



Review of Bryan Simms, *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg 1908-1923* (New York: Oxford, 2000)

Bruce Quaglia



[1] The works of Schoenberg's atonal period were written for a small, select audience. They have not gained popular acceptance in the time since their writing, but they have secured their place in the repertoire of modern masterpieces. Without these works, many of the 20th century's subsequent masterpieces would perhaps be unthinkable. Despite their status, Schoenberg's atonal works are still rarely performed today. Although the audience for these works has grown only slightly, the body of analytical and historical works about Schoenberg and about the works of this period grows significantly with each year. Bryan Simms' *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg 1908–1923* makes an important contribution to that body of literature.

[2] *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg* is tightly organized. The author proceeds in the early chapters from a discussion of the biographical and historical context within which Schoenberg's compositional impulses developed and then goes on in the subsequent chapters to treat the individual works of the atonal period in detail. The transition from the language of the late tonal works to the language of the early motivic atonal works is described early on, and the closing chapters begin to develop the underpinnings of the 12-tone method as they may be detected in the techniques of the late atonal works. In between, the works are grouped according to various significant features such as the use of new vocal techniques, the setting of texts by a particular poet, the large dramatic stage works, and the idiosyncratic and brief instrumental works. Still, Simms works through these pieces in a more or less chronological fashion that focuses on the development of Schoenberg's compositional techniques and formal stylistic elements. He correctly notes that the atonal works represent neither a specific style nor a particular technique but rather a variety of evolving techniques and styles that were initially intuitive for Schoenberg but became increasingly systematic as he continued.

[3] Simms' book is thoroughly researched and meticulous in its detail. It covers not only all of the works of Schoenberg's atonal *oeuvre*, but also treats the large body of analytical and historical thought that has surrounded it. Significantly, Simms also considers Schoenberg's own extensive writings on music and music theory in his interpretation of the atonal period. However, although Schoenberg's writings on music are as voluminous as that of any composer since Wagner, they are also often murky, self-contradictory and difficult to apply directly to the composer's own music and particularly to his atonal works. Schoenberg's writings have been extremely influential on musical thinking in our own century; his analytical insights have shaped modern musical theory nearly as much as his compositions have influenced the direction that composers after him would take. These writings form a necessary contextual backdrop for understanding Schoenberg's music, but, as Simms points out "they are themselves often in need of interpretation" (page 4).

[4] I applaud Simms' efforts to relate Schoenberg's own writings to his music, and I realize the difficulties that attend that task. I was, however, slightly disappointed that the discussion of Schoenberg's thought on the categories of *basic shape*

(*Grundgestalt*), *musical idea*, and *presentation* was not developed more broadly. If taken in their broadest sense, *Grundgestalt* and *Gedanke* are among the most powerful and compelling concepts that Schoenberg evokes in his writings, and I believe that they are indispensable to an understanding of Schoenberg as a composer and as a musical thinker. The importance of these concepts lies especially in the fact that they are not tied to individual periods or styles. They transcend the specific compositional techniques that the composer used at different times and connect his music inextricably to the music of the masters before him. These categories lie at the core of how Schoenberg viewed his own evolving musical language and its relationship to the past and are critical to a discussion of any period of Schoenberg's compositional output.

[5] Simms does not ignore these topics by any means; his discussion traces the important historical dissemination of these ideas as they are handed down in the writings of Schoenberg's students such as Erwin Stein and Josef Rufer. Schoenberg is never especially revealing in his own writings about these terms, and it is therefore often necessary to rely upon the accounts of students such as Rufer and Stein who were apparently privy to discussions of these concepts. But the treatment of these ideas is restricted to a relatively narrow interpretation. No connection is made to the broader implication of these ideas, instead Simms focuses on the relationship between basic shape and specific compositional techniques such as row manipulation. That the *Grundgestalt* is never really defined by Schoenberg in a precise way in any of his writings is a serious setback. However, there is an increasing body of recent analytical work that concerns itself with applying the idea of basic shape to a broad range of compositional issues, and I would have wished to have seen that work represented somewhere, in addition to historical writings. In particular, the scholarship of Patricia Carpenter (a Schoenberg student) and Severine Neff bears heavily on this topic. The presentation, and therefore subsequent development and deployment of the musical idea, is crucial to understanding Schoenberg and to understanding the significance of the basic shape as a musical concept.

[6] Simms' discussion of *basic shape* is often tied to the kinds of relationships Adorno articulates in his article "Schönberg: Fünf Orchesterstücke, Op. 16," (*Pult und Taketstock* 4 [1927]: 36–43): the means by which intervallic cells or motives are deployed in both the linear and harmonic dimensions at the same time and which therefore create powerful corollaries with the serial techniques that would evolve in Schoenberg's later music. This is a careful, but perhaps narrow mode of viewing the basic shape and ends up seeming synonymous with certain aspects of early twelve-tone technique. It may be that the *Grundgestalt* represents something broader than that to Schoenberg, namely a principle of organic coherence that manifests itself in particular techniques such as developing variation and row partitioning, but which is more elusive than just those particular techniques. In *The Musical Idea and the Logic, Technique and Art of its Presentation*, which has been available in translation by Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff for some years now (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), I think that Schoenberg hints at a much richer and far-reaching conception into which the *Grundgestalt* may figure prominently. Although Schoenberg's development of the idea of *basic set* certainly descended from the broader category of *Grundgestalt*, I don't believe it ever became limited to just that.

[7] Simms covers the gamut of historical perspectives on the atonal works thoroughly. Not only are the major analytical models presented, but the critical socio-historical explanations by writers such as Adorno are also represented. Schoenberg's own writings, particularly those representing his theoretical works such as the *Theory of Harmony*, are also reported on extensively. These writings are particularly useful in understanding the transition from the late tonal works to the early atonal period, and Simms does not fail to make the necessary connections.

[8] Various theoretical models have been applied to the works of Schoenberg's atonal period over the years. Some of these readings have insisted on an expanded model of tonality to account for not only isolated local harmony but formal structure as well. Hugo Leichentritt's nearly contemporaneous analysis is perhaps the first of these, but later authors such as Will Ogdon and Reinhold Brinkmann continue to pursue such a model especially with the formally more traditional pieces such as Op. 11. Simms reports on these models as well as on such later models as set theory (as espoused by Allen Forte in *The Structure of Atonal Music* and elsewhere). Another prominent view of these works is that they are contextual, free atonal works that cannot be bound together by the structural formalisms Allen Forte proposes. George Perle, Robert Morgan and Ethan Haimo are representative of this view. Simms presents and acknowledges each of these perspectives. He is careful to never take sides, although clearly these perspectives are all fundamentally at odds with one another and their opposition has a history all of its own. While I do not believe taking sides would strengthen Simms' own book in any way, I could imagine a more developed discussion of the basic philosophical differences these camps represent. I could also imagine a more critical discussion of each of these models as a way of amplifying the reception history of these pieces. The reception history of these pieces is, by and large, the analytical literature. Concert audiences have mostly ignored these works, but writers such as Leichentritt, Forte, and Perle have preserved their importance for the next century. There are profound discrepancies between these views as well as critical volleys both implicit and explicit that have been fired back and forth. As a musicologist

with expertise in this area, Bryan Simms could be invaluable in assessing the critical history of that analytical literature at this point. Such an assessment would require a greater degree of interpretive synthesis than the strict journalistic accounting that is presented here, though. I don't believe such a discussion would diminish the focus on Schoenberg or the music itself. Instead, it would make that discussion richer. Prof. Simms introduces this body of analytical literature into his discussion, but treats it so neutrally that I cannot help but wonder about what his own analytical views of this music are. His own analyses stick largely to observations about the form of pieces and to characterization of their textures. They are basically narrative descriptions, but may be especially useful as starting points for readers who will then want to venture into the more detailed analytical literature that surrounds these works.

[9] In conclusion, *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg* is a highly useful addition to the literature on Schoenberg. It provides an accounting of Schoenberg's development during the atonal period that is especially rich in biographical detail and historical context. While very little synthesis and almost no new analysis is presented here, the author is extremely diligent in describing the important analytical work surrounding this literature and especially in relating Schoenberg's own writings to the music. The context that Bryan Simms unfolds here will be indispensable for all theorists and musicologists who wish to interpret these works and their history.

Bruce Quaglia
Dept. of Music
University of Utah
Salt Lake City, UT
bruce.quaglia@m.cc.utah.edu

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