

Movement 2 and 4 of Anton Webern's Five movements for string quartet, op. 5

Anton Webern wrote the Five Movements for String Quartet in the spring of 1909 and it had its first performance one year later, on February 8, 1910. The Five movements op.5, is one of the first compositions where Webern composes and experiments in the so-called free atonal style. The music of Anton Webern has always been very secretive to me. His music has a concentrated expressive value, which makes it very powerful. When listening to his music, there is always a new tiny mystery to be unravelled.

As a composer, I would like to find out the following:

- Why does his music sound so coherent and organic?
- How did he make his decisions regarding pitch material, now that the rules of the tonal system and twelve-tone technique were not applicable?

To gain some answers, or at least some more insights, from op.5 I will be analysing movement nr. 2 and 4.

*For the ease of reading and more clarity, the examples below are not always notated in their original octave or rhythm.

Movement 2: Sehr langsam

1. General remarks

The piece is very coherent in its usage of e.g. setting, octaves, dynamics, tempo and colour. The chords are rather strong sounding. The melody, even when it switches to different octaves and instruments, is always clearly perceivable.

It has a ternary form: A-B-A' with A (bar 1-4) and A' (bar 10-14). The style of the A and A' sections can be described as melody and chordal accompaniment. The B section (bar 5-10) has two subsections with two different settings: melody and chordal accompaniment (B1: bar 5-6) and a more or less variable ostinato (B2: bar 7-9), i.e. a counter melody that supports the main melody.

2. Chord structures in A, A' and B1

In this piece there are a couple of rules or guidelines regarding the chord construction. Exceptions to these rules can be explained by motivic reasons.

Rule 1: All chords consist of a 6th interval, that is coloured by the interval 2nd or an enharmonic variant. These intervals can occur in different octaves.

Rule 2: If the interval of a second is not present in the chord, then it is part of the melody.

Notice that the sounds in bar 7-9 with its ostinato are based on the structural 6th or its inversion, the 3rd.

2.1. Example of rule 1

6th 6th + 2nd octave and an enharmonic change

6th 6th + 2nd octave and an enharmonic change

Example 1: elaborations of rule 1

2.2. Illustrations of rule 1 from Webern's piece

bar 1-4 bar 5-6

Example 2

2.3. Chord progressions

Notice that the chords have at least one tone in common. So the progression of chords is defined by common tones.

2.4. Illustrations of rule 2 from Webern's piece

bar 6 bar 10-14

Example 3

3. Melodic patterns

The melodic movement seems to circle around without having a certain goal tone.

There are two main elements, which structure the melodic movement.

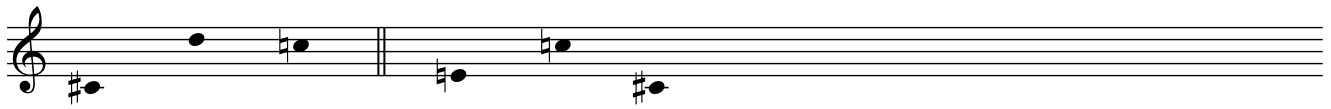
3.1. There is always a focus on a chromatic cell, which consists of three chromatic steps. These can be in succession or presented in different octaves.

3.2. The melody tones often form a dissonance of a minor or major 2nd with the chords.

3.1. A list of the chromatic cells:

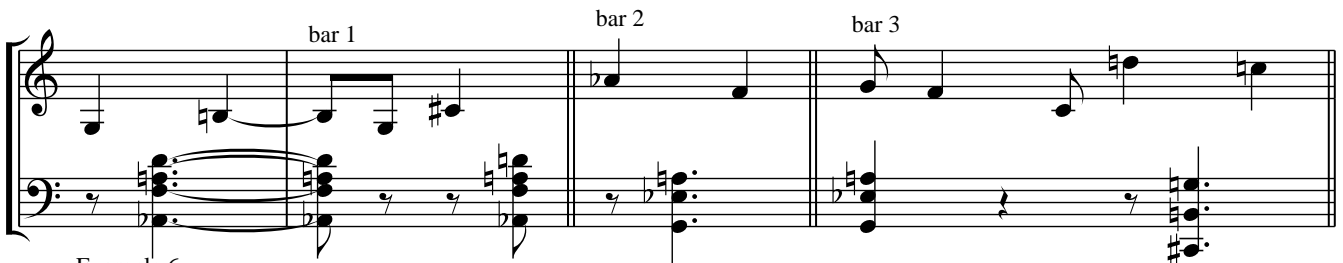
bar 1 bar 2 bar 3 bar 4 bar 6 bar 7 bar 8-9 bar 10-11

Example 4



Example 5: bar 3 and bar 1 (viola), a cell over different octaves

3.2. Minor or major 2nd melody relation to chords

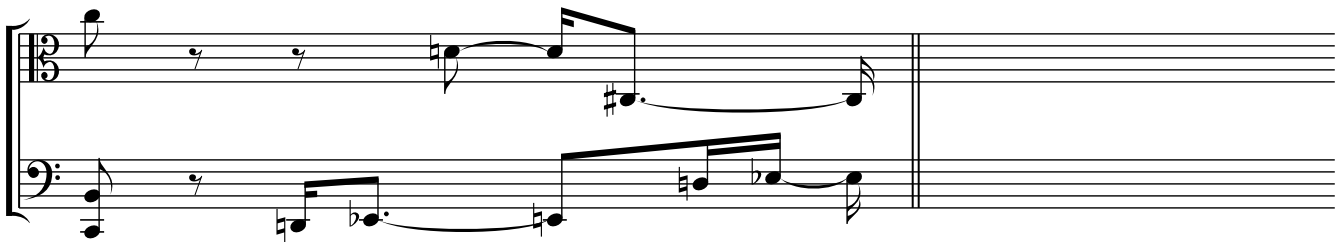


Example 6

See also 2.3

4. Continuation

The interlocking and varying of cells form the continuation in this piece. The smooth continuation i.e. is achieved by using neighbouring chromatic tones and the motivic connections between the different phrases. Also he uses variable ostinato-like figures to create length and continuation.



Example 7: bar 4



Example 8: bar 6



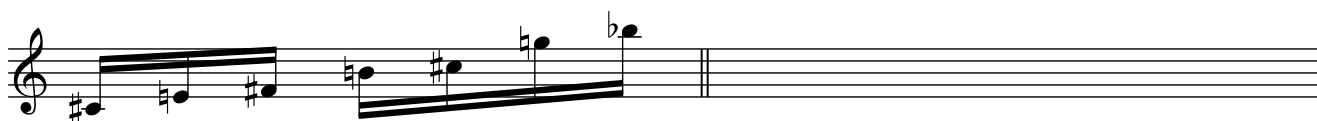
Example 9: bar 7-10

Movement 4: Sehr langsam

1. General remarks

This movement has a texture, which is very light and rich in overtones. This is due to the playing techniques and the distribution of the tones. Compared to movement 2, this is a more horizontal oriented composition. Notice that directional melodic lines always follow the more or less static sections.

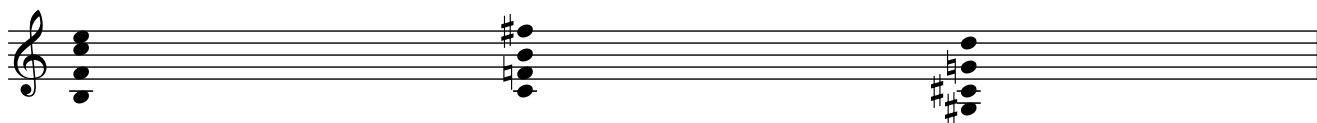
It has a ternary form: A-B-A' with A (bar 1-6) and A' (bar 11-13). Nearly all the pitch material of A and A' is exposed in bar 1 and 2. For section B (bar 7-10), most of the pitch material is exposed in bar 6, which is the closing gesture of A. The pitch materials are not confined to the octaves in which they are first introduced.



Example 10: bar 6, introduction of pitch material section B

2. Chord structures in A and A'

The chord construction is based on structural intervals: major 7th and minor 9th, which in their inversion are 2nd intervals.



Example 11: bar 1-2 and bar 12 examples of these chord constructions

3. Melodic patterns

For the melodic movement and development there are a couple of main structural elements.

1. The chords in bar 1-2 are made horizontal during A and A'.
2. In section A, there is an imitation game going on between 1st violin and the cello, but then in a different octave.
3. Repetition of the same motive in A and A'.
4. The melody of section B is based on the interval of a 3rd or its enharmonic/inverted equivalents.



Example 12: bar 3, example of element 1, the 2nd chord made horizontal.



Example 13: bar 5 and 11-12: example of element 3, repetition of the same motive in the cello.

4. Continuation

Repeating motives and imitation on a micro level form the continuation in this piece. The smooth and organic continuation is also achieved by using neighbouring chromatic tones; these can appear in different octaves. This is also achieved by using on-going rhythmic movement.



The image shows a musical score for four staves (treble and bass clefs) in a single system. The music is in 2/4 time. The first staff (treble clef) has a quarter note G4, a quarter rest, and a quarter note A4. The second staff (treble clef) has a quarter rest, a quarter note G4, and a quarter note F#4. The third staff (bass clef) has a quarter note G3, a quarter rest, and a quarter note F#3. The fourth staff (bass clef) has a quarter note G3, a quarter rest, and a quarter note F#3. This illustrates chromatic continuation across different octaves.

Example 14: bar 6, example of chromatic continuation in different octaves



The image shows a single staff in bass clef with a 2/4 time signature. The music consists of a sequence of eighth notes: G3, F#3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2. The first three notes (G3, F#3, E3) are grouped with a bracket and a '3' above them, indicating a triplet. The last three notes (B2, A2, G2) are also grouped with a bracket and a '3' below them, indicating a triplet. This illustrates rhythmic continuation through a repeating figure.

Example 15: bar 7: example of rhythmic continuation, viola plays a ostinato-like figure

About the author:

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