Gould's notes for Schönberg's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 42

by Glenn Gould

Included with the program for Cleveland Orchestra concert, Severance Hall, Cleveland, Ohio, November 26-28, 1959.

As one who habitually arrives at all concerts (even my own) seconds after the house lights have been lowered, I have always felt a bond of sympathy with those whose entry is marked by curses of ushers and aisle-sitters, by the discomfiture of the house-manager when a hushed and expectant audience is made aware that seats 5 and 6 in Row L have not been oiled this year, and who, having swung into their place with the aid of a neighbour's lapel, busy themselves in urgent analytic preparation for the ordeal to come. For all such I preface these notes with a very brief summary of certain salient facts about the Schönberg piano concerto which, in the words of the aspirin commercial, "will go to work instantly" and in which I refrain from specific musical illustration not so much from considerations of time as from fear that the concentration of an entire audience upon one reproduced musical example would transmit an intolerable telepathic wave to the poor oboist striving manfully to hold an A. In reward for my thoughtfulness I ask only that, before retiring, the reader will give due deliberation to the more complex thoughts of the essay proper, perhaps digesting them along with a portion of cinnamon toast and warm milk.

The piano concerto, though continuous, follows the four-movement order established by the Brahms B flat major concerto – a scherzo being interpolated between the first and third movements. The first movement is in the form of a theme and variations, the third is a monumental Adagio, and the fourth is a rondo with a unique twist which will be dealt with in the main body of my notes. It is a work of great formal strength, yet elastic enough to permit the twelve-tone row to exert itself as an organising force. Thus, it is impossible to dissect such a work in the conventional analytic terms applied, for instance, to a Beethoven concerto. Schönberg was not a completely happy twelve-tone composer in the sense that he was never entirely without nostalgia for the forms of the past. Yet it is, in a way, this yearning, this pathos, which gives his work its unique power and tension and very human drama.

Schönberg spent the last twenty years of his life in the United States, and his only work for piano and orchestra was composed in California in 1942. His American residence brought to fruition his career as the most indefatigable musical explorer of all time. He came to this country in 1934, recognised by a handful of cognoscenti as a man who had approached a cross-roads of musical history, and who, with unflinching courage, had selected a path and erected a

signpost to the future. To an unsympathetic public he represented the horror of anarchy, the terrifying indulgence of the supra-personal, the ingratitude of the distrustful creature who shuns the mores of society.

Today, less than a decade after his death, it is the historical view, the continuity of his achievements, the long line of uninterrupted search which the name Schönberg conjures up for an ever-growing public. With an additional quarter-century of listening we have been able to define his relationship to the past, have conceded the validity of extending the harmonic language of Wagner until in pursuit of logical extremity it disintegrates before our eyes, and of re-assembling from the shapeless rubble of atonality an edifice which, by reason and logic, could once more bear the proud rigors of artistic discipline. Yet to most people the name Schönberg still represents an aesthetic stance which for all its dynamic vigour is felt to be arbitrary and domineering, thought incompatible with the meekness and compromise of the human estate.

Schönberg's most celebrated achievement, the defining of a technique for composition with twelve tones, has brought about this colossal misunderstanding of his musical personality. We admit the validity of its preoccupation with primary functional design much as we concede the basic constructive aims of a Cézanne, or of a Gropius, yet we deny it a larger and freer association with the instinctive creative process, ascribing to it neither the warmth and colour of Cézanne nor the utility and sanity of Gropius. To an extent, Schönberg was as responsible as anyone for the creation of his public image as arbiter of musical mathematics. In his life he was surrounded by a mystique of numbers, a superstitious endowment of chance which often belied the warmth and dignity of his creative labours. His analyses of the classics, for all their perception, too often protested unrealistically the existence of absolute contrapuntal authority in eras to which such an approach was essentially foreign. Some of his disciples, notably Alban Berg, attributed an almost apocalyptic prescience to numerical order and thus did little to assuage the doubts of those who cringed in terror as the old romantic art of music seemed once more to be enchained by an arithmetical process of mediaeval exactitude.

It can be argued, of course, that in truth there is nothing more romantic than the juggling of numbers, as though they were some joyous plaything issued by the gods to entice man and tantalize him and represent to him an equation of the cosmic enigma. Yet the intellectual posture of our time was incontestably conditioned by the post-Romantic concept of free association, the influence of the subconscious, and the starry delusion that the great artist lives for great moments. Thus, every man has taken a position on Schönberg; but not I think, irrevocably.

Schönberg's American years were notable for a return to symphonic composition. His early works were dominated by the memory of Wagner and stand silhouetted in the twilight glow of the tonal epoch. Their transcendent lyricism finds fitting expression in the superb Lieder of Op. 2, 3, 6, 8, and in the giant orchestral drama, "Pelléas and Mélisande". The middle years, which may be calculated as being the period between the renunciation of tonality in his music (1908) and the first concentrated efforts in the tone-row technique (1923), witnessed a reaction to the sweeping epics of romanticism in works which stressed brevity, clarity, and precision. The alarming licence of tonal free trade caused Schönberg to gravitate toward a rational classicism for which the architectural formulae of the eighteenth century provided scholastic discipline and in which the participating forces were reduced to chamber proportions.

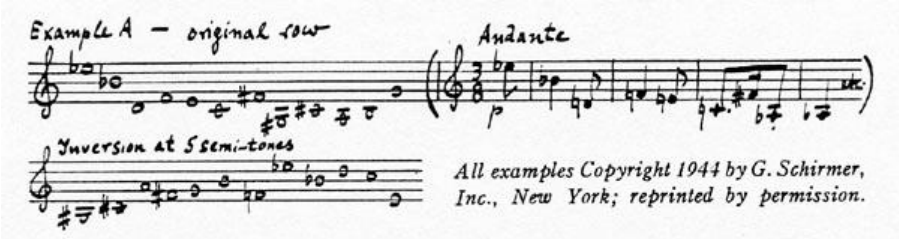
It is in this neo-classic environment that Schönberg's first tentative twelve-tone steps were taken. As was proper to their eighteenth century models, his first essays in twelve-tone writing were exercises in straightforward row technique. Such architectural forms as the dance suite, for instance, provided a convenient mould into which the first twelve-tone fluid might be poured. Thus the most marked feature of these early twelve-tone efforts is a rather external poise and grace.

Schönberg had long been aware, however, that before twelve-tone music might be said to have achieved sovereignty, the forms engendered by it would have to own of something specifically related to twelve-tone procedure something in which the growth of the most minute organism, the embryonic cell of sound would be reflected. It has been said quite seriously that whatever forms Schönberg applied to music the only constant constructive force in his work was the principle of variation. Indeed, the variation concept in its most natural state – that of constant evolution – provides the best synthesis of twelve-tone theory. The attraction of twelve-tone practitioners to the idea of perpetual development was as much an emotional appeal as an affair of the mind. Schönberg himself invented some rather sticky symbols for the unity of the work and the twelve-tone determinant likening composition to the human body which, wherever it was pricked, produced blood. Such constancy has never, needless to say, quite been achieved. To achieve it would necessitate the extension of what was initially a melodic or horizontal concept into the vertical or harmonic sphere.

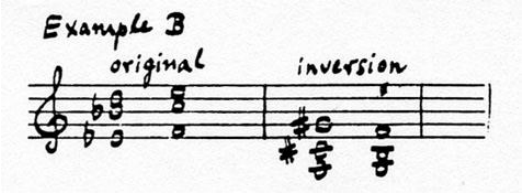
Schönberg, in his early twelve-tone works, frequently presented two transpositions of the row simultaneously, thus making a distinct division between melodic and harmonic participation. In the middle thirties, he began more and more frequently to use one transposition at a time, subdividing it into harmonic groups so that a succession of chords was formed from the row with points of melodic line appearing as uppermost factors of these chords.

Thus the harmonic control of the tone-row was tightened, while the melodic dimension was somewhat released from bondage. By the later thirties, Schöenberg was attempting to amalgamate both procedures by a simultaneous exposition of two transpositions of the same row – but a row so devised that, should it be reproduced at a specific interval and (usually) inverted, the first six tones of the original become, though in shuffled order, the last six of the inversion, and – if there is anyone who is not now thoroughly confused – vice versa.

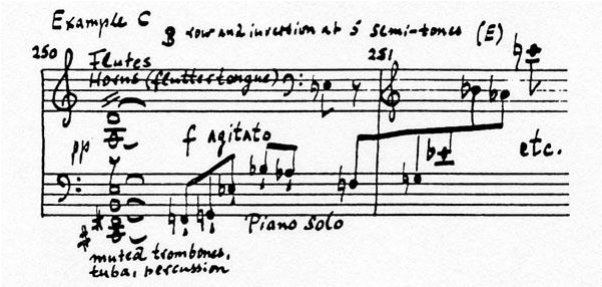
The piano concerto possesses such a row. Its original form is so arranged that, if it is inverted at five semitones above, the following results:



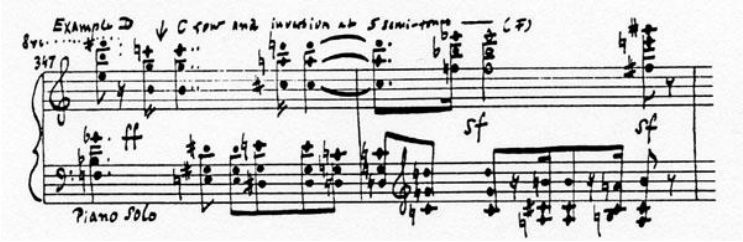
If these two transpositions are combined it will be seen that the first six tones of the original and the first six tones of the inversion produce one complete twelve-tone spectrum, while utilising only the interval combinations of half the row. Thus, within the harmonic range of a full tone-row, a greater economy of interval structure is achieved. If the row of the piano concerto is subdivided into four chords of three tones each, two positions of the same seventh chord are formed by the superposition of tones 1- 3 and 4- 6.



The same procedure applied to the consequent tones, 7-9, 10-12, makes a combination of fourth chords and whole-tone units, and passages such as the following are derived:

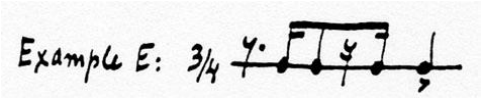


In somewhat subtler ways the two halves of the row are frequently assigned distinctive rhythmic shapes or perhaps consigned to different clefs.



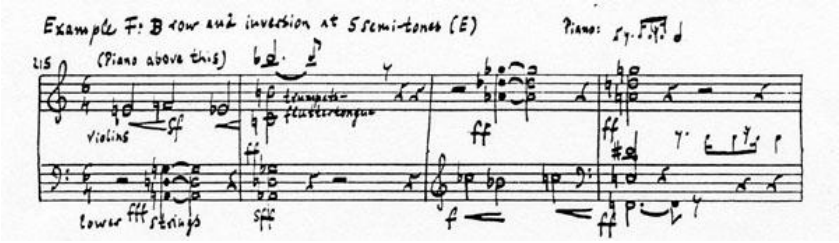
The harmonic possibilities of the row have a good deal to do with the overall formal enterprise. The work is in four movements joined without pause – or perhaps more accurately, with apostrophes – and each of these four movements develops a special aspect of the harmonic treatment of the row. In the first movement, which is a theme and variations, the theme is assigned to the right hand of the piano and consists of the four basic applications of the twelve-tone series the original form, the inversion, the retrogression and the retrogressive inversion. The inversion and retrogressive inversion appear in the transposition at five semitones. The accompaniment in the left hand consists of discreet comments derived from the row in use. Therefore, the theme of the first movement effects a pseudo-tonal solidarity by confining itself to one transposition (if the inversion at five semitones be regarded as indigenous) of the row. Each successive variation (there are three separated by episodes of rhythmic preparation) increases the number of participating transpositions of the series and hence puts pressure on the harmonic pace and results in a truncation of the main theme itself. In the first eight bars of variation 3 the original theme, or rather the first of its four sentences, is derived by excerpting and accenting individual notes drawn from no less than seven transpositions plus their complementary inversions.

The second movement is an energetic scherzo propelled by this rhythmic unit:



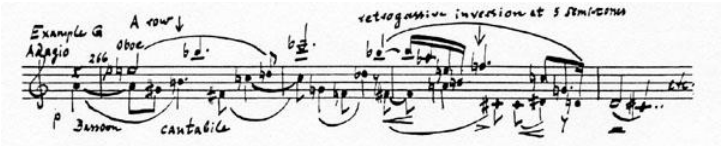
In this movement, Schönberg, counting on greater aural familiarity with the properties of the 3-tone chord units illustrated in Examples B and C, begins disconnecting successive tones of the original row and concocting new melodic and harmonic material by leapfrogging tones 1,3,5 and 2,4,6; similarly tones 7,9,11, and 8,10,12. The even numbers of the antecedent (2,4,6) and the odd numbers of the consequent (7,9,11) form chromatically adjoining fourth

chords while the remaining tones (1,3,5 -8,10,12) produce a wry diminutive of tones 10-12 from the original set:



Utilising this division of the series and playing it off against the original's consequent segment of whole-tone units in fourth-chords, Schönberg gradually eliminates all other motives and realizes in the final bars of the scherzo an almost total technical immobility.

If the scherzo is the dynamic vortex of the work, the emotional centre is surely the superb Adagio – one of the greatest monuments to Schönberg's technical skill. Here the procedures of both of the preceding movements are elaborated and combined. The a divisi melodic leapfrogging of the scherzo creates in the opening tutti of tile third movement of new melody of true breadth and grandeur:



Once again, as Schönberg assumes a greater psychological comprehension on the part of the listener, a further relaxation of the twelve-tone bondage is permitted. The four harmonic blocks of the original row, (Example B and C) are concentrated in a long solo for the piano. Then, with consummate mastery, these two procedures are brought together in an orchestral tutti which is one of the grandest edifices of the mature Schöenberg.

The final movement is a rondo – a pure, classically proportioned rondo – in which the central episode is a series of three variations upon the theme of the third movement (Example G). In this movement Schönberg returns largely to the straightforward row technique of the first movement, constructing a principal theme of jocose gallantry with admirable limitation of serial means, and the movement proceeds with the sort of virtuosic abandon and incorruptible simplicity that the rondos of Mozart and Beethoven reveal.

Yet, curiously enough this movement, and hence the entire work, was the occasion for one of the oddest bits of analytical misconception ever encountered. Some years ago, in a leading musicological journal – for which I

have regrettably misplaced volume and number but which because of its incredibility remains indelibly with me – the distinguished scholar Kurt List maintained with a perfectly straight face that the work consisted of three, not four, movements – the finale being a conjunction of the Adagio and the rondo. I strongly suspect that the above-mentioned variations in the middle of the rondo were responsible for this amazing deduction, and while I am sure that no one will lose sleep over the burning question, it is, I think, indicative of the sort of mathematical twaddle which for so long and so frequently governed the analyses even of those who ardently espoused the cause of Schönberg's music, and which could with little or no reason refute the application of instinctive logic.

I think it is not too optimistic to state that Schönberg's music will shortly experience yet another evaluation, in which even the most formidable elements of design will be seen in their proper creative perspective, be freed from all unnecessary association with the extra-musical – an evaluation in which Schönberg will finally emerge as one of the most 'natural' and least problematic of musical minds.

- GLENN GOULD

"Music without ideas is unthinkable, and people who are not willing to use their brains to understand music which cannot be fully grasped at first hearing are simply lazy-minded ... Every true work of art to be understood has to be thought about; otherwise it has no inherent life."

"I warn you of the dangers lurking in the die-hard reaction against romanticism. The old romanticism is dead – long live the new! The composer of today without some trace of romanticism in his heart must be lacking in something fundamentally human."

"If a composer does not write from the heart, he simply cannot produce good music. I write what I feel in my heart – and what finally comes on paper is what first coursed through every fiber of my body."

- ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG