

Symmetrical Relationships
in Webern's Op. 27, No. 1 for Piano

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For centuries composers have experimented with the concept of symmetry in music, ranging from small-scale rhythmic palindromes to the large-scale arc form. The dawn of the serial era in the first half of the twentieth century sparked a new wave of interest in musical symmetry, leading to compositions which embodied this spirit in more dimensions than previously attainable. Among the leaders in symmetrical composition at this time was Anton Webern, whose Op. 27, No. 1 for piano will be addressed in detail over the coming pages. In this analysis I hope to show that Webern uses and manipulates the idea of symmetry on the levels of formal structure, serial pitch organization, and surface-level gestures.

I believe it is helpful before addressing the more intricate symmetrical features of the first movement to conceptualize Op. 27 as a whole. The title, *Variationen*, very clearly aligns itself in the long and weighty Western tradition of the “theme and variations,” in which a principle theme is presented in its simplest form, only to undergo multiple mutations. Composers have traditionally used this genre as a method of showcasing technical prowess in a manner that is extraordinarily clear to the listener, effectively saying, “See how much I can do with so little”. Traditionally the theme is presented at the front, followed by each successive variation, often in a manner that temporally distinguishes each variation to accentuate the effect, with score subtitles clearly delineating where each new variation begins. In fact, Webern himself constructs his own Op. 21 much in this regard. In Op. 27, however, the only score reference to the idea of variations is in the title. Webern himself sheds some light on this choice. “[The Variations] are divided into three separate movements. I do not display the thema explicitly (at the

