# reviews

## Bryan R. Simms. *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg, 1908–1923.* Oxford University Press, 2000. ix, 265 pp.

*Reviewed by Ethan Haimo*

Schoenberg's decision, around 1908, to begin writing compositions that had no tonal center and few, if any, traditional harmonies, remains an event of surpassing historical importance, one that has had an incalculable influence on the subsequent history of music. Given the central significance of this repertoire, it is surprising that—before now—no one had undertaken the challenge of writing a book devoted to Schoenberg's atonal compositions.

Bryan Simms has responded to this curious lacuna with a book entitled *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg.* However, the scope of his book is even wider than is implied by its title: the second chapter discusses Schoenberg's evolution toward atonality and the last chapter addresses the early serial period. Thus, in some important ways, Simms's book discusses at least parts of all three of Schoenberg's principal compositional approaches: tonal, atonal, and serial.

One of the interesting changes that has taken place in Anglo-American studies of Schoenberg's music has been the gradual widening of the perspective with which the music has been examined. Whereas once upon a time, much of the discussion was resolutely technical, with the emphasis placed almost exclusively on the development and use of sophisticated theoretical tools to explain the pitch organization,[1] nowadays one is apt to find more discussion of the contexts in which the works originated.[2] *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg* reflects and celebrates this change by placing considerable stress on factors other than pitch organization. Simms quotes extensively from Schoenberg's writings, coordinates stylistic developments with biographical events, carefully examines Schoenberg's choice of texts, analyzes the meanings of those texts, discusses Schoenberg's interactions with his contemporaries, weighs the rationale for his use of a particular stylistic approach, describes the philosophical and aesthetic ideas that lay behind specific compositional decisions, and much else besides.

When this repertoire is approached in such a comprehensive manner, it quickly becomes apparent that Schoenberg's atonal music did not constitute a single unified, period—not technically, nor stylistically, nor in any

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other meaningful way. Rather, as Simms demonstrates, it was a complex and ever-changing reality, one that embraced such sharply contradictory tendencies as the motivic intensity of op. 11, no. 1 and the radical athematicism of *Erwartung,* op. 17.

Simms's decision to extend the range of his discussion beyond the chronological boundaries of the atonal period and his choice to expand the parameters of his discussion far beyond pitch structure together constitute one of the many strengths of this book. At the same time, the broad scope of this book is—alas—a serious flaw. In a book with only 219 pages of text, it is impossible to do justice to all of the topics that are contemplated; inevitably at least some are given short shrift. As a general rule, I think that the biographical, philosophical, documentary, and textual aspects are handled quite well. However, at the same time, other important topics are given insufficient attention.

For example, in his second chapter, "Schoenberg's Evolution Toward Atonality," Simms describes the features of Schoenberg's early works that prepared the way for the rise of atonality. In keeping with his approach, he does not limit himself solely to a technical analysis of the changing pitch language. Instead, he starts with an interesting discussion of the origins and use of the term "atonality" and an extended examination of Schoenberg's theoretical writings on the subject.

These two tasks are handled very well. Simms provides an insightful summary of the sometimes contradictory attitudes within Schoenberg's circle to the term "atonality." We find that—notwithstanding its later rejection by Schoenberg—the term may have originated with a supporter (Egon Wellesz) and that there was far more sympathy to its use in Schoenberg's circle than is generally recognized.

Equally effective is the discussion of the idea of atonality in Schoenberg's writings. Simms points out that although Schoenberg wrote no treatise devoted solely to the subject of atonality, his "literary oeuvre still offers an invaluable entrée into this repertory." Simms then skillfully weaves disparate writings together to show what Schoenberg meant by "extended," "suspended" (*aufgehoben*), and "fluctuating" (*schwebend*) tonality and explains how these ideas played a role in the gradual transformation of Schoenberg's language.

Only after completing his consideration of these topics does Simms illustrate the process of evolution by means of analyses of selected compositions from Schoenberg's tonal period. This is an essential step if the theoretical generalities of the previous section are to have any precise meaning. However, this task simply cannot be accomplished in the ten pages that are allotted for the purpose.

And it is not merely the number of pages devoted to the problem that is problematic. Simms illustrates the decline of tonality in Schoenberg's works by making analytical remarks about only three of Schoenberg's works, all of which are songs: *Erwartung,* op, 2, no. 1 (1899), *Die Aufgeregten,* op. 3, no. 2 (1903), and *Der Wanderer,* op. 6, no. 8 (1905). On a number of grounds, this is unsatisfactory. In the first place, Schoenberg's songs are not representative of all aspects of his compositional thought in the years 1899–1908. In general, the songs are rather short—nothing close to the size of the important instrumental works from this period. Those instrumental works face issues of tonal definition and relation that are much different than those faced in the more diminutive dimensions of the songs. Moreover, Schoenberg generally made a fairly clear distinction between the texture of his songs and his instrumental compositions. His songs tend to be homophonic, often reliant on a principal melody (not necessarily in the voice) supported by successions of discrete chords. By contrast, his instrumental works tend to be less clearly chordal and, correspondingly, more reliant on contrapuntal textures. This is an important distinction because major steps on the road to the "emancipation of the dissonance" were made possible by the radical treatment of intervals found in the contrapuntal textures of the instrumental works.

To be sure, Simms offers some reasons for analyzing only songs. He argues that the "genre of song was an especially useful laboratory in which to try out new ideas." He goes on to claim that the "inherent expressivity of the song provided an environment in which harmonic and tonal experiments needed no further justification than their alliance with heightened emotions and new poetic ideas." Finally, he cites Schoenberg's claim that "extramusical influences produced the concept of extended tonality."

But none of these is convincing. The argument that "the genre of song was an especially useful laboratory" could be said equally persuasively of any genre in Schoenberg's works. And is there really more "inherent expressivity" in Schoenberg's songs than in instrumental works like *Verklärte Nacht* or *Pelleas und Melisande*? Finally, it is an error to assume that Schoenberg's statement that "extramusical influences produced the concept of extended tonality" is a reference just to the songs. *All* of Schoenberg's completed works from the end of his apprenticeship with Alexander Zemlinsky to the writing of the Chamber Symphony, op. 9 were based on a text and thus everything Schoenberg wrote before 1906 had extramusical influences.

Although Simms gives insufficient attention to a detailed consideration of the evolution of Schoenberg's language and although the examples he chooses are not completely representative, I should not like to leave the

impression that what he actually says is faulty. To the contrary, the analytical remarks that he does make are well chosen and accurate. For example, in his analysis of *Die Aufgeregten,* op. 3, no. 2 (24–26), Simms points out that "the ambiguities that characterize the tonal plan of the song are evident from the very outset." He shows that the opening refrain "is made from a chain of primarily vagrant chords, whose progression is guided solely by a descending stepwise bass line" and thus, the listener has "no way of relating the passage definitely to any key." Furthermore, he points out that unlike earlier examples, this occurs right at beginning of the piece so that "the listener has no tonal context in which to interpret it." Simms also asserts that the composition "exhibits an experimental and nontraditional use of key that the composer described as *schwebend.*" Although Schoenberg had applied the term only to short spans, Simms feels it is appropriate to extend the idea to the large scale. He suggests "it produced its most fundamental disruption in the macrostructure of a work, weakening the unifying capacity of a key throughout the entirety of a composition." Simms further argues that in *Die Aufgeregten,* unlike the earlier *Erwartung,* there is no "large, tonally unified plan at work." Instead, the song moves through a number of remote tonal areas. Simms asserts that "the order in which these tonal areas occur and the presence of elliptical and incomplete progressions prevent the listener from deducing any one key that controls the totality of the piece." Although the key signature suggests that "Schoenberg conceived of the work as moving in F minor" he believes that "even the most astute listener cannot trace the persistence of that key from beginning to end"—as one could with earlier compositions. Thus "traditional tonality wavers to the point of fragmentation and is relegated to dim and localized references to distant regions." In summary, "no longer does Schoenberg use key to produce a unified and integrated structure."

Although these remarks are to the point, accurate, and broadly illustrative of some important tendencies in Schoenberg's early works, they do not come close to giving a full picture of what happened in the crucial period that led to atonality. Indeed, the three songs chosen, and what Simms elects to discuss in those songs, do not illustrate some aspects of the birth of atonality at all.

In the first place, none of the songs Simms chooses adequately captures the extent of Schoenberg's restless experimentation with new chordal types in the years 1899–1908. From the examples, one might conclude that Schoenberg's chordal vocabulary was only a modest extension of traditional harmony, involving mainly the increasing use of vagrant chords. But in this period (and principally in the instrumental works), Schoenberg experimented with many new chords: from the ninth chord in fourth

inversion in *Verklärte Nacht,* to the whole tone hexachord in *Pelleas und Melisande,* on to the hexachordal chord of fourths in the Chamber Symphony, op. 9—to name only a few famous examples.

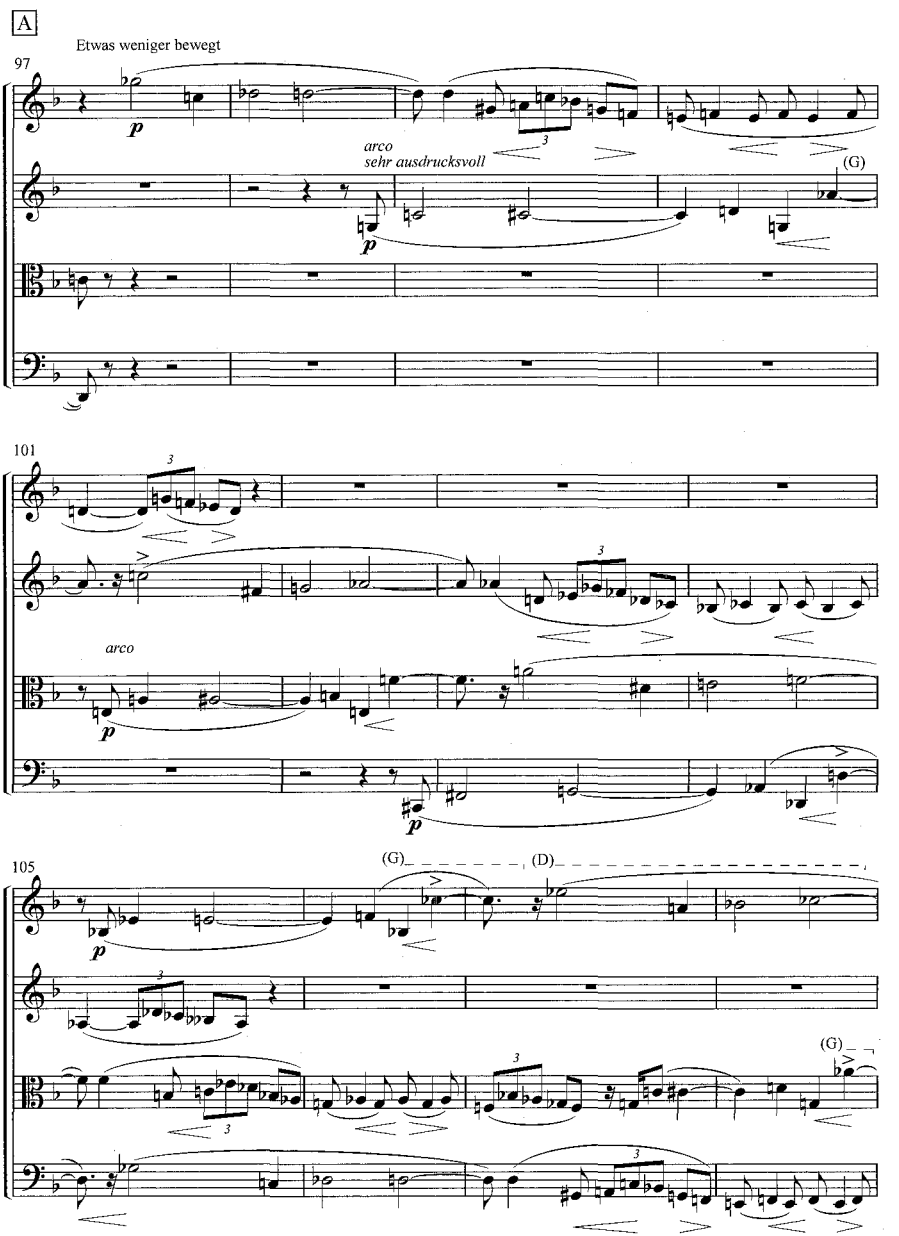
These chords are important not just because they were new, but because they are part of another important trend that is not covered in this chapter. In Schoenberg's music from this period, there was a clear evolution, not only in the treatment of chordal dissonance, but also, in its very definition. At the beginning of Schoenberg's career, many chordal dissonances still resolved in a traditional manner. But relatively quickly, chordal dissonances lost their distinctive status within a chord and their motivation for resolution. By the end of the tonal period, it had become impossible to tell which was the dissonance and which was the stable chord tone. In short, the emancipation of the dissonance was intimately connected both to the changes in chordal vocabulary and to the way in which that vocabulary was used. But nothing of this process is illustrated in the examples or discussed in any depth elsewhere.

And this highlights another important omission: the absence of examples from instrumental works makes it difficult to understand how Schoenberg's contrapuntal textures contributed to the emancipation of the dissonance. It was primarily in instrumental works like the String Quartet, op. 7 and in the Chamber Symphony, op. 9 that Schoenberg made radical strides in the direction of creating a musical language in which triads (or chords derived from triads) played little role. In passages like the fugal transition in the first movement of the String Quartet, op. 7 (beginning at A, ex. 1), the constant motion of the attack rhythm yields a quickly changing succession of simultaneities (mm. 103–6), almost none of which are triadically-based harmonies. By choosing only songs and by placing the emphasis almost exclusively on harmonic progressions, Simms shows none of this. Indeed, as can be seen from the summary of Simms's arguments above, there is no discussion of any aspect of Schoenberg's evolving pitch language other than its harmonic progressions. The story of the evolution of Schoenberg's pitch language is considerably more complicated and multidimensional than is evident from Simms's discussion.

Unfortunately, the inadequate treatment of pitch language in the chapter on the evolution toward atonality is not an aberration, but the norm. By trying to do so much, Simms ends up giving some important topics inadequate consideration. And too often, the internal structure of the music is one of the topics that receives insufficient attention.

For example, in the fourth chapter, "Small Instrumental Works," Simms discusses four important collections of compositions: Three Piano Pieces, op. 11, Five Orchestra Pieces, op. 16, Six Little Piano Pieces, op.

**Example 1:** Schoenberg, String Quartet, op. 7, first movement, mm. 97–108.



19, and Three Pieces for Chamber Orchestra—seventeen separate movements, and this in a chapter of only twenty-nine pages. As always, Simms does not limit his attention solely to the pitch language, but covers a broad range of other issues as well.

For instance, his discussion of op. 11 begins with some general observations about the opus as a whole: that it is not a unified cycle; that Schoenberg may have been hesitant about writing for piano; that he seems to have written intuitively and without sketches and with only one major rewrite in the third piece; that he made various revisions in 1924 and 1942; that he wanted the pieces to be played freely; and that he argued with Busoni about the latter's unauthorized rewriting of the second piece. These are important points, and, as usual, Simms has provided a very good, well informed, appropriate, interesting, and completely satisfactory discussion of these topics.

Simms then continues with a general summary of the formal structure of the first two pieces of the opus. He points out that they both are examples of what he calls "developmental ternary form" in which an opening group of thematic ideas returns in highly varied form after a middle section that, though contrasting, also includes fragmentary and highly varied restatements of the original themes.

Only after this does Simms get down to talking about the harmonic vocabulary itself. Here is the entirety of what he says on the topic:

> The harmonic vocabulary in Op. 11, Nos. 1 and 2, also differs subtly from that of many of the George songs in that it greatly reduces the direct use of triads and familiar seventh chords. It also moves cautiously away from the late-romantic harmonic palette—altered or vagrant chords, whole-tone harmonies, triadic tetrachords, and pentatonic subsets—that Schoenberg had used repeatedly in the early atonal style of Op. 15. The harmonic language of the Three Piano Pieces begins to show an important change in Schoenberg's thinking about atonal music, as it abandons, however tentatively, the mixed idiom of Op. 15 and adopts a homogenous, dissonant, and distinctly anti-romantic alternative that had been hinted at in "Sprich nicht" from Op. 15 and in its contemporaneous "Am Strande." This was a new harmonic practice to which Schoenberg referred in 1911 in the *Harmonielehre* when he confessed his "aversion to recalling even remotely the traditional chords . . . The simple chords of the earlier harmony do not appear successfully in this [new atonal] environment. I believe, however, that there is another reason for their absence here. I believe they would sound too cold, too dry, expressionless. Or, perhaps, what I mentioned on an earlier occasion applies here.

> Namely that these simple chords, which are imperfect imitations of nature seem to us too primitive." (63)

The first sentence is correct insofar as it goes: the direct use of triads and familiar seventh chords is indeed greatly reduced in these two pieces. So too, Simms is probably correct that nos. 1 and 2 "move cautiously away from the late-romantic palette." However, those statements are both negatives: they say what was abandoned; they do not say what is present. That is left to the end of a single sentence: "it adopts a homogenous, dissonant, and distinctly antiromantic alternative."

But this is completely inadequate. It tells us almost nothing about the harmonic vocabulary of op. 11, nos. 1 and 2 and nothing at all about the syntax. What specifically does "homogenous" mean? What precisely does "dissonant" mean in this context? (What could it possibly mean after the emancipation of the dissonance?) What is "a distinctly anti-romantic alternative?" Since none of these claims are illustrated with musical examples, we are left with very little precise idea of what is being asserted about Schoenberg's music. As before, it is not so much that there is anything specifically wrong with the claims that are made but rather, it is that they are far too general, too simplified, cover too little ground, or simply omit crucial parts of the discussion.

To be fair, there is some further examination of the pitch language of these compositions as Simms continues with a discussion of some of the controversies that have arisen about how to understand these pieces. But even this discussion is astonishingly incomplete.

Simms starts by citing some of the studies that claim that op. 11, no. 1 retains significant residues of tonal structure, even including tonal centers. He then summarily rejects this line of argument by quoting Schoenberg's assertion (in a letter to Busoni) that: "My harmony allows no chords or melodies with tonal implications any more." Simms then offers one and only one alternative. He cites and briefly explains Allen Forte's theory of pitch class sets, and remarks that op. 11, no. 1 "has proved to be especially susceptible to analysis by these principles." He then supports this assertion with a single example where the pitch class set formed by the total pitch content of one measure is equivalent to the pitch-class set of the opening hexachord in the melody.

This survey of the literature is every bit as unsatisfactory as the analyses of the works themselves. Suggestions that some tonal references remain in Schoenberg's atonal music have persisted for some time. Is it enough simply to cite one of Schoenberg's statements in order to reject this line of thought? As Simms shows in other places, Schoenberg's comments cannot always be taken at face value. If so, shouldn't there be at least some fur-

ther discussion of this topic? And shouldn't there be at least some interaction with the secondary literature?[3]

Moreover, Forte's analytical approach has hardly gone unchallenged. Pitch class set theory has been highly controversial and has sparked a vigorous debate. Richard Taruskin (1979, 1986, 1987, 1988), George Perle (1990a, 1990b), and the present author (Haimo 1996) have raised questions about this method of analysis in general and its application to the works of Schoenberg in particular. Forte and his supporters have made numerous, forceful responses to these criticisms. At the very least, shouldn't some mention of this have made it into the footnotes of Simms's discussion? And wouldn't it have been appropriate for Simms to participate in this lively intellectual debate? Shouldn't we expect a book on Schoenberg's atonal music to engage forcefully with the debates about the structure of this music?

But even beyond this, must this be the sum of all possible choices? Tonal harmony or pitch-class sets? That's it? Nothing more? Does Simms have no independent views on the subject? Shouldn't he? Shouldn't someone who undertakes to write a book on Schoenberg's atonal music have some clear and original (not to mention thoroughly detailed) ideas on the pitch structure of these compositions?

Simms's failure to confront the relevant literature in his discussion of op. 11 is, unfortunately, not an exception, but the norm. Although the bibliography as a whole is rather impressive (including dozens upon dozens of recondite entries), Simms customarily fails to be in dialogue with that literature in an effective way. Time after time, relevant citations are either not made at all, or (as with op. 11) are given only the most cursory consideration.

For example, in the second chapter ("Schoenberg's Evolution toward Atonality"), Simms scarcely interacts with recent literature on the subject. Typical of this is his response to Walter Frisch's book, *The Early Works of Arnold Schoenberg: 1893–1908* (1993), which covers the same time span as Simms's second chapter. However, in the entire chapter, Simms cites Frisch's work only twice (footnotes 47 and 50) and both times, these citations are nominal. Yet, Frisch's book discusses in considerable detail many of the problems that Simms only limns in his chapter and has many forceful ideas about the evolution of Schoenberg's pitch language, ideas that are typically supported with cogent and illuminating analyses.

Indeed, in many ways, Frisch's book is a model of what Simms's book could have been. Like Simms, Frisch examines Schoenberg's works in a broad context, not limiting himself only to the pitch language. But, unlike Simms, Frisch does not let the more inclusive scope of his book lead to a superficial consideration of the pitch language. And, again, unlike Simms,

Frisch constantly interacts with previous writings on the subject, making his work part of a lively intellectual discourse.

For all of these reasons, Simms's book is a troubling mixture of excellence and negligence. On the one hand, he has provided a significant amount of information about Schoenberg's atonal compositions—their historical background, choice of texts, relationship to the composer's biography, and much else beside. Any subsequent scholar who wishes to examine any of these pieces will shorten his or her work considerably by beginning with Simms's discussions. Indeed, anyone wishing a good general introduction to the compositions and their historical background should start here. But, unfortunately, seeing these compositions in a wider context has come at the expense of a detailed and systematic examination of the pitch language and has come without a meaningful interaction with the work and ideas of others.

*Notes*

1. See, for example, Milton Babbitt's seminal articles (1955, 1960, 1961, 1962).
2. A highly successful example of the newer approach is Walter Frisch (1993).
3. Some of the more important post-war studies relating specifically to tonal relationships in op. 11 include: Reinhold Brinkmann (1969), Will Ogdon (1981), and Howard Cinnamon (1993). Simms cites only Brinkmann in this chapter.

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