

Ramiro Limongi

National University for the Arts, Argentina
ramiro_limongi@yahoo.com

Form and Teleology Beyond the Tonal System Around 1910

ABSTRACT

Background

As an essential part of Western thought, teleology, and its consequent causality, defined the structure of temporal poetic enterprises since Aristotle (335 B.C./2013) described classical tragedy. Present all along centuries of musical developments, particularly as from those more specific ones originated since the Renaissance, it finally became indigenous to tonal music (Forte, 2000). Progressively, reinforcing the perspective of music autonomy emerged with Viennese Classical music, and either drawing from Goethe's writings on biological morphology or Hegel's teleological perspectives, nineteenth-century German music theoreticians, such as A. B. Marx or Riemann, introduced the notion of organicism as a key concept to understanding musical form (Neubauer, 2009). From Beethoven, through Brahms, also Austro-German composers generally embraced this approach, right to Schoenberg and Webern (Frigyesi, 1997), crystallizing an equivalence between organicism and organization.

On the other hand, the exploration of tonality limits, combined with a growing interest on the thought and music of Eastern cultures, led other composers to doubt and even reject this idea of form (Pasler, 1994; Junchaya, 2010). By the 1950s and 60s, the production of a non-teleological music, completely free of the inherited dramatic shape, turned into one of the main goals of avant-garde composers, especially of John Cage and the New York School. However, these frequently resulted in a spatial conception of musical relationships, neglecting, at the end, the unavoidable, essential, time dimension along which music necessarily happens (Junchaya, 2010).

Even when composers pretend to merely juxtapose the events that constitute a music work, these are perceived in a sequence, and due to habits of perception and the nature of brain processes themselves, listeners will tend to relate and compare them, deducing implications, expectations, and possibly a causal order. Sense-making greatly depends on building patterns and establishing hierarchies, combining structures within a given level to conform higher ones. Ultimately, the final grasping of the form will be correlated to prominent cues the listener may find to detect relationships along the piece (Fiske, 2008), no matter how teleological it may be.

Aims and repertoire studied

Although emancipated dissonance, atomized materials, and condensed information were revolutionizing the field of pitch organization and crashing the very frame of musical intelligibility, around 1910, Anton Webern, being himself a leading figure in this historical events, still kept the organic conception of form, proposing a distinguishable directionality and a sense of development that link the treatment of his ideas.

Contemporaneously, Claude Debussy, while maintaining more traditional vocabulary elements and, even on occasion, some of their conventional relationships in terms of tension, tended to pioneeringly abandon narrative designs (Etkin, 1983). Although his works were often considered shapeless or nebulous because of the absence of dramatic outbursts, an apparent static quality, and his interest in other parameters as axial organizers (Morgan, 1991), he carefully handled elements, subtly evaluating their interactions, in order to generate markers that allowed a clear perception of larger formal structures.

To comprehend this contrasting approaches to musical organization, this paper presents a comparative analysis of Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige*, *Préludes, Livre 1*, n. 6, for piano, written between late 1909 and early 1910, and Webern's *4 Stücke Op. 7*, n. 3 for violin and piano, composed in 1910.

Method and findings

Relating the composer's proposal to the perceptual and cognitive processes that result in the listener's recreation of the musical form requires an analytical methodology that, after describing sound phenomena, considers them as stimuli triggering the listener's experience. A systematic but flexible procedure will permit the collection of reliable data, granting both a clear understanding of each piece and the comparability between them.

For this kind of endeavor, Tarchini (2004) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging how each aspect of each parameter has its particular way of informing and how the music work emerges out of their reciprocal relationships (p.2). Her meticulous way of examining every single one of these points and the manner in which they affect human auditory perception leads to finding evidence of an early differentiation between formal markers and teleological developments, right at the abandonment of the tonal system in the selected repertoire.

In his prelude, Debussy makes use of *tempo*, register, meter complexity, rhythmic density, successive pitch intervals, modes, chord structures, and textures, mainly to characterize formal units in different levels, pointing out their delimitation and how they articulate, almost without establishing a perceptible need for this general order. Particularly, this handling of *tempo* and register becomes almost a trademark in his piano music.

Contrarily, Webern proposes a strongly narrative organization as revealed by the gradual stratification of textures and its final reversion, the general evolution of register and pitch contours, the use of pitch classes, the treatment of exposition and derivation of pitch intervals – also expanding and contracting –, the increase and regularization of rhythmic density towards the central formal unity, and its consequent perceptibility of meter, however complex it may be. Even intensity and changes in piano timbre, resulting from extreme

registers, subtly contribute to this conception. Only the slow *tempo* and the characteristic rhythmic groupings moderate the teleological essence of the composition by causing some degree of isolation of sound objects.

Nevertheless, it cannot be said here that Debussy completely avoids teleological procedures. The general organization of colors, produced by alternation and combination of modes, chord structures, ornamentation and dissonances, presents an increasing degree of complexity; register and pitch contours give some directional sense within smaller formal units, highlighted by minimal textural changes. The most teleological trait is possibly the treatment of the climactic formal unit with a faster, variable *tempo*, wider pitch intervals, and louder intensity – always within a considerably reduced range.

Implications

A clear detection of changes such as the increasingly independent employment of resources that have traditionally been merged, particularly in its initial stages, enables a better comprehension of their perceptive effect and their most adequate application. This kind of knowledge proves equally useful for analysts – in their quest for understanding how music works –, performers – in precisely communicating with their audiences –, and composers – by enriching and sophisticating their technical tool sets.

Keywords

Teleology, organicism, musical form, musical understanding, Western tonal traditions, comparative analysis

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