

BERG'S ALLUSIONS TO TONALITY

While the complex structures and abstract surfaces of Webern's music obscure his connections to Romanticism, the more familiar sounds and forms of Berg's atonal and twelve-tone works mask his obsession with elaborate and arcane compositional devices. Completed in 1922, Berg's three-act opera *Wozzeck* is not a twelve-tone work, but it anticipates his later interest in integrating tonal allusions, Neoclassical forms and genres, and complex structures. The first act is a set of five character pieces, including a Baroque-style suite, a march, and a passacaglia. Act 2 is a symphony in five movements. The third act, as discussed in Chapter 3, is a set of what he referred to as "inventions," no doubt intended to evoke Bach's famous contrapuntal keyboard inventions. In Berg's case, the inventions are closer to the idea of variations that explore different elements, including a theme, a note, and a rhythm.

Wozzeck demonstrates Berg's systematic approaches to structure. For example, the "invention on a rhythm" in Act 3, scene 3 of *Wozzeck* is based on a rhythmic ostinato, presented in both augmentation and diminution, that expresses *Wozzeck*'s gnawing sense of guilt for his crime (see Anthology 4). While Berg at times de-emphasized the significance for the listener of the many intricate forms and technical devices in the opera, in 1924 he published a letter to a critic that singled out this scene for the audibility of the rhythm that permeates the vocal

parts and orchestral accompaniment, “subjected to every conceivable combination, contrapuntal device (fugato, stretti) and variation (augmentation, diminution, displacement, etc.)”

Among Berg’s earliest completed works using twelve-tone technique are his Chamber Concerto for Piano, Violin, and 13 Wind Instruments (1925), which includes themes based on the names Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg; and his second string quartet, the *Lyrical Suite*, composed in 1925–26. Both pieces are full of intricate compositional devices and are connected to detailed programmatic elements, both public and private. The discovery years after Berg’s death of his heavily annotated pocket score of the *Lyrical Suite* revealed that many aspects of the row structure, the formal organization, and even the tempo markings contained coded messages concerning an extramarital affair. In the final movement he added a vocal line, based on a poem by Charles Baudelaire, that is sometimes now included in performances of the work.

When Schoenberg used the phrase “composing with 12 tones related only to one another,” he was insisting that the method was intended to provide an alternative to tonality. Many features of the method, including the use of all 12 tones in regular circulation, the avoidance of octave doubling, and cautions regarding the use of tonal triads and scales, were designed to prevent any one pitch from inadvertently emerging as a tonic and thus subverting the emancipation of the dissonance. But this does not mean that Schoenberg and his students always avoided intentional allusions to tonality; on the contrary, their explorations into how the twelve-tone method could assimilate aspects of tonality turned out to be particularly productive.

Berg’s Violin Concerto of 1935, his last completed work, provides an example of the effort to subsume tonality within twelve-tone composition. The second of the two movements concludes with a theme and two variations based on the Bach chorale “Es ist genug” (It Is Enough) from Cantata No. 60 (Ex. 7.2). The phrases of the chorale are presented first in a twelve-tone arrangement and then in Bach’s original harmonization, with the winds emulating the sound of a pipe organ. Like most of Berg’s works, the Violin Concerto has programmatic and autobiographical dimensions. Bach’s chorale is about the peaceful acceptance of death; the concerto was dedicated to the memory of Manon Gropius, the daughter of Alma Mahler, who died of polio in 1935 at age 18. Other programmatic elements were discovered after Berg’s death, including references to an illegitimate daughter he had fathered when he was 17. The dance-like Allegretto section in the first movement quotes a crude folk song about an illicit love affair. This passage, to be played “in a Viennese manner,” is one of several examples of folk music, dance music, and jazz that Berg incorporated into his twelve-tone works.

Berg was able to integrate tonal music so seamlessly into twelve-tone composition by constructing rows that included diatonic scales and triads, something that Schoenberg did as well despite his warnings against it. The row of the Violin

Example 7.2: Alban Berg, *Violin Concerto*, movement 2: Chorale, mm. 136–143

Adagio ♩ = ca. 54

1. Fag. *p* (*tranquillo*) *p* *espr.*

KFag. *p* *tranquillo*

Solo-VI. *CH*** *mp. ma deciso* *sul G* *doloroso*

Br. *p* *poco espr.*

**) indicates the chorale melody

Poco più mosso, ma religioso
(Mein je - sus kommt:

poco rall. *CH*

2KI. *pp* *ma deciso*

3. KI. (sax) *pp* *ma deciso*

BBKL. *pp* *ma deciso*

1. Fag. *(espr.)*

Solo-VI. *sul G* *mp dolce* *poco rall.* *Poco più mosso, ma religioso*

2. VI. *pp* *(m. D.)* *pp*

Br. *(p espr.)* *p*

in der Bach'schen Harmonisierang

It is enough! Lord, if it please you, Unyoke me now at last! My Jesus comes: . . .

Example 7.3: Alban Berg, *Violin Concerto*, movement 1, solo violin's twelve-tone theme, mm. 15–18

Solo Vn. P^0
H 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
pp, ma espr.

Concerto (Ex. 7.3), for example, can be segmented into functionally related triads, as Berg makes explicit in measures 11–14, where we hear G minor and D major (i and V) and A minor and E major (ii and V/ii). It is a striking irony that the most “modern”-sounding segment of the row—the whole-tone tetrachord in the last four pitches—is based on the opening melody of the Bach chorale. In suggesting that Bach’s music is so closely connected to his own, Berg underscores the insistence by the Second Viennese School that their music, as Schoenberg wrote, was a “truly new music which, being based on tradition, is destined to become tradition.” Such a claim—just as controversial now as when Schoenberg made it in 1931—illustrates how strongly many composers felt the need for a new foundation for music, as well as their belief that a new musical language was in their reach.