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Musical Reference in Alban Berg's String Quartet, op. 3

ABSTRACT

Background

In a letter written to Arnold Schoenberg, dated July 27, 1920, Alban Berg notated twelve different ascending interval cycles, from 1 to 12, in a note-against-note alignment, which he referred to as 'Eine theoretische Spielerei' ('a theoretical playing around'). Berg's alignment of interval cycles has been an invaluable source of study. In his 1977 article 'Berg's Master Array of the Interval Cycles', George Perle discusses the chart and examines instances of comparable cyclic structures throughout Berg's *oeuvre*, especially 'Schlafend trägt man mich in mein Heimatland', the second song from *Vier Lieder*, op. 2; the String Quartet, op. 3; and Act II, scene 3, of *Wozzeck*. Perle's pioneering article paved the way for subsequent studies, most notably that of David Headlam (1996) who further explored the intervallic and harmonic properties of Berg's alignment of interval cycles, which he calls 'aligned cycles'.

In my presentation, I focus on a two-voice aligned-cycle motive in Berg's String Quartet, op. 3 and consider the extra-musical associations that are implied in its design. In bars 2–3 of the first movement, Berg aligns a descending chromatic motive in the viola (A-flat, G, F-sharp) together with a descending interval of perfect fourths in the cello (F, C, G), which generates three different intervals: 3, 7, and 11. Perle (1990) discusses the symmetrical properties of this motive while Headlam (1996) focuses on its intervallic structure. I extend their discussions by arguing that this two-voice aligned cycle may be a subtle musical representation of Alban Berg.

Several scholars, including Gauldin (1999), Jarman (1997), Krämer (1992), and Perle (1977) have discussed Berg's use of musical acronyms and secret programs in many of his works, such as the *Vier Lieder*, *Wozzeck*, the Chamber Concerto, the *Lyric Suite*, and the Violin Concerto. Yet, referential associations in Berg's String Quartet have been ignored. According to Constantin Floros (1992, 154–5), Helene Berg, the wife of the composer, apparently remarked about the String Quartet that "Love speaks in it, and jealousy and indignation over the injustice that was done to us and to our love." Although Helene's description is not a definitive secret program for the string quartet, it does invite us to consider the possibility of an extra-musical association.

To support my argument that the opening aligned-cycle motive represents Berg, I will discuss several manuscript pages found in Berg's sketchbook for his string quartet (F21 Berg 7), located in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Austrian National Library) in Vienna. Versions of this motive are notated on four different pages of the sketchbook (F21 Berg 7), and the motive also appears in the corner of a page from another sketch (F21 Berg 49). Curiously, the aligned-cycle motive that appears

on page 64 of the sketchbook (F21 Berg 7) also includes letter names of pitches written below the music notation. That Berg wrote the letter "a" above the letter "b" ("b" in German represents B-flat) suggests that he may have used the opening aligned-cycle motive to musically represent himself, since the alignment of interval cycles in bars 2–3 has the potential to generate a semitone interval of A/B-flat, his initials.

Aims and repertoire studied

In this presentation, I will re-examine an aligned-cycle motive in Berg's String Quartet to show how this cyclic design may be a subtle musical representation of Alban Berg and his initials, A/B-flat. To support my argument, I will discuss a manuscript page found in Berg's sketchbook for the String Quartet (F21 Berg 7). Located in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, this interesting sketch reveals that Berg may have used the opening aligned-cycle motive to musically represent himself.

Methods

To illustrate that Berg composed an alignment of interval cycles to musically signify himself, I will focus on the numerous alignments that are possible for a two-voice aligned cycle. In bars 2–3 of the first movement of the quartet, Berg aligns a descending chromatic motive (A-flat–G–F-sharp) in the viola together with a descending interval of perfect fourths (F–C–G) in the cello, which generates three different intervals: 3, 7, and 11. Berg could have aligned the interval cycles to produce different harmonic intervals and different pitch combinations, but he favoured one alignment that has the potential to generate a semitone interval of A/B-flat, his initials.

Implications

My findings suggest that Berg used a particular alignment of interval cycles in his string quartet to represent himself. Although I am not the first to discuss the harmonic properties of the aligned cycles in the quartet, I will be the first to suggest that an aligned-cycle motive musically represents Alban Berg. In addition, although numerous authors have discussed extra-musical associations and secret programs in many of Berg's compositions, my presentation will be the first to focus on a musical reference in his string quartet.

Keywords

Alban Berg, String Quartet op. 3, Aligned Cycles, and Musical Acronyms.

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