

### Remnants of Tonality in Webern's Op. 3/2

“To look for remnants of tonality in these sounds is as wrong as to speak of the ‘abolition of tonality’”, writes Kolneder, who, like most, regards Op. 3 as Webern’s first step into the territory generally designated “atonal music”<sup>1</sup>). But to take the term “atonal” as implying that all twelve pitch-classes are “equal” in importance can be misleading, for there are certain “atonal” works in which a pitch-class or “chord” is invested, through contextual means, with much greater significance than its surroundings, enabling it to function as a kind of surrogate for a “tonal center”<sup>2</sup>). In Op. 3/2, both the nature of the principal motives and their association with preferred levels of transposition point to such “tonal” thinking.

In its overall effect, the work is a single musical gesture of continuous, gathering intensity, although both the text and the motivic structure may be seen to articulate a division into two parts<sup>3</sup>). The *Hauptmotiv* of the first half of the piece, labeled **A**, is a “C# minor triad” in the directed-interval pattern  $\langle +9, -5 \rangle$ . It first enters with its **TI** imitation (“D minor”) delayed by a 16th, a motivic complex we shall designate **A+TIA**:



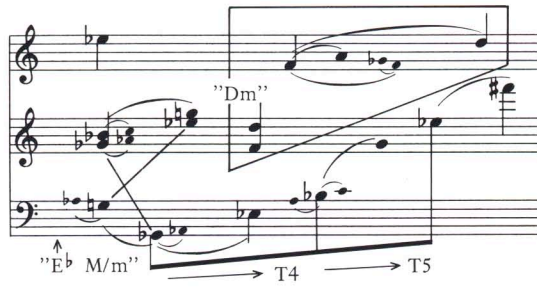
In measure (m.) 1, after the initial presentation, a variant occurs, whereupon the final 16th of the bar presents a “chord” of four pitches (*in register*) extracted from the initial **A+TIA**. Beginning on the second 16th of the second beat of m. 2, we find the complex transposed up a half step: **TI(A+TIA)**<sup>4</sup>). This effectively reverses the position of the D minor triad: “C# + D minor” now becomes “D + E♭ minor”.

In the opening bars, the voice is distinctly secondary to its “accompaniment”, **A** and its derivatives appearing only in the piano. But by m. 3, piano and voice begin to reverse roles, the piano right hand imitating the opening vocal line. In m. 4 the voice takes the “new” (“E♭ minor”) transposition of **A** for the first time:  $\langle +9, -5 \rangle$ . It continues with  $\langle +5, -9 \rangle$  (“B minor”)—an “embellished” (and transposed) retrograde starting on the common  $f\#^1$  ( $g\flat^1$ ), while the piano left hand states **A** one last time at the *original* transposition: “C# minor”.

In the second section (end of m. 6ff.), the *Hauptmotiv* (**B**), associated with the text “nun drängt der Mai”, is the appropriately pressing, upward motion shown in Ex. 2 in two forms:

In a composition hardly marked by repetition, the span comprised of the last beat of m. 6 through the first two beats of m. 8—relatively long given the dimensions of the piece—is striking indeed: virtually the entire piano part is taken up with insistent repetitions of the complex **B1+B2**. Now, if we were to ask just what this repeated pitch material might have to do with **A**, it is not difficult to hear the direct reference back to **T1(A+T1A)** illustrated in Ex. 3<sup>5</sup>:

Noting the sequential transposition of **B1** that characterizes the piano part in m. 8, beats 2–4, we might also ask: why this *particular* transpositional network? After all, given the properties inherent in the [0136] tetrachordal type produced by **B1**'s  $\langle +2, +7, +6 \rangle$ , a continuous **T4** network would have yielded all 12 tones—a typically “Weberian” move, one might imagine<sup>6</sup>). But the actual music uses the “tonal” transposition network, **T4** to **T5**, thus replicating the “E<sup>b</sup> minor six-chord” of **T1(A+T1A)**, and emphasizing the motivic G<sup>b</sup>–E<sup>b</sup>. This also means that the last tetrachord repeats pitch-classes E<sup>b</sup>, C and F<sup>#</sup>, placing the E<sup>b</sup> and F<sup>#</sup> in particularly emphasized rhythmic and registral positions, respectively. Noticing all of this, as well as some strategically placed vocal pitches, we might develop the connection shown in Ex. 3, and attempt to hear an “embellished E<sup>b</sup> major/minor and D minor”, as sketched in rudimentary form in Ex. 4:



Parts of m. 9 and all of 10 (in piano) present various transpositions of the familiar **BI**. Why *these* transpositions? Indeed, an earlier version of the piece, shown in facsimile in Ex. 5, differs precisely on this point: the last three presentations of **BI** occur at *different* transposition levels<sup>7)</sup>.



Why might Webern have revised this ending? By now the question has become rhetorical: certainly the contra  $B^b$ ,  $E^b$ <sup>1</sup>,  $F^\sharp$ <sup>2</sup> and  $B^b$ <sup>3</sup> in piano (all missing in the earlier version), together with the  $E^b$ ,  $G^b$ ,  $F$  of the voice, all reiterate one last time the importance of **TI(A+TIA)**.

Beyond the connection drawn earlier to other pieces in the repertoire, Op. 3/2 relates to other atonal works that accord special importance to the specific pitch-classes,  $C^\sharp$ ,  $D$  and  $E^b$ <sup>8)</sup>. Moreover, the “triadic” setting of these pitch-classes in the present instance recalls—if somewhat abstractly—Lewin’s “inversional balance”, one of Schoenberg’s main methods of establishing a “tonal center”<sup>9)</sup>. Finally, “D minor”, the harmonic setting of the centralized pitch-class, presents a final echo of a tonality that was extraordinarily significant to the composers of the Second Viennese School<sup>10)</sup>.

1) Walter Kolneder, *Anton Webern: An Introduction to his Works*, trans. Humphrey Searle, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1968, p. 36.

2) Here one thinks of Schoenberg's Op. 16/3, or Op. 15/14, which are approximately contemporaneous with Webern's Op. 3. See the analyses by John Rahn (*Basic Atonal Theory*, New York and London 1980, p. 59–73) and Reinhold Brinkmann ("Schönberg und George: Interpretation eines Liedes", *AfM* 26 [1969] p. 1–28), respectively. One also thinks of the notion of *Klangzentrum*, outlined by Rudolf Stephan with regard to Webern's Op. 3/4 (in: *Neue Musik*, Göttingen 1958, p. 36–38), and developed further by Elmar Budde in his analysis of the same work (*Anton Weberns Lieder Op. 3: Untersuchungen zur frühen Atonalität bei Webern*, Wiesbaden 1971, p. 68ff.).

3) Rolf Urs Ringger aptly calls the piece a *Steigerungsform* (in: *Anton Weberns Klavierlieder*, Zürich 1968, p. 19f.). This is most clearly evident in the use of dynamics (from *ppp* of m. 1 to *ff* of m. 10), the gradual expansion of register (culminating in the  $a^2$  of the voice, and the piano's contra E in m. 9 and  $Bb^3$  in m. 10), and in textural density, which again reaches its maximum in m. 9 with the piano's octaves; these enter here for the first and only time. With respect to the form of the text, Ringger notes that the first part of the poem is delicate and playful, while the second presses forward in earnest (p. 20). The first rhyming pair — "nacht" and "-facht" — articulates the midpoint, at which point George inserts the dash (and Webern inserts the "rit. — accel. —" [m. 6–7]).

4) This reading of the "upper line" assumes that we group the "alto" F with the "D minor triad", the "soprano"  $Bb$  continuing on to complete the "Eb minor triad". Webern in fact stems the piano part according to this reading in an earlier version (Paul Sacher Foundation [PSS], microfilm 101:0097). The beginning of the passage (second 16th of the *first* beat) presents **TI** of the "variant" 5-note figure from bar 1 (F, D, A, E,  $Bb$ ), which is also consistent with this segmentation.

5) This hearing also explains the genesis of  $B^s$ 's  $\langle +2, +7 \rangle$  in  $A^s$ 's  $\langle +9 \rangle$ ; in that case,  $B2$  proves to be a "filled out" version of  $A$ .

6) Moving the last four sixteenths in the bar down a half step produces precisely this transpositional network, and hence all twelve pitch classes.

7) This is presumably the "korrigierte Frühfassung" mentioned briefly by Budde, *op. cit.*, p. 14 (Now: PSS, microfilm 101:0129/31).

8) Reinhold Brinkmann finds this "Konstellation" to be involved in a crucial revision at the end of Webern's Op. 4/5 ("Die George-Lieder 1908/09 und 1919/23 — ein Kapitel Webern-Philologie"; in: *Webern-Kongreß*, hrsg. von der Österreichischen Musikgesellschaft, Kassel etc. 1973, p. 44 [*Beiträge der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Musik* 1972/73]), and explores it in Schoenberg's Op. 15/14 as well (*op. cit.*, p. 18).

9) David Lewin, "Inversional Balance as an Organizing Force in Schoenberg's Music and Thought", *Perspectives of New Music* 6/2 (1967/68) p. 1–21.

10) David Schroeder, "Berg, Strindberg and D minor", paper given at AMS/SMT National Conference, Austin, Texas, 1989.