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Tonal Focus in Atonal Music: Berg's op. 5/3

Christopher Lewis

"... for without rules there can be no art, any more than there can be a house without any doors to conduct you into it."

-John Dryden

In a beautifully turned metaphor, William Benjamin has spoken of the early atonal works of Schoenberg and Webern as "mysterious houses . . . built . . . without doors."¹ Entry must therefore be forcible, effected not with keys, but with tools to aid the dismantling of part of the structure. But even if this is true, it is not, it seems to me, equally valid a point of view from which to look at the atonal music of Alban Berg, which almost always represents an attempt at fusion of tonal and atonal principles of organization, and therefore provides entry by key—in both metaphoric and literal senses—to at least some of its rooms.

To be sure, this music is not tonal in the common-practice meaning of being structured around the prolongation of a background triad. Twenty years ago, Roy Travis was applying the term ''tonal'' to music which ''unfolds through time a particular tone, interval or chord.''² If one adopts the position that by "unfolds" Travis means "prolongs"—surely the only possible interpretation of that word applied to a single tone—and that prolongation may be effected by motion *between* two statements of the tonic sonority, or by motion either *from* or *towards* a single statement of that sonority,³ then one may understand as tonal any work in which any pitch or sonority is made the focus of harmonic or linear motion. Travis calls such a procedure "directed motion," and shows its operation in Schoenberg's op. 19/2 and Webern's op. 27 as leading to a "tonic sonority" and a "tonic dyad" respectively.⁴ It is in this sense that "tonal" is understood in this paper.

The pre-serial works of Schoenberg and his students are sometimes termed "atonal," and sometimes "motivic" music. Neither term is entirely satisfactory; the latter is so general as to be almost meaningless, and the former may be misleading since lack of tonality is not, apparently, an absolute requisite of this music: Schoenberg's own objections to the characterization "atonal" are well known. The most important and extensive attempt at formulation of an atonal syntax is Allen Forte's *Structure of Atonal Music*,⁵ but even though Forte disallows the

³See Felix Salzer, *Structural Hearing* (New York: Dover, 1962) vol. 1, p. 16.

⁴See Roy Travis, "Directed Motion in Two Brief Pieces by Schoenberg and Webern," *Perspectives of New Music* 4 (1966):85-89. The term is borrowed from Salzer, *Structural Hearing*, p. 11 ff.

⁵Allen Forte, The Structure of Atonal Music (New Haven: Yale University

¹William Benjamin, "Ideas of Order in Motivic Music," *Music Theory* Spectrum 1 (1979):23.

²Roy Travis, "Towards a New Concept of Tonality," *Journal of Music Theory* 3 (1959):261.

consideration of tonal sets in the analysis of atonal structures,⁶ it has not been shown that his significant set relations may not operate simultaneously with some tonal processes.⁷

Forte himself has traced Schoenberg's growing setconsciousness—the increasing reliance on the creation of structural and surface coherence by means of significant set relations—in the works dating from about 1904 to those immediately preceding the Three Piano Pieces, op. 11. His discussion of "Lockung," op. 6/7, includes a Schenkerian sketch of much of the song, and identification of passages which "although not completely organized in the manner of the fully atonal piece . . . do exhibit certain structural characteristics that resemble those of atonal music."⁸

Since the two principles of organization can coexist in such a way that set organization is subordinate to triadic tonality, surely the reverse may also occur, so that vestiges of tonal hierarchy appear in an atonally structured work. Forte has analysed Schoenberg's op. 19 as an atonal work; Travis and Westergaard have given sketches of the second and fourth pieces respectively, showing in each case directed motions to a tonic sonority.⁹ Are these different views of the same music

necessarily incompatible? I think not. Further, I think—to pervert Benjamin's metaphor—there are many such musical houses with both front and back doors, neither of which provides access to the whole structure, but which together allow one to enter all the rooms.

If we are to recognize this duality of pitch organization as a true architectural principle rather than a lack of control of one of the elements, then it must be shown to be not simply a result of incidental surface relationships, but a complex of procedures so deeply imbedded in the musical fabric that it serves to articulate the structure of the piece. It will not be enough to find an occasional symmetrical, linear or cadential tonal focus, or occasional atonal characteristics. But if the beginning of the piece establishes directed motions, or tonal focus, the implications of which are developed as the music unfolds, and if at the same time significant set relations articulate and unify the structure, then the interaction of tonal and atonal elements can be accepted as a legitimate compositional procedure, and further exploration of this procedure may well illuminate some shadowy pages of the atonal literature.

The third of Berg's *Vier Stücke*, op. 5, for clarinet and piano is a particularly rewarding example of the operation of tonal focus in an atonal work. The following discussion examines this duality of means and considers surface implications and the manner in which both aspects of pitch organization contribute to the structure of the piece.

Contrasts of surface features—of tempo, texture, register, density and melodic gesture—divide the movement into four parts (mm. 1-3, 3-8, 9-13, 14-18). Each of the four parts presents a single gesture by each of the instruments; that gesture may always be considered to have two parts, the second of which is a continuation or an elaboration of the first. Comparison of the clarinet gestures reveals a similarity between the final segments of Parts I and III and between those of Parts II and IV. In both cases, the later version is more elaborate than the earlier,

Press, 1973). My analysis presumes the reader's familiarity with Forte's theories and terminology. A valuable summary and commentary is David Beach, "Pitch Structure and the Analytic Process in Atonal Music," *Music Theory Spectrum* 1 (1979):7-22.

⁶Allen Forte, "Sets and Non-sets in Schoenberg's Atonal Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 11 (1973):45.

⁷Forte is careful to define his use of the term "atonal" in terms of what it is rather than what it is not: "Any composition that exhibits the structural characteristics that are discussed [in *The Structure of Atonal Music*], and exhibits them throughout, may be regarded as atonal." (*The Structure of Atonal Music*, p. ix.)

⁸Allen Forte, "Schoenberg's Creative Evolution: The Path to Atonality," *Musical Quarterly* 64 (1978):133-176.

⁹See Allen Forte, "Context and Continuity in an Atonal Work: A Set-Theoretical Approach," *Perspectives of New Music* 1 (1963):72-82; Roy Travis, "Directed Motion in Two Brief Pieces;" and Peter Westergaard, "Toward a Twelve-Tone Polyphony," *Perspectives of New Music*, 4 (1966):93.

Alban Berg, Vier Stücke, op. 5/3 (1913)



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and reaches a cadence on D. The effect is of resumption and completion of the earlier, interrupted motions. This sense of completion is not incidental, for we shall see that the focus on D is established in the opening measures and continues until the final resolution.

The piano statement of Part I is framed by two augmented triads belonging to the same whole-tone hexachord. The material between is, with the exception of the first and penultimate notes, partitioned by rhythm and articulation into sequential statements of the chromatic trichord (set 3-1). However, the pattern thus formed in mm. 2 and 3 unfolds a whole-tone descent through the same hexachord defined by the framing trichords. The bipartite nature of the whole gesture is created by the surface articulation and the eighth rest of m. 2, and by the contrast of a half-step descent in m. 1 with the unfolding whole-steps in mm. 2 and 3 (see Example 1). Continuity is provided by consistent use of set 3-1 in the upper part and by the concatenation of transpositions of that motive to form a chromatic descent from e^1 to d in the lower.

This structure is paralleled by that of the clarinet line, the

binary division of which is created by the surface articulation (here, however, it is the first segment which is a continuous line, and the second which is fragmented) and by the first rest of m. 2 coupled with the cadential aspect of the preceding d^2 . The whole of this line, then, can be understood as the unfolding of the augmented triad with which the piano cadences (see Example 2). It is apparent already that there is some sense of pitch hierarchy, and that D-especially accompanied by its augmented triad-is of prime importance. We have already mentioned the cadential importance of the d^2 in m. 2; this pitch is the goal of the preceding ascent and is approached from its upper leading tone. Furthermore, rhythmic and articulative emphasis strengthen the function of this note as the mid-point of the line and of the lower-level arpeggiation $F^{\sharp}-D-B^{\flat}$. But the pitch D is also the eventual goal of the descent in the upper staff of the piano part: it is at d¹ that the pattern is broken and the D transferred to the bass. One might also take the view that the c#2 of m. 1 is a registral preparation for the cadential d^2 in the next measure (see Example 3).

Example 1



Example 2



Example 3



The surface motives are almost trivial. The three-note chromatic ascent of m. 1 of course generates the whole of the piano part; the first repetition effects a half-tone descent $(g^{\sharp 1} \text{ to } g^1)$ which is mirrored in the lower part $(c^1-c^{\sharp 1})$ and then occurs directly or indirectly five times in the clarinet (see Example 4). An analysis of the primary set formations gives a more complex picture (see Example 5). The melodic lines feature sets 3-1 (not shown in Example 5), 3-2, 3-3, 3-4 and 3-12 (the augmented





triad). The harmonic trichords in the piano (m. 2) present the following set sequence: 3-3, 3-10, 3-11/3-4, 3-11, 3-11/3-5, 3-11, 3-9/3-9, 3-11, 3-12. The first nine trichords include fully half the possible number of trichord types, but there is a discernible order. Note the association of the first attack of each sequential unit with a "small" set contrasting strongly with the triadic sets which follow. These initiating chords (3-3, 3-4 and 3-5) themselves effect an expansion which reflects the envelope of the entire clarinet-piano gesture. Furthermore, the nine-note sets formed by all three chords of each unit are complements of important trichords; and in the case of the last two, the superset is the abstract complement of the initial trichord. Although the upper voice descends through a whole-tone scale articulated by the three "small" sets (see Example 1), the bass unfolds through c^1 , a, f[#], d: the set 4-27. When the sequential pattern is at last broken in m. 3, the concluding trichords form an eightnote superset; that set is 8-27, the abstract complement of the set just arpeggiated in the bass. Indeed, further analysis shows that these two sets, lurking just beneath the surface of the music, permeate the entire first part of the movement (see Example 6). Of the eight statements of 4-27 shown in Example 6, two pairs are identical (sets C and G and sets B and F). They are presented in the music in such a way that set C is associated with set B (they are arranged in a melodically conjunct symmetry around

 d^2) and set F is associated with set G (both are derived by imbrication—supported by the sequential patterning—from the final eleven PCs of the left-hand descent). It follows, of course, that the composite sets F+G and B+C must be equivalent, and it is surely significant that that set (7-32) appears as a primary segment as well. Also buried just below the surface of the music are three interwoven statements of set 5-31, a superset of 4-27 (see Example 7); further reference will be made to this set in discussion of Part III.

We have seen that the note D is symmetrically framed by the subcomponent sets B and C, by a background augmented triad and by the cadence chord of m. 3. But these symmetries are foreshadowed as early as the opening trichord. In addition, there is an even more subtle framing of the D, since the clarinet's semitone cadence on D in m. 2, as well as being the centerpoint of sets B and C, is preceded and followed by statements of set 5-10 (see Example 6).

Example 5







Example 7



There are, therefore, at least the following three ways of organizing pitch within Part I: conjunct motions through consistent whole-tone or half-tone segments, tending towards D; formation of primary segments and subcomponents in abstract or literal symmetry around D; and considerable use of a limited number of important and clearly articulated pitch sets (and their complements).

Part II, like Part I, consists of two bipartite gestures. The clarinet line is divided by contrasts of direction and motive, reinforced by a change of timbre (the fluttertongue) at the f#1 of m. 6. The initial segment of this phrase is constructed of two whole-tone motives (A, B, F and C, E, F#); the second segment is a brief chromatic descent. The piano states three chords of diminishing cardinality, ending with the tetrachord 4-19. That these chords should be considered as belonging to Part II rather than to Part I, as might be assumed from the tempo marking, is indicated by the articulation and, more importantly, by a set connection between the melodic set which overlaps with the first note of the clarinet entry (and which is stated three times) and the harmonic superset formed by the last two of the chords. In addition, that superset plus the first clarinet note is, of course, the complement of the three-note motive of the upper line of the piano chords (see Example 8).

Now, the tetrachord 4-19 is a superset of the augmented triad (3-12), which played an important role in Part I. The inclusion





relationship is exploited by the separation of the trichord (7,11,3) from the melodic upper part so that it may assume a subsidiary function as a separate harmonic trichord. It is at this point that the second part of the piano gesture begins, to be concluded by an inner-voice movement to a symmetrical tetrachord. The linear motions of this part, rather more simple than those of Part I, are sketched in Example 9. The focus on D is now very much less evident than in the first part. Indeed, the only reasons for assuming that the clarinet descent from F# to E stops short of D as a goal are the similarity of the gesture with the piano line of Part I, and hindsight after consideration of Part IV, below. But what little linear motion there is in the piano is clearly directed towards the establishment in mm. 7-8 of a tetrachord symmetrical around D. Although the D has thus been only weakly implied, Ab is isolated as an important note in the contour of the upper piano line, and is left unresolved. If one thinks of Parts I and II for a moment only in terms of their linear motions towards D, then in Part I the piano gesture is closed, and the clarinet gesture is open; in Part II, both gestures are open. One of the roles of the remaining two parts of the movement will be to resolve the Ab of Part II and the implication of D presented by the final tetrachord, and in so doing to provide closure for both lines.



Example 9

Although the linear motions of Part II are simpler than those of Part I, the *surface* set content is not. We have already noted the coincidence of set 4-14 and its complement at the beginning of the section. But these sets, like many of the primary segments, appear very few times. There is therefore a considerable variety of set types articulated by the surface motion (see Example 10).

The set 4-19 is clearly crucial; it appears nine times (set A_n in Example 10), always with a common subset (7,11,3), and establishes a harmonic pedal for mm. 5-7. Even after its final direct statement, 4-19 continues its influence: first as three subsets ((0,4,7,8); (8,0,3,4); (4,5,8,0)) of set 6-14 (set K in Example 10a), and then by implication through its complement, which is formed by all the pitches stated after the final direct appearance of 4-19 itself. Set 4-19 naturally occurs as a subset of a number of prime five-note sets. In fact, the only five-note sets in this passage of which it is not a subset are sets I and J, which occur only once each, at the end of the section, and therefore as subsets of 8-19. The diversity of set types is thus counteracted by the very strong similarity relationships between sets C, D, E, F, G and H. All except F and H are interrelated by the significant similarity R₂R_p (strong interval vector similarity and maximum pitch similarity-in most cases strongly represented). The exceptions stand in the relatively insignificant relationship R_p to all the other five-note sets, but not to each other.

The three sets most musically prominent are the Z-pair 5-Z17/5-Z37 and 5-21. The two members of the Z-pair of course share the same vector; 5-21 is the only set which is R_2R_p related to both 5-Z17 and 5-Z37. These closely related sets account for seven of the nine harmonic pentachords in mm. 6-7. Furthermore, m. 6 presents two overlapping statements of 7-21, so that just as the chordal "transition" is unified by 4-14 and its complement, so is this part of the gesture unified by 5-21 and 7-21.

Example 11 shows the hexachordal segmentation and a few other sets. The hexachords of this part are not as significant as the tetrachords and pentachords. There is relatively little repetition of sets; the complement relation is not exploited (none of the Z-pairs is represented by both members); the chart of similarity relations reveals minimal connection. However, because of the persistence of certain four- and five-note sets, the intersection of adjacent hexachords naturally produces familiar sets as invariants. These are 4-19 as the common subset of C₂ and E, 5-21 as the common subset of E and D₂, and 4-19 as the common subset of D₂ and F.



Example 11



Intersection of the final two hexachords produces the invariant tetrachord 4-7, and the preceding two measures consist of overlapping statements of its complement, 8-7. But the four non-invariant PCs represent set 4-14, which, with its complement was seen to control mm. 3-5. Thus, the final section of this gesture refers subtly back through statement of the complements to the eight-note sets associated with the transitional chords and the first part of the gesture proper.

Therefore, Parts I and II of the piece contrast not only on the surface, but also in terms of the type of pitch control most prominent. Part I is controlled most clearly by linear movements towards D and by certain set relations, but Part II exhibits a strong set control with subsidiary organization by symmetrical structures around an *implied* D and – very tenuously – by linear motions towards D.

Part III is dominated by a pitch ostinato from which are derived all the principal melodic lines. Again one can consider that each line is composed of a bipartite gesture. The partitioning is effected by the change in the ostinato which occurs simultaneously in both instruments on the last beat of m. 11; the clarinet does not repeat its figure, but continues upward, while the piano bass ostinato is broken (but does not entirely disappear) at the moment the upper parts abruptly change direction. The minor third e^2-g^2 stated first in the piano in m. 10 and then twice repeated and expanded, recurs in the clarinet and initiates a cadential line reminiscent of that of Part I. The correspondence is not precise, but is unmistakable, and even incorporates the motive of a falling second (see Example 12). The alteration of the minor second to a major second is a result of the reordering of set 5-31, which now generates the ostinato figure (see Example 13).

But although the clarinet line can thus be understood as providing closure for the open cadence of Part I, the same is not true of the piano gesture, the cadence of which is—in terms of motion towards D—very much open. The descent of the upper line stops on E_{P} , which is not permitted to resolve. The incom-





Example 13



plete nature of this E_{P} is obvious when one considers that *every* cadential resolution to D thus far has been from either an upper or a lower leading tone.

Because so much of the pitch content of Part III is controlled by ostinato, the prime set content is limited. Set 5-31 is most common, and is represented by its complement as well. But for the first three measures there is little other significant exploitation of set relations. The sole exceptions are the gradual evolution of set 4-Z29 as a subset of 5-25, and several recurrences of 4-27 (the crucial set of Part I) (see Example 14). The cadential measures, on the other hand, not only present two last statements of 4-27, but do so in such a way that they occur as subcomponents of 8-27, which is given a perfectly straightforward melodic statement. Thus the connection with Part I discussed above as a linear phenomenon is established also through set design. Even more remarkable is the set connection with the two most important sets of Part II: the cadence chord represents set 7-21, and that chord plus the cadential leading tone gives set 8-19. Both 4-19 and 5-21 occur strongly represented, as the uppermost four and five notes respectively of the eight-note cadential sonority (see Example 14b). One notes as well the reappearance of the chromatic trichord (3-1) in an inner voice, and the use of 3-5 as initial and final trichords in the piano bass line.

Part III, then, commences the process of closure of unresolved elements from the first half of the movement. The incomplete cadential rise towards d^3 (mm. 1-3) is resumed and completed, and the cadential superset includes primary sets of each

of the first two parts. The elements still to be resolved are (1) the Ab of Part II, (2) the incomplete descent from F# to D, (3) the Eb upper leading tone of Part III, and (4) the implication of D through symmetrical formations in Parts I and II.

Example 14b





Example 14a

Again in Part IV it will be seen that each instrumental gesture is bipartite. The clarinet descends through a whole-tone scale to the beginning of m. 17, after which point movement is by semitone. It is significant that this change commences with F#, for the following line may therefore be understood as a resumption and completion of the truncated motion to D enumerated as (2) above. The piano gesture consists of a repeated major third, under which the bass drops two-and-one-half octaves leading to a repeated precadential tetrachord. The first of these segments is an expanded reference to the initial three notes of the movement, and, like them, establishes a symmetry around D (see Example 15). The octave displacements do not disguise the semitone ascent from D to Ab, and the function of that line is therefore to re-establish the Ab of Parts I and II. The final clarinet scale, by precisely reversing this line, effects the resolution of the Ab to D (see Example 16).









The c¹ and e¹ of m. 14 frame D as did the symmetrical structures of Parts I and II, and especially the cadential chord of m. 8. The function of the evolving piano chords of mm. 15-16 is to realize the *implied* focal point by means of symmetrical linear movement to a chord which is perfect symmetrical around a stated d¹ (see Example 17). The final chord appears to disturb this symmetry. As Example 17 shows, however, it is derived from the penultimate sonority almost entirely by octave transferral: only the D does not recur, but instead moves by semitone to its upper neighbor E^b. This pitch has already been prepared by the clarinet. In effect, it is transferred from that instrument to the piano and then back to the clarinet for resolution as an upper neighbor to D, which may be taken as resolving both the Eb which is the only asymmetrical PC of the cadential chord, and the E^b which has been left unresolved since the open cadence of m. 13. Therefore, Parts III and IV have resolved all of those elements and tendencies, whether of set structure or of linear motion, left open by Parts I and II. In view of the summational character of the final superset of Part III, it is not surprising that Part IV devotes itself entirely to the resolution of other aspects and apparently contains no significant set relationships.

It is immaterial to the musical point of the analysis whether one defines one's terms so as to justify referring to the piece as either ''tonal'' or ''atonal.'' Since the work is subject to unification by several systemic procedures, exclusive use of either



Example 17

term obscures the fact that neither set-theoretic analysis nor consideration of tonal or quasi-tonal elements can by itself adequately account for all aspects of pitch structure.

I do not for a moment wish to suggest that *all* atonally structured music will be illuminated by attempts to read into it tonal focuses of one kind or another. As I implied at the beginning of this article, I agree that Webern's music in particular avoids such implications. But neither do I think the piece we have just examined need be considered atypical. One thinks of Edward Cone's remark — made in the context of a discussion of certain linear, chordal and cadential aspects of Schoenberg's op. 33a—that he cannot "see how music like Schoenberg's, with its usually clear cadential structure can fail to arouse certain traditional associations and responses."¹⁰

I shall invoke two brief examples. Gary Wittlich has given a convincing demonstration of the pitch-class set structure in Schoenberg's op. 11/1; he has noted also that there does seem to be some conscious creation of pitch hierarchy, and that G, B and E^{\flat} are especially important.¹¹ He remarks that E^{\flat} is studiously

avoided in mm. 1-11, but when it does appear, it does so prominently, in two octaves. But we hear clearly that the succeeding section, mm. 20-25, contains a number of exposed melodic statements, each of which begins on E^{\flat} . Also unmistakable is the cadential arrival in the bass in m. 47, preceded by several E^{\flat} -E melodic statements articulated by surface features. And mm. 49 and 50 again bring E^{\flat} into prominence. (Believers in the Golden Section may calculate the division for themselves and see what happens at that point!) And, of course, the piece ends with E^{\flat} .

These observations do not constitute even the beginning of an analysis, but they do stimulate one's curiosity. The E_{P} is functioning as an aural point of reference; the relative prominence of that pitch waxes and wanes in close correspondence with the formal divisions of the piece. Might further analysis reveal that this pitch, perhaps in conjunction with G and B, is made the point of linear connections operating within the strictures of the atomal structure?

The second piece of the same opus presents a very different face, for here it is points of detail which prompt one to examine the broader picture, rather than the other way around. A preliminary analysis has suggested to me that the piece is as tightly organized in the atonal sense as is the first piece. But I hear throughout the piece clearly defined tonal focuses. Let us con-

¹⁰Edward Cone, "Analysis Today," *The Musical Quarterly* 46 (1960):185. ¹¹Gary Wittlich, "Interval Set Structure in Schoenberg's Op. 11, No. 1," *Perspectives of New Music* 13 (1974):41-55.

sider for a moment the opening nine measures. There is certainly a sustained D in the bass, but I agree with Philip Friedheim that this alone does not make the pitch class a "tonic."¹² However, the upper part is directed again and again at Db, often through Eb, and often in conjunction with Ab. It is easy to hear both Eb and Db as semitone displacements of D, especially at the cadential resolution of m. 6. But the succeeding measures again establish and prolong Db and Ab, before, at m. 9, there is another cadential resolution to D. Is Db displacing D, or vice versa? I think a careful study will reveal that in fact Db displaces D which in turn displaces Eb, and that these relationships are dealt with at both the background and the foreground of the piece. In any case, a study of such connections must be at least considered in any deep study of the work. But these points are well beyond the scope of this paper.

In conclusion, let me draw again upon Edward Cone's lucidity of expression and revive his remark that "the good composition will always reveal, on close study, the methods of analysis needed for its own comprehension."¹³ To assume that because a piece exhibits a strong atonal structure it may not also depend upon tonal direction for some part of its coherence, runs the risk of doing an injustice both to the flexibility of musical art and to the subtlety of the minds that create it.¹⁴

¹³Philip Friedheim, "Tonality and Structure in the Early Works of Schoenberg," (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1963), p. 454.

¹⁴A final footnote is necessary to make two general acknowledgements. This attempt to consider *together* tonal and atonal organization was spurred in large part by Edward Cone's statement that "music whose syntax is primarly twelvetone may nevertheless legitimately call upon implicit tonal functions to clarify its concrete values" (Beyond Analysis). And a considerable debt is owed, and gratefully acknowledged, to David Beach, who has read an earlier version of this paper, and made many invaluable suggestions.

¹²Cone, "Analysis Today," p. 187.