Anton Webern and the influence of Heinrich Isaac

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Of all the members of the so-called 'Second Viennese School' only Anton Webern can be seen to have truly superseded the aesthetics of late Romanticism. Despite leaving tonality behind, Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg continued to approach composition from an essentially Nineteenth-century perspective. Their concepts of thematic working - based upon the 'free development of motives characteristic of the Nineteenth-century' (Bailey, 1991: 94) – and form in particular, illustrate this, as does Schoenberg's famous statement on twelve-note composition that "One has to follow the basic set; but, nevertheless, one composes as freely as before" (Schoenberg, 1975: 224). Yet, though Webern did retain a certain expressionistic quality in his music, reminiscent of such composers as Mahler and Schoenberg, there is a sense of this diminishing as his *oeuvre* progresses. It apparently gives way to another influence, for many years latent, rooted in Webern's doctoral dissertation study of the Renaissance composer Heinrich Isaac.

The extent of Isaac's influence on Webern has often been overlooked for a number of reasons, not least the efforts of the 1950's Avant-garde to justify their own 'total serialism' in terms of his work. But also because the influence of Schoenberg, not only on Webern's musical life but also on his personal life, appears to have been particularly profound, and has often taken precedence of interest. However, neither stylistically nor technically can the influence of Schoenberg, or his predecessors in the 'German Tradition', be seen as sufficient to explain the nature of Webern's mature composition. Certain aspects of his music become much clearer however, when related to his substantial knowledge and love of the Netherlandish composers such as Josquin de Prez, Pierre de la Rue, Johannes Okeghem, Jacob Obrecht, and above all Heinrich Isaac.

It is interesting, when considering influences upon Webern, to note that there was a significant overlap between the preparation of his Doctorate and his studies with Schoenberg. While he was officially a student of Schoenberg's from about 1904 until 1908, he completed his preparation of the edition of Isaac's *Choralis Constantinus* in 1906. While this doesn't necessarily shed much light on which of the two proved more profoundly influential, it does highlight the fact that both occurred during an artistically formative period of Webern's life (being born in 1883, he was in his early twenties). Also noteworthy is the fact that Webern's musicological studies under Guido Adler were, at the time, a primary concern of his; and he was just as engrossed in them as he was in composing. Adler's academic specialism was in the area of Renaissance music. It was under his guidance that Webern prepared his edition of the second book of Isaac's monumental *Choralis Constantinus* – a setting of the Mass Propers of the entire ecclesiastical year, and a '*summa* of Netherlandish polyphony about 1500' (Brown, 1976: 167).

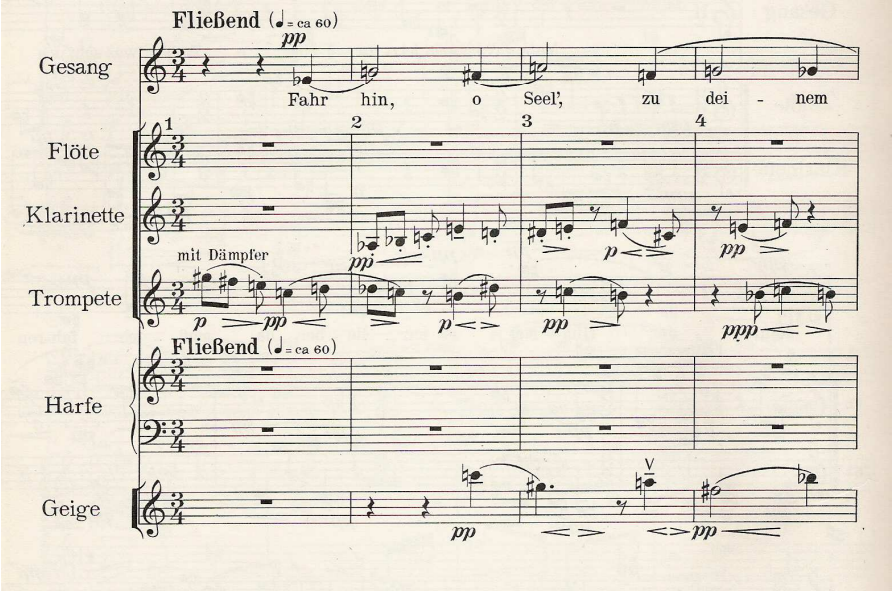
Though some would have it that Isaac wrote this work primarily in response to a commission from the Cathedral Chapter at Constance in 1508 (Reese, 1954: 216), in Webern's own perception the motivation for the task 'should be sought not exclusively in practical necessities, but also in the deep religiousness of the master and in his love of the beauty of these liturgical poems' (Webern, 1958: 23). This observation indicates that Webern's interest in Isaac went beyond mere technical fascination to a common sense of beauty, and a feeling of personal affinity: he viewed Isaac's compositional motivations as he viewed his own. Yet, the significance of Webern's study of *Choralis Constantinus* lies above all in the technical and compositional possibilities it suggested to him: the profuse employment of canonic devices and of 'close or more distant imitation' (Webern, 1958: 25); the 'subtle

organisation of the interplay of parts' (Webern, 1958: 23); the 'most delicate observation of tone-colour in the various registers of the human voice' (Webern, 1958: 25); and the overriding sense of order and unity which is perceptible in Isaac's (at times) almost architectural sense of form.

If we take one aspect of Isaac's influence to be the most clearly significant it must be that of his canonic technique. Other than *canon by inversion* we find all of the standard canonic forms in Book II of *Choralis Constantinus*. As well as the common place *two-part canons* (at the unison, the fourth, the fifth, the octave and the twelfth), there are examples of *three* and *four-part canons, double-canons, crab-canons* (also known as *retrograde canons*), and *canon by augmentation/diminution*. Webern takes note of all of these in his introduction to the edition highlighting their significance for him (Webern, 1958: 24-25). That said, it was not until many years after the completion of his dissertation, around 1922-24 with the last of the *Five Sacred Songs* Op. 15 and the *Five Canons* Op. 16 (both pre-serial works), that canonic technique began to assume a role of primary compositional significance in Webern's music.

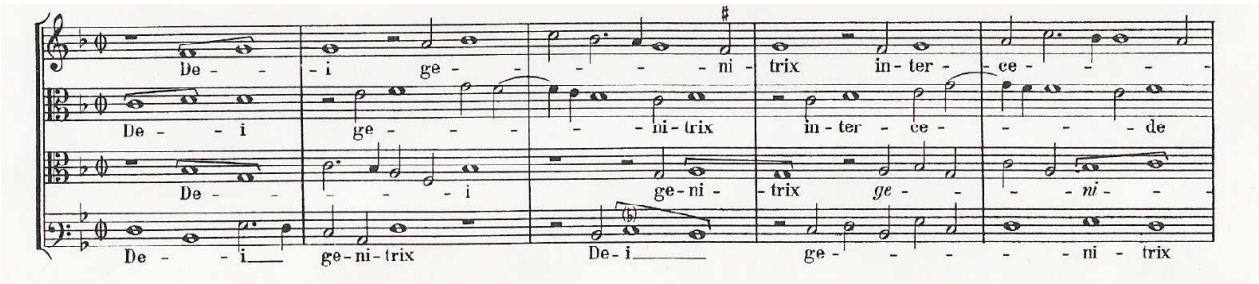
The fifth movement of Op. 15 is a *double-canon in contrary motion,* and it is here for the first time (with the exception of the pre-atonal Op. 2) in his mature work that 'the traditional imitative techniques of the kind on which Webern was to rely so heavily in his twelve-note music are found' (Whitall, 1999: 202). The two canons employed in this movement have highly contrasting characters, particularly in the opening bars (1-4). *Canon I* (trumpet and clarinet) has rhythmic qualities of quaver movement and syncopation, and has an intervalic character of predominantly major and minor seconds; whereas *canon II* (voice and viola) alternates crochets and minims, emphasising the third beat of each bar, and is intervalically based more on major and minor thirds.

Example 1: Anton Webern, *Five Sacred Songs* Op. 16, movement V.



Such a distinctive characterisation of the different musical 'layers' can also be seen in *Choralis Constantinus*. Though it is maybe less striking than in Webern's work, his comment that Isaac made 'each voice an independent, highly individual entity' (Webern, 1958: 24) shows that Webern had noted this tendency during his studies. A pertinent example from Isaac's work occurs in Mass IV *Purificationis Mariae* (p.33, system 4) of *Choralis Constantinus*, where there is another *double-canon* in which each of the canons has a distinct intervalic character. Whereas *canon I* (altus and discantus) consists largely of stepwise motion, major and minor seconds, *canon II* (bassus and tenor) employs larger intervals, notably descending thirds (major and minor) and ascending perfect fourths.

Example 2: Heinrich Isaac, *Choralis Constantinus*, Book II, *Purificationis Mariae*.



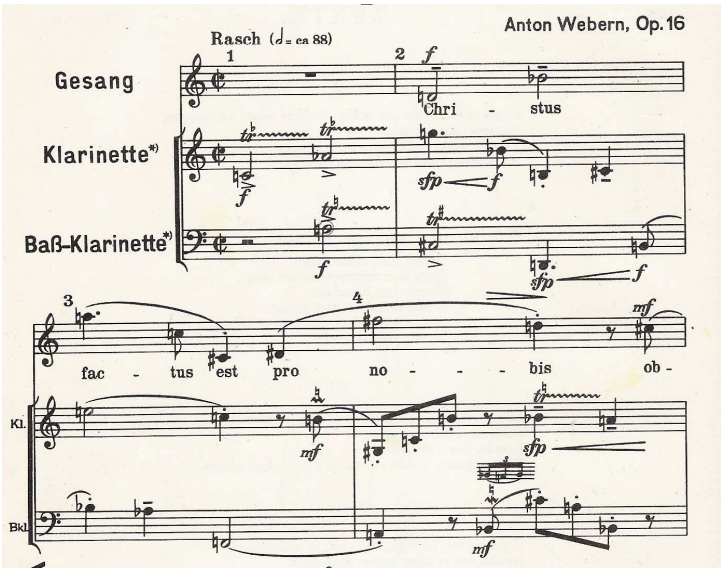
I'm not suggesting that these examples were linked in Webern's mind, but that the similarities they reveal are indicative of the *osmosis* of technique that seems to have occurred as a result of Webern's studying Isaac.

As its title suggests, Webern's next work, the *Five Canons* Op. 16, is composed entirely using canonic techniques. It is as if he had reminded himself of their musical possibilities with the final movement of Op. 15, and now set out to explore them more thoroughly. Yet, to perceive any real connections between the canons of Op. 16 and those of *Choralis Constantinus* is difficult beyond the obvious use of the technique itself. It is unsurprising, given Webern's atonal idiom and more complex rhythmic language that his canons inhabit a different world to those of Isaac; a comparison of the two is nevertheless revealing.

Many of the things basic to Isaac's canonic approach are actively avoided by Webern, so as not imply any tonality. Whereas in *Choralis Constantinus* two and three-part canons occur only at the unison, octave, fourth or fifth/twelfth, in the *Five Canons* these are replaced by two-part canons at the minor ninth/second and augmented fourth (movements four and two respectively), and three-part canons where the second and third imitating parts bear different interval relations to the initial *dux* (movements one and five). As a result the three-part canons of Webern are more complex than those of Isaac. In the first of the *Five Canons* for example, *comes 1* (Bass Clarinet) is an inversion of the *dux* (Clarinet) at the minor third below, while *comes 2* (voice) is uninverted at the major second above. Despite this resulting in *comes 2* entering at the interval of a perfect fourth above *comes 1*, the fact that *comes 1* is inverted avoids any sense of traditional tonal relationship (see *Example 3*). These apparently opposite harmonic approaches in fact highlight an acute sense for *dissonance control* common to both composers, and the fact that stylistically they

work within different idioms is less significant than their common sense for intervalic consistency. The study of *Choralis Constantinus* surely imparted in Webern a profound appreciation of the subtlety of relating lines within a contrapuntal texture; the principles remain the same whether the music is tonal or atonal, the difference simply lies in which intervals are emphasised and which avoided.

Example 3: Anton Webern, *Five Canons* Op. 1, movement I.

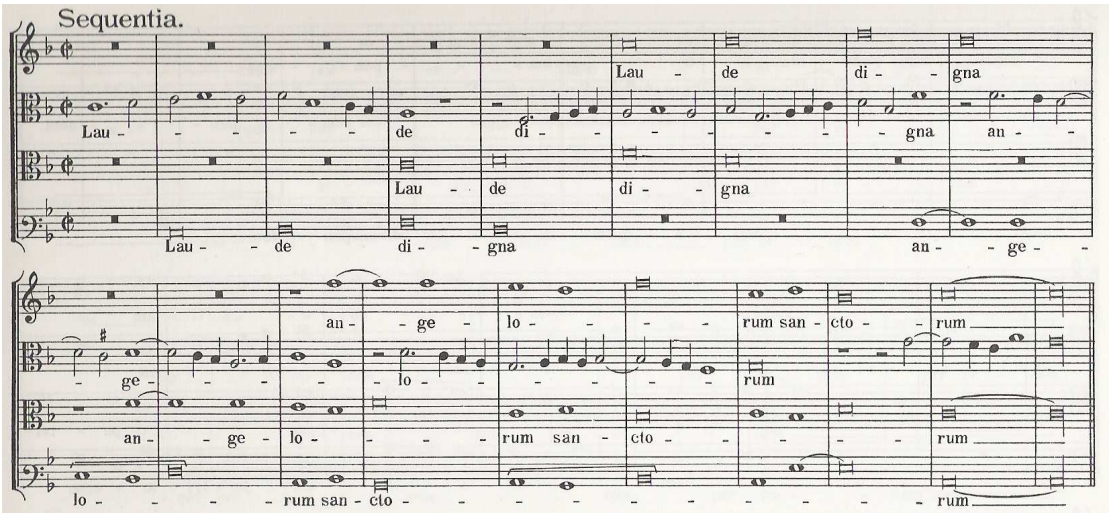


If in terms of pitch-intervals similarities are hard to come by, in terms of the time-interval between entries Webern's approach is remarkably similar to Isaac's. To take the first movement as an example once more; at the start there is a delay of a minim between each imitative entry, this is then compressed by half to a crochet delay in bar 8. What is significant however, is the fact that all the parts have an equal temporal relationship. That is to say, the time distance between *comes 1* and the *dux*, is the same as that between *comes 2* and *comes 1*; and even when the time-interval changes (from minim to crochet), the relationship between the parts remains the same. A look at *Example 4* will reveal the same procedure in the work of Isaac, though in this example the time-interval between parts remains constant (two bars). This may seem a very obvious point, but there is every possibility that Webern could have created

more complex temporal relationships between the parts (as later he would), and it seems a clear decision on his part to stick to traditional intervals of entry.

One further significant similarity should be noted. It seems that Webern recognised in Isaac the possibility of constructing concise, yet whole musical structures through the use of canon. None of Webern's *Five Canons* is even a minute long, yet each is an effective musical structure. Similarly, in *Choralis Constantinus* canons are often used to construct shorter, self-contained sections within the mass. Beautiful examples occurs in the *Graduale* of Office VI (p.42 system 6 - p.43 system 1) on the word *Alleluia*; and the opening section of the *Sequentia* of Office XVIII, *De Nativitate Mariae* (p.137 systems 3-4, see *Example 4*).

Example 4: Heinrich Isaac, *Choralis Constantinus*, Book II, *De Nativitate Mariae*.



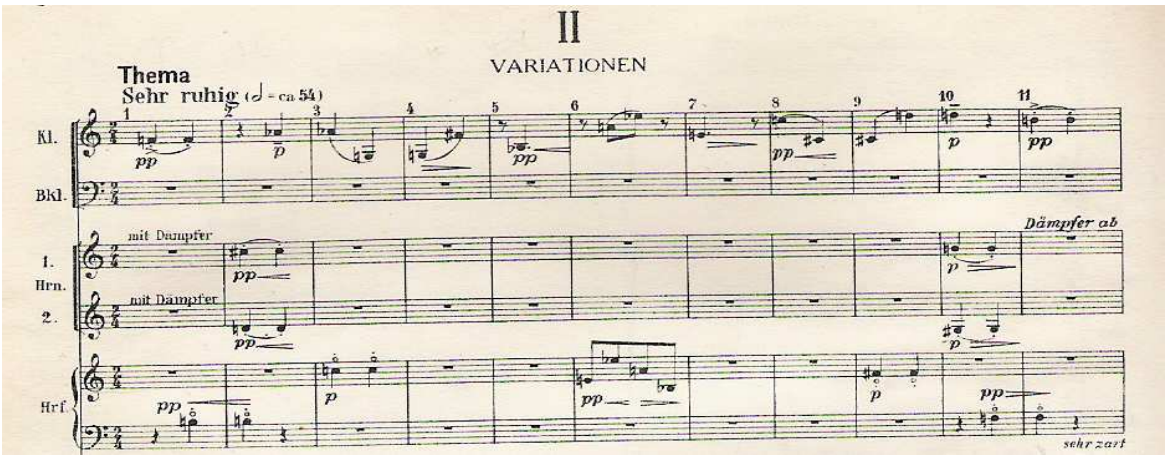
The three-part canon here occurs in the bassus (*Dux*), tenor and discantus (*Comites*), while the altus sings a freely composed melodic line above it. Canonic techniques aside, this melody is worthy of comment in it's own right. It covers a wide registral range (major tenth) during its course and is beautifully melismatic, but perhaps more significantly, it has a highly syncopated rhythmic quality and a sense of motivic construction, both of which can be observed (albeit rather differently) in Webern's *Five Canons*.

Op. 16 was a pre-serial work, however, and while it may have hinted at what was to come, it was with the composition of the *Symphony* Op. 21 and subsequent works that Webern's exploration and exploitation of canonic technique became more profound. With the new techniques of the twelve-note system effectively assimilated in Opp. 17-20 Webern was free to embark on the ambitious task of an almost entirely canonic, serial piece. Given that the 'twelve-note technique was perceived as an inherently polyphonic method' (Bailey, 1991:94), it might be seen as somehow tautological to apply canonic principles to it. This view is supported by Adorno who sees counterpoint in twelve-note composition as being 'no longer distinguishable from the process of composition in general' and therefore a 'futile struggle' (Bailey, 1991: 113). However, while he expresses this view with negative overtones, it needn't be seen as such, as, for Webern, ideas of unity and order – which he saw as a pre-requisite for comprehensibility – were of the utmost artistic importance. How better to achieve the highest degree of unity and order than to create a work in which the compositional process is at one with basic material and the final artistic product? It seems that Adorno possibly overlooked Webern's basic artistic purpose.

It is in this purpose that we find another, and possibly the most profoundly important, link between Webern and his beloved *Netherlanders*. And it is in his *Symphony* that we find possibly his most effective realisation of this aim. That the 'extreme thematic unity of his music…was consciously linked in his mind with the example of the Netherlands composers' (Donat, 1972: 11) is highlighted by his comment in the 1932 lecture series *Der Weg zur neuen Musik* that 'Greater unity is impossible. Even the Netherlanders didn't manage it' (Todd, 1978: 50). He was referring to the second movement of his *Symphony* in which 'nine different musical realisations of the palindrome achieve various degrees of symmetry in different

ways.' (Bailey, 1991: 200). This use of palindrome is at its clearest in the opening *theme* of the second movement (incidentally the only non-canonic section of the piece). It is an eleven bar structure in which the second half is a transposed retrograde of the first half, the point of reflection occurring mid-way through bar 6. The use of reflection is all encompassing, involving not only the pitch and rhythm, but also the timbre/orchestration and the dynamics (see *Example 5*).

Example 5: Anton Webern, *Symphony* Op. 21, movement 2, *theme*.

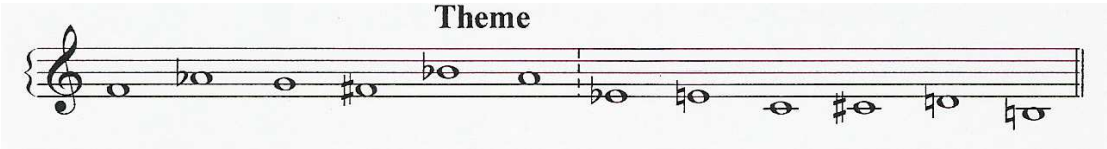


Ideas of symmetry are all pervasive in this movement, both on a large and a small scale. Thus, as well as each individual variation being (to a greater or lesser extent) palindromic, the collection of movements as a macro-structure also has a sense of symmetry:

> all nine sections of the movement have the same number of bars, eleven (9 x 11 = 99 in all), and each eleven bar section is divided in half, the two halves in some sense forming mirror images of each other. While the "sound" may vary considerably, each of the first four sections has its "procedural" counterpart among the last four sections, and these are arranged to form an arch with the fifth part (Var. IV), the only unique section at its center. (Smith, 1967: 96)

On the smaller scale, the basic row is itself symmetrical, the second six pitches being a transposed (down six semitones) retrograde of the first six.

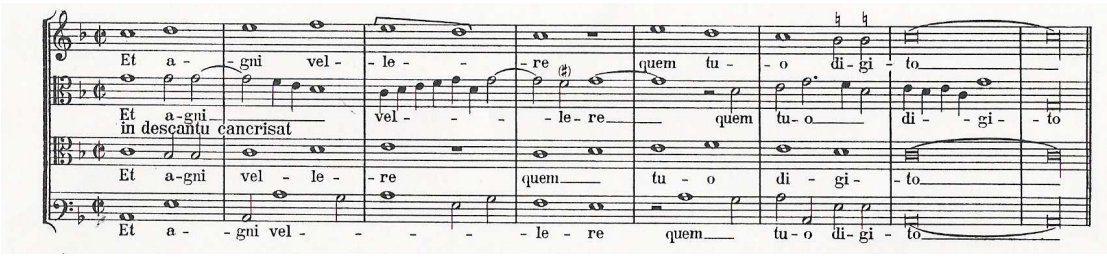
Example 6: Prime order of the row for movement two of Webern's Op. 21.



However, as Whittall has pointed out, 'the last thing Webern aspired to in this work was a mechanically predictable succession of palindromes…such obviousness could not be expected to appeal to a composer of such motivic concentration and subtlety' (Whittall, 1999: 207). Rather, he sought to create the highest unity, yet avoided banality by varying the extent to which the symmetry was exact.

As Webern's self-comparison with the Netherlanders suggests he had observed techniques similar to those he employed in the *Symphony* in their music. *Choralis Constantinus* contains two particularly good examples, which may well have been an inspiration to Webern. In the *Sequentia* of Office X (p.80), there is a *crab canon* lasting eleven minim beats (starting on the second minim of bar 1 and ending on the second minim of bar 6), between the tenor and the discantus (see *Example 7*).

Example 7: Heinrich Isaac, *Choralis Constantinus*, Book II, Office X.



While this canon does not exhibit perfect symmetry, certain features give it a strong symmetrical sense that Webern surely picked up on. The melody of the discantus is an exact retrograde of the tenor part (except for the naturalised B's before the cadence). This results in a strong unity and similarity of intervalic relationships between the parts on either side of the point of symmetry (beat one of bar 4). The symmetry is more clearly indicated by *Example 8* where it will be noted that either side of the

central octave there is a rest in one of the parts, this is followed in both directions by another octave, above and below which we have parallel tenths and sixths (clearly related intervals) respectively. While the bassus and altus are not so integral to the symmetry of the passage, they too exhibit symmetrical features. The pitches (though not the rhythms) in the bassus part are almost exactly mirrored around the point of symmetry (on the first beat of bar four). The only pitch not to fit in with the symmetrical scheme in this part is the B on the fourth beat of bar three. This is possibly suggestive of the slightly obscured symmetry that Webern himself employed. The altus, on the other hand, appears more freely composed, yet the significance of the pitch G should be noted as it occurs structurally at the beginning, the middle and the end of the passage, and is the highest note in that parts tessitura.

Example 8: The following diagram highlights the intervalic relationship between the parts on each of the eleven beats of the canon:

1: Maj 10^{th}

2: Maj 10^{th}

3: Min 10^{th}

4: 8ve

5: discantus solo/tenor rest

6: 8ve [central point of symmetry]

7: tenor solo/discantus rest

8: 8ve

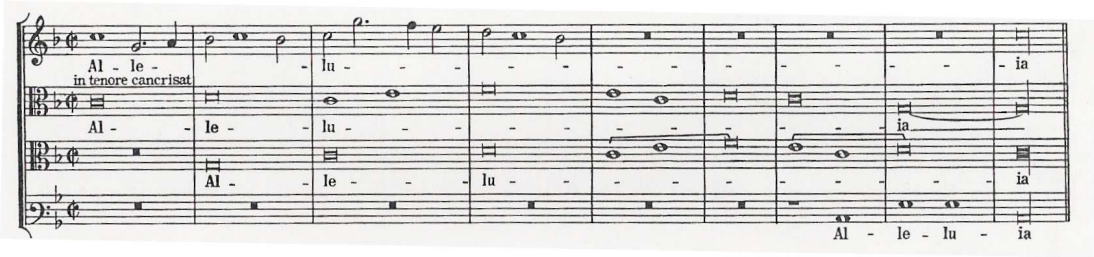
9: Maj 6^{th}

10: Min 6^{th}

11: Maj 6^{th}

Another *crab canon* occurs in the *Versus* of Office XX of *Choralis Constantinus* (p.153, *Example 9*), this time between the altus and the tenor. Once more it reveals a symmetrical construction (see *Example 10*). The symmetry is even more clearly evident in this example as it is not obscured by simultaneous intricate workings in the bassus and discantus parts. The symmetry between the two parts is only unbalanced by Isaac's (unsurprising) decision to sustain the altus into the final bar, but despite this, the possibilities it must have suggested to Webern are clearly evident.

Example 9: Heinrich Isaac, *Choralis Constantinus*, Office XX, *Versus*.



Example 10: the interval relationships between altus and tenor, bar by bar, revealing symmetry.

1: altus solo/tenor rest

2:Perfect 5th

3:Unison-Maj 3rd

4:Min 3rd

5:Maj 3rd-Maj 3rd (Point of Symmetry)

6: Min 3rd

7:Maj 3rd-Unison

8: Perfect 5th

9: Perfect 4th

Had Isaac not harmonised the cadence, bar 9 would also fit the symmetrical structure, reading instead ‘tenor solo/altus rest’; yet Isaac, like Webern was concerned more for the musical result than the blind pursuit of strict technique. To comment anachronistically, the refinement of this example is almost reminiscent, in its sparse texture of the *theme* from movement II of Webern’s *Symphony*. It seems clear that Webern’s penchant for symmetrical structures and palindromes, manifest in the *Symphony*, are based in his study of Isaac.

After the *Symphony* Webern’s canonic technique underwent a gradual process of abstraction, to the point where the canonic origins of some of the later works are entirely imperceptible. With this abstraction it becomes increasingly difficult to relate Webern’s work to procedures that he would have encountered in the music of Isaac. However, there is a paradoxical sense in which, while superficially moving away from the Netherlandish practices, on a deeper level Webern was moving closer to the *spirit* of the Netherlanders. That is to say, the underlying principles, rather than the surface techniques seem to become more important to Webern, as does an attitude of advancing compositional technique (from a basis firmly rooted in tradition); surely a concern also of the likes of Heinrich Isaac.

In particular the idea ‘as old as the art of counterpoint itself’ of producing ‘multiplicity out of unity’ (Smith, 1967: 87) remains a primary concern of Webern’s even when the details of his approach changes. The change in canonic approach between the two *Cantatas* Opp. 29 and 31 illustrates this. While in Op. 29 the alteration of the original canonic structure took the ‘form of simple rhythmic distortions, the voices of Op. 31 are subjected to combinations of verticalization, value replacement, augmentation and retrograde, in some cases in such a way as to obscure completely their common rhythmic basis’ (Bailey, 1991: 119). Yet, through

these processes, though Webern may be creating forms obscure to our perceptual abilities, he succeeds in creating an essential unity among the parts – what's more, he succeeds in doing it on an ultimately canonic basis, the root of which seems to lie in his study of *Choralis Constantinus*.

Maybe there is an analogy here between Webern's creation of unity through obscured-canonic techniques and his observation that

> What is wonderful is precisely how Heinrich Isaac grasps with the greatest insight the spirit of the chant, and so absorbs it into himself that the chant appears in the master's music not as something foreign to its nature but welded into the highest unity with it. (Webern, 1958: 25)

Though Webern didn't assimilate alien music into his compositions, he nevertheless employed his technical proficiency to weld the basic materials of his pieces into to the highest unity with the overall structure, just as Isaac did with his chant. Yet beyond this, it seems that Webern sought to transcend in his own music the unity in that he perceived in Isaac's. Commenting on the fourth movement of the *Cantata II* Op. 31 Webern has said that 'this section is constructed in a way that perhaps none of the 'Netherlanders' ever thought up; it was probably the hardest task (in that respect) that I've ever had to fulfil!' (Bailey, 1991: 120). His almost competitive comparison highlights a constant awareness of the compositional presence and stature of the 'Netherlanders' in Webern's mind, which by the time of the *Cantata II* was having its most profound effect on his music.

Perhaps then, it is fitting that the final movement of Webern's final work should even look like a Netherlandish score. In it he returns from the complex obscured-canons that appeared earlier in the work, to a style of relative simplicity, in which a linear four-part canonic texture is maintained throughout and in which the

temporal relationships between the voices remains constant. It is not completely traditional, in that the parts are only rhythmically identical, possessing their own unique melodic contours. However, it is in this movement that we see most clearly the affinity between Webern and Isaac. Not only is there a palindromic sense to the row-structure of the movement, beginning with *Prime* and *Inversion* forms and ending with *Retrograde* and *Retrograde inversion* forms on the same transpositions (see *Example 11*). But the movement also relates to other of Webern's observations regarding *Choralis Constantinus*. In particular his perception that Isaac achieves the

Example 11: Row-structure for *Cantata II*, movement VI (Whittall, 1999: 219).

Tenor	P-8	RI-10	RI-4
Alto	I-4	I-10	R-8
Soprano	P-0	P-6	RI-8
Bass	I-8	R-6	R-0

'most delicate observation of tone-colour in the various registers of the human voice. This is partly the cause of the frequent radical crossing of parts and of their movement by leap' (Webern, 1958: 25) could equally be applied to this movement, besides much of Webern's other composition. Yet, Webern even enhances the 'delicate tone-colours' of the voices with a subtle *klangfarbenmelodie* unison accompaniment of each of the contrapuntal lines, in the orchestra. Once again we see Webern, in some sense, transcending his influence.

If, as I argued in the introduction, Webern was the only member of the 'Second Viennese School' to go beyond the late Romantic aesthetic, it seems that this occurred not through any modernist urge to forge the future, but through his looking back to the more distant past of the Renaissance. However, it was not with nostalgia,

but rather with a sense of affinity and common purpose that he looked at the music of the Renaissance masters, and above all Heinrich Isaac. The influence was not a stylistic one, but more profoundly an influence of compositional *approach* and *technique*.

> If Webern buried himself in work on his thesis…he was not shutting himself up in a distant historical sphere, but was studying the continuing relationship between the works of a great period of European music and the experiences of present day music. (Kolneder, 1968: 21).

To this it should be added that he was not only studying, but more importantly contributing through his own music to that relationship.

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