

Amsterdam University Press

Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: Music of the Twentieth Century

Book Subtitle: A Study of Its Elements and Structure

Book Author(s): TON DE LEEUW

Published by: Amsterdam University Press

URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt46n27q.5>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



Introduction

I

The musical world of the twentieth century is a divided world. None of the dreams and expectations of enthusiastic minds at the beginning of the twentieth century has been fulfilled. In our new society an old nucleus has persisted, with its own customs and imagination stemming directly from concepts rooted in the nineteenth century.

Worldwide social revolutions, a series of unbelievable and radical scientific discoveries, entirely new views concerning almost every field of life, and different generations of composers and performers, scholars and technicians have not succeeded in preventing the official music world from revolving, and continuing to revolve, around a very definite period of the past with a span of scarcely two hundred years.

This historical heritage is in itself a strange amalgam of a number of brilliant masterpieces alongside musical follies as numerous as they are popular, of – broadly speaking – an exceptionally high level of performance, and of related musical theory developed to a similar degree. This is coupled, on the other hand, to a most rudimentary musical aesthetic, characterised by entirely bourgeois, romantic concepts which continue to rule our democratised musical life as a mere imitation of what was once – in the nineteenth century – a living and authentic intellectual movement.

The contemporary creative artist can hardly function in such a musical practice. The public at large that fills our concert halls has become both anonymous and amorphous. It has no need of nor does it make demands upon creative contemporaries.¹ The small and select social groups that determined European artistic life until far into the eighteenth century are no longer; the so essential interaction between creator and receiver has therefore disappeared. Through the lack of any collective stimulus, only the most vital of individuals are able to maintain contact with contemporary art. The enjoyment of music has become a strictly individual matter, just like composition. The disinclination to regard oneself as a revolutionary is typical of many modern composers. Stravinsky, in his conversations with Robert Craft, claimed that he could not imagine that his music could sound strange to the public.² Equally characteristic is the attitude of Anton Webern, who spoke of his most radical pieces as if they were classical sonatas.

Yet here is precisely the dichotomy: modern music is not the result of

wanting to be 'different', but is indeed *normal* in the imagination of the creator. The fact that this 'normality' sounds so abnormal to so many people indicates the full extent of present-day individualism.

2

When individualism increases, signs indicate that subjectivism decreases. Debussy, an individualist *par excellence*, maintained close contact with nature, though in a different way from the romantics. The romantic mind projected itself in nature, while Debussy in the first place listened. Webern listened too. Silence became audible. A new world was revealed. Those who had ears, heard the new sound: the sound of an overpowering universe in which humanity had lost its central position. The gardens of Versailles and the idyllic Viennese Forest made way for the mysteries of microcosm and macrocosm.

Unprecedented elementary forces came to the fore in mankind too, leading – especially at the beginning of the twentieth century – to volcanic eruptions. The dynamic world of technique released new and vital energy. On the other hand, the importance of craftsmanship, the general preference for lucid, neo-classical contours, and a religious trait in various creative contemporaries which should not be underestimated, bore witness to a new mentality in which the romantic desire to be expressive seemed to have lost all meaning.

This is probably where the problem lies for many people. Is not expressivity the purpose of music making? The desire to be expressive has even become second nature to many performers. The inclination to 'interpret', to create an expressive sound, is revealed in even the tiniest details of performance. The average listener and critic expect nothing more. A musician either is expressive or has no feeling. There is hardly room for gradations within such a restricted musical antithesis. The fact is ignored that by far the most music ever produced by mortal man never had expressivity as its purpose. Music has been made to exorcise spirits, to symbolise the order of the universe, to bring man into harmony with his surroundings, for the pure joy evoked by the movement of dance, to sing the praises of God, to pray, to work better, to calm animals and children, and to honour kings. The making of music to convey one's own personal emotions arose only at a time when the artist could feel that he was the centre of the world, in which there was only one form of servitude, namely to himself. This enslavement to oneself has given rise to immoderate overestimation of the self and to pathological conditions. It is not surprising that the romantic period was so successful in producing the type of artist who had been shaken out of balance, and who could therefore create enormous mental tension in his work.

A rapid expansion of all musical resources was to increase the transmission of this tension, particularly from the time of Beethoven onwards. The artist freed himself conclusively from any social servitude and delivered a soliloquy. A tendency arose to overwhelm the listener, to make him defenceless. Not

only the fascinating monologues of Wagner, but also the loudspeakers of Stockhausen thundering from all corners of the auditorium were the result of a sometimes barely hidden effort to shock, which was very far removed from the balance and perfection of the classical masters. The ideals of both classicism and romanticism are known in our time, indeed in an acute form. Among various present-day creative artists, however, the view that expressivity is not the purpose but rather the result of the action of music making is gaining ground once more. For the genuinely musical, music making is a completely autonomous activity that can bring a satisfaction and deep joy incomparable to any definable emotion.

3

The contrasts mentioned above hardly constitute a problem for those who are truly sensitive to music, unless milieu or training have debased the capacity to feel. This applies likewise to a related misunderstanding which is very widespread in present-day musical life, namely an underestimation of the element of craftsmanship. It is astonishing to discover how even musicians accept as a matter of course the highest demands made on them in instrumental or vocal proficiency, but adopt a most negative attitude as soon as there is any mention of craftsmanship in the creative process. This is seen at best as a necessary evil; it is the familiar problem of form and content viewed as two separate entities, with the emphasis on content – the artist's emotions. For a genuine artist this problem is meaningless, and the splitting of form and content inconceivable. What he puts on paper, in sudden visions or through long and persistent work, is one and indivisible. What he brings to the surface is a living organism, with innumerable internal relationships. Where is the form and what is the content? Any intervention disturbs and falsifies this fabric. The theoretically minded deform it into a scheme, the hunters after expression hold up a colourful soap bubble in their hands. Naturally, emotions may play a large part in the creative process. They can stimulate or accelerate, they can slow down and extinguish. There is a close interaction which escapes our perception. It is certain, however, that the value of the result is subject to totally different criteria, the essence of which we cannot describe, but only experience. Provided we are receptive... to music.

The element of craftsmanship therefore comes to stand in quite a different light. Like the directly emotional, it can accelerate or slow down, stimulate or extinguish the creative process. It is really as unavoidable as it is unreal for the ultimate essence of the musical work of art. It is entirely unimportant whether a composer 'calculates' little or much, whether he allows himself to be carried along by his emotions, or controls himself. The sources of the phenomenon of music are just as unknown to him as they are to the listener. Our only concern is to reveal this mysterious human utterance as accurately as possible. It is the composer's own affair what means he uses,

what attitude he adopts, whether it be one of nervous tension or complete mental balance. What we are really trying to say is that the element of craftsmanship embraces immeasurably more than the mere technical aspect. To the real creator each act and thought are a function of his creative work. His emotions, experiences, daily contacts, consciousness, in short his whole personality, are attuned to it. The most brilliant of ideas can be disturbed by a blemish on the wallpaper.

Conscious control of the material, or technique, therefore plays a part too in this complicated and somewhat impenetrable process of creation, in which not the partial man – the emotional man – but the whole personality is involved. We are now going to extricate this control from the whole, because it is the most easily approachable and, at the same time, the most neglected aspect of contemporary music.

Where weak figures are involved, conscious technical intervention may result in sterility. In the work of great creative artists, the opposite is often seen: the more inner charge, the more need for rigorous mastery of the material. Great romantic composers form no exception.

In another manner this also applies to us. Any analysis is worthless if we do not have the required musical fantasy. Those who regard technique and analysis as necessary evils not infrequently do so precisely because of their own lack of fantasy.

4

The romantic composer had a different attitude from his classical predecessors. He believed that music had to express something from his subjective world of experience. Although he adhered essentially to the forms of the classical period, his increasing need for expression resulted in their becoming hollowed out; yet also enriched, since the slow disintegration of the classical structure into its elements was coupled with an unprecedented differentiation, particularly in harmony, which is the expressive resource *par excellence*. From about 1850 *floating tonality* made its appearance. The bonds of classical balance had become too narrow, and the desire for expression sought an escape by avoiding an all too emphatic effect of key. The means to this end included the following:

- frequent modulation
- absence of (or indistinct) chord resolution
- resolution otherwise than suggested
- increasingly ambiguous harmonic functions
- chords inclining towards harmonic ambiguity
- enharmonic devices
- relations based on the mediant instead of the fifth
- increasingly intensive chromatic leading-note function (thwarting the vertical-functional relationship)

As a result the music 'floats' between keys, and, in extreme cases, the tonic is avoided completely until the end. The influence of the tonic, however, is always present. It is precisely the friction between the centrifugal forces of the music and this latent basis that constitutes the typically expressive element in much romantic music. Here lies a basic difference from Debussy, for example, who gave independence to harmony, releasing it from its functional bond. When Schumann declined to resolve a dominant seventh, he evoked mental tension: we expect something that does not occur. In the case of Debussy, the intrinsic value of the chord is restored. It is not 'unresolved' and therefore not 'vague', as many listeners consider who interpret in a romantic manner. Many young modern composers, particularly those who have had German models, began with floating tonality (Schönberg, works written before 1908; Bartók, *First String Quartet*, *Two Portraits*, etc.). The increasing exaltation of late-romantic floating tonality led, in Schönberg, to the dissolution of the classical tonal basis. The era of *free atonality* and later that of *bound atonality* (12-note technique) was ushered in. (Further information on this is found in chapter 7.) In the case of Bartók and Stravinsky we find rather the phenomenon of *extended tonality*, which likewise already had its origins in the nineteenth century. In extended tonality a central, centripetal effect persists and is indeed so strong that even relatively complex harmonic structures cannot undermine it. Elementary harmonic functions still occur, but the forces active at the centre are often of a horizontal nature. Extended tonality may be manifest in numerous variants: from the simple addition of modal elements, parallel harmony, intermixture of major and minor, added notes etc., to polytonality with various simultaneous centres. For the rest, the actual concept of extended tonality is very closely related to our aural capacities. What perhaps sounds chaotic and 'atonal' to an untrained listener may be perfectly cohesive to the insider. What was considered polytonal in 1920 is today monotonal, if we are but able to relate all the parts to one centre.

5

Concepts of form in classical tonality have their limitations too. Once again, it was the increasing demand for harmonic expression which, for example, began to disturb the classical balance of sonata form. This balance is very closely related to the tonal balance of the sections. In strong contrast to the firm planes of sound of the exposition, with its central points of tonic and dominant, there is the harmonic quicksand of the development, based on a well-considered plan of modulation. The transition from the unstable harmony of the development to the original tonal basis of the recapitulation is in many works, particularly those of Mozart, a breathtaking musical occurrence. An absolutely superior game is played here, as the very structure becomes expression, while the consciousness of form is perfectly classical.

The romantics' gain in terms of harmonic wealth went hand in hand with

the loss of this classical awareness of form. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the first subject of a sonata sometimes contained so many modulations that the development lost its contrasting function. The same applied to so-called thematic assimilation. Tonal forces contributing to form were levelled out, and larger tension relationships lost their function in favour of differentiation of detail. Naturally, this did not apply solely to harmony. *Disintegration into elements* was general, but this tendency itself became independent at the same time. Harmony, tone colour and dynamics underwent this process, to which the early modern composers also added rhythm. This process of disintegration and independence came to a temporary end in recent serial music, but in the meantime something had happened. The early moderns were becoming aware of this independence, and the elements began to lead an autonomous life: rhythm in Stravinsky, sound in Varèse, atonal chromaticism in Schönberg, etc.

What has been said here briefly could easily fill a whole chapter. The imaginative reader, however, will realise that one of the turning points lies here. The generation that tried to take a different path on the basis of these emancipated elements marked the beginning of a new music. Other concepts of form arose, but traditional ones were to continue until the present day. All sorts of transitional phases occurred, depending on the composer in question. Let us look at just one example from the work of Debussy, but from a broad angle, since it is impracticable to discuss all important details here.

From a classical point of view, the first movement of *La Mer* is an insoluble problem. It comprises four sections, the first and last of which have the character of a prologue and epilogue. The symmetrical enclosure of classical form is absent here; what is more, the sections have no unity of key, tempo or theme. The whole nonetheless forms a unity. How does this arise, and to what extent is it expressed in the musical technique? In chapter 3 we will find the surprising solution: a unity of interval in all the melodic material. This unity lies on a material level, as it were, before the material is shaped into higher categories of form. The contrasts are therefore not as large as they appear (on paper): all the melodies are different crystallisations of the same basic intervals.

In *Nuages* (from *Trois Nocturnes*) we encounter exactly the opposite: with a few exceptions towards the end, this piece consists of a continual alternation of two most rudimentary melodic motifs. There is no question of classical thematic development in this continual repetition. Ostensibly, Debussy does nothing at all, and there is a lack of contrast. The more one delves into the score, however, the more the master appears to exploit an extremely subtle and highly developed art of variation, particularly in terms of tone colour. With regard to form, this element became an absolutely indispensable factor, without which we miss something essential. The emancipated element of timbre acquired an autonomous formal function, replacing earlier means of contrast.

In both works we speak of free form, i.e., the causal relationship between the sections has been reduced to a minimum. One section does not necessarily lead to another as in enclosed classical forms: rather than emanating from one another, they exist in free juxtaposition. The themes are not classical themes, they have no thematic function; they can at best be repeated a few times in succession before definitively making way for others.

To classical ears such themes never 'finish', but the reader knows that the classical causal relationship between antecedent and consequent has disappeared. Each element of this music has a superior freedom in the form as a whole, moulded by a composer with an astounding intuition for correct proportions.

6

The absence or reduction of causality and symmetry may also be perceived in the harmony (abandonment of harmonic functions) and rhythm (abandonment of the metrical context). The resulting open, asymmetrical chain structures occur in many modern works but are in fact as old as the history of music itself. Exceptional is the *enclosed, symmetrical development form*, the very type that flourished during the era of classical tonality. It is remarkable that the romantics among the moderns, Schönberg and Bartók, did their best to adhere to this type, as is expressed particularly in their pursuance of a strongly developed motivic development technique, a procedure not found in composers such as Stravinsky, Debussy and Varèse. This genetic manner of writing gave rise to a method that can be referred to as germ-cell technique. Yet in a figure such as the Dutch composer Pijper, for instance, theory and practice diverged considerably: his germ-cell technique was far from genetic and consisted rather of an additive juxtaposition of the same or related individual motifs.

Aesthetic views revolving around the question of *what is or is not foreseeable* do not make the situation any clearer. Certain composers were nothing less than allergic to anything foreseeable. They were found most easily in circles influenced by the Viennese school which, from the very beginning, primarily stressed the principle of variation in every aspect of music. This tendency obviously moved towards atonality and all that goes with it, and it has continued until the present day. But here again this all too simple view was clouded by Anton Webern, who from about 1928 in particular increasingly incorporated the element of symmetry in his structures, even reinstating repeat signs.

After all that has been said, the reader will realise that it is impracticable to put down on paper even an approximation of the whole subject of form in modern music. So many factors are involved that insight into this new, confusing and so individual world of form can be gained only through an exhaustive study of relevant compositions.

Tonality is in some respects very old and very general. Its traditional interpretation, however, is a historical phenomenon with the limited range of approximately two centuries. As soon as music outside these two centuries is discussed, a surprisingly large number of musicians sometimes have difficulty in escaping from it. They neither see nor feel that the linear polyphony of the Renaissance, for instance, is quite a different matter; they give a vertical interpretation to originally horizontal phenomena and are supported in this by apparent similarities. Something similar also occurs in contemporary music. A different view can result in a distorted interpretation and a lopsided picture of what is actually taking place. Anything falling outside traditional modes of interpretation is easily experienced as arbitrariness. It need hardly be said that the norms that protect artistic freedom from arbitrariness cannot be linked to a world of ideas that was valid only for a certain period.