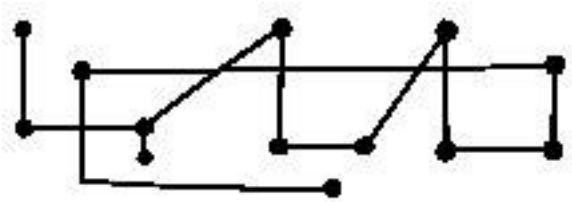
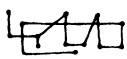


BERG'S OP. 5: REHEARSAL INSTRUCTIONS

WILLIAM DEFOTIS



The primary problem to which Berg addressed himself in the composition of the clarinet-and-piano pieces was how to compose in small forms with materials recognizably derived from large ones; he wanted to find out what would happen if that contravention were allowed to manifest itself rather than be resolved. Consistent with his penchant for setting up a counterpoint of intentions for himself, he solved the problem by simultaneously using two opposing approaches: 1) omitting the expected continuations and resolutions of those materials, thereby constantly creating unconsummated beginnings; 2) interpolating transformations of the materials, dwelling upon pivotal moments of those transformations. Thus, the pieces are simultaneously abridged and extended with regard to the *tendencies* of their materials.

The performers have two problems that relate respectively to Berg's opposing approaches:

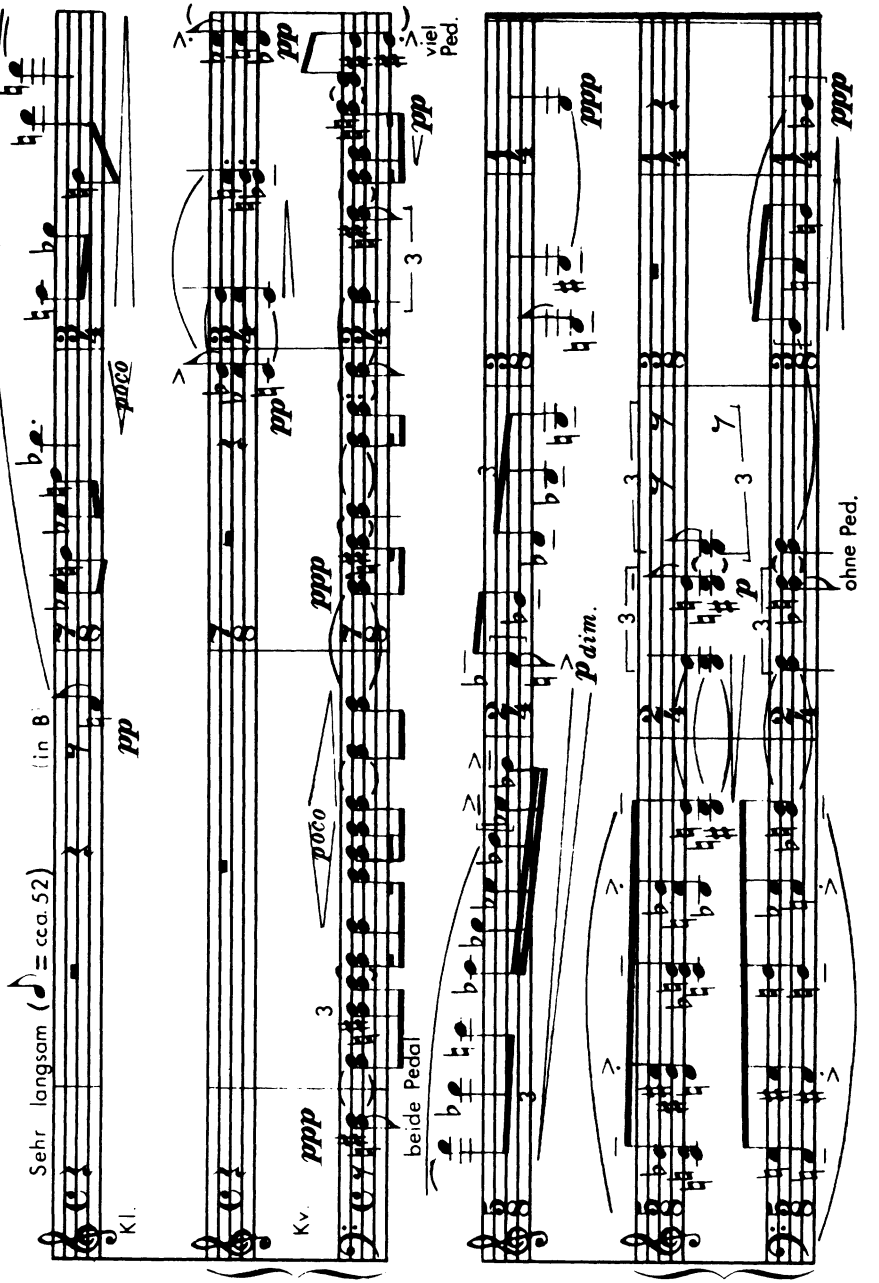
1) Given that they recognize the externally defined tendencies of the materials (those provided largely by the body of music known to Berg), how do they play the pieces such that these tendencies and Berg's willful abandonment of them are heard? (For example, how might the first measure sound like an incomplete paraphrase of *Till Eulenspiegel*?)
2) Given that they understand the internally defined tendencies of the materials (those stipulated by the composer, such as motivic relationships), how do they play the pieces such that the connections made by pivotal moments are heard, rather than swallowed up in a seemingly inevitable flow of events, or obliterated by a series of gearshifts? (For example, how might the quasi-

recapitulation following the fermata in m. 9 of the first piece *emerge* from what precedes it, rather than simply follow it smoothly?)

It may seem to musicians that these two problems—especially in the examples cited—will take care of themselves so long as the musicians play "as written". This is not the case, even with Berg's fanatically detailed scores. If it is not understood that Berg slurs notes into rests as a metrical indication—namely that the silence is to function as a downbeat to what precedes it—the clarinetist will not play the written F♯ in the first measure as if there were a note on beat 4, and the incomplete paraphrase will not be heard. If the clarinetist inserts an open G on beat 4 while practicing the first two measures, slurring down to it and playing it softer with each reading until it is entirely gone, the proper effect will be reached. In m. 9, the fermata must be just long enough to break the momentum of the acceleration, but short enough for the A in the piano to be still ringing loudly as the left hand resumes: this A makes the connection between the intervallic expansion of the piano's top voice in mm. 8–9 and the opening motive of the piece. The proper articulation of this pivotal moment as a sort of suspension of time will not be made without also a correct balance of the three voices. The left and right hands of the piano have separate dynamic indications throughout the pieces. The crescendo indication for the right hand in m. 7 *begins* fff. By beat 3 of m. 8, the right hand should be ffff, while the left hand is "only" fff. The word "dimin." in the right hand as opposed to the symbol  in the left hand in mm. 8–9 is the difference between *making* a diminuendo and following the decay of the piano. The diminuendo in the left hand should be enormous, whereas the right hand should still be forte upon reaching the fermata, in order to match the clarinet. This can be rehearsed by the pianist omitting the last five of the seven five-note clusters leading up to the fermata, listening to the natural diminuendo of the piano, and trying to reproduce it with the given rhythmic accentuation. The clarinetist may wish to imitate the envelope (attack and decay characteristics) of the piano with an imperceptible diminuendo on its written F♯ at the fermata, in order to accentuate the momentary unanimity of parts. However, there must be enough sound left to make a quick and noticeable diminuendo on the written G following it, so that the piano can emerge with the illusion of a crescendo. The inclination of the whole piece toward

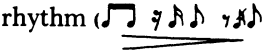
heterophony is capsulized in the second half of m. 9 by the descent of all three voices into the frozen aggregate of the last three measures. This gradual unification of the voices requires that the left hand of the piano at the *flüchtig* indication let the right hand be heard through it, not only by being softer but also by an articulation not quite so legato as that of the right hand and the clarinet: the similarity of the three voices' shapes is to be brought out by emphasizing the diversity of their expressions. (That these three beats are to be played without pedal is implied by *flüchtig* and by the comma after the fermata.) The motionlessness of the last three measures can manifest itself if the clarinetist is conscious of "getting stuck" on the last written A of m. 9: each ensuing note is a reiteration of the last instant of the last note of the last phrase. Each of these notes in m. 10 should be not only "identical" with each other but also of a shape referring to the end of m. 9—perhaps very short with a soft attack? The clarinetist should also experiment with executing the ritardando of the last two measures while keeping the silences between the notes at a constant duration, thinking less of getting slower than of stretching each beat within a steady tempo.

Just as a proper performance of the first piece depends upon understanding how its phrases stop short, the second piece requires the performers to stretch isolated moments of one single phrase: reminiscences of immediately preceding pivotal moments acquire a presence of their own. Perhaps Berg began with the following contrapuntal situation: the clarinet plays one phrase that gradually moves toward spelling out the accompanying harmonies of the piano; conversely, the piano gradually moves toward a melodic statement. Perhaps the piano's melodic statement is to be derived from the clarinet part at precisely the moment it began to outline the piano's harmonies—a four-note chromatic descent. (In the fictitious preliminary sketch on the next page, this four-note figure is marked by brackets—partially verticalized in the clarinet part to highlight the pivotal moment at which the parts exchange functions.) In addition, the piece is to be a composed accelerando in the form of progressively shorter measures.


Sehr langsam (♩= cca. 52)
Kl.
Kv.
beide Pedal
viel Ped.
ohne Ped.

Perhaps Berg decided that a certain amount of resistance needed to be built into the piece in order to upset its rush toward the inevitable end, so he subjected the sketch to one of his favorite procedures: the articulated ritardando of a composed accelerando. (This was already used in the second half of m. 5 in the first piece.) In addition, every new moment was to be lingered upon rather than immediately surrendered to the movement forward. And finally, the opening piano figure—derived from the opening of *Death and Transfiguration* as well as from Schoenberg's Op. 19, No. 2—would be allowed to appear again in the light of all that it brought about, accompanied by the most efficient way of "verticalizing" the last melodic note of the piano: a chord of octave doublings.

By rehearsing the sketch, the performers could become aware of how the piece presents "still shots" of one phrase. The piece's gesture of reluctance-to-continue can be articulated if the clarinetist pays attention to releases—always playing as if more will come—and if he or she knows when the part must be approached "one note at a time", such as at the *zögernd* indication, where the written A and G♭ receive separate diminuendi. The pianist must play m. 5 with an articulation referring back to the pairs of chords played by the right hand in mm. 3–4, continuing the gentle syncopation. To clarify this connection, the *A tempo* should relate to the *Etwas langsamer,* not to the beginning. Lastly, the pianist should abruptly release the notes in m. 7 *with* the clarinet, not after.

The third piece is a series of four vaporizations (disappearances into thin air) whose connections to each other become increasingly tenuous until the last section, where the clarinet's rhythm of m. 2 is repeated successively by the clarinet and piano in mm. 16–17, making a quasi-scherzo reprise. This rhythm () capsulizes the sort of spatial perspective of the piece: a pair of objects seem to converge as they move farther away. The performers must begin each of these four sections (mm. 1–4, 5–8, 9–13, and 14–18) loud enough to execute the diminuendi, while finding timbres that create the overall impression of softness. This makes the clarinet part in mm. 10–13 very problematic: it must begin much softer than the piano, (sneaking in as an extension of the pianist's left hand,) and proceed to make a diminuendo while ascending to the highest register. By imperceptibly exaggerating the crescendo at the end of m. 11, the clarinetist can create a little more room for the diminuendo, while at the

same time emphasizing the clarinet's one moment of intersection with the piano.

The fourth and longest piece resembles a rondo-finale, with the opening chord serving as a "rondo theme". This chord alludes to the finales of Mahler's Sixth and Seventh Symphonies by its superimposition of major, parallel minor, and flat-submediant functions. The piece suddenly departs from the domain of clarinet-and-piano music, adumbrating a piece for string orchestra (with percussion) in the form of a reduction: the dashes above the chords in m. 1 mean "non dim.", hardly possible on the piano; the detailed markings for the clarinet in m. 3 approximate a typical violin phrasing; there is even an up-bow indication at the end of m. 4; there are the articulations for the piano in m. 8 and the clarinet in m. 9 that suggest short up-bows; one hears the obvious trill, tremolo, martellato, and flageolet effects. All of these orchestral effects point away from the clarinet and piano, and toward reminiscences from the other pieces, which now are being transformed into each other for the first time. The clarinet begins with the chromatic descent from the second piece, first with three notes, then with four. This is repeated at the *Noch langsamer* indication before m. 5, with an octave displacement in the three-note group, and a permutation of the four-note group. This promises to begin again with the leap of a major seventh to the written A in m. 6, where, however, the expected written G♯ on beat 2 is delayed by the intrusion of the written F♯, introducing the soon-to-become-important minor third. (For the written G♯ on beat 4 to emerge as a delayed resolution, the clarinetist must not take a breath before it.) Meanwhile, the piano has taken up the end of m. 5 in imitative counterpoint, transforming it into a reminiscence of mm. 9–13 of the third piece, which, in effect, have exactly the same metronome marking. The stillness of m. 8 sets up the exchange of parts at beat 2 of m. 9, from which point the parts converge upon B–C♯—the clarinet by intervallic expansion and the piano by contraction. (This convergence is analogous to the spatial perspective of the third piece.) If the pianist plays these five beats without pedal and with the outer voices *softer* than the B–C♯, the convergence will be heard. Its relation to the third piece is made explicit by the clarinet in mm. 11–12, where the three successive statements of B–C♯ form a reversal of that spatial perspective. B–C♯ then initiates the sequential build-up that ultimately consummates the abandoned climax in mm. 7–8 of the first piece, taking

the contrary motion of the parts as far as it can go. (The pianist can play m. 17 in the proper tempo by thinking of m. 5.) The emergence of the flageolet in m. 18 is the "resolution" of the "rondo theme": its superimposed minor and flat-submediant functions have been removed. T. W. Adorno said of the last three measures: "The pent-up harmonic energy of the pieces has shattered its dams along with the form: a stirred voice sadly thinks back upon it." [1] However, these three measures are not only the denouement of the pieces but also a microcosm of their contrapuntal principle of multidirectional time: the clarinet plays a signal followed by the beginning of its echo while the piano plays the remnants of an echo followed by its signal.

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *Berg. Der Meister des kleinsten Übergangs* (Vienna: Suhrkamp, 1968), p. 80. Author's translation.