Alban Berg's Three Pieces for Orchestra, Opus 6: Form and Thematic Structure, and their Relationship to *Wozzeck*

Mark DeVoto

On September 8, 1914, Alban Berg gave to Arnold Schoenberg as a birthday present the orchestral score of two of the Three Pieces for Orchestra, Opus 6. In an accompanying letter he explained: "For four years it has been my secret but strong hope and wish to dedicate something to you. The pieces I worked on with you, Mr. Schoenberg, the sonata, songs, and string quartet, were necessarily excluded, having been received directly from you. My hope of writing something independent and yet equal in value to the earlier works, so as to have something I could dedicate to you without angering you, failed me for several years. Now the kind invitation which you made to me last spring, on the ride from Amsterdam to Berlin, has given me the courage to attempt a work which I would not need to be ashamed to dedicate to you."

The reverent, even obsequious feelings which Berg felt for his teacher come out in this quotation. What are not expressed are the difficulties Berg experienced in getting even this far. The works which he had written in the two preceding years — the Altenberg Songs, Opus 4, and the Clarinet Pieces, Opus 5, had encountered Schoenberg's sharp criticism. Because the relevant correspondence has not yet been studied, what displeased Schoenberg is only partly clear to us, but clearly the relative brevity of the works in question had something to do with it; Schoenberg felt these to be contrary to Berg's expressive nature, which was naturally suited to longer and more developed pieces. Schoenberg also felt that Berg was too much concerned with "new means" [*neue Mittel*], novelty for novelty's sake, especially in the Altenberg Songs.

Whatever Berg's inclination towards short pieces may have been, Schoenberg's judgement seems to have been confirmed in all of Berg's later works. What was meant by "new means" can only be guessed, but in this regard Schoenberg seems to have been unjust to Berg. Could these "new means" have been the twelve-tone series in the first Altenberg song, or the twelve-tone chord in the third song, or perhaps the four-interval series or the retrograde motive in the first song? After all, these are adumbrations of Schoenberg's own twelve-tone technique developed twelve years later. In any case, Schoenberg's summary judgement of Berg's "new means" now appears merely peevish and by hindsight not a little envious, and Berg was absolutely right not to heed it. Perhaps Schoenberg could have admitted later that Berg was right after all, for he seems not to have complained that the Three Pieces for orchestra were too complicated — an objection that even today, 65 years later, would be entirely understandable. It is certain that many of Berg's compositional techniques that appear for the first time in the Altenberg Songs return with much greater intricacy in the Three Pieces, as though his imagination and self-discovery, bottled up during a difficult year when he composed only relatively little, were suddenly released and more decisively carried out.

The immediate stimulus seems to have been Berg's visit to Amsterdam in 1914, where he heard Schoenberg's Five Pieces for orchestra, Opus 16, for the first time. The sound and texture of that masterpiece, in which what has come to be called *Klangfarbenmelodie* is so important, left influences everywhere in Berg's Three Pieces. So did the music of Gustav Mahler, who had died three years before and whose memory Berg treasured. Several writers have called attention to the Mahlerian *Schwung* of the Three Pieces, from the characteristic employment of *Ländler* and march styles and dense, highly rhythmicized orchestral counterpoint right down to the actual resemblances of specific details. The most persistent spiritual characteristic of the Three Pieces, however, is what Mahler, Schoenberg, and Berg all shared in: the eschatological approach to tonality and form, the feeling of utmostness that stretches classical form into the most extreme complexity and that warps tonality to the limits of perceptibility and indeed well beyond it. The very temper of the times seemed to demand it, and it is not surprising that Berg should have completed the *Marsch* during the tenterhook days that immediately preceded the outbreak of the Great War. George Perle quite rightly refers to the *Marsch* as a *marche macabre*, psychologically comparable to Ravel's not-so-called *valse macabre*.

If it is possible to trace in the Three Pieces, as several writers have done, the psychological roots of Berg the dramatist, it is even more possible to trace the evolution of Berg the architect. And certainly it is simple to trace that evolution from Berg's earliest works, even from the early songs, in a direct line from the Piano Sonata, Opus 1, through the String Quartet, Opus 3, to the Three Pieces. These are all large-scale works whose structures are dominated by the most intense manipulation of a small number of melodic components; in other words, they are all pervasively thematic, the thematic process at times extending into every aspect of the musical texture. This is also true of the Altenberg Songs, Opus 4, whose middle three songs, though very short, all show a very tight internal organization, and in addition are thematically integrated into the overall cyclic structure that is more dramatically demonstrated by the much larger first and last songs.
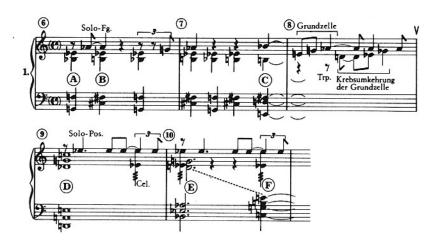
It is in the Three Pieces, however, that Berg tremendously increased the thematicity of his compositional technique. That increase, mandated by the expanded dimensions of the work, proceeded along two principal and opposite lines. The first line is that of literal repetition and invariance, as represented on the one hand by the use of several core motives and cells that seldom if ever change, and on the other by the application of systematic repetitions and contrapuntal procedures. The opposite and more refractory line is that of constant transformation, as represented by several motives which are developed relentlessly but continuously altered, so that they never appear the same way twice. Thematic transformation as a formal principle was not, after all, new to Berg, and the tried and true transformational processes of Liszt's symphonic works are amply echoed in Berg's early Piano Sonata. But the articulative processes of the Piano Sonata, or of Schoenberg's early tonal works to which the Sonata owes so much, presuppose a certain relative stability of thematic reappearances concomitant with the transformations, and it is precisely the lack of such stability that brands several of the Opus 6 themes. Such a theme can be envisioned as a philosophical exercise, namely that of seeing how many transformations can be projected without utterly destroying recognizability — a task made more difficult by the absence of any "standard version" of the theme. In Berg's case the recognizability of a theme under transformation usually depends on traditional properties: rhythm, length, contour, sometimes even instrumentation. Later, of course, Schoenberg took the opposite reach, eliminating all

those specifying characteristics of melodic projections and retaining only the invariant intervallic succession, and this great abstractional step became part of the very basis of serial technique.
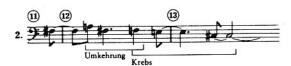
Some of the main formal outlines of the Three Pieces are easy enough to discern. The *Bogenform* principle, a favorite device of Berg's in all his works from the Seven Early Songs on, is evident in the Three Pieces as a whole and individually as well, most notably in the vaporous beginning and ending of the *Präludium*. As a principle of thematic association between movements, the *Bogenform* is only one manifestation of cyclicality in the work. A more persuasive cyclicality is afforded by the use of a relatively small number of distinct themes, distinct in that they usually occur consistently and in unaltered form. Beyond this cyclicality is microstructure of certain intervallic cells, about which I am not prepared to say much more than that they do appear to exist sometimes in Opus 6, and that while their genetic significance for the whole work may be great, I doubt that such significance could be demonstrated convincingly without the assistance of a third-generation digital computer.

For convenience I have distinguished, in the examples which follow, two categories of motives. Those occurring in more than one of the Three Pieces are designated with Greek letters; those peculiar to the individual pieces are labeled with Roman numerals.

The *Präludium* begins in vagueness, with unpitched percussion sounds. When the kettledrums enter in the third measure, indeterminate pitch is replaced by uncertain pitch, and then by definite pitches gradually articulated by an assortment of instruments. The textural similarity of these opening measures to the "Farben" movement of Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra is striking. As in Schoenberg's piece, changes in the basic sonority are effected by the unobtrusive entrance of some pitches and disappearance of others. In contrast, Berg articulates these changes not through a constantly shifting instrumentation with minimum rhythmic variety as Schoenberg does, but through a constantly shifting rhythmic and figurational texture with minimum change in instrumentation. Berg's cloudy texture here serves as in the opening Prelude of the Altenberg Songs, as the support of an emerging motive, first Ab in the high bassoon, then G-Ab, then E-G-Ab. The last of these, echoed in the same measure by muted trumpet, is the first clear statement of the intervallic cell 3-1, an important referential component that appears prominently in later motives (Example 1).

Two important motives follow in the next two measures. One of them, the fortissimo melody in mm. 11-13, is generated entirely by the basic cell just mentioned (Example 2).

It reappears in the bass of mm. 38-40, and again, with most of its original harmony, at mm. 160-161 of the *Marsch*. The other, a monotone Eb for ultrahigh solo trombone, in mm. 9-10, is a rhythmic motive (Example 1). Its pattern appears again at m. 14 in the low instruments, at mm. 36 and 38 in the horns, at the return measures 42-43, and at m. 119 of *Reigen*.

Thus far we have seen simple motives which reappear later at widely-scattered points. A more complex situation is that of the supporting harmony, for it too is thematic. The series of six chords beginning at mm. 6-10 (I have labeled them A through F, circled) is the harmonic basis of at least the beginning of the gradually accumulating texture of transformations starting at m. 16. I have traced it through m. 23 (see Example 3, mm. 15-23, on the following page; I don't think that this measure number in and of itself is symbolically important), and cannot find much of it beyond there because the small motivic fragments have by then assumed full command.

With the upbeat to m. 25 a second section of the episode begins with the inverted basic cell. The earlier harmonic background disappears and is gradually replaced by an enormously complex accumulation of statements, no two of them exactly alike, of a single motive which first appeared at mm. 20-21 (Example 4). (Just within the short space of mm. 31-35 the motive appears probably thirty times; but as each statement is varied in some way, and many are overlapped, it is hard to be certain.)
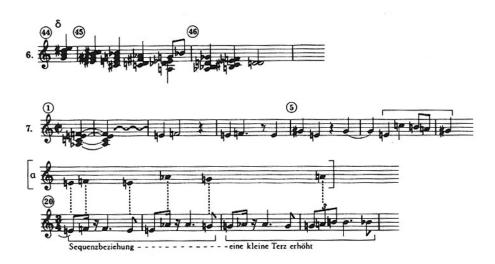
The climax to this process occurs at m. 36 (shown in Example 4a on the following page). As the climax peaks, the motive of Example 4 is shortened to four pitch-classes (C, Bb, Eb, Ab) in a simultaneous statement in five different note-values: sixteenth, eighth, quarter, triplet half, and half. The winding-down process leads to a new theme which becomes, both in its entirety and as a collection of three fragments α, β, and γ, one of the two chief themes of *Reigen*, as well as a source for themes in the *Marsch*.

As β is announced in m. 38 it simultaneously appears below in an extended form using the rhythmic motive of mm. 9-11, while in the bass, beginning at the end of the measure, the melody of Example 2 appears. A transition of two measures leads to a recapitulation of the original statement of the rhythmic motive and its harmonic background (mm. 42-43 ≡ mm. 9-11) with different scoring, the last chord serving as the first collateral harmony of a new melody δ which becomes the second chief theme of *Reigen* (Example 6). A quasi-retrograde restatement of the opening section follows, with the return to the single note, Ab, of the basic cell, the gradual evaporation of pitches, and finally the single tamtam stroke that began the movement.

Example 4a

Bruce Archibald's thoughtful article, to which much of the analysis here of *Reigen* is indebted, discerns in that piece "a kind of sonata form with introduction and coda." Archibald's appraisal of the sonata form is made principally on harmonic grounds. When one separately considers the thematic material involved, a somewhat different shape emerges: a large *Bogenform*, framed by introduction (mm. 1-19) and coda (mm. 111-121) which are both based on δ with collateral harmony as it first appeared in the *Präludium* but a semitone lower. Both the introduction and coda present δ initially over a C# pedal which is the only pitch-class in the chromatic totality *not* represented in the eleven-tone sonority at the very end of *Reigen*; this relationship could be called a *Bogenform* of complementation.

Reigen shares a kinship with the *Präludium* in the relative restrictedness of its thematic substance, which consists mostly of the α, β, γ, and δ themes subjected to the most intense variation and development. Only two others receive any extensive use. The *Präludium* themes in particular are constantly reborn in new guises and incorporated into new episodes of remarkable textural variability. Example 7 shows how the first self-standing melody in *Reigen* arises from the initial chord δ, immediately followed by a transformation of α into the "slow waltz" theme, a process illustrating Berg's characteristic ingenuity.

The complex counterpoint that is so pronounced in the *Präludium* and *Marsch* is lacking in much of *Reigen*, being replaced instead by a fascinating, delicate orchestration in the upper and middle registers. Yet certainly there are several notable passages where the *Ländler* character of the piece dissolves in episodes for the full orchestra of the most extreme contrapuntal complexity. Such a passage, beginning in m. 60, is initiated by a chord of three perfect fourths, to which further fourths are added in succession, the different voices above and below imitating and coalescing, until the climax is reached in m. 66 in a complete chromatic tower of eleven perfect fourths. (It should be noted that this tower of fourths is the only twelve-tone structure so far discovered in the Three Pieces. By contrast, the Altenberg Songs reveal two important twelve-tone constructions, one of them a genuine twelve-tone series. Could it be that Berg's apparent abandonment of the twelve-tone serial idea until *Wozzeck* may have had something to do with Schoenberg's supposed objection to the overly "theoretical" aspects of the Altenberg Songs? If this supposition could be substantiated, it would be one of the nicer ironies of music history.) A different episode of massive counterpoint in *Reigen* begins in m. 83 with a succession of ostinati; it breaks off abruptly in m. 89, only to begin again, hugely intensified. Igor Stravinsky called this passage "one of the most remarkable noises [Berg] ever imagined." As the texture subsides the tones of β gradually come together to form the waltz theme (Example 7) (m. 95ff., corresponding to m. 20ff.), while the waltz accompaniment is imperceptibly restored. The inversion of δ (which up to now appeared only as a fleeting background melody in mm. 49-51) now enters in the solo violin (m. 98ff.); simultaneously with this, at half speed, is the uninverted melody in the bass. From here to the end δ, its inversion, and variants of both, form nearly the entire thematic substance of the entire texture, excepting only a single return of β in the horns and trumpets in the last two measures.
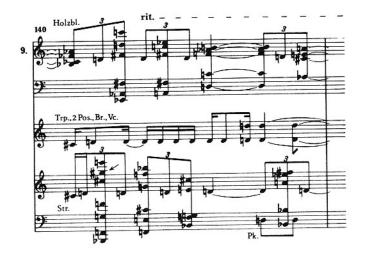
The *Marsch* poses greater problems for the analyst; it is as big as the *Präludium* and *Reigen* combined, and more reliably frenzied than either of them. If one considers the concept of "theme" in the narrower sense of a principally melodic component which returns not only in its immediate context but also with a certain frequency in the course of an entire piece, then one can discern in the *Marsch* at least 31
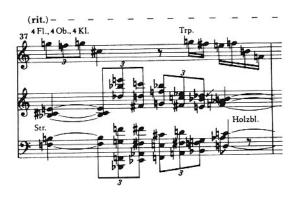
different themes, including important self-standing variants or inversions. Some of these themes are simply short motives, recognizable by their rhythm or monotone character, or by the presence of a distinguishing interval. Others consist of relatively long melodic lines, such as the string melody, 30 notes long, that forms the theme from m. 11 to m. 14.

Another dimension of Berg's thematic technique is revealed in his use of motivic harmonic progressions. In this regard he was a true adherent of the Schoenbergian model; he spoke about them several times in his Guide to Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*, although of course the motivic harmonic progression did not originate with Schoenberg. In the Three Pieces for Orchestra Berg expanded the associative principle into the structure of an actual chord series: what in the String Quartet, Opus 3, and the Altenberg Songs, Opus 4, had been an association of two harmonies, became in the Three Pieces a succession of several, and in *Wozzeck* a succession of many, as for example in the fourth scene of Act II, based on a series of 20 chords. In an expanded form, such a procedure brings to mind Bach's "Goldberg" Variations or Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, whose harmonic basis is structurally more important than the melodic. Yet even Berg's motivic harmony in the *Marsch* shows a tendency towards structural variation in harmonically connected passages. Thus the discovery of such connections is laborious and sometimes even a matter of luck. It is not at all obvious, for example, by repeated hearings, nor even by analysis of the orchestral score, that mm. 25-28 and mm. 136-139 have almost the identical harmonic succession; the difficulty of perceiving the connection is not just because of the transposition of the later passage down a semitone, but also because of the very different *Auskomponierung* (see Examples 8 and 9). In view of the succession of musical events, one might suppose that m. 140 depends on m. 29; actually it is derived from m. 37 (m. 36 corresponding to m. 28).

Kondensierung der T. 136–137 (weiße Noten) und der T. 25–26 (schwarze Noten). Unterschiede sind mit Pfeilen bezeichnet.

The principle of nonstandardization of themes, already evident in the *Präludium* and *Reigen* (it resurfaces in the Andante affettuoso, Act I scene 5, in *Wozzeck*), is applied systematically in the *Marsch*. Occasionally the analyst is compelled to determine the basic form of a theme arbitrarily or statisically, much as one might establish a textbook model of the sonata form by comparing a hundred sonata movements by thirty or forty composers. This makes an analysis of the pitch and interval content of the themes of the *Marsch* extremely arduous and perhaps pointless. The analyst can no longer rely on the uniformity of motivic pitch content for defining the thematic structure, at least, no analyst who is not willing to spend hours, or even days or months, in comparing all the thematic differences and precisely studying their connections. These difficulties lead inescapably to the question: given that there are more or less distinct variants, do their differences themselves fall into any kind of pattern? For the present, I can answer this question only indirectly: in some apparently intractable passages in other works of Berg, the deviations are unquestionably systematic; in other cases, one can only say that the solution to the puzzle has not yet been found.

The sheer abundance of themes and the even greater abundance of variants themselves form a compositional resource in the *Marsch*. They provide a climate of structural freedom in which the possibility of transforming one theme into another becomes not only plausible but actual. We have already seen how the α-theme of the *Präludium* is reshaped into the waltz theme in *Reigen*. Another simple

example of transformation occurs in mm. 20-23 of the *Marsch* (Example 10). The opening motive I in the bass is taken up again in the upper voice of m. 20 with only its final note changed, and is then varied by fixing the initial note and transposing the other two; the third restatement is a repetition of the two statements just heard, joined together and supplemented by two more notes, forming the same intervallic succession as α (Example 5, transposed). The absence of collateral major thirds, which normally accompany α, and the different rhythm (recalling I), make the connection with α easily overlooked.

Theme II, first appearing in m. 2 (Example 11) is utilized much more extensively. It soon returns (m. 8) in inversion, continuing with an extension by means of the collateral major thirds. This extension, with collateral voices, recalls α with its partial mapping in the whole-tone scale (Example 11, last staff); thus the connection of β with theme II at its next occurrence (m. 17) should not come as a surprise (Example 12).

Within the limits of practical audibility, the multiplicity of themes in the *Marsch* nevertheless hinders the ready comprehension of their relationships, not only because of the often complex contrapuntal connections between them, but also because of the complicated supporting material. Berg counters this difficulty in part by stating most themes very distinctly in their first appearances, and by separating the textures into recognizable structural blocks in which at least some themes predominate. Nevertheless, from the structural point of view, the *Marsch* is by far the most complex of Berg's works, and even today it is one of the most difficult to bring off in performance, if only because of the uncertainty, on the part of both performers and listeners, as to what parts of the texture are most important to hear;

unfortunately Berg's *Hauptstimme* and *Nebenstimme* indications solve the problem only in part. After repeated hearings one recognizes that some themes are distinctive by virtue of appearing in isolation, rather than by their instrumentation within a single complex texture; their relative significance depends as much on their audible projection as upon the frequency of their appearance.

The contrapuntal web of the *Marsch* includes, as might be expected, the widest variety of types and densities: from simple melody and accompaniment (e.g., m. 91f.) to counterpoint of three themes (m. 29f.) to seven-part canon in different note-values (m. 75; mm. 84-90) to a texture of two three-part canons together with a third incomplete three-part canon, partly with collateral voices, all simultaneously over a pedal point (mm. 115-119). Such thematic treatments appear in episodes separated by cadences or changes of tempo or which are integrated directly into the general thematic succession. In any case, the *Marsch* unifies all these disparate ideas within a single lengthy "symphonic" piece that drives orchestral declamation and virtuosity to extremes never reached before and that have hardly been reached since.

Many of Berg's compositional techniques were carried further in *Wozzeck*, after a two-year interruption due to the First World War. We know that the literal quotation of mm. 80-83 of the *Marsch* appears in *Wozzeck*, Act I, scene 2, mm. 274-278. In general the structural similarities between the Three Pieces for Orchestra and *Wozzeck* are revealed as more subtle and refined in the later work. In *Wozzeck* it is possible to recognize a simplification of some of Berg's techniques, a simplification that is simultaneously a strengthening, in that the unnecessary complication of the musical surface is avoided. How this change came about is an interesting subject whose elucidation will demand much future effort. I hope, in this paper, to have illustrated some of the framework for that.

(translated by the author)