

Grundgestalt

(Ger.: 'basic shape').

A term used by Schoenberg for basis of coherence in a musical composition. According to Schoenberg: 'Whatever happens in a piece of music is the endless reshaping of the basic shape ... There is nothing in a piece of music but what comes from the theme, springs from it and can be traced back to it; to put it still more severely, nothing but the theme itself' ('Linear Counterpoint', 1950). Schoenberg neither defined *Grundgestalt* precisely in musical terms nor provided examples from the literature. Rather, inferences must be drawn from his writings on related topics, his own musical analyses and accounts from his students.

The *Grundgestalt* is an important part of Schoenberg's musical thinking; at the centre is the axiom that music must be comprehensible in order to create intellectual and emotional satisfaction. The most direct means through which this is achieved is by the frequent repetition of the basic motif. Sometimes the repetition will be 'exact', as for Schoenberg in literal transpositions, inversions, augmentations, diminutions and retrogrades. More often, repetition involves variation, where the features and note-relations of the motif are not strictly preserved. This process, which Schoenberg called 'developing variation', is meant to overcome the monotony potentially created by exact repetition; it also produces new motivic forms adapted to fulfil various compositional functions that become necessary as the piece progresses. In a masterwork, even so-called transitional passages and cadential figures are developing variation.

A basic motif that undergoes developing variation in this way may be considered a *Grundgestalt*; that is to say, the *Grundgestalt* may be a fragment of the musical surface that subsequently undergoes repetition, variation, development and 'liquidation' as the piece unfolds, much like the principal motif of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. It may also generate other aspects of the piece, as, according to Schoenberg, the principal motif of the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony (F-A \flat) may undergo a variation to become the key scheme of the exposition (F major to A major).

Conflicting accounts from Schoenberg's students suggest that his notion of the *Grundgestalt* evolved during his teaching career. Erwin Stein, who studied with Schoenberg from 1906 to 1910, interpreted the *Grundgestalt* as something like a pitch-

class set, where ‘the same succession of notes [may] form the most diverse melodies’. In 1923 he claimed that Schoenberg's new serial compositions (opp.23–5) were the first to be exclusively based on a *Grundgestalt*, though he clearly distinguished *Grundgestalt* from row. Since this music is saturated with certain recurring pitch-class sets, one might say that here it is more fruitful to consider the *Grundgestalt* a set, not a traditional motif. However, for a different style of composition, exemplified by the first of the Five Orchestral Pieces op.16, where the intervals in thematic statements are continuously changing, the *Grundgestalt* would seem to be best represented by rhythms and melodic contours.

In contrast, Josef Rufer, who studied with Schoenberg from 1919 to 1922, wrote that his teacher defined the *Grundgestalt* as a surface figure composed of specific pitches and rhythms. It would generally consist of a closely bound succession of motifs occupying two or three bars. According to Rufer, Schoenberg discovered the *Grundgestalt* in works of the tonal masters, and by thus linking functionally Schoenberg's music with that of the past, Rufer's account of the *Grundgestalt* emphasizes Schoenberg's connection with tradition. Rufer sees this connection even in Schoenberg's serial music. The row is simply one element of the *Grundgestalt*, the part that governs pitch-class succession, but not those features of rhythm, contour and motif that make up the complete *Grundgestalt*.

Patricia Carpenter, who studied with Schoenberg in his later years, described the *Grundgestalt* as the concrete presentation of an abstract musical ‘idea’. Carpenter's work is focussed on Schoenberg's conception of tonality, which was the subject of his treatise *Structural Functions of Harmony* and of his essay ‘New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea’, both of which date from about this time (1946–8). She presents Schoenberg's view that, in tonal music, the ‘idea’ is the means by which the principal tonality restores the balance that was temporarily lost through the introduction of secondary key areas. In this context, the *Grundgestalt* is the concrete musical means (that is, composed of pitches, rhythms and so on) through which this balance is restored, but not necessarily concrete in the sense of being a traditional motif. For example, in an analysis of Beethoven's ‘Appassionata’ Sonata, Carpenter gives the *Grundgestalt* as the pitch-class set A^b-C-D^b . These pitch classes function differently in the keys of F minor and A^b major, and her analysis demonstrates how this phenomenon forms the basis for the important structural events in the piece. But nowhere in the analysis is this trichord shown to appear as an actual three-note motif in the traditional sense, even though such motifs occur at several places in the music. This interpretation thus sees the

Grundgestalt as an analytical construct rather than a physical feature of the music. However, in her later analyses, especially that of the Brahms Intermezzo op.76 no.6, Carpenter relates the *Grundgestalt* more closely to the musical surface.

Schoenberg's reluctance to give a clear definition of the relationship linking motif, idea and *Grundgestalt* suggests that this relationship depended on the language and style of the piece. For Schoenberg, the *Grundgestalt* was clearly a construct transcending stylistic distinctions: it allowed him to place his own compositions squarely within the tradition of the masters he revered, indeed substantiating his claim that his musical language was a natural continuation of that tradition.

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