

# ANALYZING SERIAL MUSIC

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How far is analyzing serial music the same as analyzing any other music?

According to Allen Forte, the kind of reduction technique that Schenkerian analysis exemplifies 'is not suitable for the analysis of 12-tone music, nor is it required there in order to explain structure. The 12-tone system has its own history, its own terminology and analytic technique.'<sup>1</sup> Now the kind of analytic technique which Forte has in mind involves identifying the series present in a composition together with the various transformations in which it appears, which in some cases called doing a *note count*, and it involves deducing the formal properties that hold between the various transformations of the series, so that they can be correlated with those aspects of the musical design that are not directly determined by the serial structure - things like rhythms, textures, thematic design and so forth. And procedures like this are basically different from the kind of analytical techniques I was setting out in the first part of this book. They are different on two counts. First, they are explicit; they require the application of precisely stated rules, so that they could well be carried out by a computer. Admittedly this is also true, to some degree at least, of the kind of formal techniques (such as Forte's own set-theoretical technique) which I discussed in Chapter 4, as well as the comparative techniques I described in Chapter 5; but even these are unlike the techniques of serial analysis, because (and this is the second point of difference) serial

<sup>1</sup> In Maury Yeston (ed.), *Readings in Schenker Analysis and other approaches*, Yale University Press, 1977, p. 33.

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techniques relate directly to compositional procedures. That is to say, more or less any piece can be analyzed by Schenkerian, formal or comparative methods, if with varying degrees of success; it is in no way a precondition that the composer himself should have been consciously aware of Schenkerian or formal principles. Indeed, you can analyze a piece in terms of sonata form without being sure that the composer was consciously thinking of his music in terms of sonata form, because (as I explained in the last chapter) the basic principles underlying sonata form became a habit of mind for composers - something that they took for granted in writing music. But serial structures do not occur except through a conscious decision on the composer's part to construct them; and where they do not occur, serial analysis is simply a non-starter. Serial analysis, then, is more tightly bound to a specific repertoire than other analytical techniques.

But even when a piece is composed by serial methods, are specifically serial techniques of analysis all that is required to 'explain structure', as Forte put it? The answer to this is certainly no, because the techniques of serialism - at least of classical serialism, meaning Schoenberg, Berg and Webern - leave so many crucial aspects of the music undetermined: rhythm, texture, patterns of consonance and dissonance, form and so on. All these free aspects of the music play a crucial role in determining what effect, if any, the series makes on the listener. In fact, it is only when there is an unusually direct association between these free aspects and the serial structure that it becomes possible for a listener to perceive the serial structure as such.

An example of this is Webern's *Symphony*. Everything here is designed to make the series audible. The series is presented melodically rather than harmonically. The texture is sparse and the tempo very moderate. Each statement of the series is divided from the next by a caesura and a change of texture. Under these circumstances it is, if not easy, then at least possible for a listener to pick out the occurrences of the series - in a way it is not when, as is more often the case in serial music, the series is used harmonically, split up texturally, staggered against the phrase structure, or used at faster tempi. But there is a further point. The fact that listeners can, if they try, pick out the series does not mean that they do so in the normal way; I have carried out tests

<sup>1</sup> I mentioned in Chapter 3 that motivic analysis arose partly through attempts by some of Schoenberg's pupils to discover more-or-less serial patterns in non-serial music, particularly that of the classical era. I do not find these demonstrations convincing or musically interesting, but for another opinion see Hans Keller's *Strict Serial Technique in Classical Music*, *Tempo*, No. 37, Autumn 1955, p. 12.

*is significant procedure a serie?*