

**Compositional Traits in  
Schoenberg's *String Quartets No. 2 and No. 3*  
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There is a perception among some music critics that Schoenberg's earlier pantonal pieces are more inspired and expressive than his later twelve-tone compositions. His later compositions are often criticized as highly organized music, the work of a great theorist and little more. Schoenberg insisted that this perception of his music was incorrect. He insisted that his later twelve-tone works were written with the same compositional style and inspiration as his early pieces. Schoenberg said that this perception was the result on the row. He wrote "I can't say it often enough: my works are 12-note *compositions*, not *12-note* compositions."<sup>1</sup>

In his notes that accompany the first recording of *String Quartet No. 3*, Schoenberg recalls the public reception that followed its premiere in 1927.

'Neither at this first performance, nor at some following performances at Prague and Berlin, did it provoke any kind of riot, as my former two string quartets had done. This might make one think that now my music was understood and I had finally succeeded in convincing the public of my mission as a composer. But it would be a great error to assume this [...] Because, while in spite of the riots, caused by a part of the public, there were always a certain number of critics who stood by my work against the opposition, now there was a certain unanimity among these judges, saying that I might possess a remarkable musical knowledge and technique, but did not create instinctively, that I wrote without

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<sup>1</sup> Nuria Schoenberg Nono, ed., *Arnold Schoenberg Self-Portrait* (Pacific Palisades: Belmont Music Publishers, 1988), 67.

inspiration. I was called a constructor, a musical engineer, a mathematician.’ In response to these criticisms, Schönberg insisted that his compositional style of the late 1920s differed little in affect from that of decades earlier. Throughout the latter part of his career, Schönberg maintained that dodecaphony was only a tool, a means of organization, but should not be mistaken for the music itself.<sup>2</sup>

This paper will demonstrate that Schoenberg was correct in his assertion that his “compositional style of the late 1920s” differs “little from that of decades earlier” by comparing *String Quartet No. 3* written in 1927 with *String Quartet No. 2* written in 1908. First, we will look at Schoenberg’s program notes and publications regarding these pieces to discover what the composer himself has to say about his compositional style. Then, the pieces themselves will be analyzed to demonstrate that his compositional style is the same in both his early pantonal period (*String Quartet No. 2* written in 1908) and his later twelve-tone period (*String Quartet No. 3* written in 1927).

The above description of the reception of *String Quartet No. 3* is a stark contrast to the reception of his *String Quartet No. 2* in 1908. Schoenberg wrote,

My second string quartet caused, at its first performance in Vienna, December 1908, riots which surpassed every previous and subsequent happening of this kind . . . they were a natural reaction of a conservatively educated audience to a new kind of music. Astonishingly, the first movement passed without any reaction, either for or against. But, after the first measures of the second

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<sup>2</sup> Camille Crittenden, “Drittes Streichquartett [Third string quartet] op. 30: Introduction,” Arnold Schönberg Center, <http://schoenberg.at/> (accessed November 14, 2010).

movement, the greater part of the audience started to laugh and did not cease to disturb the performance during the third movement “Litanei,” (in form of variations) and the fourth movement “Entrückung.” But at the end of this fourth movement a remarkable thing happened . . . this coda was accepted without any audible disturbance. Perhaps even my enemies and adversaries might have felt something here.<sup>3</sup>

String Quartet No. 2 was controversial because the public was blindsided. They were not expecting a piece with such a complex harmonic vocabulary, and they had no way to process it. They had no method to simplify the harmonic structure. In contrast, the premiere of *String Quartet No. 3* was less controversial because Schoenberg’s twelve-tone system was known to the public by this time. They could process it as the twelve-tone method. This was a mixed blessing. Schoenberg wrote, “according to the belief of the ordinary, everyday critics, use of such a method could only be attempted in a scientific way, and a scientist seemed to them opposed to the concept of an inspired composer.”<sup>4</sup> This muted the reaction at its premiere because the audience was able to process his music as the work of a “scientist.” There is nothing to get excited about here, just the work of a scientist organizing note relations.

Bob Dylan understood how dangerous this can be. He refused to be labeled as a “folk singer.” In *Don’t Look Back*, Dylan insisted that he was not a “folk singer.” He believed if the audience can label an artist or his music, they can isolate his influence and say “he is just a folk singer” and not entertain the idea that his music has a broader, deeper meaning.

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Steiner, “A History of the First Complete Recording of the Arnold Schoenberg Complete Quartets,” *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 2 (1977-78): 133.

<sup>4</sup> Steiner, “A History of the First Complete Recording”, 134.

Arnold Schoenberg understood this too. He did not want his “Method of Composing with Twelve-Tones” to be known to the public, but he had to reveal his method because Josef Hauer was about to publish a book on the twelve-tone method. Schoenberg decided to formally present his method to twenty of his pupils plus Hauer to insure that he received credit for developing it first. He understood once it was known, everyone would want to analyze his pieces to see how it was done and would neglect to pay attention to what was said in them. Schoenberg wrote about this in *Style and Idea*.

At the very beginning, when I used for the first time rows of twelve tones in the fall of 1921, I foresaw the confusion which would arise in case I were to make publicly known this method. Consequently, I was silent for nearly two years. And when I gathered about twenty of my pupils together to explain to them the new method in 1923, I did it because I was afraid to be taken as an imitator Hauer, who at this time, published his *Vom Melos zur Pauke*. . . But, at the same time, already I did not call it a ‘system’ but a ‘method’, and considered it as a tool of composition, but not as a theory. And therefore I concluded my explanation with the sentence: ‘You use the row and compose as you had done it previously.’ That means: ‘Use the same kind of form or expression, the same themes, melodies, sounds, rhythms as you used before.’<sup>5</sup>

This quote captures the essence Schoenberg’s philosophy regarding compositional style and the twelve-tone method. Schoenberg did not think that the row composed for you. He did not consider it important to even count the notes. He encouraged his students and admirers to

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 212.

stop counting the row. It was a *method* not a theory or a system to Schoenberg. Despite his efforts, his students fell into sin. “What I feared, happened. Although I had warned my friends and pupils to consider this as a change in compositional regards, and although I gave them the advice to consider it only as a means to fortify the logic, they started counting the tones and finding out the methods with which I used the rows.”<sup>6</sup>

To Schoenberg, the twelve-tone method in *String Quartet No. 3* “fortified the logic” of his pantonal method in *String Quartet No. 2*. The twelve-tone method became a referential collection that gave *String Quartet No. 3* coherence. It replaced the more nebulous pantonal-referential method in *String Quartet No. 2*. It was a method that provided a fixed relationship between all twelve notes, and it gave Schoenberg the ability to write longer works without text. The note relationships hold *String Quartet No. 3* together instead of key relationships, but the row is not the compositional style of the piece. The row does not write the piece for you. All of the same compositional techniques must be used to write a good twelve-tone *composition*.

Did Schoenberg take his own advice? “You use the row and compose as you had done it previously. . . Use the same kind of form or expression, the same themes, melodies, sounds, rhythms as you used before.” A comparison of the second and third quartet will prove that Schoenberg did adhere to his own advice. It will also prove Schoenberg’s statement was true that his “compositional style of the late 1920s differed little in affect from that of decades earlier.” The row was a referential collection in Schoenberg’s hands.

The real compositional style of a composer is how he develops his ideas. That is the true test of a composer. Anyone can write an interesting melody, but a good composer can

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<sup>6</sup> Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 213

hold the attention of an audience with it for a sustained period. The best way to do this is through repetition and variation. Repetition creates continuity and form, while variation creates growth and variety. The main tools in a composer's arsenal to create melodic variation are inversion, retrograde, retrograde inversion, augmentation, diminution, fragmentation, octave displacement, stretto, and sequencing. These tools are used by all great composers. The way a composer uses these tools and to what affect determines his style.

Now, we will look at Schoenberg's use of these compositional techniques in *String Quartet No. 2* and *String Quartet No. 3* to see if his compositional style is the same in both pieces. Of the compositional techniques mentioned above, Schoenberg uses fragmentation, inversion, augmentation, and sequencing throughout both quartets. For example in his second quartet, there is a thirty second note ascending figure followed by a double dotted quarter in measures 2-3 (see example 1). Intervallically, this four-note motive is made up of an ascending minor third followed by an ascending perfect fourth. According to Schoenberg's own analysis in *Arnold Schoenberg Self-Portrait*, he considers this to be motive C from the first theme (see example 1).<sup>7</sup> This motive is repeated in melodic inversion and rhythmic augmentation in measure 19 of the viola part, erroneously label measure 20 (see example 2). On the second beat of measure 19 in the viola part, there is a descending minor third followed by a descending perfect fourth in sixteenth notes. This inverted version of motive C is repeated and sequenced in measures 19-23, and it alternates with a non-inverted version of itself in the cello part. Schoenberg sequences these two versions of motive C in measures 19-23 in a rhythmically accelerating pattern. This gives measures 19-23 great deal for forward motion and tension.

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<sup>7</sup> Nono, *Arnold Schoenberg Self-Portrait*, 79.

Then the main theme returns in measure 25. These particular measures are a good example of Schoenberg's *inspired* use of fragmentation, inversion, augmentation, and melodic sequence to build tension.

The question is can we find an example of his use of these same compositional techniques to build tension in the third quartet. The answer is yes. In the second movement, Schoenberg considers measures 1-5 to be the main theme (see example 3).<sup>8</sup> In measure 2 of the main theme on the third beat, there is a sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth note. Intervallically, this is an ascending perfect fifth. Rhythmically, it is fast/slow.

Schoenberg develops this motivic fragment with the same compositional techniques as motive C in third movement of the second string quartet. He uses fragmentation, inversion, diminution, augmentation, and melodic sequencing. For example, this ascending perfect fifth motive is repeated on the upbeat of beat four in measure 17 (see example 4). In this measure, it is an ascending perfect fifth again. Rhythmically, it is still fast/slow, but this time, it is a thirty second note followed by sixteenth note (rhythmic diminution). This motive is sequenced down a major second, then up a major second from its starting note of C in measure 18. Additionally, the interval is augmented each time. It is a perfect fifth, then a major seventh, and then a minor 9<sup>th</sup>. This rhythmic motive (fast slow pattern) is repeated in measures 19-20 with increasing dynamic tension. This builds up tension just before the return of the main theme in measure 21; therefore, this fragment is developed with the same compositional techniques as motive C from the third movement in the second quartet. He uses fragmentation, diminution, augmentation, and melodic sequencing to build tension in both quartets.

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<sup>8</sup> Nono, *Arnold Schoenberg Self-Portrait*, 84.

Why does Schoenberg use compositional techniques to build tension in the middle of these pieces? The answer is to create form. He uses these techniques to prepare for the return of the main theme and signal the beginning of a new section. For example, in the second string quartet, the sequenced motive C that we analyzed above builds up forward motion and tension. It reaches a climax in measures 23-24. This is highlighted with a fortissimo dynamic marking. Immediately following this, the main theme returns in measure 25. The main theme is highlighted with a sudden return to piano. Schoenberg does the same thing in the third quartet. The sixteenth note to dotted eighth note motive (fast slow) in measures 17-20 builds forward motion and tension. Its climax is highlighted by a poco ritard that signals the return of the main theme. It is highlighted with a sudden forte dynamic marking. All of this is designed to highlight the return of the main theme and create form.

In both quartets, Schoenberg uses stretto when the main theme returns. In the second quartet for example, the viola plays motive A (in sixteenth note diminution) from the main theme in measure 25 (see example 2). The second violin enters with motive A before the viola has finished. Then the cello plays the same motive, and it enters before the second violin has finished. In total, there are four versions of motive A sounding in stretto in measure 26.

In measure 21 of the third string quartet, there are two versions of the main theme sounding at the same time. The first violin plays the sixteenth motive that the viola played in measure 2, while the viola and cello play the motive that the first and second violins played in measure 1 (see example 4, page 2). Before this motive is finished, the second violin plays the same sixteenth note motive from the viola part in measure 2. This means that there are two versions of the main theme sounding in stretto in measure 21, one in the cello, viola, and



second violin, and a second version sounding at the same time in the first violin; therefore, measures 25-26 in the third movement of the second string quartet and measures 21-23 in the second movement of the third string quartet are examples of Schoenberg's use of stretto.

Schoenberg uses the coda as a moment of retrospection in both quartets. Michael Cherlin discusses this in his chapter on the third string quartet in his book, *Schoenberg's Musical Imagination*.

Coda space is traditionally the place for retrospection. Examples of retrospective codas abound in Schoenberg's earlier works – the codas for *Pelias und Melisande* and the First String Quartet are remarkable examples that we have already studied in the confines of this book. The coda in the Third Quartet is retrospective in a very particular sense in that it acts as the *Entspannung* as (temporary) relief from whatever had caused the unresolvable conflict up until this point.<sup>9</sup>

We will look at the third quartet in a moment. For now, let us look at the second quartet. There is an excellent example of retrospective resolution of conflict in the third movement. In measures 66-67, the main theme returns in the vocal part. On a number of levels, this is an excellent example of relief of unresolved conflict in the coda, see example 5. It is the first time in the movement that the vocalist sings a version of the main theme. Until this point, it has always been in the string quartet and not in the vocal part. In measures 66-67, the main theme is slightly altered. It is in rhythmic augmentation and the intervals are slightly different. The first descending half step is now a descending major second in the coda, and on

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Cherlin, *Schoenberg's Music Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 223.

the word glück, the note is G natural instead of Gb, compare example 1 to example 5. Also there is an ascending fifth leap in measure 1 that is now a tri-tone. Despite these changes, the basic melodic shape of the main theme is the same in the coda. It is as if the vocalist resists the temptation to sing the main theme throughout the entire movement until the very last words of the poem. This thematically resolves the conflict between the quartet and the vocal part. The vocalist finally gets to sing the main theme at the most important moment in the third movement.

This also resolves the conflict within the poem. The vocalist sings the main theme to the words “. . . gib mir dein glück! (give me your happiness),” and the dynamic level suddenly drops to piano (see example 5). The rest of the poem that precedes this passage is about torment, thirst, and hunger. The words that immediately precede it are “. . . nimm mir die lie (Take away love from me). . .” The dynamic level is fortissimo, and the highest note occurs here, a C natural. The largest leap occurs on the word “me,” a two octave minor ninth; therefore, there is a great deal of dynamic and registral tension in the passages that leads up to “. . . give me your happiness.” As the words turn toward happiness, the dynamic level drops to piano and the main theme returns. All of the dynamic conflict disappears and the thematic conflict is resolved as the words speak of happiness. This is a very affective example of retrospection in the coda that resolves conflict in the second string quartet.

The second movement of the third string quartet also contains retrospective resolution of conflict in the coda. For example, in the program notes that accompany the score, Erwin Stein states that the coda begins at measure 85 (see example 6).<sup>10</sup> Like the second quartet, the

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<sup>10</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Streichquartett III*, Analysis by Erwin Stein (Austria, Universal Edition, 1954), 1.

main theme returns at the beginning of the coda in measure 85. It returns at pitch, but it is slightly altered like the coda in the second quartet. The upper voice of the main theme is displaced by an octave. The minor seventh leap down in the first violin from G to A at the beginning of the main theme in measure 1 is replaced by an ascending major second from G to A in the second violin. The ascending leap from A to C of a minor tenth has been compressed to a minor third. This slightly altered retrospective-return of the main theme is preceded by a phrase that builds to a fortissimo dynamic level. This phrase also contains the highest note of the entire movement. It is a high Db that occurs in first violin part, measure 77 (see example 7). The same thing happens in the third movement of the second string quartet. Just before the return of the main theme in the coda, he gives the vocalist her highest note of the entire movement and the dynamic level is fortissimo. When the main theme returns the dynamic level is piano. In the third quartet, the same thing happens. He builds the melodic and dynamic tension just before the return of the coda. Then the main theme returns at pitch and the dynamic level drops to piano. This resolves the dynamic tension and resolves any melodic conflict by returning the main theme to its original pitch.

There are other examples of retrospective returns that resolve conflict in the second and third quartets. At the end of the fourth movement in the second string quartet, there is a five measure postlude that brings back the first six notes of the introduction (see example 8). The first six notes of the fourth movement are G#, B, G natural, F#, A#, and D. In *Schoenberg Self-Portrait*, he considers this ascending motive in thirty second notes to be an introduction and not part of the main theme (see example 9).<sup>11</sup> At the end of the movement, the same six

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<sup>11</sup> Nono, *Arnold Schoenberg Self-Portrait*, 80.

notes from the introduction return in the cello part in measure 152. They are at the same pitch but slightly altered. In this case, this fragment from the introduction contains the same pitches, but the rhythm is augmented. This is the same technique that he used in the other codas that we have examined. They were thirty second notes at the beginning of the movement. They are eight notes at the end. Additionally, the motive is trunked at the end of the movement. The last two notes are missing.

This return to the opening motive resolves harmonic tension and reflects back on the beginning of the movement. In the last two measures, there is an additional resolution of harmonic conflict on a larger scale. The final chord is an F# major chord. This returns the entire piece to the parallel major of its original key, F# minor. The F# major chord sounds like a Picardy third.

There is a similar return to the opening motive at the end of the fourth movement in the third string quartet. In measure 202, the main theme returns in the viola part (see example 10). As before, it returns to its original pitch, but it is slightly altered. The main motive is E natural, D#, C#, D natural, D#, E natural, F#, and F natural. The return at measure 202 starts on E natural and D#, and measure 203 starts on notes D# and E natural. Instead of a descending major seventh leap between C# and D natural, there is a descending minor second between A natural and Ab. Instead of descending minor ninth, there is an ascending minor second between notes F# and G natural. This is the same type of octave displacement that occurs at the coda in the second movement. In measure 200, this retrospective return is preceded by a melodic ascent to the highest notes of the movement and a dynamic ascent to fortissimo. This occurs in the other movements that we have examined. There is also a sudden drop in dynamic

level to pianissimo at measure 202. This also occurs in the other movements when the main theme returns. Most significantly, Schoenberg does this whether or not the piece is twelve-tone or pantonal. His compositional style does not change.

To sum up what we have learned so far, it is clear that Schoenberg's compositional style of melodic variation is the same in both quartets. He uses inversion, retrograde, retrograde inversion, augmentation, diminution, fragmentation, octave displacement, stretto, and sequencing to create melodic variation in both quartets. It is also clear that he brings back the main theme at the beginning of or near the end of the coda to create a retrospective return that resolves conflict in both quartets.

With this in mind, there is another aspect of his compositional style that is the same in both string quartets. Schoenberg brings back the main theme at different pitch levels to mark the beginning of sections in the middle of the movement. This creates formal sections within the movement itself and a sense that the piece is developing or modulating to a new pitch area like a traditional piece would modulate to a new key. Additionally, these returns are usually accompanied by a change of tempo to help delineate them.

A good example of this occurs in the fourth movement of the second string quartet. In measures 49-50, there is a six note ascending motive that is a fragment of the main motive from the introduction in measure 1 (see example 11). We looked at these measures earlier in this paper as an example of Schoenberg's uses of fragmentation and sequencing. They are also a good example of how he creates sections in the middle of the movement. Measures 49-50 come at the end of a section and mark the beginning of a new section. In this case, the motive precedes the entrance of the vocal part in measure 52. This return of the main motive is

accompanied by a crescendo to fortissimo and a molto ritard to mark these measures as an important formal event. They are further marked by a double bar line at the beginning of measure 52 and a sudden change in dynamic level to piano as the voice enters. These elements parallel what happens just before the return of the main theme in the coda. Another example occurs in measures 97-99 (see example 12). The same ascending motive from the introduction returns to mark the end of a section. Again, it is accompanied by a crescendo and a molto ritard with a double bar line at measure 100. There is also a sudden change in dynamic level to piano when the voice enters at measure 100. All of these elements create a sense that something has come to a close and a new section has begun in the middle of the movement.

There is one element about these particular returns of the main theme that does not fit the premise that the return creates a sense that the piece has “modulated” to a new pitch level. All of the returns that we have just examined begin on note G#. This is the same pitch that the motive begins on in measure 1. Perhaps Schoenberg returns to this pitch in this particular movement because the rest of the movement is so tonally ambiguous. The other movements do start the main theme on a different pitch as in the middle of the movement.

In the fourth movement of the third quartet, Schoenberg uses the main theme to create sections in the middle of the movement too. In this case, the main theme begins on different pitches when it returns in the middle of the movement. In measure 41, Schoenberg brings back the main theme from measures 1-2 in the viola part (see example 13). In fact, nearly all of the original elements of the main theme are present in measures 41-43. The doubled dotted notes from the first two measures are now in the first and second violins instead of the viola and cello. Additionally, measures 41-43 are also marked *Etwas langsamer*, somewhat slower. The

Etwas langsamer tempo indication is followed by an eighth note rest. The tempo change plus the rest and the return of the main theme emphatically places a period at the end of a major section. Additionally, this return of the main theme occurs on a C#. The main theme begins on E in measure 1; therefore, it has “modulated” from E to C#. This gives the listener a sense that the piece is beginning a new section at a different pitch. It has progressed through pitch space or “modulated” to a different starting pitch level. Perhaps Schoenberg feels free to modulate to different pitch classes in his twelve-tone *String Quartet No. 3* because the row gives the piece overall continuity. There is no need to return to the original pitch class until the end of the movement.

Schoenberg’s *String Quartet No. 2* and *String Quartet No. 3* were written twenty years apart. They do not share the same harmonic vocabulary. The public reception of these two quartets was entirely different. By the time Schoenberg wrote *String Quartet No. 3*, he was perceived as a scientist of music, a “brilliant theorist and little more.” His *String Quartet No. 3* was considered the work of a mathematician and overlooked as “uninspired.” This is unfortunate because a close comparison of these quartets reveals that his compositional technique is the same. He develops the thematic material in the same manner. He retrospectively brings back thematic material and resolves conflict and tension in the coda in the same manner, and he develops formal sections in the same manner in both quartets. Schoenberg always insisted that this was true and that he composed “in the same manner” as he always did whether the piece was pantonal or twelve-tone. To Schoenberg twelve-tone *composition* was a method of composition and not a theory. Perhaps we should take

Schoenberg's advice "stop counting the row" and learn to appreciate the compositional style of his twelve-tone *compositions*.



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