

“Organized Post-Tonality” and its Aural Perception. The Interaction of Primary and Composite Segments in Schoenberg’s Piano Piece Op. 23, No. 2

Abstract. The term *free atonality* was soon after its emergence heavily denied by Arnold Schoenberg, as is reported by Anton Webern (Webern 1930, see Slonimsky 1971). Indeed, the oeuvre of the Second Viennese School composed between circa 1908 and 1921 is characterized by musical material that is neither without tonality in a broader sense, nor free in the sense of being unstructured at all. On the contrary, the tone material in these pieces is very strictly organized even though these compositions predate dodecaphonic principals.

This leads to the assumption that two levels are coexisting within the focused musical repertoire: (1) a musical surface level which may be distinguished by musical structures that can be aurally (or visually with a score) perceived more immediately, and (2) the structural background level, which is often determined in the pre-compositional phase and in contrast to the musical surface, thus its audibility opens up only after theoretically defining the work. The coexistence of these two levels is a rather intriguing aspect, as it led, at the time of its emergence, to new concepts of composition.

Within the text Schoenberg’s attempts to invent brand new reprise techniques around 1921 are analytically revisited, using Schoenberg’s piano piece Op. 23, No. 2 as an example. The aim is to show how within these reprise sections the structural background level can be made audible by applying the set-theoretical concept of the *inclusion relation*. In that connection, the text wishes to disclose the tension resulting from the permanent interaction between immediately perceivable *primary segments* and structurally relevant *secondary segments*, categories that are understood as representatives of the two diverging levels described earlier. “Audibilizing” the structural background of the piano piece in focus might lead to insights being relevant both to its analytical and practical interpretation.

Keywords: Schoenberg, pitch-class set theory, post-tonal music, analysis.

The European continent may be called the cradle of classical modernism and, thus, also the birthplace of post-tonal music, yet the American continent is the cradle of musical set theory. Since Arnold Schoenberg’s emigration to the United States in 1933, the discourse about his music and the music of the Second Viennese School can be described as being divided into two parts: the European and the American. During the years after the Second World War only very few more or less popular systematic approaches to classify post-tonal musical material were being developed in Europe, in example the teaching books of Hanns Jelinek (Jelinek 1952) and Herbert Eimert (Eimert 1950). In contrast to that situation, the United States were, among other beneficial circumstances, profiting from Schoenberg’s presence at that time, and research on the field of post-tonal theory was blossoming.¹

The development of pitch-class set theory is one of the most crucial outcomes. Pioneer works by authors such as Milton Babbitt (Babbitt 1946), Allen Forte (Forte 1955), and Howard Hanson (Hanson 1960) attempt to deliver solutions to questions surrounding post-tonal compositional techniques and tonal materials that are left unanswered by other analytical systems and tools. One of those aspects is the discrepancy between the level of tonal structures in the background of a given work and the level of the musical surface. Such a discrepancy becomes most relevant during Schoenberg’s turn from so-called free atonality to dodecaphony around 1920–1923. During that phase the composer invented brand new reprise techniques in which, while the reappearance of certain tonal materials is hidden only in the structural background, the musical foreground provides some seemingly completely new arrangement.

Probably the most remarkable example of those techniques is to be found within the piano piece, Op. 23, No. 2, composed in the summer of 1920 (Sichardt 1990: 206).² According to Ludwig Holtmeier, within this brief composition the two poles of free-atonality and dodecaphony are colliding, both being “in full command of their power” (Holtmeier 1999: 50).³ A realization of reprise moments contained in this composition would be hard to achieve just by listening to it. Therefore, it seems necessary to have an analytical view on the piece, at first, to point out where those reprises are hidden.

¹ In that connection, John Covach recently discussed the existence of an “Americanization” of Schoenberg’s compositional respective theoretical concepts, a procedure that might be compared to the one that it is already accepted since a long time in the case of Heinrich Schenker (Covach 2018).

² A fragmentary version of the piece was written down by Schoenberg already on 8 July 1920. Until 27 July 1920, more sketches were drawn and the first complete writing was made.

³ Own translation, original text: “...im Vollbesitz ihrer Kräfte...” For a detailed analysis of the op. 23 cycle of piano pieces see furthermore Bailey 2001.

The musical score is divided into several systems, each with specific performance instructions and dynamic markings. The segments are labeled as follows:

- System 1:** "Sehr rasch (♩)", "heftig", "pp". Segments A1, A2, A3, A4.
- System 2:** "poco pesante", "A5 //", "A8", "A9", "B3", "B5".
- System 3:** "B7 + B8", "B10 + B11 + B13", "frei", "accel.", "ppp". Segments B6, B9, B12.
- System 4:** "frei", "accel.", "ppp". Segment B1.
- System 5:** "etwas ruhiger im Ausdruck", "rit.", "B2", "B4", "B5", "B7", "B10", "B11", "B12". Segments B3, B8, B9, B13.
- System 6:** "accelerando - cresc.", "molto rit.", "part of B3", "ff", "fff", "sf". Segments B7, B4.
- System 7:** "A1 (starting with d)", "etwas langsamer", "part of A3", "A5", "cresc.", "molto cresc.". Segments A2, A4, A6, A7.
- System 8:** "Pesante", "allmählich langsamer werden", "part of A9", "B1", "ff", "sf", "dim.". Segments A8, A9.

A. Schoenberg, *Five Piano Pieces* Op. 23, Wilhelm Hansen, ed. no. 2326, Copenhagen 1923, p. 6, bars 1–7; “segmentation” with changes after J. Maegaard, *Studien zur Entwicklung des dodekaphonen Satzes bei Arnold Schoenberg*, Copenhagen 1972, vol. 3, p. 66–67.

A. Schoenberg, *Five Piano Pieces* Op. 23, Wilhelm Hansen, ed. no. 2326, Copenhagen 1923, p. 6, bars 6–9.

A. Schoenberg, *Five Piano Pieces* Op. 23, Wilhelm Hansen, ed. no. 2326, Copenhagen 1923, p. 7, bars 12–18.

Figures 1a, 1b and 1c. Organization of tonal material and reprise moments within Schoenberg’s piano piece, Op. 23, No. 2 (reproduced after Schönberg, Arnold: *Fünf Klavierstücke*, Op. 23, ed. no. 2326: 6f. Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen). The segmentation is based on the analysis of J. Maegaard (Maegaard 1972 [vol. 3]: 66f.)

The exposition section reaches from bars 1 to 6 and is divided in two parts, named A (bars 1 to 4) and B (bars 5 and 6). While a reprise moment of Part A occurs in Bar 15, the tonal material of Part B is repeated independently from Part A from bars 8 and 13 on. Already this division of the material being exposed within the first bars of the composition shows that, obviously, two levels of perception are relevant for that composition: Part B starts on the first beat of Bar 5, which is, at the same time, the ending point of the preceding phrase, the great crescendo, starting with the upbeat in Bar 2.

For this reason, I may from now on distinguish between (1) the musical surface level which is identical with musical motives, phrases and – to use a term by Schoenberg – “*Gedanken*” and can be perceived immediately by the listener and interpreter and (2) the structural background level, which refers to the tonal material and – often being in contrast to the musical surface level – sometimes opens up its audibility only after exploring and theoretically defining the work.

Let us first have a look at the tonal material of the exposition bars. Where there is no such compositional principle as a tone row functioning as an obvious source of cohesion, it is difficult to decide both how to locate the structural background level and whether it should be to a great extent identical with the musical surface level (at least when being introduced the first time) or not. In terms of pitch-class set theory the question arises as to which way the tonal material should be grouped together.⁴

In 1972, the Danish composer and musicologist Jan Maegaard published an extensive analytical study on Schoenberg’s pre-twelve-tone works based on the composer’s own compositional sketches (Maegaard 1972). Though Maegaard does not use pitch-class set theory, his analytical methods are very close to it, at least when it comes to drawing circles and geometrical figures around groups of notes that belong together, in this way providing a de facto segmentation. However, simply copying Maegaard’s analytical figures in connection with Op. 23, No. 2 (see Maegaard 1972 [vol. 3]: 66f.) and “translating” them into pitch-class sets is not possible as it bears some problem. According to Allen Forte’s “classical” set theory⁵, only sets containing between three and nine pitch classes possess analytical relevance. However, Maegaard’s figures B2, B7, B11, and B13 contain less than three notes. Furthermore, Figure A5 consists of altogether 10 different pitch classes. As a solution to these analytical problems, the excessively small figures may be merged with their neighboring figures and to divide A5 into two parts (see Figure 1a).

These analytical procedures can be justified by a powerful set-theoretical tool with regards to the aural perception of post-tonal pitch structures: the inclusion relation.

Figure 2 displays musical notation for various bars of Op. 23, No. 2, showing pitch-class sets. Each staff includes a set label, an interval vector in brackets, and a sequence of pitch classes. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat.

- A1: 9-3 [767763] 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- A5 II: 6-2 [443211] 9 2 5 8 6 7
- A6: 6-31 [223431] 5 8 1 9 2 6 7 1 4 2 6 9
- A7: 6-Z17 [322332] 5 9 2 6 1 3
- A8: 6-5 [422232] 6 1 5 3 9 8
- A3: 5-3 [322210] 4 3 8 6 2 5 6 7 8 4
- A4: 4-7 (12) [201210] 2 6 4 8 4 8 5 7
- A5 I: 4-2 [221100] 2 5 6 3 4 3 8 6 5 6 7 8
- A9: 4-13 [112011] 1 9 7 3 3 5 2 1 7 8 3 2
- A2: 3-4 [100110] 1 6 8 4 9 1 8 2 4 7 4 5 9 3 6
- B3: 7-Z36 [444342] 5 7 2 8 9 4 6
- B4: 7-3 [544431] 2 6 3 5 8 4 1
- B12: 6-Z41 [332232] 4 9 5 2 7 3
- B10 + B11 + B13: 6-Z40 [333231] 4 9 2 5 3 8 5 1 4 3 6 7
- B1 + B2: 5-9 [231211] 2 6 7 5 8
- B6 + B7: 5-Z36 [222121] 5 1 3 2 6
- B9: 5-6 [311221] 5 7 8 4 2 8 1 9 6 3
- B7 + B8: 4-6 (12) [210021] 3 5 9 4 6 3 1 5
- B1: 3-3 [101100] 1 8 9 4 1 2 6 2 3 7 5 8 8 4 6
- B5: 3-9 (12) [010020] 3 9 4 6 1 5 9 4 7
- B8: 3-5 [100011] 5 9 4 3 1 5 7 2 8 1 3 9
- B10 = A2 (U): 3-4 [100110] 1 6 9 4 9 2 5 1 4 7 4 8 8 2 6

Figure 2. Affiliation of all musical sets used in Op. 23, No. 2 to Figure A1, according to the inclusion relation (this graph has been published in Lewandowski 2014: 319f.)

⁴ Sarah Schaffer has discussed this aspect in a comprehensive study (Schaffer 1991).

⁵ The term “classical set theory” refers to the theoretical contents being presented in Forte 1973.

It provides the possibility of both visually and aurally recognizing relations between certain groups of notes, as they are defined as belonging to one family. In the case of Schoenberg's piano piece Op. 23, No. 2, Maegaard's Figure A1 may be considered a superset. All other figures are subsets of A1, meaning that they are related to A1 through either transposition, inversion, or transposition of the inversion. This even might bear a set-theoretical understanding of Schoenberg's term "Keimzelle", the motivic cell given with A1, which is not only developed on the syntactical level (the musical surface), but also on the level of the structural background. At this point, it is not claimed that one is able to hear the exact segmentation of the opening bars of Op. 23, No. 2 given by Maegaard, however, it is assumed that the presence of the inclusion relation explains why we are able to hear the tonal material within that composition as coherent. Therefore, the use of the term "ordered" or "organized post-tonality" is preferred instead of "free atonality" because that term might be misinterpreted as random disordered post-tonal composing, with no underlying compositional rules.

Let us now have a look at the first reprise moment, the reoccurrence of Part B in bars 8 and 9 (see Figure 1b). This short musical section should be played "*etwas ruhiger im Ausdruck*" (somewhat calmer in expression). It is introduced by the mirrored chord at the end of the preceding bar, whose tonal material also contains Figure B1, so that Bar 8 starts with B2. This chord has been described by Holtmeier as the gateway to modernism (Holtmeier 1999: 45). According to him, from the moment of its appearance, everything would be different because of a new-born definition of reprise that follows. Not only does Schoenberg choose a completely new musical character – a mysterious, quietly floating atmosphere which is created by low registers, very soft dynamics as well as half notes and the constant use of triplets – but he also constructs the greatest contrasts on the level of the tonal material. Figures that were consisting of chords within the first bars are now transformed into melodic lines, such as B3. The previous melodic lines within the exposition section appear now as mainly chordal figures (see for example Figure B4).

Though the identity of the tonal material between these bars 8/9 and the previous bars 5/6 within the exposition section is apparent, the musical surface level hides the fact that both passages are linked to each other. Significantly, this concealment evokes the work of Schoenberg's musical rival, Heinrich Schenker, who understood such a hidden musical camouflage in biological terms as a concealed repetition ("*mehr verborgenen Wiederholungen*") (Schenker 1956: 155). In any event, the compositional procedures being effective here may be only brought to light by analyzing the structural background level. Given that analysis, a structural coherence might even be disclosed to the listener's or interpreter's ear.

Figure 3. Arrangement of Figure A1 in bars 10–12
(reproduced after Schönberg, Arnold: Fünf Klavierstücke, Op. 23, ed. no. 2326: 6f. Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen)

The following passage, bars 10–12, is defined by the nine-tone Figure A1, the superset of the whole piece. It cannot be described as a reprise section, because A1 is not followed by its subsets of the exposition part. Instead, several transpositions of the superset in combination with its attendant three-tone Figure A2 are arranged here in a way that shows remarkable characteristics of the treatment of sets within Schoenbergian twelve-tone technique, which was developed nearly at the same time. When the German theoretical discourse states that within these bars "*Reihentechnik*" (row technique) determines the compositional background that

would be the antithesis to free atonality within Op. 23, No. 2, it suffers from a lack of adequate terminology.⁶ From the very beginning on, Schoenberg composes sets (and not tone rows in the sense of the word), groups of tones in which there are no hierarchical orders, but every member stands in equal relation to every other member (Schoenberg 1976: 72–96). The graph shows how within every occurrence of Figure A1 the ninth tone is put to the front position, while the other members are used pairwise, building four simultaneous intervals (either seconds or thirds). Altogether, there are six transpositions of A1. Each form is transposed 7 half steps (a perfect fifth) higher, compared to the preceding one. The musical foreground is mainly identical here with the structural background, which is often the case in Schoenberg's early twelve-tone compositions.⁷

The identification of two distinct levels in connection with the reduction to one (or two) “mother sets” leads us to discover its own aesthetic. That approach is distinguished from compositional contexts in which several different sets are involved, which is usually more associated with “free atonality”.⁸

Two more reprise sections follow within Op. 23, No. 2 (see Figure 1c). They are interrupted by another occurrence of the pair A1 and A2 in Bar 14 before the final section again is determined by row technical and set technical procedures that use only one set pair. It may be not by chance that these procedures have finally won the fight within that piece by speaking the last word, in this way quasi predicting Schoenberg's near compositional future.

However, of special interest with regards to the focused aspects are the two reprise sections comprising bars 13 and 15–17. The first reprise moment refers to Part B of the exposition, consisting of the figures B1, B4, and a fragment of Figure B3. The fragment can be clearly explained by the inclusion relation.

After a reminiscence of the end of the climactic passage in bars 10–13 within Bar 14, there occurs a last reprise from Bar 15 on, which soon dissoles into fragments (see the figures at the end in the left hand). Here, as well as in the preceding reprise section in Bar 13, the structural background level has to be considered again as independent from the musical surface level. Schoenberg uses composite segments (see in example B4 bars 13/14) and also changes the appearance of some figures by shortening them (see Figure A3 Bar 15) or double-defining some notes (for example the note A in the bass register in Bar 15 belongs to both figures A4 and A5).

Of some special interest might be the recurrence of this Figure A5, whereas the marked note f1 is not identical with the d1 in the exposition section. This difference is commonly known as a mistake by Schoenberg (see for example Ganter 1997: 125).

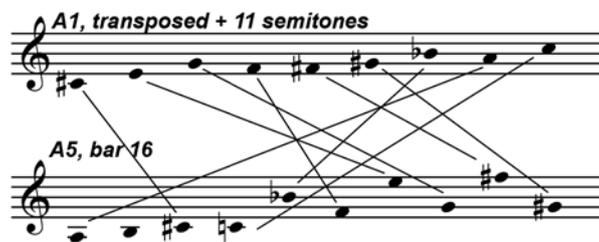


Figure 4. Figure A1 considered as subset of A5

The correct note has to be the f1 – what might be proved not only by looking at the sketches, but probably also by analytical procedures: According to the inclusion relation, Figure A1 (having been considered the superset of the whole composition so far) is a subset of Figure A5 in the version containing the pitch-class f. Figure 4 shows the identity of tone members between the two sets: It becomes clear, when A1 is transposed ten half steps higher. It has to be added, that, in terms of “classical” set theory, sets being larger than 9 notes are of no analytical relevance. Nevertheless, a set of 9 members being a subset of a super set consisting of 10

⁶ Michael Beiche has discussed problems around terminology concerning Schoenberg's theoretical and compositional thoughts and concepts (Beiche 1984). See also Alsmeier 2001: 54, and Perle 1977: 2).

⁷ The *Musette* from Schoenberg's *Suite für Klavier*, Op. 25 has a very similar texture with vertical borders between two occurrences of a set form and might serve as an example to illustrate that fact. Analytical studies including Schoenberg's suite for piano are presented by Georg Krieger (Krieger 1968), Claus Ganter (Ganter 1997), and Eun-Mi Ko (Ko 1998).

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno describes this sound “... flashing like steel furniture from Bauhaus” (own translation, original text: “... blitzend wie Stahlmöbel aus dem Bauhaus”) (Adorno 1984: 425).

members is a case of some special construction – be it conscious or not.⁹ It provides a possibility for considering the tonal material of Op. 23, No. 2 and its compositional processes as coherent, with regards to both analytical and aural aspects.

The acceptance of pitch-class set theory beyond the borders of the Anglo-American theoretical discourse took quite a long time. Michiel Schuijjer characterizes those continental discrepancies in the field of post-tonal musical analysis by referring to an anecdote that happened as late as 1999 during the 4th European Music Analysis Conference in Rotterdam: an American scholar asked why the participants of a discussion on methods of analyzing post-tonal music did not talk about pitch-class sets. The French chairman responded that nobody *talked* about pitch-class sets because nobody could *hear* them (Schuijjer 2008: 1f.).

This comment contains two characteristic issues concerning the discussion around set theory: first, it shows the ongoing aversion against this systematic approach that, in comparison to European ones, would lack focus on individual rules to be found in every composition of the classical modern era. Second, it bears some critique regarding the fact that set theory has been designed as an analytical tool concentrating merely on the tonal material and not on aural aspects. Indeed, only in more recent years, set theory seems to have become more open and sensitive to contexts of *hearing* pitch-class sets. Approaches of post-tonal ear training based on the training of hearing pitch-class sets have been introduced, for example, by Michael L. Friedmann (Friedmann 1990), Michael Berry (Berry 2009: 23–44), and Jeremiah Goyette.¹⁰ But while these approaches mainly provide good strategies in aurally distinguishing set classes, only very few convincing investigations have been taken so far in applying those techniques to a concrete musical work. “Audibilizing” segmentation, as it has been suggested in this little study, using Op. 23, No. 2 as an example, is still a field of research being nearly untouched. Such an approach might provide a new path through the pre-dodecaphonic jungle.

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⁹ Forte assumes Schoenberg’s “set consciousness” as early as 1908 (Forte 1978: 133–176).

¹⁰ Goyettes *Post-Tonal Ear Training Suite* is published online here: <https://jeremiahgoyette.com/ptetsuite/> (last visited on 29th of December 2018).

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„Organizuotas posttonalumas“ ir jo percepcija klausia. Sąveika tarp pirminių ir sudėtinių segmentų A. Schoenbergo pjesėje fortepijonui op. 23 Nr. 2

Santrauka

Straipsnyje pateikta antrosios iš penkių Arnoldo Schoenbergo pjesių fortepijonui op. 23 analizė yra pagrįsta aukščio klasės setų teorijos idėjomis ir koncepcijomis. Remiantis išsamiais Jano Maegard'o analitinėmis studijomis, šios kompozicijos tonų aukštis yra padalytas į tam tikras natų grupes, kurios įvardijamos kaip aukščio klasės setai.

Teigiama, kad kūrinio aukščio struktūrų lygmeniu egzistuoja keli repriziniai momentai, susiję su tuo, jog ekspoziciją sudaro dvi sekcijos, kurias derėtų laikyti nepriklausomomis viena nuo kitos. Vis dėlto šie repriziniai momentai nėra suvokiami vos išgirdus kūrinių, jų suvokimas klausia atsiveria tik teoriškai juos išnagrinėjus. Keliama hipotezė, kad egzistuoja du lygmenys: 1) muzikinis paviršius ir 2) antraplanis struktūrinis lygmuo. Pagal setų teorijos terminologiją, muzikinio paviršiaus sąvoka siejama su visomis natų grupėmis, kurios yra identiškos savo motyvais, akordais ar frazėmis ir dėl to suvokiamos akimirksniu, o struktūrinis lygmuo yra siejamas su komponavimo technikomis, kurios naudojamos prekompozicinėje komponavimo stadijoje. Nei vienas, nei kitas lygmuo nėra mažiau svarbus tiek analitinei, tiek praktinei kūrinių interpretacijai. Jų koegzistavimui reikalingas nuolatinis dėmesys kelia naujus iššūkius tiek instrumentalistui, tiek klausytojui. Straipsnyje stengiamasi išsiaiškinti, kurioje vietoje dominuoja kiekvienas iš šių lygmenų ir kaip jie abu nuolat tarpusavyje sąveikauja. Taigi pirminiai segmentai yra traktuojami kaip reprezentuojantys muzikinio paviršiaus setų struktūras, o sudėtiniai segmentai – kaip reprezentuojantys struktūrinį lygmenį.

Analitinės procedūros leidžia daryti šias išvadas:

- Pjesės fortepijonui op. 23 Nr. 2 aukščio struktūra gali būti visiškai paaiškinta, joje nėra nė vienos natos, kuri nepaklustų komponavimo taisyklėms, kurias, kaip manoma, taikė Schoenbergas. Dėl šios priežasties „laisvo atonalumo“ terminas šiame muzikiniame kontekste laikytinas nenaudingas; siūloma jį pakeisti „organizuotu posttonalumu“.
- Pjesėje randame pasazų, sukonstruotų naudojant technines procedūras, kurios akivaizdžiai byloja apie būsimą Schoenbergo dodekafoninę techniką. Jie skamba kitaip nei šalia esantys pasazai, sukomponuoti kita technika, todėl kuria savitą estetiką.
- Visi kūrinyje nustatyti aukščio klasės setai yra tarpusavyje susiję, kaip priklausantys vienam supersetui. Melodinis motyvas, skambantis dešinės rankos partijoje, funkcionuoja kaip „motininis setas“; visi kiti setai yra „motininio seto“ subsetai.

Šie pastebėjimai nurodo vieną iš alternatyvų, kodėl ir kaip net nepatyręs klausytojas (apie kūrinio struktūrinio lygmens kompozicines taisykles neinformuotas asmuo) randa atspirties taškų posttonaliame muzikiniame kontekste. Panašūs setų teorija grįsti suvokimo kontekstų tyrimai galėtų būti taikomi ir platesniam posttonaliam repertuarui tyrinėti.