MUSIC IN TRANSITION: A STUDY OF TONAL EXPANSION AND ATONALITY 1900-1920, by Jim Samson
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The number of books dealing with the music of the early part of this century is relatively small: indeed, large histories excepted, only two suggest themselves — George Perle's *Serial Composition and Atonality*[1] and Allen Forte's *The Structure of Atonal Music,*[2] both of which cover part of Samson's field from widely differing viewpoints. The title should, I think, be read in conjunction with a sentence from the Preface describing the scope of the book. 'In selecting a small number of composers for detailed analytical study I was guided less by the considerations of quality ... than by the light these composers shed upon the central development.' The eccentricity of one of Samson's choices and the resulting effect on the balance of the book will be considered later in this review.

Samson divides his book into three parts:
(1) 'Tonality: its Expansion and Reinterpretation': tonality in the 19th century, late Liszt, Busoni, Debussy, Bartók and Stravinsky;
(2) 'Paths to Atonality': early Scriabin, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern and Szymanowski;
(3) 'Early Atonality': a further consideration of those composers covered in Part Two under the headings 'Atonality and tradition', '"Free" atonality' and 'Rappel à l'ordre'.

Included in the second part is a more general historical-geographical survey relating the more detailed discussions to the two decades as a whole, and in the third part a brief 'attempt to clarify some of the difficulties of terminology which arise in a study of tonal expansion and atonality'. The plentiful examples include 'harmonic abstracts' in addition to quotations from the literature. This prompts me to wonder for whom the book is intended: would a student with access to the range of music covered, and the ability to cope with the reductions, find any great value in the rather cursory chronological section?

The central theme of the book as set out in the Preface is 'the breakdown of traditional tonal functions and the subsequent rejection, by some composers at least, of the principle underlying those functions'. It is worth establishing exactly what is implied here by 'traditional tonal functions'. 'The central harmonic unit of classical tonality is the major triad, its fundamental harmonic progression I——V——I. These represent a vertical and horizontal expression of an acoustical phenomenon in nature.' (pp.2, 223) Having thus sketched out the basis of tonality in unambiguously Schenkerian terms, it is surprising to find that Samson neither adheres to this definition, nor places Schoenberg, for example, correctly in relation to it. A clear statement of the distinction between Schoenbergian tonality (as set out in his *Harmonielehre)* and that defined above is found in Schenker's *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik.*

> Since a mechanistic approach had already existed due to the departure from live voice leading in Rameau's principles, one mechanical entity led to another ... gradually, the seventh, whether a passing tone or a suspension ... and the ninth, whether a suspension or an auxiliary note, were set down as chord constituents, all of which led to the assumption of seventh and ninth chords. Once on this path, there was no hesitation in recognising eleventh and thirteenth chords, until finally today ... any superposition of tones ... is explained as including distant partials of the overtone series and is likewise taken for a chord.[3]

Samson correctly points out (p. 100) that the *Harmonielehre* belongs to the 'Rameau-Riemann line of harmonic theory' without apparently understanding the corollary of this statement: that the distinction between passing and harmonic notes has been swept away and with it the principal source of motion in *truly* tonal music. Tonality has been deprived of its ability to function alone as the 'central point of reference' (p. 2). It is significant that composers at this time sought to increase the role played in their music by other potentially compensating techniques, e.g. the contrapuntal intricacies of Reger (shown to have no meaning in true tonal terms by Schenker)[4] and the adaptation of Brahms's obsessive thematic integration (the latter was regarded by Schenker as 'the last master of the German musical art').[5] As Schoenberg remarked: 'Renouncement of the unifying power of the tonic still leaves all the other factors in operation.' He lists, as the other integrative qualities, 'rhythms, motifs and phrases'.[6] What remains is a fundamentally triadic language in which the relationships between the triads do not function in respect of an overall tonality, but which require to be defined anew with every composition. Music has moved from a tonally *exclusive* to a tonally *inclusive* language. It is at once apparent that the term 'tonal expansion' is a complete misnomer: we are here dealing with a *contraction* in the role of tonality.

The distinction proposed here is not simply semantic; rather it fundamentally alters our perception of post-Brahms music, dispensing with the fruitless disservice we do such music by assuming the ramifications of tonality instead of hearing the actual hierarchies set up within a given work. The process of evolution, whereby the role of the triad is gradually reduced within a language that is already 'atonal' in the sense usually employed, is clearly perceptible. None of this emerges from the book. Instead one is confronted with such meaningless terms as 'neo-tonality' and pointless deliberations on the tonality or otherwise of the second of Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces,* Op. 16 or Bartok's Second Violin Sonata. A major cause of the difficulties encountered by theorists of this period is their inability to countenance tonality as capable of a high degree of chromaticism (witness Samson's remarks on Chopin's Mazurka, Op. 68, No. 4 on pp. 3-4) coupled with a refusal to hear triads as anything other than tonal. In a recently completed thesis, Robert Hanson has demonstrated how the triadic climax in bar 13 of Webern's song Op. 3, No. 5 is the logical outcome of the non-tonal material. He goes on to say that 'if this is tonal music then it is very bad tonal music'.[7]

I shall illustrate the type of analysis employed in this book by examining Samson's discussion of Schoenberg's Second String Quartet, but before undertaking this I ought to point out the serious error in the harmonic abstract of the second of Berg's *Four Songs,* Op, 2 (Ex. 34(ii), p. 122). Samson's reduction shows 'a grouping of seven ascending and five descending fourths' outlining 'the tritone B flat—E'. The first seven fourths are correct, articulated by the minim plus crotchet harmonic rhythm. However, the chord on the downbeat of bar 4 comprises the same notes as the first chord of bar 1 and an overlapping cycle of fourths beginning on D ensues, retaining the harmonic rhythm (now filled out with whole-tones) and continuing to the B flat on the third beat of bar 7 (note the change of harmonic rhythm in this bar and the use of thematic compression). The smooth semitonal progression of the upper parts suggests that the initial sonority is transposed by this interval rather than the fourth favoured by Samson, and this is borne out by the resumption of this downward movement at bar 13, continuing from the pitch level reached at the onset of the middle section (bar 9). There is a wealth of sublety in this song that Samson has not begun to explore. There is also an accidental missing from the first chord (a) in the reduction of the fourth of the Op. 2 songs (Ex. 34(iv)): the C should be C sharp and the designation (a) deleted.

Whatever one's view of its tonality, Schoenberg's Second Quartet is a work of crucial importance to his development and Samson rightly devotes to this work a major part of his discussion of Schoenberg's 'pre-atonal' music. He summarises the first movement as follows:

> The thematic groups of its exposition section are short and self-contained, and Schoenberg makes little attempt to develop them extensively in the early stages of the work ... For this reason ... a working-out section is more essential and makes for a more effective contrast with the outer sections in this work than in either Op. 7 or Op. 9. ... The section (bars 90-159) begins with a 'false repeat' ... before turning to an exhaustive contrapuntal exploitation of the principal thematic material, in particular that of the second subject group. At bar 160 the central F sharp tonality returns and there is a condensed recapitulation in which the order of thematic presentation differs from that in the exposition. (p. 105)

A glance at the score reveals alarming differences: the first theme is already extended sequentially in bar 10 and overlaps the second idea with its characteristic falling semitone A—G sharp. The latter also figures prominently in the new theme (D—C sharp, G—F sharp, F sharp—E sharp etc. in the viola and all the cello part at bar 12ff). In bar 24 the second violin plays a five-note figure that develops via bar 50 into the new idea that finally emerges at bar 58 (first violin). In fact this exposition might well be described as an example of thematic interpenetration. Contrast Schoenberg with Samson concerning the development section: 'In this quartet a disinclination against the traditional Durchführung ... can ... be observed' and speaking of the third movement: 'I designed this movement to present the elaborations (Durchführungen) I had restricted or omitted in the first and second movements respectively'.[8]

Much more is now known of Schoenberg's personal circumstances during the composition of the work and this makes it difficult to understand why Samson sees the quotation of the Viennese street song in the Scherzo as indicative 'of the acute creative crisis engendered by the tonal suppression of the quartet's final movement' (p. 2), particularly when on p. 229 he cites the very book that revealed the link between the quartet and Mathilde Schoenberg's involvement with Gerstl.[9] There is an interesting parallel here with the recently discovered 'programme' for Berg's *Lyric Suite.*[10] Both works are quartets featuring vocal settings (albeit suppressed in the Berg) and cryptographic references, and both were written at times of marital crisis. Such coincidences (or otherwise)

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would not have been ignored by Berg.

It is only with the last movement that we reach an extensive attempt to demonstrate the 'tonal-harmonic structure of the movement' (p. 110) in two and a half pages of text plus a full page harmonic abstract. Here I felt that we were really dealing with the notes, although I suspect that the text was edited at this point as the figure (p) in the reduction is never discussed. Lack of bar numbers makes the correlation of abstract and score rather tiresome (this criticism can be levelled at the book as a whole), a chore further hampered by mistakes in the musical text. On the second system, bass clef, the second C sharp—G sharp should read C—G sharp (bar 14, viola) and the figure (x) should comprise only the notes A—G sharp—D; third system, treble clef, (p) should read D sharp—C sharp—G sharp—F sharp: fourth system, bass clef, the final note of (a) should be F sharp (bar 76, cello); fifth system, treble clef, should refer to Introduction (iii) (compare bars 10, 83) and bass clef, (p) is three statements of the figure F—B flat—C—E flat, D flat—G flat—A flat—C flat, A—D—E—G, connected by whole-tones as the example shows; treble and bass clefs, the final semiquaver figure should be marked (a) and its last note amended to D (see bar 97, second violin); sixth system, bass clef, IIii should surely read IIi as both harmony and melody (second violin) are identical with bar 52ff. Several important motivic occurrences are omitted without explanation (most curious of all the first appearance of (p) at bars 21-23 to the words 'Ich fuhle Luft') and I found the reduction of the third section of the Introduction rather arbitrary. Why is the cello fifth G—D (bar 13) omitted when it forms part of a fifths progression (bars 13-15)? In linking the C sharp and F sharp triads (bars 16,25) as part of a tonal progression, Samson omits to mention the structural role played by the notes C sharp and D, particularly in the low cello register (e.g. bars 25-29, 38-39, 79-83, 151), an emphasis which calls to mind bars 89-92 of the Scherzo. The idea is also used in transposition at bars 30-31, 146ff. Despite these reservations, I found this by far the most interesting of the reductions even if I was left with the impression of many apparently unrelated fragments rather than the unity expressed by the music itself.

Despite his protestations in the Preface regarding the criteria governing the selection of composers for discussion, I feel that Samson's enthusiasm for Szymanowski in particular has left his book seriously unbalanced in favour of the 'minor figures'. Perhaps because of what I see as a totally unjustified division of composers into 'neo-tonalists' and 'atonalists', this imbalance is inevitable, for it debars such major figures as Bartók and Stravinsky from the latter two-thirds of the book. Consideration of Szymanowski extends to 1932, the final section (pp. 200-207) being an 'extended parenthesis' devoted exclusively to works composed beyond the two-decade scope of the book. This fact, taken in conjunction with the comparative brevity of the text and the number of important works barely mentioned or omitted altogether — *Pierrot Lunaire, The Rite of Spring, Wozzeck,* Sibelius's Seventh Symphony — gives some idea of the bias involved. I am not denying the right of an author to discuss minor figures, rather the propriety of allowing them to assume a wholly disproportionate scale in a book concerned with an historical movement projected by far more important composers.

NOTES:

[1] 4th, revised, edition, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977.
[2] New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.
[3] Sylvan Kalib, 'Thirteen essays from the three yearbooks *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik* by Heinrich Schenker: an annotated translation' (Northwestern University, 1973), Vol. II, p. 504. This is obtainable from University Microfilms, No. 73/30626.
[4] A negative example: Max Reger, *Variations and Fugue on a theme of J. S. Bach,* Op. 81, see Schenker/Kalib op. cit., pp. 451-490.
[5] Heinrich Schenker, *Beethoven: Neunte Sinfonie* (Vienna, 1912), dedication.
[6] Arnold Schoenberg, 'My Evolution', *Style and Idea* (2nd, revised and enlarged, edition, London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 87.
[7] Robert Hanson, *Anton Webern's Atonal Style* (unpublished thesis, University of Southampton, 1976), p. 12.
[8] Ursula von Rauchhaupt (ed.), *Schoenberg, Berg, Webern — the String Quartets: A Documentary Study* (Hamburg: DG, 1971), pp. 43, 47.
[9] H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Schönberg: Leben, Umwelt, Werke* (Zurich: Atlantis-Verlag, 1974). This has just been published by Calder and Boyars in an English translation by Humphrey Searle and will be reviewed in the next issue of *Contact.*
[10] See George Perle, 'The Secret Programme of the Lyric Suite', *The Musical Times,* Vol 118, Nos. 1614-1616 (August-October 1977).