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## Is the Twelve-Tone System Inherently Organicist? Some Reflections on Conflicting Perspectives with Notes on Analysis

### ABSTRACT

#### Background

Organicism was central to the approach of Schoenberg and his successors, with organic metaphors appearing again and again in their writings on the twelve-tone system. It is also an analytical methodology that has received widespread criticism for at least the past thirty years. What is a modern analyst to do with the organicist claims of Schoenberg and his successors?

#### Aims and repertoire studied

This study investigates organicism in historical accounts of twelve-tone music in order to evaluate its usefulness in modern analysis. The repertoire to be considered is the twelve-tone music of Schoenberg, Webern, and Babbitt, with a few comparative comments on post-war European serialists, particularly Boulez.

#### Methods

The organicism of source texts will be re-evaluated by comparison with three recent studies. The first, and most important, is philosopher Kendall Walton's theory of 'prop-oriented make believe'. In this account, metaphors serve a heuristic function: they illuminate something about a real-world 'prop' under consideration. Thus, one of the functions of organicism in the writings of twelve-tone composers is as a heuristic for comprehensibility. Organicism provides a shorthand for the conditions under which listeners can apprehend twelve-tone music. The second is Scott Burnham's account of pedagogical organicism in the writings of Adolf Bernhard Marx. Twelve-tone organicism, similarly, might be taken as a representation of the process of coming to understand that piece. The third is Daniel Harrison's account of Hindemith's acoustic derivation of Series 1 as a 'creation myth': something generically obligatory from the perspective of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century speculative German music theory that had to be undertaken for the remainder of Hindemith's composition manual to be accepted. Similarly, organicism was a practically obligatory component of fin-de-siècle Viennese language on music—it was a mark of seriousness and high-mindedness.

Given these three models, I suggest that we primarily consider the organicism the Schoenberg circle attributes to twelve-tone music as an instance of prop-oriented make believe, focusing on the ways in which organicism serves as a heuristic for comprehension, while recognizing that language may also serve pedagogical and social functions. In this light, organicism retains relevance: modern analysts, too, seek to understand and describe how listeners comprehend music, and organicism can be a useful aid. And what sort of comprehension does organi-

cism serve? Basically, Schoenbergian organicism is motivated by a logic of association: to make sense of musical events is to make sense of them in relation to each other. Babbitt's organicism adds a hierarchical element: he uses the metaphor of organic growth to describe a recursive hierarchy. This, too, is for the sake of describing the conditions of comprehension: Babbitt draws from cognitive science the lesson that hierarchy facilitates memory. Organicism assists in the conceptualization of this process.

Two modern, non-organicist accounts of twelve-tone music, by Joseph Dubiel and Dora Hanninen, are also considered and compared with the heuristic model of organicism. I will discuss how, despite their distance from organicist ideology, these accounts are consistent with a heuristic understanding of twelve-tone organicism.

#### Implications

Organicism has been dismissed as old-fashioned, ideological, limited, and distant from experience. While acknowledging these critiques, this paper argues for that it retains value as a heuristic for the analysis of twelve-tone music. Of the part-part and part-whole relationships central to organicism, associative (part-part) relationships are shown to be more broadly applicable. A further implication is the recognition that a heuristic view of organicism appears in the prose of composers such as Schoenberg, Webern, and Babbitt.

#### Keywords

Organicism, twelve-tone music, Schoenberg, Webern, Babbitt, Boulez, Kendall Walton, metaphor, history of theory.

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