in which musically qualified listeners made detailed observations of the first movement of Webern's Symphony without becoming aware of its being serially structured at all – simply because they had not been asked to listen out for a serial structure! And the observations these listeners did make were the sort of observations that could have been made about many non-serial pieces – of tensional shapes, developmental processes, effects of finality and so forth. It is clear that basic categories of musical experience such as these are as applicable to serial as to non-serial music. And this means that if what you are interested in is how a given piece of serial music is experienced, then its serial structure can only be the starting point for your analysis. As with sonata form, the important thing is not the structure as such, but the use the particular piece you are analyzing makes of that structure.

This chapter includes brief expositions of the techniques of serialism, interspersed between the analyses. But its main topic is the relationship between these techniques and the wider concerns of musical analysis as a whole.

II

A piece of music is serial if in some respect it is determined by a strict pattern of recurrence. In classical serialism it is pitch classes that are ordered this way, and the series states every note of the chromatic scale once and once only. It is possible to use series that contain only a selection of the twelve chromatic notes, but when this is done the effect of the music tends to depend more on the harmonic properties of the set of notes as a whole, and less on the order in which they come. In twelve-tone serialism (also called 'dodecaphony' – a term which in practice implies serial organization, as opposed to 'atonality' which implies the lack of it) it is only the order in which the pitches come that distinguishes one series from any other. As the analytical techniques specific to serialism are based on ordering as their structural principle, it is twelve-tone serialism that I shall talk about in this chapter.

About the simplest possible example of twelve-tone serialism is the twenty-bar piece from Webern's sketchbook of 1925, the first half of which is shown in Fig. 143; it would be sensible to play it through before reading further.
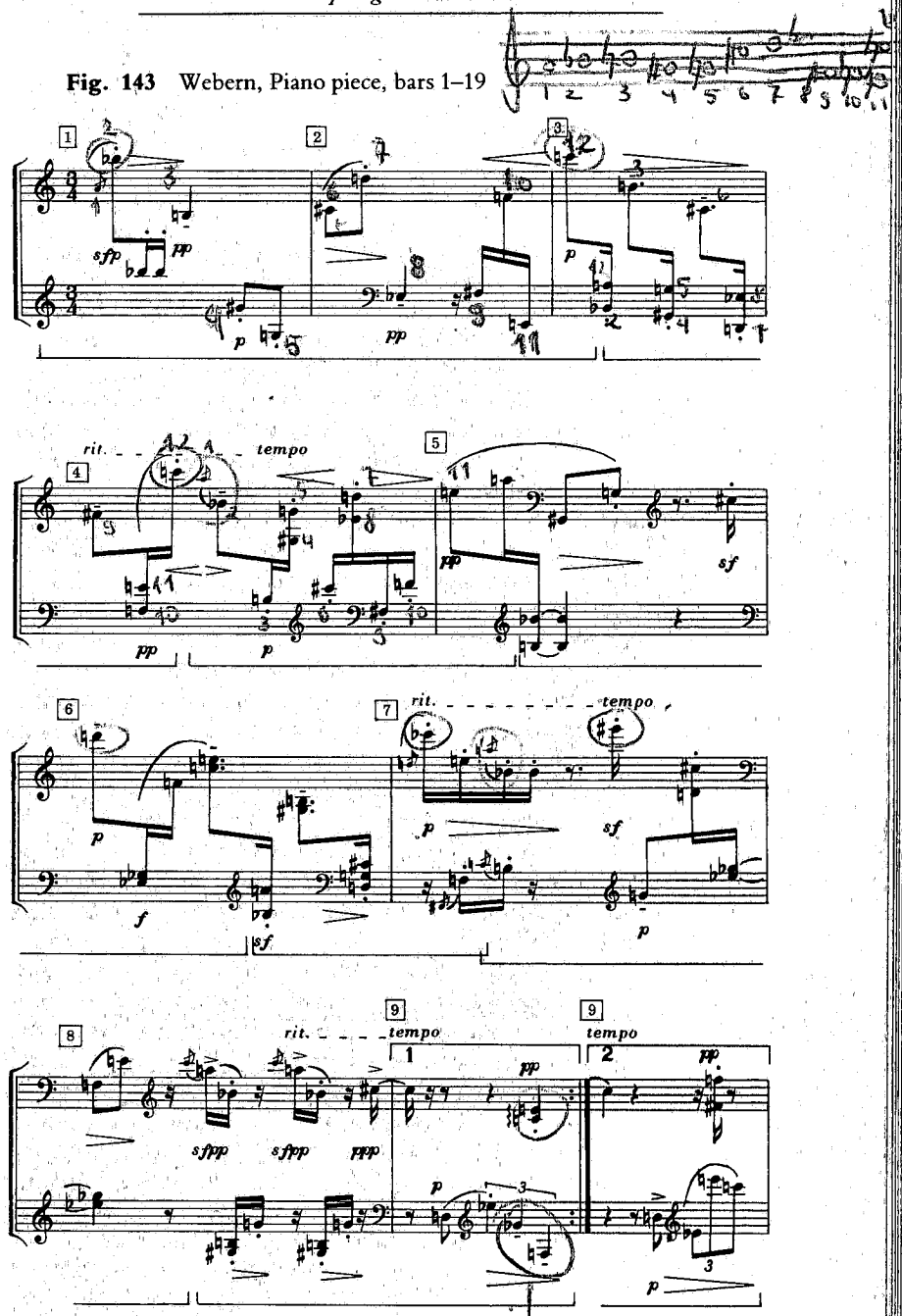
Fig. 143 Webern, Piano piece, bars 1–19