attached he was given only occasional jobs as conductor , proof-reader and the like at the fringes of the so-called official musical life ,and as a composer he was appreciated only by a small group of initiated friends that was generally considered a bunch of lunatics. The Nazi regime deprived him even of this limited acclaim as it suppressed his music and annihilated his few followers or scattered them over the face of the earth. A cruel fate prevented him from realizing that during those frightful years of violence his fame had unbelievably spread underground. A few months after the end of World War II Anton Webern was shot to death ,presumably by accident , by an American sentry in the mountain village of Mittersill in the Austrian Alps. The tragedy has not been fully explained to this day.



However, the age of Webern had come. To everybody's surprise it turned out that young composers all over the world had made Webern their patron saint. What attracted them to him was this magic word "pre-formed". They became possessed with the idea of extending the principle of the strict organization of musical design through the twelve-tone row to all aspects of the musical process. Not only the sequence of tones and intervals, but also the duration of the various elements, the dynamic volume and the sound qualities of the tones should be preformed, predetermined by the series, that is by some sequence of measurements and proportions set up in advance and governing every single detail of the musical process. Within a few years after Webern's untimely death this development of musical thought has opened up the new frontier of electronic music, a medium which gives the composer unlimited control over all and any detail of the musical process. So far we have only taken a few steps into this unexplored territory, and the ultimate outcome of the adventure is beyond anybody's guess. Tempting as it is to embark on a discussion of electronic music we have to stop right here lest our discourse would approach the dimension of a Mahler symphony rather than conform to the concise brevity of today's subject.

It remains to answer our first question: Is Webern's work a symphony? The answer is no, if we adhere to the traditional concept of the symphonic form as a dramatic development of clearly stated thematic characters. The answer is yes, if we accept a re-definition of the term "Symphony" as a work written for instrumental ensemble embodying the most demanding type of musical design and thereby realizing the highest degree of significance. Let us now, in the spirit of this new definition, hear once more the Symphony by Anton Webern, without any further comment.

( play the whole Symphony again )