SERIALISM IN THREE CHAMBER WORKS OF REGINALD SMITH BRINDLE

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Abstract

This presentation examines the usage of serial techniques in three of Reginald Smith Brindle's chamber pieces for guitar—*Tierra Seca* from *Four Poems of Garcia Lorca*, the first movement of *Ten-String Music* for cello and guitar, and *Lachrimae* from *Five Sketches* for violin and guitar—in light of Brindle's own writings about serialism in his 1966 book *Serial Composition*. The attitude toward serialism that Brindle articulates in this book is a very skeptical one, and he mainly advocates for the use of serial techniques for their practical compositional and pedagogical value rather than the ideological merit often attached to them by the composers of the Second Viennese School. Specifically, Brindle finds that the absorption of serial techniques is a very effective way to teach the budding composer to write in an atonal musical language and that a tone row can provide the more experienced composer with musical material with which to work during the early stages of the compositional process. But Brindle also identifies several "defects" in music produced by the strict adherence to serial techniques and thus advocates for a more liberal approach to the ordering of pitch classes in a tone row. This practice is particularly evident in *Ten-String Music* where the presence of tone rows are quite evident but the pitch classes within them frequently appear out of order. From the pieces examined in this presentation, it seems that whether Brindle follows serial practices strictly—as in *Tierra Seca* where he utilizes a tone row and derives all pitch material from that row or one of its transformations—or liberally—as in *Ten-String Music* where only portions of the work are constructed from a tone row and those that are often contain modifications to the row ordering—, his reasons for doing so arise from the needs of the individual piece, rather than from some belief in the superiority of such methods. The freedom with which Brindle treats the series suggests that serial practices may have been at play during the compositional process of many of Brindle's works, even those that do not seem to exhibit serial characteristics on the surface. While the row from which Brindle worked may not always be present on a note-to-note level in such cases, the analysis of *Lachrimae* suggests that many of the row's larger pitch structures may still be present in the music. Above all, the findings of this presentation suggest that serial techniques need not always be used in the strict and uncompromising way that they are normally presented and that we as theorists might look for traces of serialism in a variety of musical contexts.

In his 1966 pedagogical manual *Serial Composition*, Reginald Smith Brindle articulates a very liberal and pragmatic approach to composing with serial techniques. In it, Brindle advocates for a substantial relaxation of the "strict" requirements of serialism because he values serial techniques more for their compositional and pedagogical utility rather than the musical unity and structure they create. This is a very different approach to serialism than that of the Second Viennese School, and the results of such a philosophy are evident in many of Brindle's chamber works written around the time of the publication of *Serial Composition*. In this presentation, I will discuss several of Brindle's chamber works for guitar as they relate to his ideas about serialism and the ways in which these ideas inform our understanding of his music.

To begin, let us explore Brindle's approach to serialism as it compares to that of the composers of the Second Viennese School. For its pioneers, twelve-tone composition seems to have been appealing because it offered a means of achieving maximum compositional unity within the non-tonal musical language that had developed by the end of the 19th century. To quote Anton Webern:

> Composition with twelve notes has achieved a degree of complete unity that was not even approximately there before. It is clear that where relatedness and unity are omnipresent, comprehensibility is also guaranteed. . . . So what has in fact been achieved by this method of composition [the 12-tone method]? . . . To be very general, it's a matter of creating a means to express the greatest possible unity in music (Webern 1963, 18 & 42).

Webern's focus here is almost exclusively on the musical unity afforded by the twelve-tone method since he seems to believe that unity and comprehensibility go hand in hand. The twelve-tone method provided the composer with a single ordering of the aggregate from which they could derive nearly every detail of the musical structure; theoretically ensuring unity by default. Pre-ordering the aggregate into a tone row also allowed pitch classes to regain some semblance of the tendency and function they had in the system of tonal harmony. This "syntax"

comes only from the *order* of the pitch classes in the row, however, which is why it was vitally important that this ordering was followed as strictly as possible.

Any deviations from this pre-determined ordering were thus usually "justified" in some way and couched so as to retain as much of the structure as possible. In the Gavotte from his *Suite* Op. 25, for example, Arnold Schoenberg presents tetrachordal segments of the row out of order. He is careful to note, however, that the Gavotte is not the first movement of the *Suite*, so the listener will have had time to learn the normal ordering of the row, and also that the order of the pitch classes within each segment is followed strictly (Schoenberg 1950, 126–130).

Brindle, on the other hand, seems quite skeptical of the "unity" provided by the twelve-tone method. Quoting from *Serial Composition*:

> There is absolutely no reason why such serial works as Stravinsky's *Threni*, Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron*, Webern's Symphony Op. 21, or Berg's *Lulu*, could not have been written in a free style, without using any series. The only reason which can be advanced is that the works would lack 'serial unity'. But as composers usually strive to avoid too-obvious serial relationships and aim for thematic variety rather than constancy, the continuous recurrence of the series is rarely audible and therefore 'serial unity' is often enough a chimera of questionable practical value. The only kind of audible unity a series can provide is one of thematic character and if such thematic unity is needed, it can easily be provided through free composition, rather than by the roundabout method of serial practice (Brindle 1966, 193).

It thus seems that Brindle is largely uninterested in the desire for unity that originally motivated the creation of the twelve-tone method, and, as a result, would care little for the strict adherence to row ordering. Furthermore, Brindle also notes in *Serial Composition* that the twelve-tone technique, if left unchecked, tends to produce music with many characteristics that are stylistically undesirable: such as octave relationships between parts, implied tonal centers, and inconsistent levels of harmonic dissonance or tension (Brindle 1966, 51). These undesirable tendencies result largely from the creation of harmony and polyphony through the blind combination of segments of a single row form or several row forms. In order to combat these

"defective" tendencies, Brindle advocates for a process of "serial manipulation" in which the ordering of the series is altered slightly (usually by exchanging pairs of notes) in order to produce more idiomatic and stylistically-correct harmonies and contrapuntal lines (Brindle 1966, 51–52).

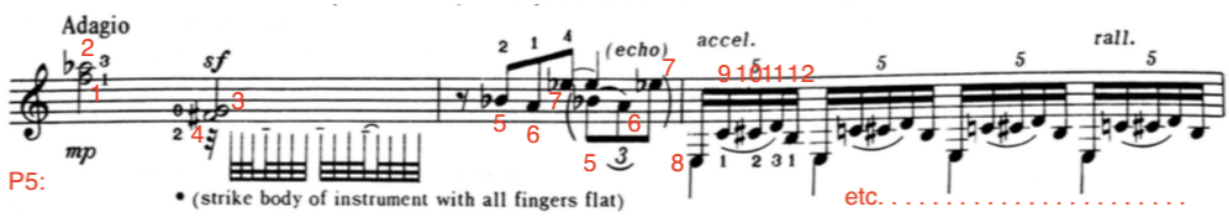
What value, then, does Brindle see in composition with serial methods that would cause him to write an entire book about it? I quote two passages at length from the beginning and end of *Serial Composition*:

> . . . composers who use the serial method observe that, while working, certain note-successions may suddenly reveal latent possibilities, and that the creative faculties of the mind, seizing on these, will form new musical designs. In fact, in serial music, the method itself is a powerful stimulus to the imagination, through the very fact that the creative mind can set to work without delay on already-prepared note-successions (Brindle 1966, 1–2).

> . . . it is necessary to be able to think instinctively in terms of total-chromaticism and without the facilitation of Schoenberg's twelve-note series . . . this is no easy task. . . . Our aim should be to conquer every facet of technique and then strike out boldly along the path suggested by our uninhibited imagination. It may be an arduous route, we may frequently have to fall back on the structures of serialism, but in the end our work will be authentic, truly creative, and without the dross of functional systems. But there is no short cut to the technique of free twelve-note composition. *It can only be attempted after the discipline of serialism has been completely absorbed*, *when the mind instinctively thinks in terms of total chromaticism and when new self-imposed disciplines can be evolved* (Brindle 1966, 194, emphasis mine).

For Brindle, then, serialism serves the practical need for a composer to have ideas to work with and the pedagogical need for would-be composers to learn to compose in the language of atonality, but it is not the ultimate goal. Rather, Brindle seems to view serialism as a means toward the end of free atonal composition. When serialism is used in this way and in tandem with Brindle's method of serial manipulation, it becomes more of a compositional heuristic—suggesting note combinations to the composer who then modifies them to conform to stylistic principles—than a musical language of its own.

Let us now see how these ideas play out in several of Brindle's own compositions. We begin with *Tierra Seca* the third of the *Four Poems of Garcia Lorca.* This is possibly the most conservative example of Brindle's serial usage in that every single pitch in the movement can be accounted for as a member of one of three transformations of the basic row. As per traditional twelve-tone practice, the order of the pitch classes within each of these row forms is followed quite strictly. Only twice (mm. 9 and 22) do any pitches occur out of order. In both cases Brindle appears to change the order of the pitches to allow for the continuation of a line in a single direction. The main deviation from strict serial technique in this movement comes in the form of repeated row segments. The first presentation of the row in measures 1–3 demonstrates this technique (Example 1). Here order positions 5–7 and then 9–12 are first presented and then immediately repeated in order.



Example 1. mm. 1–3 of *Tierra Seca* with each pitch annotated according to its order within P5

Such practices are not unheard of in strict serialism, however, and the continued concern for the order of the pitch classes resonates well with traditional serial technique. What sets this movement apart is Brindle's rational for choosing to follow such strict procedures in the first place. In the preface to *Four Poems*, Brindle writes that " . . . parts of the music have been composed with the serial technique, *so that the emotive, poetic imagery of the words is tempered by a musical language which has a certain rational discipline*" (Brindle 1977, 1, emphasis mine). This implies that Brindle decided to use such strict serial techniques here precisely because of the type of musical surface they tend to create. This is somewhat akin to the practice

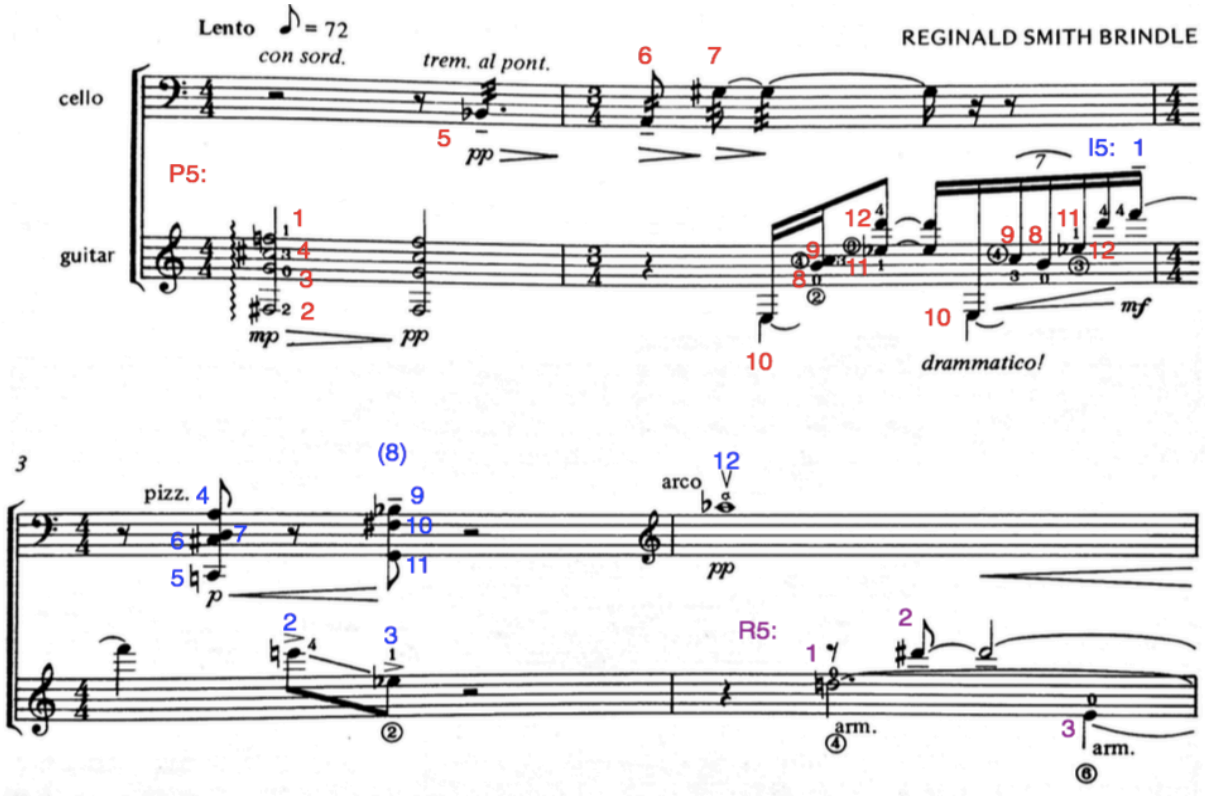
of 19th century composers writing in a strict fugal or canonic style in a work that is not otherwise based upon such principles. The goal here is to achieve a certain effect, and serialism is simply a technique used to that end.

Serial practices also play an important role in the first movement of *Ten-String Music* for cello and guitar. Here, Brindle accomplishes the constant circulation of the aggregate through the use of both serial and non-serial techniques. Each statement of the aggregate on the opening page (part of which is reproduced and annotated below in Example 2), for example, corresponds quite well to a single form of the row. Tone rows do not account for all of the movement's pitch material however; there are also substantial passages of the movement where the aggregate is still used but not in an order that corresponds to any transformation of the basic row. During such passages (like mm. 19–20 reproduced below as Example 3), Brindle constructs harmony and melody from complementary pitch class sets in order to ensure the completion of the aggregate. As can be seen in this formal diagram (Table 1), these two types of musical construction (serial and non-serial) alternate back and forth in passages of roughly equal length throughout the movement. This helps to provide some sort of contrast and return in a texture that would otherwise remain quite undifferentiated because of the constant circulation of the aggregate.

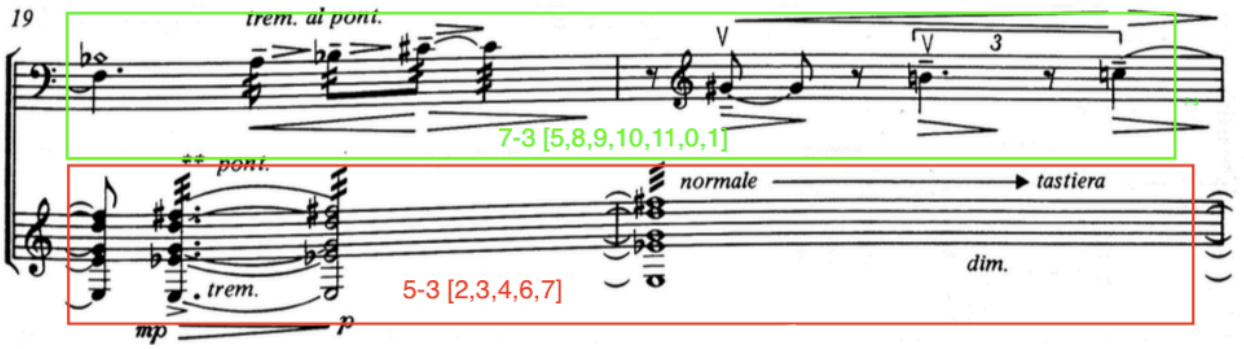
1–6	7–12	13–17	18–22
Serial	Non-Serial	Serial	Non-serial
P5 → I5 → R5 → I5	Z-related hexachords	R5 → I5 → (P10)	5-3, 7-3, 5-2, 7-2

Table 1. Formal organization of the first movement of *Ten-String Music*

Even when tone rows are used, however, it is often quite freely. Returning to the first four measures (Example 2), we find that the very first two statements of the row contain several pitch classes out of order, repeated subsets, and even omissions. It is not until the third statement of the row (in retrograde form) in measures 5–7 that the row is actually stated in order and in its entirety. It would thus only be retroactively, if at all, that the listener would be able to deduce the row on which the serial portions of this movement are based. This seems to underscore, once again, Brindle's lack of concern for the strict ordering of the row and also reinforces the idea that Brindle is using serialism more as a tool than a musical language of its own.

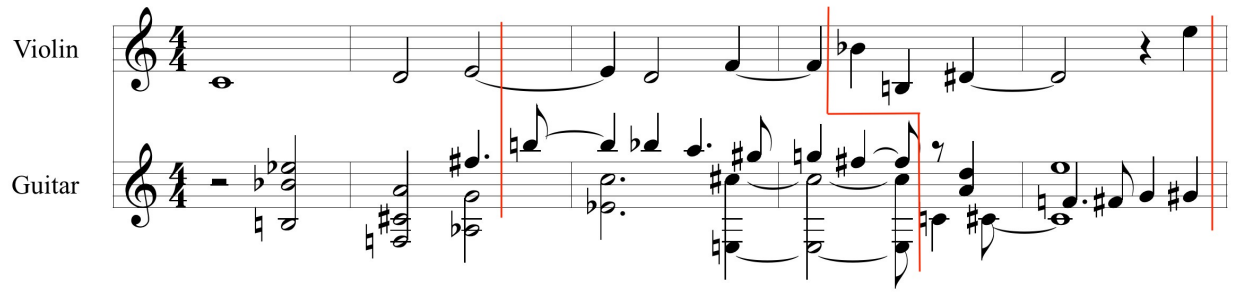


Example 2. mm. 1–4 of *Ten-String Music* annotated with row form and order numbers



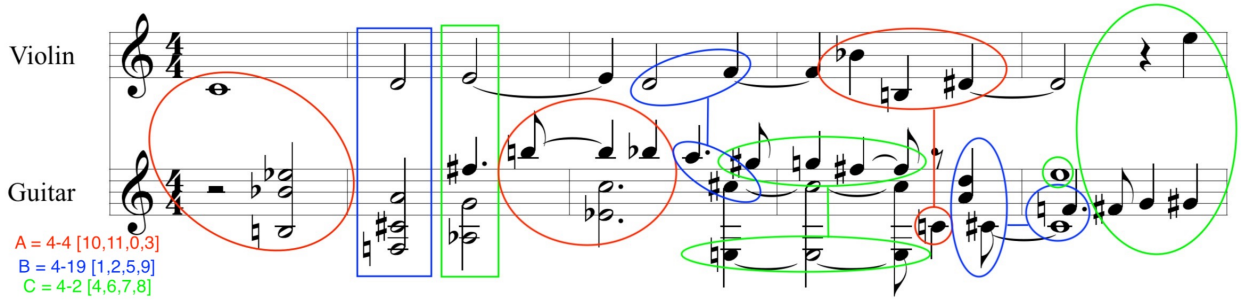
Example 3. mm. 19–20 of *Ten-String Music*. These two complementary pitch class sets complete the aggregate, but the ordering of the pitches in the cello do not correspond to a single row form

Finally, let us examine *Lachrimae*, the fifth and final sketch from Brindle's *Five Sketches* for guitar and violin. This sketch also seems to demonstrate many characteristics of serial construction. Especially in the first five measures, displayed here (Example 4), we may note the constant circulation of the aggregate, the use of all twelve pitch classes before any is repeated, and several groups of pitch classes that often appear in close succession (C, B, Bb, and Eb for example). And yet despite all this, it is impossible to identify a single tone row that would account for the pitch class succession observed even in these first five measures. Here (Example 4), I have added lines to the first five measures to indicate the completion of the aggregate. As we can see, the first statement of the aggregate begins with C, which is then followed by B, Bb, and Eb. In the next statement of the aggregate these four pitch classes still appear in close proximity, and yet the statement begins with B, rather than C. The third statement of the aggregate similarly differs as it begins with Bb. We would not expect all four of these pitch classes to remain grouped together if Brindle were merely using different forms of the row, and yet we also would not necessarily expect to see so many of the same pitch classes appear together if this passage were freely-constructed. What this indicates, then, is either a very loose adherence to a single row form or an altogether different conception of the row as a whole.



Example 4. mm. 1–5 of *Lachrimae*. Lines indicate completion of the aggregate

If we group the notes of this passage into tetrachords by the order in which they are introduced, an interesting structure emerges. As can be seen here (Example 5), this passage consists of the ordered progression of three tetrachords "A" = 4-4 [10,11,0,3], "B" = 4-19 [1,2,5,9], and "C" 4-2 [4,6,7,8]. Continuing this analytical process for the remainder of the sketch reveals that it is completely saturated by these three tetrachords; indeed, it is possible to account for very nearly every single note in the sketch as a member of one of these tetrachords. The ordered succession of these tetrachords is only present in certain portions of the sketch however. Specifically at the opening, the return of this thematic material in measures 21–25, and, more roughly, at the end of the sketch.



Example 5. mm. 1–5 of *Lachrimae* analyzed as pitch class sets

In any other context we would most likely assume that such a texture was the product of "free" atonal composition. Given what we know about Brindle's serial practices, however, I argue that these three tetrachords—particularly because they are initially presented in a particular order and recur in this order later in the sketch—might be understood to be analogous to a sort of tone row. Indeed, we have already noted in *Ten-String Music* how Brindle often mixes "free" passages with serially-constructed ones. It is even possible that the pitch successions in measures 1–5 and 21–25 were first constructed, loosely, from a tone row using Brindle's technique of serial manipulation.

What I hope to have shown in this presentation is that serialism—at least in the music of Reginald Smith Brindle—is just one of many compositional "tools" that a composer might use to achieve a variety of musical surfaces. Our discussion of *Lachrimae* suggests that serial techniques might have played a role in the compositional process of many of Brindle's works, even those that appear more "free" on the surface, and such techniques, even if only loosely followed, will still tend to exert an influence on the melodic and harmonic structure of a work. While it may not be possible to reverse engineer the tone row from which Brindle worked, its influence might thus still be felt throughout the work. I also hope this presentation has broadened our idea of what a tone row "is"; that it need not necessarily be an explicit ordering of all twelve pitches, but rather might consist of an ordering of larger pitch-class structures from which various note-to-note orderings might be derived. Above all, we must remember that serialism is a compositional *method* and that there are a number of ways this method might be used. For the analyst of Brindle's music, it is important to understand that much of his music is neither serial nor freely-composed but rather something in between, and to try to force it into either of these categories would be to misrepresent it altogether.

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