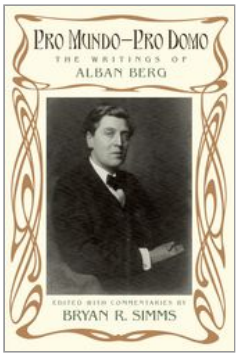

Pro Mundo - Pro Domo: The Writings of Alban Berg
Bryan R. Simms

Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199764068
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2015
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199764068.001.0001

Why Is Schoenberg’s Music So Difficult to Understand?

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DOI:10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199764068.003.0009

Abstract and Keywords

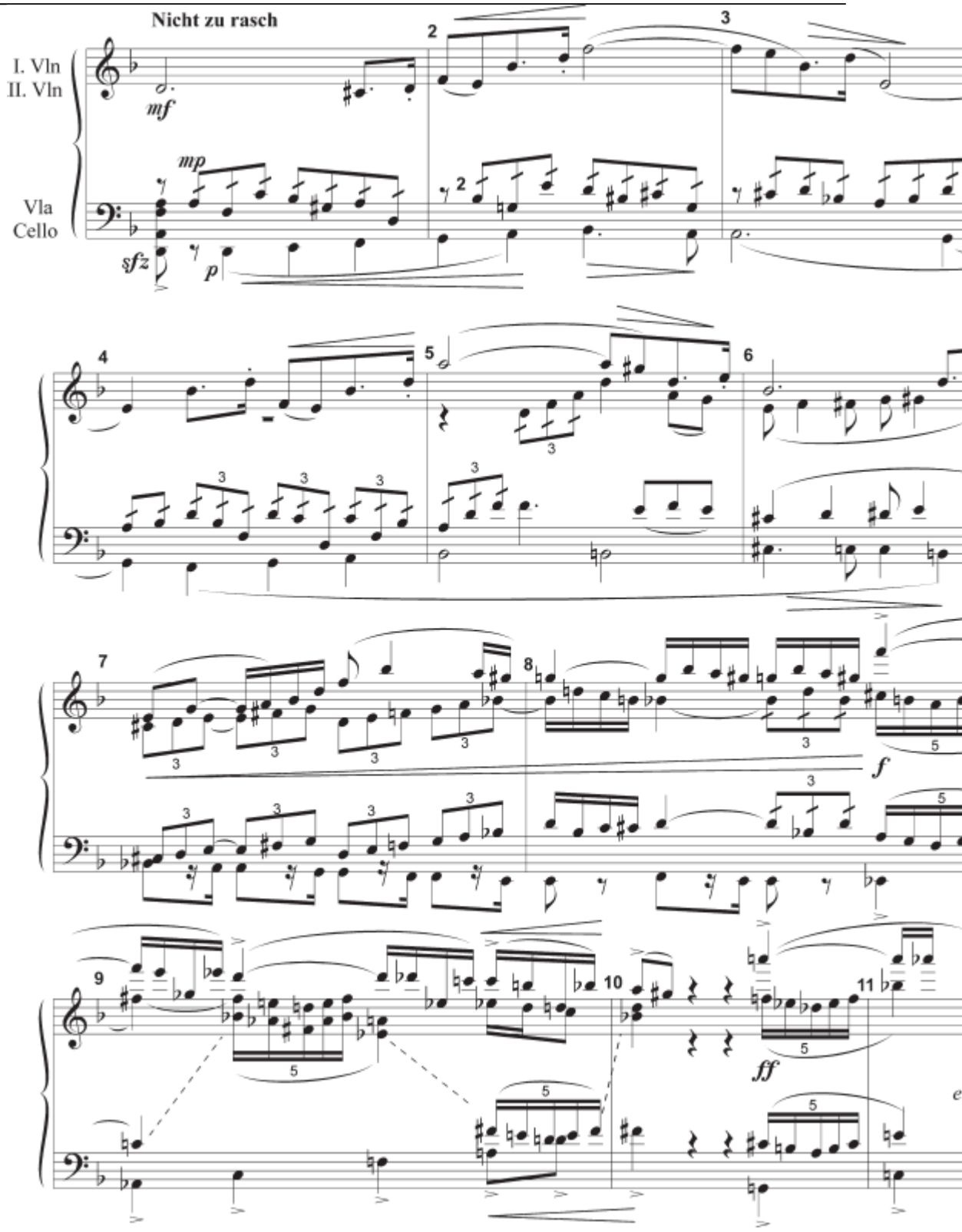
This chapter presents a translation of Berg's essay in which he analyzes the opening measures of Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 1 (1904–1905). He underscores elements of the work that deviate from the norm and pose barriers to its “understanding” and, consequently, its greater acceptance. Berg's central argument is that a richness of materials and multiplicity of innovative forms make Schoenberg's music difficult to understand. He contends that difficulty is a property of the music, not a failing, and it brings the work to a higher artistic level than other contemporary music, from which such complexity is absent.

Keywords: Alban Berg, Arnold Schoenberg, String Quartet No. 1, music

To answer this question we might be inclined to trace the ideas behind Schoenberg’s works, or to explore the intellect that resides in them, or, as is often done, to approach the music through philosophical, literary, or other such avenues. This will not be my objective. I will address solely the musical content of Schoenberg’s works, his means of compositional

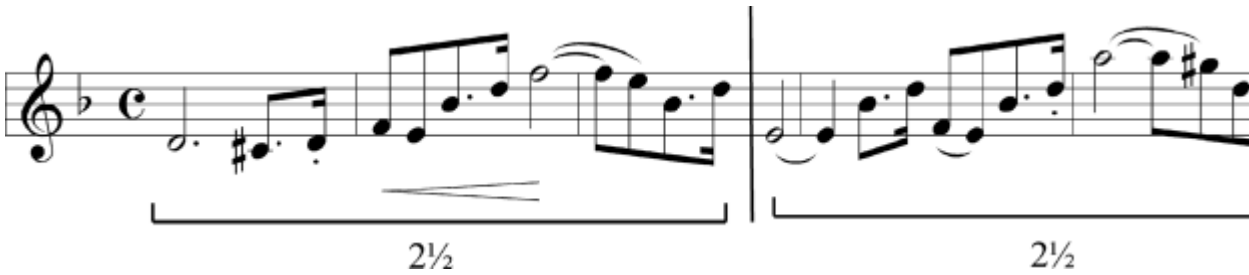
expression, which must be regarded, as can be assumed in the language of every work of art, as uniquely suited to the object that is represented. To fully understand this language and to **(p.184)** grasp its details implies, in general, being able to recognize the beginning, middle, and end of every melody, to hear the simultaneity of voices not as chance phenomena but as harmonies and harmonic progressions, and to perceive the small and large relationships and contrasts as such; in short, being able to follow a piece of music as one follows the words of a poem written in a language that one knows perfectly. He who possesses this gift has the ability to think musically, which is tantamount to understanding a work. So it seems that the question posed at the outset of this essay will be answered if we succeed in testing the intelligibility of Schoenberg’s means of compositional expression and then drawing conclusions on the extent to which this can be grasped.

I will do this on the basis of a single Example [Schoenberg’s String Quartet no. 1, op. 7, mm. 1–10], since much can be achieved by a detailed examination. I have chosen this Example at random, and there are few passages in Schoenberg’s works that would not be just as good for such an investigation.



(p.185) These ten measures that open the D Minor Quartet—twenty years after they were composed—may no longer be incomprehensible or especially difficult. But it can still be said about them that if a listener at first hearing recognizes only the main voice, follows it to the end of the ten measures, hears

this as a single melody—which it certainly is—and demands that it be as singable as the beginning of a Beethoven quartet, the listener so engaged will meet with difficulties of understanding even in the third measure. The ear preconditioned to melody whose most essential property is periodic symmetry of construction and to thematic organization that moves in units of even-numbered measures (a type of structure that with few exceptions dominated all of music for the last 150 years) questions the rightness of the opening measures of a melody that consists, contrary to expectations, of 2½-measure phrases.

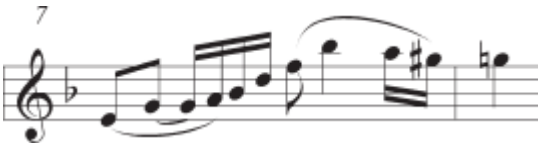


A thematic structure that avoids two- or four-measure phrases is certainly nothing new. Quite the opposite. [Ludwig] Bußler rightly said that “the very greatest masters of form (he meant Mozart and Beethoven) love free and bold constructions and do not always force themselves into the framework of even-numbered metric units.”[20] But how rarely do we find this [freedom and boldness] among the classicists (Schubert possibly excepted), and how readily was the freedom that was so evident in the eighteenth century and before forgotten in the music of the romantic era (except for Brahms’s folk-song melodies), even by Wagner and the entire New German School. Even the *Heldenleben* theme [by Richard Strauss], seemingly so bold for its time, is entirely made from two- or four-measure units, and these lead after the typical sixteen-measure opening to a literal repeat of the first phrase, which is the surest means of promoting understanding. Even the music of Mahler and Debussy—the latter a master in a different style from the same period—has melodies almost entirely made from even-numbered metric units. The sole exception (other than Schoenberg) is Reger, who preferred fairly free structures, like prose, as he put it.*[21] This is the reason for the relatively limited accessibility of his music: the only reason, let me say, because other features—themes (motivic development of long phrases) and harmonies, not to

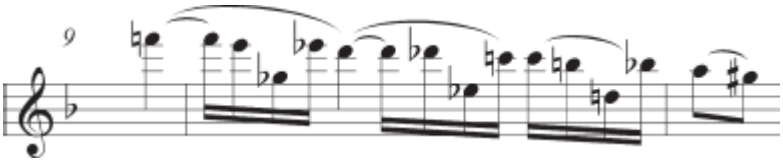
mention **(p.186)** his contrapuntal style—would not hinder the understanding of his musical language.

Given these circumstances it is clear that a music that admits asymmetry and free structure in themes—and this is perhaps the most essential feature of Schoenberg’s style—as readily as two-, four-, and eight-measure divisions will be difficult or (as in his more recent works) incomprehensible.

Such a theme—returning now to our single Example—undergoes an exceedingly rapid development that corresponds to its energetic and stormy character. The phrase that was itself scarcely graspable in rhythm [mm. 1–3] makes use of its right to variation and appears in its second repetition [mm. 7–8] in this abbreviated form.



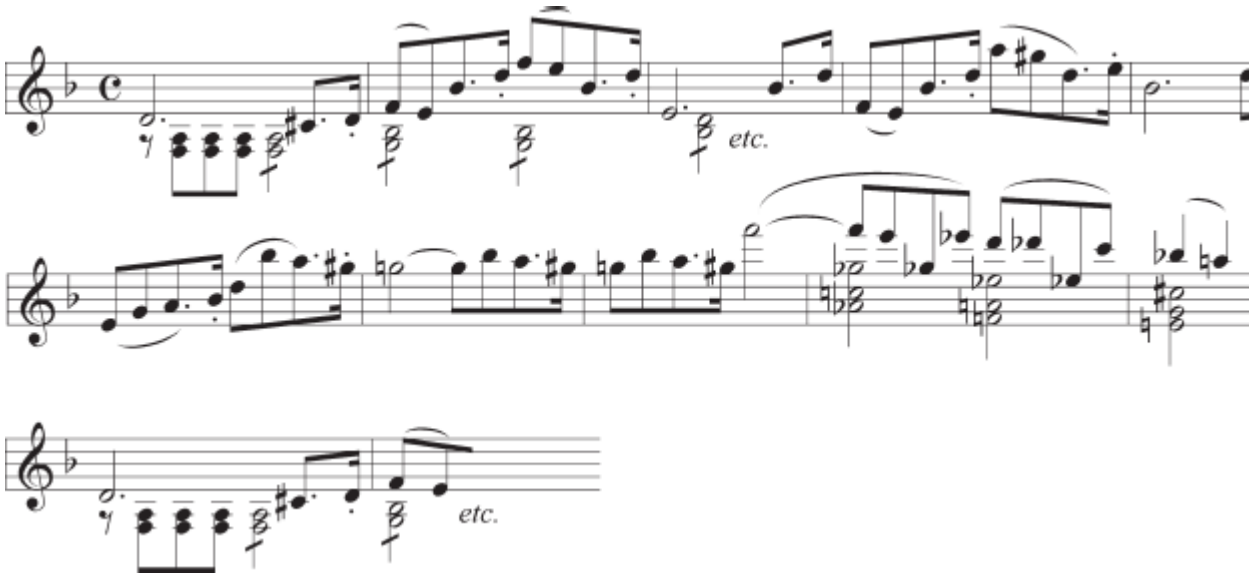
Here the listener loses the thread, even before the first melodic climax is reached two measures later.



The sixteenth-note motive here may seem to have come from the blue, but it is simply the natural melodic continuation of the main theme (obtained, to be sure, by variation). As is evident still today from performances of the Quartet, it is just this succession of chromatic leaps of the seventh that poses a nearly insurmountable barrier to the understanding of the listener, who is accustomed to a slow development of a theme or one that is created by sequences and unvaried repetitions. As these sixteenth-note figures hurry by, the listener is rarely able to relate them to a chordal basis, which certainly is present, and he loses his last point of orientation: interpreting the passage at least in terms of its approaching cadential function, or hearing it simply as a caesura or climax. It seems to him instead to be an arbitrary assemblage of “cacophonies” produced by a senseless zigzag in Violin I. He cannot possibly follow its continuation, which reveals a new and related thematic form based on the richest motivic work, which after

nineteen additional measures leads [at m. 30] to a repetition of the main theme (in E♭!).

How much easier it would be for this listener if everything that proved difficult was removed, if the beginning of the quartet had taken the form that follows—*please* ***(p.187)*** *forgive me this atrocity!*—which intentionally avoids richness of rhythmic structure, motivic variation, and thematic work and preserves only the number of measures and succession of tones of a melodic inspiration that even these mutilations cannot destroy.



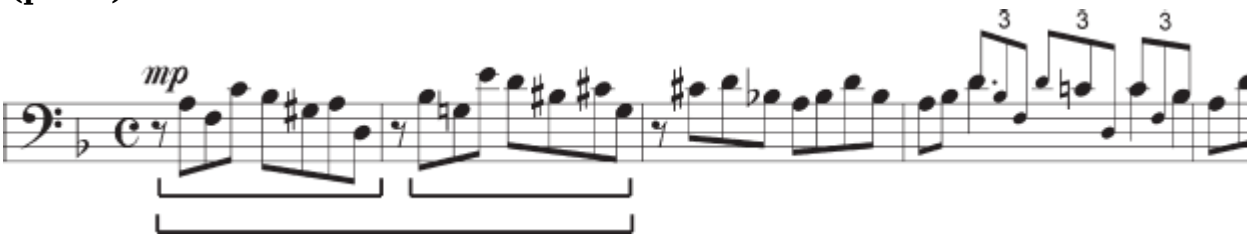
Here the asymmetry of the original is removed and the two-measure phrases so satisfying to the densest of listeners are restored; motivic and rhythmic development goes nice and slow, and every possibility for variation is avoided. Sixteenth notes, which could trip us up in a fast *alla breve* movement,[22] are entirely absent, and with them the last stumbling block—the difficulty of those chromatic leaps of the seventh presented melodically—is swept aside, leaving a motion that does not exceed eighth notes and harmonies that change every half note. And just so there will be no danger of lack of understanding for this distorted theme, it is given a literal repeat in the main key immediately after its end. And to add to a general accessibility bordering on the popular, all polyphony is avoided, replaced by the simplest conceivable accompaniment.

How different is Schoenberg! “To penetrate the psychology of his creations, the sketchbooks, which he used exclusively during the epoch of this quartet, are of the greatest value. No one who has examined them will be able to say that

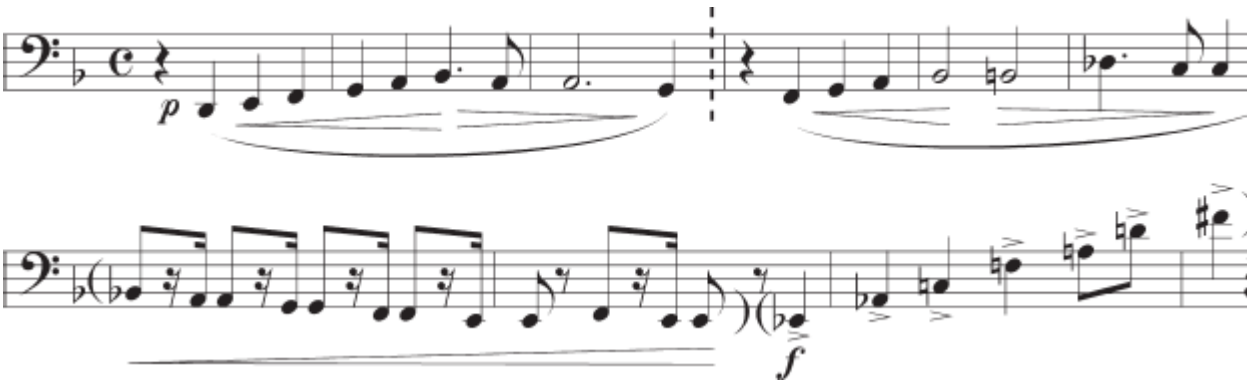
Schoenberg’s music is contrived, intellectualized, or any other such slogan used to deny the superiority of his overflowing fantasy.” Because “*every thematic idea is conceived of immediately with all of its counter themes*.”*[23]

And all these are to be heard! The eloquent melody of the middle voice at the very beginning of the quartet—

(p.188)



—might be overlooked without damage to the total impression. This melody—built exceptionally from one- or two-measure units—is counterpointed with the first five-measure phrase of the violin theme. But it is impossible to correctly grasp even the beginning of the main idea if one overlooks the expressive melody in the bass voice, which could easily happen on account of its division into two units now of three measures each.



To avoid this oversight—if one does not feel the beauty of such a theme (and of the music in general) with the heart—requires a faculty of hearing that, at the minimum, can distinguish among voices so finely diverse in character, that can recognize melodic phrases of differing lengths that drop out and reappear at different points within these first six measures, and that can follow their progress as well as understand their formation of harmonies. It also requires a faculty of hearing that receives its most difficult challenge in regard to *rhythm*,

which here and generally in Schoenberg’s music reveals an unprecedented multiplicity and variety.

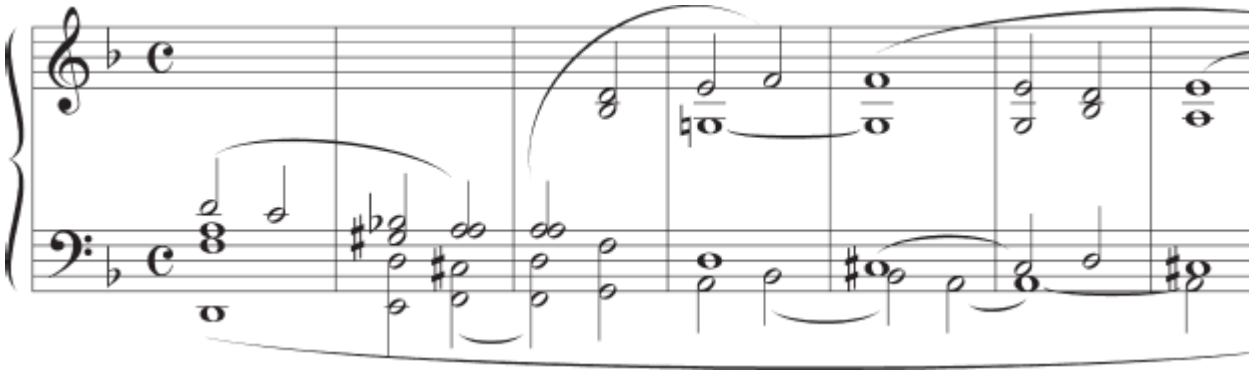
We see this in the cello line just cited. Its long-extended opening legato phrases lead in the seventh measure to a skipping dotted-eighth scale,* which two measures later is joined to a contrasting seven-note theme (E♭, A♭, C, F, A, D, F♯) in weighty quarter notes made of an upward thrusting alternation of fourths and thirds. Here two important motivic elements of the Quartet are introduced. All these rhythmic forms are brought into a contrapuntal connection with the other voices, which are developed using entirely different durational relations.

One would have to be quite deaf or quite malicious to call such music “arrhythmic” when it has such rhythmic richness and concentration in both successive and **(p.189)** simultaneous dimensions.[24] Yes, if by this word it is meant that all temporal and durational relations are “arrhythmic” when they are not derived from mechanical motions (e.g., mill wheel, railroad) or similar bodily ones (march, dance, etc.). Then I could see calling Schoenberg’s music this, but also Mozart’s and that of all the classical masters, except in their dances and movements (scherzo, rondo, etc.) borrowed from old dance forms.

Or perhaps by the term “arrhythmic” is meant the opposite of the term “rhythm” when not used as a musical concept, but instead (like “ethos” and “cosmos,” “dynamics” and “mentality” and other such clichés of our time) as a concept that could serve for anything concerning motion, whether in art or sports, philosophy or industry, world history or finance. Such a usage that does not refer to musical forms in motion but to something vague, not defined by music itself, could be applied to the recent stock-market crash just as well as to the rhythm of a piece of music. It is plainly useless to account for rhythmic phenomena that originate in musical details and spread throughout an entire work. That such a watering-down of concepts could occur—even among composers whose high standing makes it least expected—shows how difficult it is for music to be understood when it has only art as its means of measurement, rather than some “agenda.”[25]

So we come once again to the main task of my investigation: to the difficulty of understanding of Schoenberg’s music, a difficulty that is produced, as we have seen, by the beautiful abundance of its themes, counterpoint, and rhythm. It remains yet to speak of the harmonic richness of this music, of the immeasurable fullness of chords and chordal connections, which comes from a polyphony (to be discussed presently) that is extraordinary in contemporary music. This polyphony is the outcome of juxtaposing voices that are characterized especially by an unprecedented mobility of melodic line. Like everything else, this superabundance of harmonic activity is destined to be misunderstood—and just as falsely!

The strict choralelike setting below does not contain, as might be thought, the chords of an adagio unfolding in leisurely curves. No, it is simply the harmonic skeleton of the much-discussed opening of the Quartet.



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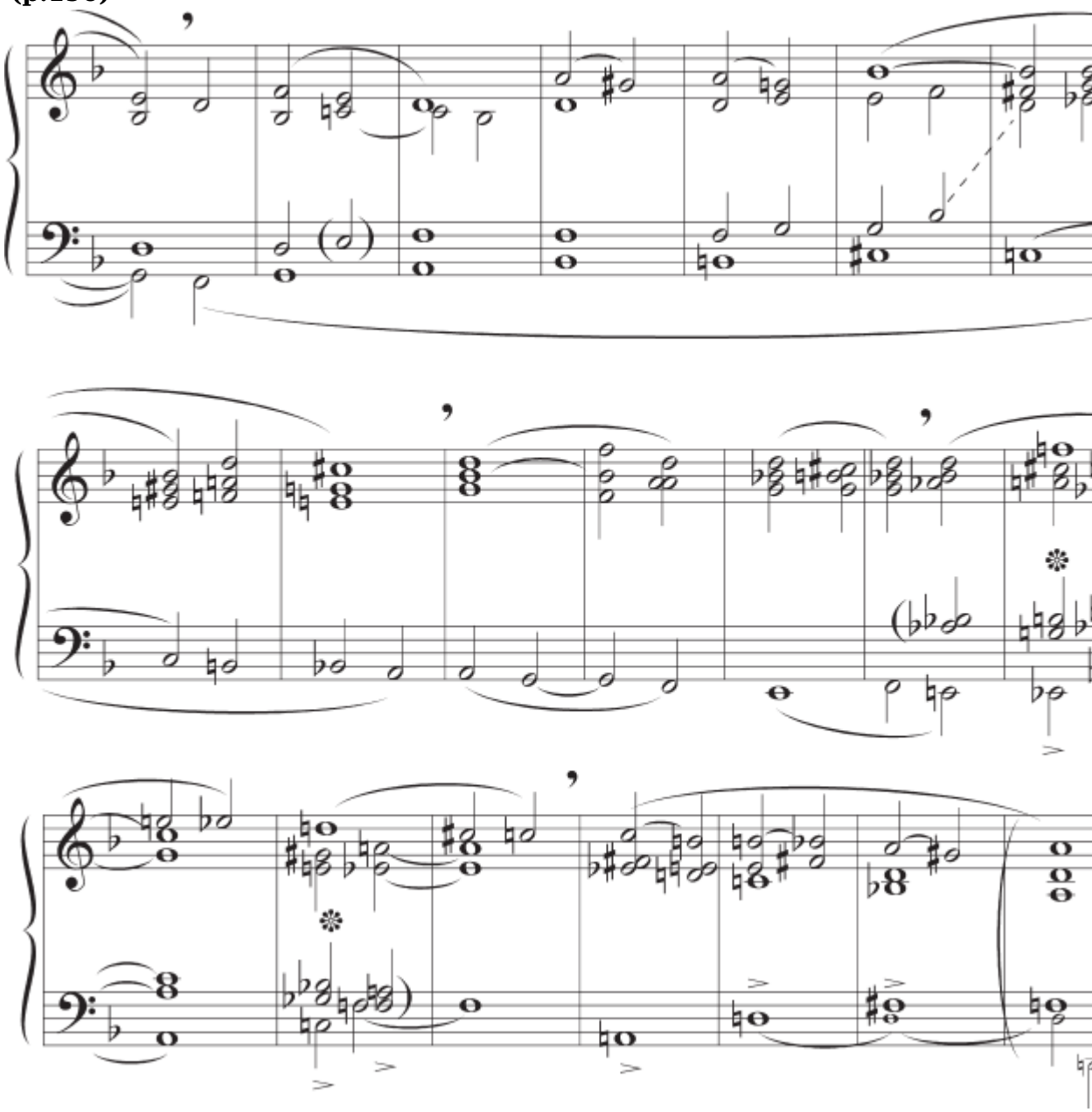


It seems inconceivable that something so simple could ever fail to be understood and be greeted by its first audiences, in search of scandal, as an orgy of dissonances. So unusually many and diverse chords lined up within the narrow space of ten measures in a quick *alla breve* time—even though logical—explains how an unsophisticated ear accustomed to the poverty of chord degrees in other contemporary music cannot take in a succession of five or more harmonies in a few seconds without finding “hypertrophy” (another cliché), when only richness and abundance prevail. This last Example should show that the makeup of chords and their connections cannot be blamed for difficulty of understanding. Nowhere in the

Quartet’s ten measures, not even in the most fleeting sixteenth note, is found a simultaneity that would need further explanation for an ear trained in the harmony of the past century. Even the two whole-tone chords (marked by * [in the musical Example above]), with their chromatic preparation and resolution, could not today offend anyone’s moral principles without making him the laughingstock of the musical world.

(p.191) So we see how incorrect it is, and always has been, to assess Schoenberg’s music by speaking of a reckless “modern” voice leading that ignores the harmonies it generates. These ten measures that I have shown can just as well be found in any part of this work. Even those passages in the development having the boldest harmony are no playground littered with unsupervised chords arising by accident. Even here nothing happens by chance, and whoever still cannot follow along must quietly take the blame himself and trust in the hearing of a master who produces these things that seem difficult to us with the same ease with which he tosses off the most complex contrapuntal exercise before the eyes of his students. And to the question of whether he “had then been really aware” of an especially difficult passage in one of his works, he answered with quip that contains a deep truth: “Yes, right when I composed it!”

A style shaped by such an unwavering musicality encompasses all compositional possibilities and is accordingly never entirely or fundamentally explainable. Not even theoretically.

The results so far of my analysis (however thorough my intentions) have far from exhausted the content of these few measures. For Example, it is still to be mentioned that its voices, created from the very beginning in invertible counterpoint, admit by the rules of polyphony a variety of manifestations in the different reprises of the main idea. And since nothing is repeated mechanically in this early work by Schoenberg, the melodies of the violin and cello are the first to change places. To represent this graphically, let the vertical order of voices in the first measures of the Quartet be:

1

2

3.

On page 5 of the study score [from m. 30] these take the order

3 (in octaves [in Violins I and II])

2

1.

On their third appearance (page 8 [m. 65]) the subsidiary voices, while strictly preserving their melodic notes, are varied. The ordering is then:

2 (variant in sixteenth notes [in Violin II])
1 (in octaves [in Violin I and Viola])
3 (whirling in eighth-note triplets [in Cello]).

(p.192) Finally, at the last reprise of the main section (page 53 [m. 909]), the main voice and counter voice, apart from the countless combinations with other themes in this work, have the order:

3 (variant in eighth-note triplets, which is different from the preceding one [in Violin I])

1 (in octaves [in Violin II and Viola])

(3, inversion in an eighth-note diminution [in Cello]).[26]

These ten initial measures and their recurrences that are varied in these ways are only a very, very small fragment of this nearly hour-long work. They can give only a general idea of the harmonic activity that thrives in thousands of measures in this music, together with an abundance of polyphony and counterpoint not heard since the time of Bach. One can calmly assert, with no charge of exaggeration, that each of its smallest phrases, each accompanimental figure is significant for the melodic development of the four voices and for their ever changing rhythm. To use a single word, each one is *thematic*. And this occurs within a single large symphonic movement, whose colossal architecture cannot even be superficially explored in the context of this study.

We should not be surprised if an ear accustomed to the music of the last century cannot follow such occurrences as here. In that music homophony almost always prevails, themes are made from symmetric two- and four-measure units, and developments and elaborations are largely unthinkable

without numerous mechanical repetitions and sequences. All of this demands a relative simplicity in harmony and rhythm. Decades of familiarity with such things make the listener of today quite incapable of understanding music of a different type. He is irritated by the revival of an unfamiliar technique and the departure from the tried-and-true, even in a single musical element that may still be allowed from the standpoint of rules. In Schoenberg’s music there is a combination, a simultaneous appearance, of properties that would be considered traits of good music if they were found individually or distributed over different periods of time.

Let us think of Bach’s polyphony, or of the often quite free thematic design, in respect to construction and rhythm, of the classicists and their forerunners. Or of the romantics, with their juxtaposition of distantly related tonal regions that still today is considered bold, or of Wagner’s new chords, produced by chromatic alteration and enharmonic change, with their obvious incorporation into tonality. Finally of Brahms’s thematic and motivic work, which often reaches to the smallest details.

It is clear that a music that brings together *all* of these resources inherited from the classicists will not only be different from contemporary music from which such a combination—as I will show—is absent. Despite its characteristics recognized as traits of all good music, despite its pronounced richness in all musical areas—or, **(p.193)** better, precisely because of this—such music will be as difficult to understand as Schoenberg’s music in fact is.

I will be criticized in this study for having proved something that is in no need of proof—that the D Minor Quartet is difficult—when it is actually a “tonal” work that is no longer a problem, and, quite the opposite, generally recognized and thereby understood. Even if that goes too far, I admit that the question addressed in this article would seem to be answered only if what I showed in a few bars in the minor mode is also demonstrated in at least one Example of so-called atonal music. But to do so would raise questions not only of difficulty, but also (as will probably have been seen in my analysis) of proving that things are right and proper in this music despite much that will be found quite difficult to understand. Things are right and proper, to be sure, things demonstrably of the highest art! Of course this is easier to show with an Example

that still rests on major and minor tonality, but, in spite of that, having the additional advantage that the music in its day caused as much agitation as “atonal” music does today. And from the moment when *I noticed that this [agitation] was as evident with the former music as with the latter*, I would need only to extend* what I said about these ten Quartet measures to some chosen passage in his later and most recent works. *And the agitation is just as great*, not only with the works of Schoenberg—the “father of the atonal concept,” as he is generally known—but also with those of the majority of the musical universe. So the question of the title would appear to be answered here too and evidence produced that things—those of the highest art—are right and proper in this music. We shall see that *it is not so much so-called atonality*—an expression much on the lips of contemporaries—*that creates difficulty of understanding*, but instead the other structures of Schoenberg’s music: the fullness of artistic means that are achieved and generally applied also in this harmonic style, the drawing together of all existing compositional resources from the music of past centuries, and, in a word, its immeasurable richness.

Here too we find the same diversity in harmony and the same multiple chord degrees marking cadences. Here too melody suited to such harmonies, melody that puts to the boldest use the resources of the twelve tones. Here too the asymmetry and free construction of themes, with their untiring motivic work. Here too the art of variation that reaches in this music to themes as well as to their harmonization, counterpoint, and rhythm. Here too a polyphony that spreads over an entire work and an unparalleled contrapuntal technique. Here too, finally, the multiplicity and differentiation of rhythm. Let it be said again that in addition to its own laws, this rhythm is also subjected to those of variation, thematic development, counterpoint, **(p.194)** and polyphony. Here too an art of construction is attained that proves how wrong it is to speak of any “dissolved rhythm” in Schoenberg’s music.

Viewed from this universal standpoint, other contemporary composers—even those whose harmonic language has broken with the domination of the triad—appear fundamentally different. Of course, in their music we may find the artistic means just enumerated, but we never find them, as with

Schoenberg, combined in the work of any one personality. They are instead always divided up among different factions, schools, age groups, nations, and their representatives.

One composer will adopt a polyphonic style but reduce thematic development and the art of variation to a bare minimum. Another will use bold harmonies, not shrinking from any combination of tones, but then write a single melodic line that scarcely exceeds a simple homophony in two- and four-measure phrases. For some, “atonality” consists in placing false basses beneath primitive harmonic phrases. Others use two or more (major or minor) keys simultaneously, in either one of which the remaining musical procedures dwindle under a frightful poverty of invention. Music that is distinguished by a richly moving melody and free thematic construction will suffer from inertia in its harmony, marked by a poverty of chord degrees, long-sustained chords, endless pedal points, and repetitive harmonic progressions. We can generalize that music of this type could scarcely get by without its mechanical repetitions and primitive sequences, something seen especially in rhythm. This borders on monotony, as it uses its many changes of meter and displacements of beat to disguise scantiness as formal richness. Its rhythms—stiff, hammering, dancing, bouncing—more often than not are the only point of cohesion in an otherwise trivial music. The representatives of this compositional technique are those who are praised as “strong rhythmicists.”

The orientation toward these more or less fixed principles, this exaggerated one-sidedness that approaches mannerism, this self-satisfaction or (to put it nicely) being “modern but not extreme” promotes the accessibility and the relative popularity of this “atonal” and otherwise “progressively oriented” music. Even if it places one or a few difficulties before the listener, it usually does not deviate in any other respect from the conventional and is often intentionally “primitive,” so that owing precisely to these negative qualities it can please the ear of the musically less gifted, and, in a word, make for easy appeal. All the more so since the authors of such music, to be pure in style, need be conscious only of their own type of modernity and feel no necessity to accept the consequences of a *combination* of all resources.

Let me repeat that there exists an inescapable necessity to accept even the most far-reaching consequences of a self-chosen musical universality, and this is uniquely found in Schoenberg’s compositions. And this, I believe, points to the final and perhaps strongest reason for its difficulty of understanding. This noble necessity is observed with a sovereignty found, I would say, only in the genius. It supports everything I have said about Schoenberg’s great expertise, which is beyond that of any contemporary, and leads to the assumption—no, to the certainty—that here **(p.195)** we have the work of a master. When all the “classics of our time” are in the past, Schoenberg will be one of the few who will be called a classic for all times. Not only has he “drawn from German musical culture the final, boldest conclusions,” as Adolf Weißmann aptly put it in his book *Die Musik in der Weltkrise*,[27] he has also brought them further than those who sought new paths without reason, and thus, consciously or not, negated to some degree the art of this musical culture. So today, on Schoenberg’s fiftieth birthday, one need be no prophet to say that through the works that he has already sent forth into the world, the supremacy of his own art seems assured—as well as that of German music for the next fifty years.

Notes:

Alban Berg, “Warum ist Schönbergs Musik so schwer verständlich?,” *Musikblätter des Anbruch* 6 (1924): 329–41. Translated by Bryan R. Simms © 2013.

(*) An expression that Schoenberg has also used, independently from Reger, for his own musical language.

(*) Egon Wellesz, *Arnold Schönberg* [Leipzig: E. P. Tal, 1921), 26–27; English translation by William Kerridge (London: Dent, 1925), 19–20].

(*) When it is recognized that the sixth measure is a variation of the third and that the seventh measure is a variation of the previous measure, the feeling for musical coherence (without which music would be senseless) becomes obvious.

(*) For Example in the Woodwind Quintet [op. 26], about which I dare to speak without knowing a note. Its composition, which is nearing completion, was begun in this summer of 1924

(what a coincidence!), in the same place [Traunsee] where exactly twenty years earlier the D Minor Quartet was begun.

(20.) Ludwig Bußler, *Musikalische Formenlehre* (Berlin: Carl Habel, 1878): 54. Bußler’s Examples of uneven metric units—which he explains as extensions or condensations of regular units—come mainly from works by Mozart.

(21.) Berg’s source for this assertion was probably an article by Egon Wellesz, “Analytische Studie über Max Regers ‘Romantische Suite,’” *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 4 (1921–22): 106–15. Here Wellesz describes the *Romantic Suite* as “asymmetrical and a good illustration of a remark attributed to Reger, that he writes musical prose” (p. 107). See Susanne Popp, “Zur musikalischen Prosa bei Reger und Schönberg,” Festschrift für Ottmar Schreiber, Reger-Studien 1 (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1978), 59–77.

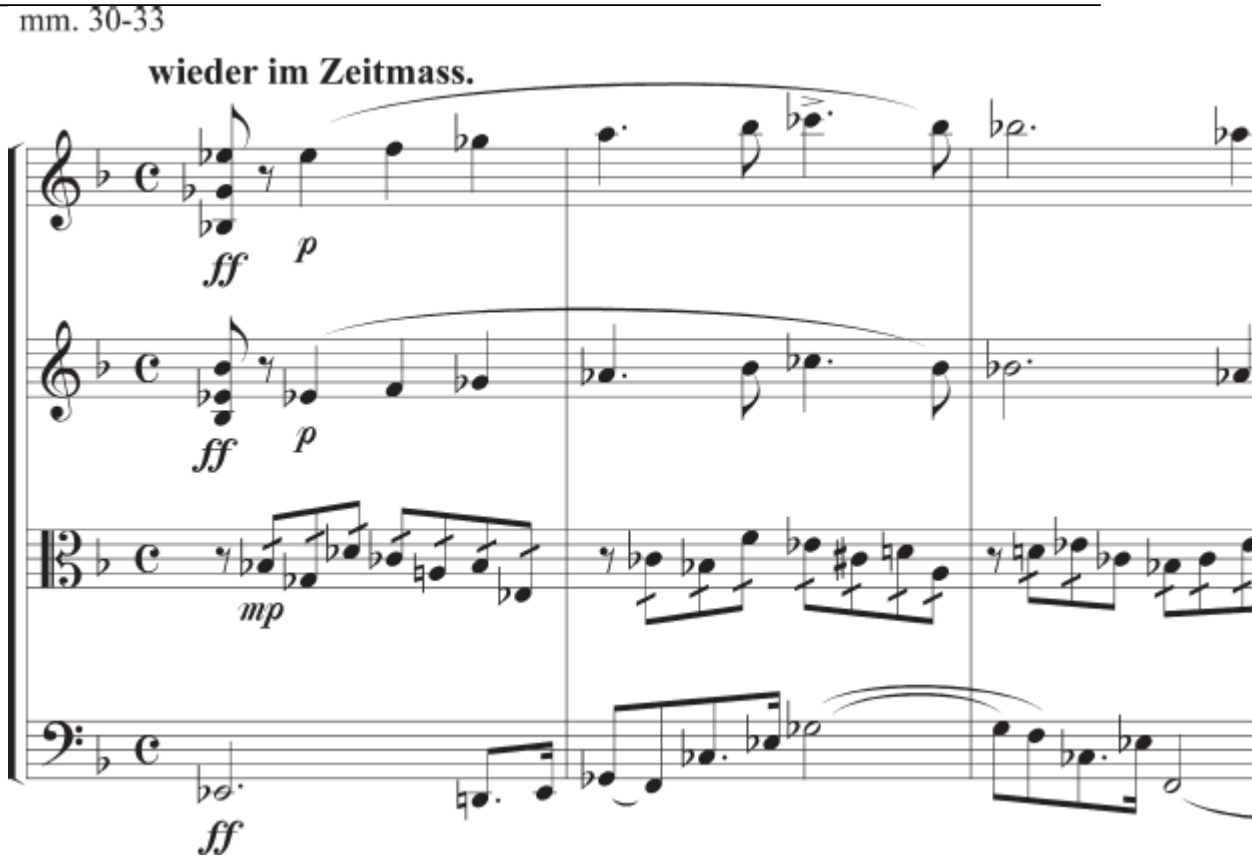
(22.) The opening of Schoenberg’s Quartet is in 4/4 time and marked “not too fast,” not, as Berg says, a fast *alla breve*.

(23.) Berg’s quotation from Wellesz’s text is not exact. The original reads: “To penetrate the psychology of his creations, the sketchbooks, which he used exclusively during the epoch of the First and Second Quartets, the Chamber Symphony, and the songs and sketches from this time, are of the greatest value. No one who has examined them will be able to say that Schoenberg’s music is contrived, intellectualized, or any other such slogan used to deny the superiority of his overflowing fantasy. Every thematic idea is conceived of immediately with all of its counter themes.”

(24.) Here Berg probably refers to a review of Schoenberg’s *Pelleas und Melisande* by Julius Korngold (“Festaufführungen Wiener Musik,” *Neue freie Presse*, 5 June 1920) in which Korngold characterized *Pelleas* as “arrhythmic mood music.” Schoenberg’s music had been earlier been described as *arhythmisch* in Arnold Schering’s lecture-essay “Die expressionistische Bewegung in der Musik,” in *Einführung in die Kunst der Gegenwart* (Leipzig: E. A. Seemann, 1919), 139–61.

(25.) Werner Grünzweig suggests that Berg is referring here mainly to Hans Pfitzner, the composer who “waters down” concepts. Werner Grünzweig, *Ahnung und Wissen, Geist und Form: Alban Berg als Musikschriftsteller und Analytiker der Musik Arnold Schönbergs*, ABS 5 (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2000), 108.

(26.) Here are the beginnings of the three passages that Berg cites:



(27.) Berg refers to Adolf Weißmann’s *Die Musik in der Weltkrise* (Stuttgart and Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1922); however, the quotation that he gives is not in this book, but in Weißmann’s article “Strawinsky,” *Musikblätter des Anbruch* (June–July 1924): 228–34. Berg’s confusion probably arose on account of a footnote in Weißmann’s article saying that the material on Stravinsky would appear in the forthcoming English edition of *Die Musik in der Weltkrise* (*The Problems of Modern Music*, trans. M. M. Bozman [London: J. M. Dent, 1925]), although it does not appear there either. See the Commentary for more on Weißmann’s article and its relation to this essay.