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Berg's Piano Sonata and Reverse Organicism

ABSTRACT

Background

Much analytical and critical commentary on Alban Berg's Piano Sonata, op. 1, has viewed the piece through an organicist lens, arguing that the piece enacts some sort of becoming (Jarman 1979, 31; Schmalfeldt 1991, 85–90; Headlam 1996, 33; Wadsworth 2008, 331). This tendency holds even for Theodor W. Adorno's (1991) analysis, which Adorno (1982, 184; 1991, 39) himself criticizes as inadequate to his insight that Berg's music instead accomplishes a "permanent re-absorption back into itself," which "comprises its true modernity." Byros 2008 builds on Adorno's insights but does not critique Adorno's analysis.

Aims and repertoire studied

My aim is to revise Adorno's analysis of Berg's Sonata so as to accord with his own insights and with Arnold Schoenberg's little heeded principle that development often proceeds backwards. In other words, the introduction of a contrast signifies a leap in development, which is generally followed by *back-formations* that fill in the gap so as to make the coherence of the contrasting parts comprehensible. What is characteristic of Berg's music is that backwards development is exhaustive—not, as is more common, merely suggestive—re-absorbing both the components and the products of a *Grundgestalt* or basic shape into an even more elementary motive.

Methods

My method is to apply Schoenberg's theories of harmony and form to analysis and criticism, giving particular attention to his central notion of the musical idea as unrest. These theories are represented by *Structural Functions of Harmony*, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, *Theory of Harmony*, *The Musical Idea and the Logic, Technique, and Art of Its Presentation*, and other published and unpublished writings. This method is apropos as Berg composes the Sonata under Schoenberg's instruction.

Adorno's main error is that he does not distinguish between *motives*, *Gestalten*, and their *features*. Adorno also does not adequately distinguish between the various ways motives or *Gestalten* can appear, which is necessary for a precise delineation of their development and connection: *repetitions*, *variants*, and *motive-forms* (and *Gestalt-forms*). He also does not recognize the different kinds of coherences motives and/or *Gestalten* can have: *direct*, *indirect*, *stronger*, *weaker*, *disguised*, and *worked out*. It is particularly important to distinguish when a coherence is demonstrated, either

immediately through a *link* or retrospectively through a *missing link*.

Meanwhile, Byros (2008, 280 and 279) attempts to relate Adorno's reference to a death urge in Berg's music not to its permanent re-absorption but instead to an "inclination to defamiliarize and resist all things normative or systemic," which he opposes to a "necessity" of designing another all-embracing system" like tonality. Byros assumes an equivalence between the normative and the systemic, which for Schoenberg have little to do with one another.

Implications

Permanent re-absorption, or what I call *reverse organicism*, is particularly prominent in the Sonata, which famously begins as if it were ending. An examination of the development of the work's motives and *Gestalten* reveals a network of different kinds of coherences, clinched in the closing measures, in which every motive is connected to every other motive either directly or indirectly. 58 of these 62 coherences involve missing links, which means that most of the development is backwards, and the organicism is reverse organicism. This study expands possibilities for analysis, substantiates and refines Adorno's criticism, and shines a new light on Berg's accomplishments.

Keywords

Berg, Adorno, Schoenberg, organicism, modernity.

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