A Consideration of Anton Webern

by Glenn Gould

Mimeograph, distributed with program for New Music Associates concert, Toronto, October 3, 1953 (rescheduled to January 9, 1954).

The names of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern are so frequently linked as a trinity that the casual listener might presuppose a basis for stylistic identity among the masters of the modern Viennese school. It is true that a certain spiritual affinity emanated from their common culture and that the teacher-student relationship stimulated a unity of purpose based upon a shared concept of musical evolution. In fact, this concept provided the impetus for the creative activity of these men in so far as each sought to construct his work as a logical development of the conditions which constituted his heritage. But the growing experience of musical consciousness of the composers caused each to emphasize particular aspects of the traditional elements of art, reactivating and channeling them in a course consistent with the dictates of his own genius. One has only to compare any of the works of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern written at the same period, to recognize that we are dealing with musical personalities, intensely complex and fundamentally distinct. Rather than attempt to trace the course of each of these personalities in these necessarily limited notes, I have confined myself to a few remarks about the most controversial and most easily misunderstood of this trio, Anton Webern.

There is common to most musicians who have come under the influence of the Schoenbergian universe an approach toward music, classic as well as contemporary, which attempts through analysis, to reduce all sound forms to the lowest possible denominator. That is, to search for motivic units which in some way contort and evolve themselves, and which thus can be considered embryonic organisms which formulate the totality of the structure. The development of this philosophy coincided with the decline of tonality in the nineteenth century, and in fact, constituted a replacement of the architectural functions of the decaying harmonic language. When one considers that during the first decade of Schoenberg's work, his increasing use of chromatic resources steadily dissolved the bulwarks of tonality, and the precipitous collapse of triad harmony threatened an unregulated state of chaos, it is not surprising that the development of the detailed minutiae of the motivic complexes on a two-dimensional level became part and parcel of an artistic credo.

Webern's approach to the problem of unifying the musical idea reveals an impeccable conscience. Even in his earliest works, he seems almost reluctant to write a single note which is not an indispensable participant in the totality,

and which, one might almost say, cannot justify itself by an intellectual explanation of its presence. Obviously, the overall dimensions of such music must display a brevity consistent with their internal compactness. Schoenberg once remarked that Webern has the gift of reducing a novel to a sigh. Possibly this extreme condensation within the formal mould of his structures has been the greatest stumbling-block to most listeners. No matter how radical may be the stylistic divergencies of Berg or Schoenberg, their architectural designs, (the time element in their music) may, with few exceptions, be classed among the predetermined patterns of rococo and early romantic art. Webern allows his materials to create their own formal structures. It is significant that during the years following the cessation of the tonal impulse in their music and predeceding [sic] the arrangement of the laws governing the new atonal resources into the twelve-tone technique, that is 1908-1924, when Berg produced such works as his epic, *Wozzeck*, Webern was content to experiment with this new world of sound in such a cautious manner that, until the most discriminating intellect of twentieth century music had been satisfied with the sureness of his craftmanship, he wrote only a series of works for various chamber combinations, many of which lasted but a few seconds, and none more than a couple of minutes. That one informed critic should have labeled a master with such indominitable [sic] integrity and honesty, a "parsimonious composer" shows the regrettable lack of understanding awarded Webern throughout his life.

The string quartet pieces of Opus 5 are one of his first essays in atonal writing. Though nothing could display a less extrovert emotionalism, there is a strikingly sensual quality manifest not only in the treatment of the strings themselves, but also in the manner by which Webern frequently isolates an individual tone or short interval-group, and, by alternating dynamic levels and instrumental timbres, succeeds in immobilizing a particular pitch level around which the oblique shapes of his half-counterpoints seek to fulfill their evolutionary destinies. It seems to me that the expressionistic qualities of this music such as the above mentioned isolated tone procedure - (*Klangfarbenmelodie*) carries to its zenith the very essence of the romantic ideal of emotional intensity in art. Personally, I can never hear the mystical, opiated quality of the brief fourth movement without recalling one or other of the series of *Improvisations* with which Wassily Kandinsky, whose career closely parallels Webern's, began his essays in abstraction in this same year. Almost more than any other music this work symbolizes, for me, the instability of its period, the close of an epoch, and the over-lapping of ideals from a new era.

Two decades separate these pieces from the *Saxophone Quartet*, Opus 22. Those decades witnessed a most decisive step in the evolution of the musical language – a step which was the outcome of many years of experimentation for which the composers of the Viennese school were largely responsible. The formulation of the laws of the twelve-tone technique was a logical, though one

would hesitate to say permanent, solution toward the problem of disclipining [sic] the resources of atonality. Its prime manifestation is the principle of the tone row, a sort of super motive which is considered not as a theme but rather as an embryonic complex within which are contained the various interval groups from whose consecutive movement melodically, and conjunct subdivision harmonically, is assembled the composition at hand. The results of this coercive and arbitrary procedure are off-set by the endless number of possibilities from which the principles of perpetual variation can draw. Though it would be a waste of time to defend the work of some adherents to the twelve-tone system who have proven themselves inextricably ensnared by the fatal fascination for mathematical wizardry, the fact remains that the essential idea is a grand one. Attached to the thought of the oneness of the musical conception is an aura of quite romantic evocation, allying itself with the preordained vision of the work of art on which much argument was spent in Schopenhauer's Germany.

However, putting idealism aside it must be admitted that the twelve-tone technique has produced in its more extreme examples an end result which resists comparison with the traditional genre of romantic art. And it is precisely in the consideration of the extreme divergencies as exhibited in the works of Webern that we are forced to re-examine our own methods of musical evaluation. Of the three pre-eminent masters of modern Viennese music, Webern stands alone in that he seems to have been born to the system, to have lacked his natural element until he adopted it, and to have established its devices as the rhetoric at the base of his musical consciousness.

Webern began to use the twelve-tone technique consistently after 1925 and, subsequently the solidity and assurance which were absent in many of the works of his transitional period, are felt in the more forceful and extended treatment, of his ideas. The *Saxophone Quartet* is one of the longer of his early twelve-tone works (it lasts almost eight minutes). The first movement is ternary in shape and canonic in texture. It opens with a five-bar introduction which lays bare the interval properties of his row in four three-tone groups which are echoed in inverted canon by a row transposed down two semi-tones. The canon is rhythmically altered to display subtle relationships between these two rows;

```
    A     B   C  D
|-------|    |-----|  |----|     |-------|
 Db Bb A     C     B  Eb    E  F     F#     G# D  G

 B  D  E     C     C# A     G# G     F#     E  Bb F
|-------|    |-----|  |----|     |-------|
    B     A   D  C
```

Without reproducing the score it would be impossible to describe the ingenuity of this wonderfully placid prologue. Whereas in the opening of most of Schoenberg's twelve-tone works, that composer makes his original row forms into a recognizable melody, in most cases harmonized by the subdivision of its tones vertically, and plunges us precipitously into the composition proper with as orthodox a beginning as anything of Mozart or Spohr. Webern's course pursues the opposite path. He detaches each significant factor in his row presentation, isolating it by a pause, as organically rhythmic and as expressively variable as the sound pattern. The use of silence as the frame of sound is, of course, as old as music itself. But Webern's utilization of it, not as punctuation, but as an integral part of the phrase gives to his melodic delineation the effect of a diagram in alternating patches of black and white. Compared to the virile symphonism of Schoenberg the fragility of Webern's texture may seem almost puerile but those who are willing to adjust themselves to the plane of receptive sensitivity which Webern's musical thoughts demand, will find his works the product of the perfect raconteur, who possesses the sense of mystery which stimulates the telling of his narrative. And thus, in this wonderful opening of the *Saxophone Quartet*, he carefully prepares us for the adventure in variation which constitutes the work.

The main theme of the first movement, if one can still speak of themes in this music, has been described by Rene Liebowitz as a "cantus firmus for the saxophone", around which other instruments weave a lovely embroidery in the form of a two-part canon in contrary motion. The centre section of the movement is a canonic development of the motives from the introduction. The range and dynamic intensity are increased by enlarging some intervals an octave, and the development takes the form of a mirror episode proceeding retrogressively from its axis. The reprise of the cantus firmus, this time distributed among saxophone, clarinet and violin marks the recapitulation, with the piano being assigned both parts of the canon. Finally, five measures of epilogue which present retrogressively the two raw transpositions of the introduction bring the movement to a close. This andante has the shape of an arc, whose zenith is attained with the insertion of the mirror image (*Spiegelbild*) at the point when the span between the linear patterns has reached its apex, exactly five octaves separating the highest and lowest tones of the entire movement.

While the first movement is notable for the severity of its outline, the second derives its effect from the spontaneity of its development. This is one of Webern's most extended movements and it is very difficult to apply to its one hundred and ninety-two measures the designation of any preconceived mould associated with tonality. It can only be described by a detailed analysis of the row technique which demonstrates the logic and significance of each section, as it evolves in perpetual variation. This movement, in fact, is one of

the most conspicuous successes of Webern's twelve-tone period, a testament to the unfailing imagination which characterizes his use of the tone row technique. Moreover, the structural pliancy and lucidity which results bears witness that Webern is the rare example of a composer who has made the twelve-tone system serve to magnify the philosophy of aesthetics which all great artists comprehend – that sorcery lies within the very idea of creation.

If I have a reservation about the *Saxophone Quartet*, it is, that I have always found it difficult to reconcile myself to its two movements belonging to the same work. While each reveals the undeniable stamp of Webern's greatness, there is a disunity of mood between them which is accentuated by the diverse treatment of the tone row. Much the same may be said for the otherwise magnificent two-movement *Symphony*, Opus 21. But no such objection can be raised in considering the succeeding series of twelve-tone works, such as the *Concerto for Nine Instruments* and the *Piano Variations*. Unfortunately, I have not been able to become acquainted with the two cantatas for chorus and orchestra which Webern produced during the war years and which culminated his creative activities. Admitting this limitation of perspective, I feel that the *Piano Variations*, Opus 27 display, with the highest degree of refinement, those characteristics which we have already ascribed to Webern's musical development.

The title, "Variations", seems almost ludicrous and redundant in view of the twelve-tone ideology. One cannot, of course, relate a twelve-tone work with this title, either to the ground base variation principle of the baroque, or the theme and melodic-elaborative variation type of the rococo. To be sure, in the second movement of his *Symphony*, (also entitled "Variations") Webern maintains a clearly marked division between his theme and its succeeding variants although the variations constitute an elaboration of structural elements within the theme itself and are quite athematic in character. In Opus 27 however, even this barrier of definition has been removed. The work is in three movements, each of which places specific values on certain associations within the row forms, the initial presentation of which constitutes the "theme". Webern is, however, remarkably exact about one detail. The number of measures which are allotted to theme and variants are maintained intact. Thus, the ternary first movement consists of three sections of eighteen measures each, the second movement's row presentation takes five and one-half bars and is followed by three variants of exactly that proportion, while the third movement's sixty-six measures are divided into a theme and five variations each of eleven bars.

The first movement utilizes the *Spiegelbild* principle which was described in the *Saxophone Quartet*. But here it serves not as a centre of gravity for the movement as a whole, but as the guiding principle within each segment. A mirror image is inserted at the centre of each phrase causing the consequent

portion to recapitulate retrogressively the antecedent. Webern's use of the row in this movement is governed by this principle, for in the antecedent portions of each phrase, tones one to six are accompanied by tones twelve to seven; thus with the mirror image causing the consequent reflection, the entire phrase will consist of one row in its original form, accompanied by its retrogressive version. The character of the movement is also governed by this principle which brings each sentence close to the point of immobility, and a casual and leisurely expression is the result.

The second movement is a strict canon in contrary motion which is so devised that between the four pairs of row transpositions which are employed, various patterns of relationship are established, and revealed by an effect of shading so novel that it must be ranked among the most important of Webern's contributions to instrumental technique. In this movement he makes use of only three dynamic levels, piano, forte and fortissimo, with no intermediate crescendi or diminuendi. He arranges his terse rhythmic figurations so that the relationships within the row forms are displayed by the alternation of these plateaus of volume.

The final movement is more extended and consists of a "theme" and five variations which are recognizable by a gradual transition of mood, rather than by any too obvious boundary. The "theme" is almost monodic. There is, in fact, only one vertical coincidence in its eleven measures though several harmonic combinations are produced by suspension. Such a remarkable economical texture does not, in itself, constitute a criterion of merit. We must be careful to differentiate between 'simplified' art which has a vogue with the neoclassic and various "back-to-" cliques, and art in which purity and directness emanate from a creator who has visualized the dramatic intensity that can underline the appearance of each tone. There is no suggestion of reduction in this music. It was conceived this way. This final movement attains a climax with the rhythmic syncopation of the fourth variation. A coda, the final variation, more richly harmonized that the rest of the movement, utilized once again, a modified *Spiegelbild*, which assists it to subside into an all-enveloping serenity.

It is, I suppose, inevitable to attempt a comparison between the twelve-tone works of Schoenberg and of Webern. One cannot, of course, ignore the strong bond of kinship which exists between the two men, nor deny the idealistic outlook which manifests itself in the use of the twelve-tone system by the Viennese fraternity in general. But however closely allied may be the general outlook and Utopian aspirations, it is left to the personality to determine the products of great men, and there is really no more excuse for categorizing Webern with Schoenberg, than Kandinsky with Kokoschka, or Thomas Mann with Nietzsche.

In all of his mature twelve-tone works, Schoenberg turns a powerful ray of light upon every detail of his structure and, often with complete lack of reservation, illuminates the most intimate details of the motivic-fragments metamorphosis. If his means, therefore, become obvious it is because his aims are grandiose. Webern's is a more suggestive art. Although in his use of the twelve-tone technique he shows even greater consistency than Schoenberg, a microscopic inspection and tabulation of each possibility is foreign to the delicacy of his style and the reticence of his manner. In many of his later works we are almost unaware of the schematic manipulations of his technical devices.

The extent to which he draws upon the total resources of the twelve-tone vocabulary is regulated by a very singular selectivity. From this somewhat epicurean temperament stem those qualities of refinement and discrimination which we have already discussed. And it is these qualities which, originally motivated by a desire for technical fastidiousness, approach, in his maturity, a realm of emotional transcendence. There is an almost unearthly intuitiveness about the last works of Webern. It is as if he sought a metaphysic with each creation. It would be false to suggest that his is purely a cerebral craft. The gratification of the intellect and of the senses is inseparable in art. However, any physical response or sensual stimulation has been elevated to so subliminal a state, that it is very difficult to relate Anton Webern's music to the world as we know it. But on the rare occasions in art, when we find revealed a visionary region of such paradisacal [*sic*] enchantment, it is the happier diversion not to try.