1 Musical idea and symmetrical ideal

Arnold Schoenberg's response to Rudolf Kolisch's analysis of his Third String Quartet reveals something important about the composer's perspective on structure in his serial works. Kolisch had apparently sent Schoenberg a row-count of some or all of the quartet, to which the composer replied: "But do you think one's any better off for knowing it? . . . The only sort of analysis there can be any question of for me is one that throws the idea into relief and shows how it is presented and worked out."[1]

One of the most basic motivations for what follows in my survey of Schoenberg's twelve-tone music is a desire to do what the composer was asking – that is, show how the "musical idea" in the nine pieces and movements I will analyze is "presented and worked out." To do this, I will interpret musical idea as an analytic framework: a process spanning the whole piece in which some sort of opposition or conflict between musical elements is presented at the beginning, elaborated, and deepened through the course of the piece, and resolved at or near the end. The musical elements and relationships that participate in such a process will be described using the terminology of late twentieth-century twelve-tone theory for the most part (but observations about tonal references will work their way into the discussion from time to time). In this way, Schoenberg's Idea will serve as a scaffold for the kinds of analytical observations that are typically made about his music under categories like "invariance," "combinatoriality," "harmonic area," "multidimensional set presentation," or "isomorphic partitioning," in an attempt to show how such observations contribute to the logic of the whole. The analyses in this book are thus somewhat unique in the English-language literature on Schoenberg's music, in that they endeavor to give a complete account of a piece (or scene in the case of *Moses und Aron*) from beginning to end, not presenting the details measure by measure necessarily, but accounting for the processes that characterize every section of a piece. I firmly believe there is no other way to account for "musical idea" as Schoenberg seems to be characterizing it.

In a number of the pieces I will analyze, the conflict that sets the Idea in motion is between a musical "ideal" and some musical reality that provides an imperfect image of that ideal. (Schoenberg seems in this way to demonstrate his debt to Arthur Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*, a book that was

[1] Arnold Schoenberg, *Letters*, selected and ed. Erwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Faber and Faber, 1964; reprinted, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965; reprinted, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 164–65.

contained in his library and that he apparently knew well.)[2] Typically, what marks the ideal as such is pitch, pitch-class, and/or intervallic symmetry in the horizontal and vertical dimensions. Examples of oppositions between ideal and real musical shapes will be found throughout my book, starting with the first piece we will discuss, the Prelude from Op. 25. The Prelude begins with only a partial image of an ideal horizontal pitch-symmetrical structure, but after obscuring that image further, Schoenberg achieves it completely near the piece's end. And one of the last pieces we will consider, the opera *Moses und Aron*, begins with its ideal structure clearly expressed, a partition of a pair of rows that creates horizontal and vertical pitch and interval symmetry on a number of levels. This partition accompanies God's call to Moses to prophesy, and it is a reasonable assertion that the multiple symmetries represent God's unattainable perfection.[3] Moses and Aaron later have leitmotivic partitions associated with each of them which capture some of God's symmetries, but not others (and the symmetries that Moses captures are different from the ones Aaron does). The conflict between ideal shape and the subsequent intervallic shapes associated with the title characters then gives rise to other conflicts between partitions (as Aaron makes the Golden Calf, for example); in other words, the opposition is elaborated. Unlike that of the Prelude Op. 25, however, *Moses und Aron*'s central conflict between God's perfection and the brothers' inability to understand or communicate Him is never resolved: the Idea remains incomplete.

Now, it is important for me to assure my reader at the outset that my attempts to "throw the idea into relief" throughout this book should not be interpreted as detailed descriptions of the composer's thought processes as he wrote these works. At best, I can give a vague, blurry outline of what may have been going on; and in certain places, I will venture, tentatively, to use his sketches to illustrate parts of that outline. My response to the inevitable question of the composer's intention with respect to the representations of "musical idea" I find in these works is the same as my response to Ethan Haimo's well-known denial of the notion that "Schoenberg composed with pitch-class sets."[4] I believe that Schoenberg very well could have been thinking about the concept we call set class in atonal works like Op. 11, No. 1, but he would most likely have called it by a different name, if he used any name at all; maybe he thought of the various sets in a class as "close or remote motive transformations." In the same way, the manifestations of musical idea through

[2] See Pamela C. White, "Schoenberg and Schopenhauer," *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 8/1 (June 1984): 42, 45–47.

[3] This assertion is similar, but not identical, to ones made by David Lewin and Michael Cherlin; see Lewin, "*Moses und Aron*: Some General Remarks, and Analytic Notes for Act I, Scene 1," *Perspectives of New Music* 6/1 (Fall–Winter 1967): 1–17, and Cherlin, *Schoenberg's Musical Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 241–42, 278–86.

[4] Haimo's challenge to the idea that Schoenberg composed with set classes can be found in "Atonality, Analysis and the Intentional Fallacy," *Music Theory Spectrum* 18/2 (Fall 1996): 167–99.

vertical and horizontal symmetry, combinatoriality, trichord exchange, collectional invariance, tonal references, and so on that I will illustrate in this book *could* have been part of his mental process as he composed the pieces I am studying, but he would have called many of these relationships by different names. In the end, it is impossible to know all the details of Schoenberg's thought process in composing his twelve-tone works, but it is reasonably certain, given his expressed desire that his analytic interpreters focus on the "musical idea," that an analysis using musical idea as a framework would comprehend his music in a worthwhile manner.

I also need to assure my reader that I do not consider my analytical readings of these nine pieces to be the only correct ones, which will finally bring all the debates about Schoenberg's music to an end, because they alone "throw the idea into relief." I am trying to avoid Richard Taruskin's "vice of criticism and scholarship" that assumes that "that the meaning of artworks is fully vested in them by their creators, and is simply 'there' to be decoded by a specially-gifted interpreter."[5] Rather, my explanations of "how [the Idea] is presented and worked out" should be understood as suggestions to hearers and readers of this music concerning one way they can make sense of it, and invitations to them to respond with their own ways of describing the Idea. For Schoenberg's music, David Lewin's assertions in "Music Theory, Phenomenology, and Modes of Perception" seem correct to me: that different hearers can create coherence for themselves from the same piece in different ways, and that one's viewpoint on "the way things hang together" can even change in the middle of a hearing of the piece.[6] This same viewpoint was expressed succinctly by Schoenberg himself in the essay "Gustav Mahler," responding to published criticism of Mahler's music:

> In every case where human understanding tries to abstract from divine works the laws according to which they are constructed, it turns out that we find only laws which characterize our cognition through thinking and our power of imagination. We are moving in a circle. We always see and recognize only ourselves, only, at most, our own being, as often as we think we are describing the essence of a thing outside ourselves.[7]

Despite Schoenberg's warning and my disclaimer, I will indeed make statements of the sort "Schoenberg did X" or "the piece does Y" in this book, but I encourage the reader to understand these statements as actually saying "(It is reasonable, in my opinion, to conceive that) the piece does Y" or, even better, "(To imagine that)

[5] Richard Taruskin, introduction to *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. xiii.

[6] David Lewin, "Music Theory, Phenomenology, and Modes of Perception," *Music Perception* 3/4 (Summer 1986): 327–92.

[7] Arnold Schoenberg, "Gustav Mahler" (1912, 1948), in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, rev. paperback edn., ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 452.

Schoenberg did X (helps me to create for myself an interesting way of hearing the piece as hanging together)." After all, too many references to the fact that I am explaining *my* understandings of coherence in these pieces rather than revealing "what's simply there" would cause this book to grow even larger than its already unwieldy size.

As I have been speaking of multiple, valid analytical perspectives, I would be remiss not to mention an approach to Schoenberg's twelve-tone music that has become very popular in recent years, but which contrasts sharply with my usual *modus operandi* of illustrating conflict, elaboration, and resolution using mostly twelve-tone properties and elements. I am referring to the habit of Richard Kurth, Michael Cherlin, and others to concentrate on references to functional tonal chords and progressions that are brought out by certain segments of Schoenberg's twelve-tone textures. As a result of their perspective and the fragmentary, incomplete nature of such tonal references, these authors tend to understand his music as disjointed and characterized by unresolved conflict and confusion. In a number of places, I will argue that synthesis in the realm of twelve-tone relationships supersedes such fragmentation, but there are others among my analyses where the tonal-reference viewpoint is quite useful: the conflicts between references to key areas throughout a piece highlight and make more audible the problems in the twelve-tone realm.

Finally, my last disclaimer before moving on to an explanation of Schoenberg's concept and a survey of its ancestors in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German thought has to do with the issue of the perceptibility of the Idea, just mentioned. After all, I have encouraged my reader to consider my analyses as one way to "make sense" of Schoenberg's music, and that implies a listening strategy. But at least some listeners will be strongly tempted to ask the question, after reading my work and going back to hear the music again, "Can I really *hear* (perceive, feel) what he has labeled as a problem or solution in that way?"

I have to admit that, in some pieces, the large narrative arc is indeed difficult to perceive completely and immediately. My analysis in Chapter 6 of the first movement of the Fourth String Quartet serves as an example: it is hard to *feel* the union of the opposing motives <D, C♯, A> and <G, A♭, C> within a single row form, P_6, in the recapitulation's second theme as a "solution," especially for a listener trained to be sensitive to patterns caused by dissonance and consonance in tonal music (as most of us are). And, yet, *understanding* them as such pays dividends: it helps the listener provide himself or herself with a large, overarching framework within which the more perceptible details of the piece can be understood as logical sequences. (In this way, the "musical idea" has a similar function to the Schenkerian *Ursatz*.) For example, the first part of the first theme in the Fourth String Quartet, mm. 1–6, features <D, C♯, A> along with a thicker texture and a quadruple heard

meter (for the most part). It can be understood as setting up a motivic opposition with the second part of the first theme, mm. 6–9, where <G, A♭, C> appears together with a thinner texture and a triple heard meter. Grasping the first nine measures as an opposition between motives helps the listener to grasp the obvious contrasts between heard meter and texture in that passage as a logical sequence within a larger context.

But there are pieces, mostly shorter ones, where the large framework, the Idea, does present itself to the listener as something that can be felt. The Prelude Op. 25 that I mentioned above provides an excellent example. In it, a symmetrical pitch-class pattern is hinted at, gradually obscured, approximated using a different pattern, and finally achieved. The last two stages of this process are clearly marked by a frightening increase in dynamics, texture, and register in mm. 17–19 for the approximation, followed by a sudden decrease in all three parameters to a "peaceful" level during the appearance of the symmetrical pattern, mm. 20–21. It is difficult *not* to perceive the latter two measures as a resolution of some sort, unless the pianist fails to emphasize the dynamic and registral contrasts, or rushes headlong through mm. 20–21 (as often happens).

Schoenberg's musical idea

Since the existence of a "musical idea" as an overarching framework in any Schoenberg twelve-tone work is the central hypothesis of my book, I should begin by not only trying to give a better explanation of Schoenberg's conception of Idea as described in his theoretical works, but also outlining some of its musical and philosophical antecedents, as well as modern writings that have been influenced by it (and that have in turn influenced my approach). This will give the reader an aesthetic, historical, and theoretical context for the analyses in the following chapters, which manifest Idea in a variety of ways. Throughout his career, Schoenberg struggled to formulate and describe his own precepts according to which a traditional tonal composition could manifest a "musical idea," and in some cases suggested that the same principles should also be applicable to his atonal and serial music. Listed below are five quotations from the composer pertaining to different aspects of the concept.

1. In its most common meaning, the term idea is used as a synonym for theme, melody, phrase, or motive. I myself consider the totality of a piece as the *idea*: the idea which its creator wanted to present. But because of the lack of better terms I am forced to define the term idea in the following manner: Every tone which is added to a beginning tone makes the meaning of that tone doubtful. If, for instance, G follows after C, the ear may not be sure whether this expresses C major or G major, or even F major or E minor; and the addition of other tones may or may

not clarify this problem. In this manner there is produced a state of unrest, of imbalance which grows throughout most of the piece, and is enforced further by similar functions of the rhythm. The method by which balance is restored seems to me the real *idea* of the composition.[8]

2. Through the connection of tones of different pitch, duration, and stress (intensity???), an unrest comes into being: a state of rest is placed in question through a contrast.

   From this unrest a motion proceeds, which after the attainment of a climax will again lead to a state of rest or to a new (new kind of) consolidation that is equivalent to a state of rest.

   If only a single tone is struck, it awakens the belief that it represents a tonic. Every subsequent tone undermines this tonal feeling, and this is one kind of unrest. a) tonal, b) harmonic.

   Such is also the case with duration and stress. A single attack or several attacks equidistant from one another and of the same intensity would be perceived as a state of rest or as monotony.

   But by changing (?) the time span between (??) tones and the intensities of their attacks unrest arises again. The unrest can be increased still further through the dynamics (and through other means of performance) . . .

   This unrest is expressed almost always already in the motive, but certainly in the gestalt.

   In the theme, however, the problem of unrest that is present in the motive or the fundamental gestalt achieves formulation. This means that as the theme presents a number of transformations (variations) of the motive, in each of which the problem is present but always in a different manner, the tonic is continually contradicted anew – and yet, through rounding off and through unification an "apparent state of rest" is established, beneath which the unrest continues.[9]

3. Every succession of tones produces unrest, conflict, problems. One single tone is not problematic because the ear defines it as a tonic, a point of repose. Every added tone makes this determination questionable. Every musical form can be considered as an attempt to treat this unrest either by halting or limiting it, or by solving the problem. A melody re-establishes repose through balance. A theme solves the problem by carrying out its consequences. The unrest in a melody need not reach below the surface, while the problem of a theme may penetrate to the profoundest depths.[10]

[8] Arnold Schoenberg, "New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea" (1946), in *Style and Idea* (1984), pp. 122–23.

[9] Arnold Schoenberg, *The Musical Idea and the Logic, Technique, and Art of its Presentation* (1934–36), ed., trans. and commentary by Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 103–07. Parenthetical question marks and underlines are Schoenberg's own.

[10] Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, 2nd edn., ed. Gerald Strang and Leonard Stein (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 101.

4. [Each composition] raises a question, puts up a problem, which in the course of the piece has to be answered, resolved, carried through. It has to be carried through many contradictory situations; it has to be developed by drawing consequences from what it postulates ... and all this might lead to a conclusion, a *pronunciamento*.[11]

5. I say that we are obviously as nature around us is, as the cosmos is. So that is also how our music is. But then our music must also be as we are (if two magnitudes both equal a third . . .). But then from our nature alone I can deduce how our music is (bolder men than I would say, "how the cosmos is!"). Here, however, it is always possible for me to keep humanity as near or as far off as my perceptual needs demand – I can inspect it from in front, and from behind, from right or left, above or below, without or within; if I find there is no other way of getting to know it from within, I can even dissect it. In the case of the cosmos all this would really be very hard to manage, if not impossible, and no success in cosmic dissection will ever earn it any particular respect![12]

These quotations depict a multi-leveled concept, working back from the piece of music itself to something more metaphysical that the piece "represents," which has to do with the true nature of the human being and ultimately with the nature of the cosmos.[13] As a tonal musical entity, the Idea is, essentially, a compositional dialectic (the outline of which is given to the composer as a sudden inspiration [*Einfall*], and then he works out the details as he composes). Its three principal characteristics are: (1) a specific succession of pitches and intervals associated with a specific rhythm, which Schoenberg often called a *Grundgestalt* (thesis); (2) problems concerning the uncertainty of appropriate tonal or metrical contexts for features of the *Grundgestalt* such as pitch or harmonic or duration successions (antithesis); and (3) a design that considers alternative solutions for these problems and poses new problems, and ultimately decides on one solution to each problem posed, while reinforcing the piece's "home" key and meter (synthesis). The problems produce unrest and imbalance and the ultimate solutions restore balance within the overall design, which is the whole piece. Though it plays a similar role as large framework, this musical design is something substantially different from Schenker's *Ursatz*, and from recent adaptations of Schenker for

[11] Schoenberg, "My Subject: Beauty and Logic in Music" (MS, late 1940s), cited by Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff in their commentary to *The Musical Idea*, p. 63.

[12] Arnold Schoenberg, "Hauer's Theories" (1923), in *Style and Idea* (1984), pp. 209–10.

[13] Charlotte Cross's article "Three Levels of Idea in Schoenberg's Thought and Writings," *Current Musicology* 30 (1980): 24–36, is a much more thorough description of Schoenberg's multi-leveled concept. She takes up, in turn, the notions of idea as piece of music, as description of the composer's nature, and as revelation about the cosmos and its Creator – while at the same time discussing the philosophical antecedents of the more metaphysical levels.

Schoenberg's music, in that it constitutes a diachronic process from beginning to end of the piece (more accurately, a master process incorporating numerous subprocesses), instead of a synchronic structure that guarantees coherence from back to front.

The main purpose of this book is to show that a parallel musical design underlies most of the twelve-tone pieces we will consider.[14] As I suggested above, many times the "problem" and its elaboration in a twelve-tone piece stem from the differences between a symmetrical musical ideal and passages in the piece that only approximate it, as in the case of the Prelude Op. 25 and *Moses und Aron*. Other pieces we will look at that have similar designs are the Piano Piece Op. 33a and the third *Satire* Op. 28. In some of the other twelve-tone pieces we will study, the initial opposition involves identical or different partitions of different rows that create what seem like completely irreconcilable elements (set classes of different sizes that are subsets of different referential collections, for instance). The solution in these cases typically involves a demonstration of how all the conflicting segments and partitions can be traced back to the original source row. The third movement of the Woodwind Quintet Op. 26 falls into this latter category, as does the opening movement of the Fourth String Quartet Op. 37. The last piece we will look at, the String Trio Op. 45, involves a conflict between different source row forms for primacy, which is only completely resolved at the piece's end. Finally, as I mentioned above, fragmentary references to tonal chords and progressions often participate in the conflict and elaboration stages of an Idea, but are not usually part of the ultimate solution (the final cadence of the third *Satire* Op. 28 is an exception to this rule).

Now, the characterization of Schoenberg's twelve-tone music as having to do with problem, elaboration, and solution that I have just presented might seem to be something of a stretch for readers familiar with Schoenberg's unpublished writings. Specifically, it seems inconsistent with certain comments he made in an early

[14] Much of my work in the past ten years has been devoted to showing how the music of Schoenberg's middle, "atonal" period also manifests musical ideas in the sense we are discussing. See "The 'Musical Idea' and Global Coherence in Schoenberg's Atonal and Serial Music," *Intégral* 14–15 (2000–01): 209–64, which describes a parallel process in "Seraphita" from the Four Orchestral Songs Op. 22; "The 'Musical Idea' and Motivic Structure in Schoenberg's Op. 11, No. 1," in Jack Boss and Bruce Quaglia (eds.), *Musical Currents from the Left Coast* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 256–81, which discusses one in the named Piano Piece; and "The 'Musical Idea' and the Basic Image in an Atonal Song and Recitation of Arnold Schoenberg," *Gamut* (Online Journal of the Music Theory Society of the Mid-Atlantic) 2/1 (2009): 223–66, which considers a manifestation of Idea that parallels Stefan George's text in "Als wir hinter dem beblümten Tore," song No. 11 from *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* Op. 15.

manuscript (November 12, 1925) on the subject of "representing a musical idea" tonally and as a twelve-tone piece:

> Compositions executed tonally in every sense proceed so as to bring every occurring tone into a direct or indirect relationship to the fundamental tone, and their technique tries to express this relationship so that doubt about what the tone relates to can never last for an extended period.
>
> This is not only the case for the individual tone, but also all tone-progressions are designed in this way, as well as all chords and chord-progressions.
>
> Composition with twelve tones related only to one another (incorrectly called atonal composition) *presupposes the knowledge of these relationships*, does not perceive in them a problem still to be solved and worked out, and in this sense works with entire complexes, similar to the way in which language works with comprehensive concepts whose range and meaning are assumed generally to be known [italics Schoenberg's].[15]

From this quotation, one could doubt whether a serial piece could represent a dialectical Idea at all, in the sense of posing, elaborating, and solving a problem. Could the "twelve-tone musical idea" in Schoenberg's thinking mean only a bare assertion that all harmonic as well as melodic materials need to be derived from the tone row? I believe it is important to notice that Schoenberg mentions only the *pitches* (or "tones") of a twelve-tone series in this quotation, claiming that none of *them* are more foreign than any other (because of the lack of a referential tonic). There are other planes on which musical elements can be opposed to one another within a twelve-tone row, various intervallic planes, and Schoenberg's serial music itself indicates that he may well have been aware of such locations for the representation of an Idea, as this book will illustrate. Moreover, another passage from the same November 1925 manuscript admits that even though there is no *inherent* problem regarding the relationships of tones to each other in a twelve-tone piece, a listener certainly might ask questions about how certain elements or passages at or near the beginning relate to the source row, which need to be answered as the piece progresses:

> One such technique is offered by "composition with twelve tones related only to one another" (in short, called "composition with twelve tones"). With this technique, the relationship of the twelve tones is set once and for all for a whole movement, indeed for a whole piece; and no other relationships can come in, except for those given by the *Grundgestalt*. *The course of the piece then serves to bring nearer to the*

[15] "Zu: Darstellung d. Gedankens" (November 12, 1925), cited and discussed in *The Musical Idea*, pp. 14 and 416.

> *understanding all those things that could not be detected on the first hearing, through frequent repetition and diverse representations* [italics mine].[16]

I am proposing, then, that Schoenberg was finding ways to create, elaborate, and solve problems between symmetrical and non-symmetrical pitch-class and interval shapes, between different kinds of interval, set class, referential collection, and partition, in the 1920s just as he was asserting that no pitch in a twelve-tone context is any more "problematic" than any other (but that a twelve-tone piece could pose and solve problems nonetheless, at least from the listener's standpoint). He then continued to develop and refine these new kinds of problems and solutions as his career progressed.

Musical idea before Schoenberg

The first of the five Schoenberg quotations above alludes to the pre-history (before Schoenberg, that is) of the term "musical idea," which can be rendered in German as *musikalische Gedanke* or *musikalische Idee*. As he puts it, "In its most common meaning, the term idea is used as a synonym for theme, melody, phrase, or motive." Instances of the term's use for segments of a musical work smaller than the whole can be traced back to the Baroque and Classical tradition of understanding and describing a musical work in rhetorical terms, and in the nineteenth century, conceptions of "musical idea" began to be modeled after contemporary philosophical definitions of the term "Idea," while still retaining many of the features they borrowed from rhetoric. Thus I will survey the works of a number of musicians before Schoenberg who use the term, taking note of the influence of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century German philosophy on some of those music theorists and music scholars.

The terms corresponding to "musical idea" make their first appearance in writings on music in the eighteenth century, when composer-teachers and aestheticians sought to train their students to understand the logic of whole movements in the works of the masters and to create their own complete movements using the terminology of rhetoric, which was a central part of European education at that time.[17] According to rhetoric, the creation of an effective oration, one that

[16] "Zu: Darstellung d. Gedankens" (November 12, 1925), cited in Rudolf Stephan, "Der musikalische Gedanke bei Schönberg," *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 37/10 (October 1982): 534. The English translation is my own.

[17] Of course, the application of rhetoric to the composition and analysis of music predates the eighteenth century; as Patrick McCreless reports in the "Rhetoric" chapter of *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, it began in the mid-sixteenth century and flowered in Germany in the seventeenth century as the *Figurenlehre* of Burmeister and Bernhard. But the eighteenth century