



Arnold Schoenberg's Piano Suite, Op. 25

Morgan has recently been awarded the Andrew Mellon Foundation and Volkswagen Stiftung "Postdoctoral Fellowships in the Humanities at Universities in Germany and the United States." Her project is titled: Theodor Adorno's Narrative of Alban Berg and His Music: Source Study and Analysis.

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Introduction

Arnold Schoenberg's Piano Suite, Op. 25, composed between 1921 and 1923 and published in 1925, a pillar of twentieth-century music. In this work Schoenberg's quest to reclaim musical order, described further in the accompanying [survey of twentieth-century music](#), through the codification of freely atonal harmonic language into a "method of composing with twelve tones related only to each other," is made manifest. In this piece, as well as others from the same era, Schoenberg combined his new, systematized techniques for twelve-tone composition with forms traditionally associated with tonal music to put forth a new musical language. The Suite at once offers a revolutionary approach to organizing pitches, while, at the same time advocating tradition.

Although the Piano Suite might be the most famous – and often relayed as one of the first fully twelve-tone – pieces, it is one among many dodecaphonic works that Schoenberg started in 1920-1921. After Schoenberg composed the Prelude of the Suite and began working on the Intermezzo in July 1921, he completed the Intermezzo and the remaining movements between February and March 1923, while, at the same time he was also working on sections of *Klavierstücke*, Op. 23. This is not to say that the finished works should be considered as fragmentary, or even that each movement be considered self-contained, but rather to draw attention to the fact that Schoenberg was actively working on ways to implement his new compositional techniques, and that the development of ideas took place over many years, particularly from 1920–1925. At the same time Schoenberg and others were developing concepts of composition with twelve tones, he was also an active teacher and conductor. Between 1920 and 1923 Schoenberg saw great interest in his own works throughout Europe. While later generations associate Schoenberg with the invention of dodecaphony, during the early to mid-1920s multiple approaches aside from Schoenberg's own version co-existed.

In light of pairing of new (twelve-tone techniques) and old (traditionally tonal forms), it is important to examine how Schoenberg made the musical materials meaningful without tonal hierarchies. It is also important to examine the significance of this work and its techniques, for Schoenberg's students, later composers, and later compositional techniques.

Combining New and Old

Each movement of the Piano Suite illustrates some of Schoenberg's strategies for composition with twelve tones. "Schoenberg's twelve-tone method," as John Covach states, "has come to define the classic-twelve tone practice, with its ordered series and forty-eight row forms based on transposition, inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion."¹ A twelve-tone row orders all

¹ John Covach, "Twelve-Tone Theory," in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 609.

twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, while each pitch only occurs once. The source row for this piece is notated below (P-0) in Example 1. While Schoenberg's prime row generated every version (prime, inversion, retrograde, retrograde inversion) of the row and every transposition available, he chose to structure the whole piece on two transpositions of each version of the row, using only eight of the options, as shown below in Example 1 (P-0, P-6, I-0, I-6, R-0, and R-6). The construction of the prime row and the various transpositions, inversions, retrogrades, and retrograde inversions are all pre-compositional materials from which the composer could choose. Schoenberg further constructed the prime row in such a way that it can be divided into smaller segments of three- and four-note groupings, which make up the thematic and harmonic materials of the Suite. By limiting the rows, building trichord and tetrachord motives into the rows, and placing them within the dance forms similar to a Baroque keyboard suite, Schoenberg allows the twelve-tone materials to function analogously to tonal regions, all the while avoiding traditional functional harmony and tonal centers.

Example 1: Arnold Schoenberg, Piano Suite, Op. 25, Pitch Material, Rows P-0, P-6, I-0, I-6.

P-0 →

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

← R-0

P-6 →

← R-6

I-0 →

← RI-0

I-6 →

← RI-6

Particularly in his earlier twelve-tone pieces, Schoenberg utilized old classical forms as a way to “[restore formal control to a musical style whose freedom had come to seem anarchic](#).”² The Piano Suite has six movements, all stylized dances common in Baroque keyboard suites: Prelude; Gavotte; Musette; Intermezzo; Minuet and Trio; and ends with a Gigue. Following the formal conventions for these stylized dance movements, Schoenberg places importance on

² While, in his atonal works, he did use older forms in new ways, he utilized such forms also in his most pertinent, early, dodecaphonic pieces, particularly, Variations for Orchestra; Op. 31 String Quartet 3; Op. 30 and String Quartet 4, Op. 37; Violin Concerto, Op. 36; and Piano Concerto, Op. 42.

reoccurring motives to emphasize formal divisions. Developing new, twelve-tone compositional techniques and placing them within the structures of classical forms allowed Schoenberg an element of stability in which to place and mold the new techniques. This idea was not entirely different from that of [Stravinsky's neoclassicism](#).

The Prelude, Gavotte, and Minuet and Trio

Schoenberg's Prelude (movement 1) has three sections and, like Baroque preludes, demonstrates a relatively free form: the tripartite division of the free form is follows, measures 1–9, 9–16, and 16–24. The movement opens with the presentation of P–0 in the right-hand melody, with the twelve notes of the row divided into three tetrachords, which inform the internal phrasing of the first melody. It is accompanied by P–6, also divided into tetrachords, where the first four notes sound with the melody, and the last 8 (measures 2–3) sound together. While the initial statements of the row forms are clearly presented throughout each movement, Schoenberg obscures the row forms by starting with internal tetrachords, but not always the first ones. In the Prelude the three sections are relatively unrelated, but each develop a rhythmic or gestural character that builds to rhythmic complexity of section three. In section 1, mm. 1–9, Schoenberg focuses on the driving, repetitive, 16th notes, while in section 2, mm. 12–14, a trill-like motive dominates.

The Gavotte (movement 2) also maintains some of the characteristics of its Baroque predecessor; it is in a duple meter, albeit passages in 5/4 and 3/4 meter interrupt the duple meter, and, as opposed to the Baroque model, melodies begin and end in the middle of the measures. In the pick-up to measure 1 Schoenberg begins the P–0 row in the right hand with the first and second tetrachords, but the row order is interrupted when pitches 9–12 enter in the left hand on the second eighth note of measure one. With a few changes, this idea is repeated in measure 2 with a presentation of the I–6 row (mm. 2–3). In both these phrases Schoenberg states the full row form, while in the left hand he repeats the four pitches before starting a new row, see measures 2 and 4–5.

In both the Prelude and the Gavotte, the row presentations become more difficult to identify after their initial entries. Often the rows begin with internal tetrachords, not the first four notes. Chords are then built on these groupings, or Schoenberg reorders notes within the tetrachords, making the row harder to follow. Further complicating the row presentation, he elides one tetrachord with another. The Minuet and Trio (movement 5) share these characteristics; the initial statements of the row in the Minuet and Trio are obvious, but get complicated through imitation and developing variation.

The Minuet, a rounded binary form, is characterized by the rhythmic and melodic repetitions related to the imitative gesture in measures 1–2. Retaining the form, meter, and melodic characteristics of the genre, Schoenberg builds a harmonic rhythm and sense of phrasing through two-part imitation. This two-part imitation begins in the right hand, measure 1, with the second tetrachord of P–0 row, while the first part of the row follows one-and-a-half beats later in the left hand. The imitation creates a sense of closure after two bars, and the imitation starts again in measure three with the I–6 row broken up and internally-reordered in the same fashion. There is a row statement every two measures in this imitative interchange, which create a harmonic

rhythm analogous to the tonal expectations of a minuet. Creating short, two-measure phrases, punctuated by rests and coupled with the dotted dance-like rhythm, Schoenberg evokes the idea of a minuet with the new dodecaphonic materials.

As pre-compositional material, a source row (P–O) allows the composer to control the pitches and their intervallic relationships, and makes it possible to divide them further into segments. Motives are essential to Schoenberg's pre-compositional work as much as in the composition itself. They, as the building blocks for building rows, serve as auditory and structural markers in the finished work. Beyond identifying rows and the internal re-orderings of the pitches, Schoenberg uses motives to play on the conventions of cadence, closure, and form within the twelve-tone idiom, by using his own concepts of developing variation, repetition, and recombination.

Conclusion

With the Piano Suite, Op. 25, Schoenberg established a compositional precedent not only for his immediate circle, specifically Alban Berg and Anton Webern, but also for post-World War II composers, who expanded the notion of a systematized ordering of the twelve chromatic pitches to any musical element. Thus, dynamics, durations, rhythmic elements, and other elements could be ordered or serialized. Of his immediate contemporaries, Berg took a slightly different approach to composition with twelve tones. While Schoenberg advocated for a system in which one source row was used and developed throughout a single piece, Berg expanded the idea of a single source row to include multiple source rows and derivations thereof. Webern's manifestations of Schoenberg's compositional technique, on the other hand, are precursors of the [Darmstadt School](#) and the later integral serialism. Schoenberg's Piano Suite, Op. 25, one of the first fully twelve-tone works, codifies the motivic ideas Schoenberg had been working on in his atonal works into techniques for composing with all twelve tones. He reconciles his new techniques with the stability of the traditional forms from tonal music to question the harmonic and melodic hierarchies of tonal music, all the while he stabilizes the new ideas within familiar forms.

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