

ODE TO NAPOLEON

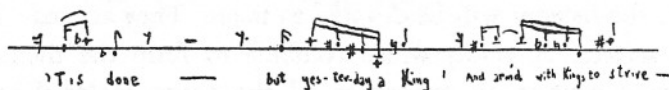
KURT LIST

THE twentieth century scarcely permits anyone not to be with it. The brutality of the time has torn down the splendid isolation of the artist. Though Arnold Schönberg has never expressly entered the field of politics, he too has always been a fighting artist. In his search for truth, his life without compromise, and his striving for new musical worlds, he has waged a ceaseless war against hypocrisy, decay and stagnation. The *Harmonielehre*, a true manifesto of new ways, attacks not only theoretical conceptions, but the laziness and superficiality of the stereotyped mind as well. His music destroys the comfort of outworn clichés and shows that truth is more alluring than easy success.

In setting to music Byron's *Ode to Napoleon*, he now makes his first specifically political gesture. The intent here is to express the civilized world's contempt for tyranny and dictatorship. His means to that end are without noise or pathos. The work was originally scored for speaking voice, piano and string quartet, which latter has since been enlarged to a string orchestra.* The lack of heavy apparatus is significant. It is not the great orchestra's roar, but man, himself, who is permitted to speak in protest against intolerable fate.

The choice of Byron's poem is not altogether happy. Byron is at his best when he bites. In this serious effusion, the lines are monotonous in rhythm, shallow and dragging. They wander aimlessly along, achieving calmness and beauty only in the last stanza, when the free spirit of Washington is contrasted with the egocentricity of the emperor. The parallel with Hitler is all too obvious. But Schönberg chose the poem in order to generalize from a historic parallel. Instead of limiting himself to the cold psychopathic cruelty of the contemporary dictator, he erects a monument to a struggle that reaches beyond the terrifying immediacy of the present. His success in building a master work, despite the handicaps of the verse, is further testimony to his genius.

The *Ode* was completed in June 1942. Against a background of strings and piano, the speaker recites. His part is written on one line, as in the following example: †



* The New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra will introduce the *Ode* next fall.
† (All quotations are taken from the original score, copyright 1944 by G. Schirmer, Inc.)

Thus the activity of the voice is rhythmically determined, its phrasing prescribed. Unlike the *Sprechstimme* in *Pierrot Lunaire*, however, it receives no direction as to absolute pitch. Inflections are suggested but not literally demanded, and much is left to the speaker's creative imagination. The chromatic accidentals seem to serve two purposes; first they help break up what might become a diatonic picture, and second they blend the speaker's timbre with the sound of the orchestra. The effect is not so much of a voice accompanied by instruments, as of a tonal combination of speech and music. Schönberg breaks the monotony of the poetic rhythm, to the great advantage of the work as a whole, by veiling the endless succession of nine-line stanzas with the rhyme scheme a b a b c c b d d.

The music is composed in the twelve-tone technic, but even in a close analysis of the score one fails to discern the twelve-tone series. The obvious use of many motifs (predominantly the Washington motif near the end) in inversion, crab, diminution and augmentation gives the series the function originally planned by Schönberg; it serves as the source of tone material, but not as thematic substance. The motifs though derived from the series are not identical with it. Representing the thematic germ, they allow for melodic sequences. The series is thus a device for the composer, not a tonal pattern, and of no interest to the audience which is aware only of the motifs.

This tendency to sublimate the series has been apparent in all of Schönberg's works – and in those of his pupils as well – from the very beginning of the twelve-tone technic. In the *Ode* it reaches its highest fulfillment. As early as May 1935, in a letter to Richard S. Hill of Cornell, Schönberg wrote "I think . . . that the analysis of the use of the series is of no greater importance than this recognition of the motival structure . . ." The achievement of the *Ode* should put an end to the fable of Schönberg as formal constructivist.

The main theme of this work, (which enters after a short introduction) is of great interest, since it represents, by and large, the technic Schönberg has employed during recent years to achieve balance between series and motif. Since the motifs are the building elements, the chief attention of the listener will be devoted to them. They are mainly characterized by selected intervals which combine to form the theme and in this manner constitute an exposition of the entire material to follow. (Consult the quotation on the opposite page.)

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The first system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a melodic line featuring various accidentals and a fermata. The middle staff is a treble clef with a more complex accompaniment, including chords and a fermata. The bottom staff is a bass clef with a rhythmic accompaniment.

The second system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff continues the melodic line with a long, sweeping phrase. The middle staff provides harmonic support with chords and a fermata. The bottom staff continues the bass line with rhythmic patterns.

The third system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes. The middle staff has a simpler accompaniment with a fermata. The bottom staff includes a triplet of eighth notes in the bass line.

The fourth system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff has a melodic line with a fermata. The middle staff has a complex accompaniment with a fermata. The bottom staff features a complex bass line with multiple triplets of eighth notes.

The predominant intervals are: the minor second, minor third, fourth and, as combinations of the latter two, the minor sixth. Note these intervals in the melody – top stave: F-A \flat ; A \flat -D \flat ; D \flat -E; E-F; F-D and so on – and compare with the intervals quoted below. These are also the predominant intervals in the lower voices which take their material from the motivic content of the melody and work it into a counterpoint. The individual motifs, characterizing certain personages and phases in the poem, are split off from this thematic exposition and develop independently.

Thus, the fourth at the end of the theme assumes independent motivic character, giving the impression of a military signal and leading into a phrase (characterizing Napoleon) in which ascending fourths alternate with descending minor seconds.



The Napoleon motif gradually approaches the Washington motif, the end-aim of the structural evolution being to build up a steady surge to the apotheosis of Washington. The first motif undergoes continuous metamorphosis until, near the end, it appears over rhythmically diminished imitations of the same motif in the lower voices, in its final form.



The Washington motif contains as an essential interval, the fifth which, in its inversion of the Napoleon fourth represents Washington as the opposite force. This fifth appears as interval between the first and third, second and fourth, and fifth and seventh notes of the motif.

The similarity of the rhythmical position of these notes, – either on the weaker beat, (first and third notes, and fifth and seventh notes) or on the stronger beat (second and fourth notes) – accentuates the interval. Rhythmically the Washington motif falls into two parts of which the second, consisting of the last four notes, is a diminution of the first. Each starts on an upbeat, like the Napoleon motif, but then, unlike it, continues in equal time values. Thus a tantalizing impression is engendered of similarity and yet dissimilarity with the dictator motif.

Hand in hand with this development comes a loosening of strict vertical relationships. Consonances are not deliberately avoided and there is repeated doubling of melodic lines in octaves. All of which makes for longer stretches of tonal complexes where triads figure predominantly.



The ending appears tonal, though it must be kept in mind that the chord progressions result from the series, not from tonal considerations.



Clearly discernible is a tonal cadence on E_b . Analysis of the last five chords yields the functional progression 1-V-1. The first three represent the first degree in E_b , though altered differently each time, appearing respectively as ninth, seventh and seventh chord with the third omitted. (Notice the treatment of the third; in the first chord it appears as both G and G_b thus creating a certain ambiguity as to its major or minor character; in the second it is there only as G_b , definitely setting the minor mood; in the third chord it is omitted, thus leaving the question of major or minor undecided.) E_b is the only note that reappears steadily in the moving voices through all these three chords, an emphasis that firmly establishes its importance. It disappears in the fourth chord (dominant) only to appear again as bass note in the last chord, where it assumes a strong tonic function which is enhanced through the fifth step B_b-E_b in the middle voice (lowest on second staff.) The fourth chord is the dominant; its notes are, according to structural orthography, B_b , D, $F\sharp$

(altered) $A\flat$, $C\flat$ (altered), E double \flat (altered) and G double \flat (altered). It is therefore a thirteenth chord. Tonal combinations thus emerge from the series itself.

The extent of the $E\flat$ tonal influence is further revealed by Schönberg's quotation of the motif of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* (Victory) in its original form, without incongruous effect. (See the *Tristan* quotation in Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite*.) It is interesting to compare the original quotation with a later use of the same motif when it derives from a part of the series which does not yield a tonal appearance.



(Incidentally, Schönberg was not the first to use the Beethoven motif. Some thirty years back Charles Ives employed it as a structural motif throughout his *Concord Sonata*, though in an entirely different manner.)

An interesting departure from the four and eight measure grouping of classicism is Schönberg's use of a thirteen measure unit. Each thirteen measures represent one musical thought, giving the work structural equilibrium. To mention a few outstanding groups: measures 1-13 bring introduction and theme; the speaker's voice enters in measure 26; Beethoven's Victory motif is quoted once in its original form, from measure 64 to 65, and once as determined by the series in measure 156; the last stanza of the poem (the only one dedicated to Washington) starts in measure 247; the climax of the apotheosis begins in measure 259. The composition ends with half a group (six and a half measures as cadence) in the middle of the last measure.

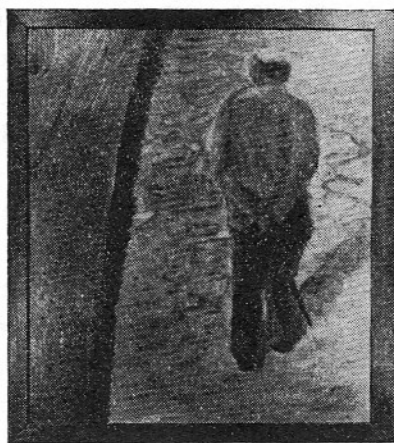
III

What has been said about the relationship of series and motif, the structural treatment of the motifs, the arrangement of the tonal complexes and the groupings of measures may give the appearance of mechanical constructivism in Schönberg's music. But in order to create a work of even beauty, the artist must have a plan for the minutest details of execution. The plan is no substitute for inspiration or invention. It merely serves as a framework on which to build the artist's ideas. All the great masters have had such plans. What the scale was for Mozart, the series is for

Schönberg; periodization in four or eight groups served Beethoven, while Schönberg employs a thirteen measure grouping; both Bach and Schönberg plan their tonality, the first does it for the entire work, the latter for shorter or longer structures within the work. Such planning is obvious to the musical analyst who observes the processes whereby the work is constructed, who attempts to relive each stage. The audience receiving the work as a finished whole can only be impressed by its total appearance. But this appearance, to be perfect, must be based upon the artist's well-thought out plan.

About the actual orchestral sound I cannot speak, since the work has not yet been performed. However, it can be safely said that the scoring allows for full and interesting sonority, which at times is somewhat impressionistic. On the whole the part devoted to Napoleon sounds jagged, while the apotheosis of Washington has a dark, warm color, which expands to a majestic glorification not unlike the exalted glow of a Bach oratorio.

Schönberg's *Ode* seems to have carried him beyond his initial concept. Its clearness and beauty will doubtless impress many who were bewildered by his work in the twenties. He is not the grand old man of modern music stowed away on a dusty musicological shelf. He remains young among us and among all those who, though much younger in years, grow old in spirit.



SCHÖNBERG
Self-Portrait, 1910