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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Dreyer, Martin. 1974-1975. 'Pierrot's Voice: New Monody or Old Prosody?'. *Contact*, 10. pp. 15-21. ISSN 0308-5066.

Pierrot's voice: new monody or old prosody?

Why do musical analysts invariably concern themselves with scores rather than sounds - using their eyes rather than their ears? Before Pierrot, Schenkerian scrutiny has its worth: a melodic line can be neatly slotted into its harmonic context, contrapuntal ingenuities admired as inevitable pieces in a musical jig-saw, and the recognition of formal outlines provide enormous satisfaction to the listener who likes to have his intellectual preconceptions confirmed by musical sounds. For the ordinary listener, however, this type of analysis simply will not do: it bears no relevance to what he can actually hear.

Pierrot threw, and still throws, audiences off balance by its treatment of the voice. The listener, however musically adroit, needs aural signposts. But Sprechgesang, atonally accompanied moreover, provides few of these: we tend to understand less through very familiarity with the mechanics of speech than, for example, with those of the piano. We react as negatively to Sprechgesang as did Darwin's French beans to the playing of his trombone.

The majority of us use a comparatively small range of intonation in ordinary speech, concentrating most of our expression within the bottom third of the voice and covering a pitch-range of roughly a perfect fifth. It seems likely that this is considerably less than was common in Shakespeare's day, a consequence of the separation of written word from spoken sound hastened by the advent of print technology. There may indeed have been a permanent decline in the physiological potential of our voices over the past few centuries as a result.

Pierrot calls for a speaker to cover a range of nearly two and a half octaves (from E flat below middle C to G sharp on top of the treble staff), four times the normal speaking compass. This would present little difficulty if the vocal line were to be sung, but since (with a few exceptions) singing is to be avoided - as Schoenberg specifically states in his preface - the performer has a serious problem. The need to sustain the speaking line with enough resonance to fill a hall, over up to five instruments, without resorting to the type of head-tone characteristic of song, can easily mean that upper notes, particularly above C an octave above middle C, degenerate into a meaningless shriek. Listen to an inexperienced performer at the start of Der Dandy (No.3) or in the upper reaches of Heimweh (No.15), and this will become abundantly clear (see Ex. 1). The problem of quantity can be easily mastered by the subtle use of amplification, but producing a sustained line with the kind of extreme vocal tension implicit in speaking in the upper ranges is a virtual impossibility. This, far from 'liberating' the human voice, as Hans Keller claims, shackles it into impotence.

Then what was Schoenberg really after? Exactly what type of vocal declamation is required? The preface tells us that

Ex. 1 No. 3, Der Dandy, bars 1-5

Rasch ($\text{♩} = 76$)

a 'tonic' function, and the G sharp above (157 occurrences), its 'dominant'. These two are the nodes around which the vocal line revolves, and it can hardly be an accident that they form a tritone. No other note occurs more than 130 times, most considerably less. In addition, a third, upper nodal point is formed by E flat, which regularly functions as either a climactic note in a vocal phrase or as springboard for upward or downward leaps. Even those with an abhorrence of mathematical computation as a relevant approach to musical analysis cannot deny the obvious significance of this for the speaker: she must find the relative D and G sharp in her own voice and be able to return to them at will. The D does in fact correspond, within a tone or two on either side, to the pitch-level at which most of us (with octave variance according to sex) normally express ourselves, and the G sharp, with similar slight variations, to the tonal level we may use for ordinary stress in speech, along the lines of tonic accent in Gregorian chant. By extension, the upper E flat will be reserved for strong additional emphasis and anything above that for purely frenetic expression. A breakdown of this note-count according to the three sections of the work shows a relatively low median pitch-range over Part I, an even distribution of levels in Part II, and a relatively high tessitura in Part III - a build-up of intensity that reflects the increasingly grotesque images assailing Pierrot's path.

There are other prosodic features which suggest more than a casual approach to the sounds of language on Schoenberg's part. Words spoken at ordinary speed in everyday speech are largely guessed at by listeners according to context - if only because most of us have an all-embracing concentration span of only a few seconds. The word-distortion that results from the distension of vowels - an inevitable process in concert hall performance - puts a premium on the use of syllabic text-setting, if a modicum of intelligibility is to be maintained. Consequently Schoenberg is restrained in his use of melismata: over the whole work, there are some 75 examples, and nearly half of these occur in Parodie (No. 17). This poem is also notable for the incidence of rests within words and in the middle of phrases at other than punctuation points, a technique not unknown in Bach recitative, but which betrays Schoenberg's attention to enunciatory detail.

Ex. 2 No. 17, Parodie, bars 6-10

The musical notation shows two staves of music. The first staff covers bars 6-10 and includes the lyrics: "sitzt die Du-en-na-mur-melnd". The second staff continues the melody with lyrics: "im-ro-ten Rök-chen da-". The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings such as p and pp . There are several instances of short rests within the phrases, marked with 'x' above the notes.

There are in fact examples of such (usually) short rests for juncture - intentional pause or hesitation - in all but four of the settings. The predominance of simple time-signatures is in line with German being, like English, a stress-timed language - its stressed syllables tend to be isochronous - but this is counterbalanced by the abundant use (in all but

five of the settings) of triplets, which 'flatten out' the rhythmic pulse and move the vocal line closer to the realm of song than speech.

Schoenberg's use of pitch-movement shows him at great pains to obtain an exact effect, despite his own apparently casual attitude to language in Style and Idea. There he professed indifference to texts in Schubert Lieder he knew well:

"I had completely understood the Schubert songs, together with their poems, from the music alone, and the poems of Stefan George from their sound alone..."(3)

The actual written text was not important. The key lay in its sounds. Despite the immediate rise or fall rule noted earlier, there are still some 50 examples of repeated notes in Pierrot. Whereas the ratio of falling to rising intervals over the whole work is about 3:2, this increases noticeably with minor and major seconds: there are twice as many falling as rising, and in fact nearly 20% of all intervals used in the work are falling minor seconds. Apart from what this reveals of Schoenberg's attitude to speech intonation, along with the high incidence of augmented and diminished intervals where simpler forms would have served equally well, we may deduce that Schoenberg was indeed attempting an accuracy of vocal line unattainable with the notational means at his disposal. Even simple speech inflexions, let alone Pierrot's tortuous vocal neuroses, are far too complex to be contained within a system of notation based on equal temperament and devised for the 'harmonious' interaction of executants. Merely from the standpoint of pitch-movement, a simple semitone is much too wide an interval to describe accurately the minute intonation changes of ordinary speech, as Harry Partch and other experimenters have found. We may remember that Schoenberg himself abandoned the five-line staff for the speaker in his Ode to Napoleon, Op. 41 (1942) in favour of a single line - though with ledger lines he notates well over an octave compass even then. In the Ode, the effect of this reduced scoring is to leave the reciter a great deal of freedom in every aspect of his delivery except rhythm.

For purposes of brief historical comparison, we may take 1600 as the date from which composers of the modern era became seriously concerned with the transfer of vernacular patterns into music drama. The Florentines' guiding credo was a return to the word, and yet from the moment that a paying public was admitted to deride or admire, the word was to fight a losing battle with the voice - until this century. In this sense, then, the music of Pierrot restores the humanity to the human voice that had been refined out of it over the preceding three centuries.

Schoenberg's real antecedents, however, are to be found much earlier. The written language of the Greeks contained clear indicators of prosodic features in the spoken word: acute and grave accents for rising or falling intonation patterns and rough and smooth 'breathings' for aspirated or un-aspirated initial vowels. It was these very features that virga and punctum in Gregorian chant were intended to convey. These signs and their neumatic derivatives presupposed an oral tradition and conveyed only relative pitch-relationships. Standardisation of pitch did not occur until after the invention of the staff. Seen in this context, Schoenberg's inevitably

relative pitch notation for the Sprechstimme brings the wheel round full circle - he is both a new monodist and a very old one. Plus ça change...?

Amid the general welter of superlatives provoked by Schoenberg's centenary canonisation, it is difficult to maintain a sense of perspective. It is now possible to see, however, that Pierrot's is not merely a new voice rising from the ashes of a perverted monody, a renaissance in musical treatment of language unheard since Monteverdi. Paradoxically, despite Schoenberg's minute attention to prosodic features of speech, his primary concern is a rediscovery of long-neglected human sounds - as purely musical sounds. In a vital sense, Pierrot's journey represents the nocturnal writhings of Western music emerging in a new dawn of self-discovery in this century.

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Notes

- (1) From the preface to the score, as quoted in Arnold Schönberg: the formative years (2nd edition of the English translation, London 1971), p. 139.
- (2) My underlining.
- (3) Arnold Schoenberg, Style and Idea (London 1951), pp. 4-5.

Glossary

Intonation - speech melody as it functions in sentences (as opposed to single words). Not to be confused with the usual musical meanings of singing/playing in tune or Gregorian recitation notes.

Pause - an aspect of continuity, or lack of it, in speech. Unfilled pauses, notatable in music only by rests, may result from taking a breath, difficulty in enunciation, or hesitation, intentional or otherwise.

Prosody - an umbrella term covering vocal effects superimposed on vocabulary and grammar in speech. Major prosodic features are pitch, dynamic level, duration and silence.

Rhythmicity - intersyllabic variations in speed of utterance. It covers such musical features as legato, staccato and glissando which, in speech, tend to affect rhythm.

Selective Bibliography

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Discography

De Gaetani, Jan; Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, cond. Weisberg - Nonesuch 71251.

Stiedry-Wagner, Erika; Kolisch, Auber, Steuermann, Posella, Bloch, cond. Schoenberg - CBS 61442 (Mono).

Thomas, Mary; Fires of London, cond. Maxwell Davies - Unicorn RHS 319.

These three excellent recordings are essential listening, providing a contrast between two different present-day performances and Schoenberg's own 1941 version. The following are added for the sake of completeness:

Beardslee, Bethany; ensemble, cond. Craft + four other works by Schoenberg - Columbia M2S-679 (2 records; U.S. import).

Escribano, Maria; ensemble, cond. Cerha - Turnabout 343155.

Howland, Alice; ensemble, cond. Zipper - Concert-Disc 232 (U.S. import).

Laine, Cleo; Nash Ensemble, cond. Howarth + Ives songs - RCA Victor LRL1 5058 (in English).

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