Alban Berg’s Piano Sonata, Op. 1:
A landmark of the tonality and beyond in early 20\textsuperscript{th}-Century music

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Alban Berg’s piano sonata, Opus 1:

A landmark of the tonality and beyond in early 20th-Century music

Introduction

Alban Berg’s youthful piano sonata, Op.1 (1908), is well known not only for its hyper-romantic nature, but also for its “modern” harmony, with its heavily chromatic inflection (though it is completely tonal music). This essay presents the work in its contemporary context, and focuses on issue of thematic integration, as well as Berg’s distinctive music language. The goal of this study is to assist pianists to have an overview of this masterpiece from theoretical and musicological perspectives. The central theme is how the former composers, particular Schoenberg, influenced him and how Berg created his original music language. Four parts are included in this paper: biographical background, musical analysis, influence by other composers, and Berg’s progressive style.

Background

Alban Berg, an Austrian composer, was born into a Viennese bourgeois family on February 9th 1885 and died on December 24th 1935 at the age of fifty. Along with his teacher Arnold Schoenberg and fellow pupil Anton Webern in the years before and immediately after World War I, he moved away from traditional tonal music to write free atonal and then Twelve-tone music.
Berg grew up in an environment of literature and music. He started to compose at the age of fifteen, when he began self-study in music. He began studying with Arnold Schoenberg to learn counterpoint, music theory, and harmony from October 1904. Four years later, Berg completed his opus 1: a single movement Piano Sonata (1907-8). This work reflected by the influence of Schoenberg and Mahler’s music with the dark melancholy tone and the style of late romanticism to a certain extent, but the nature of material and the harmonic language undoubtedly shows a master piece. ¹

Berg took lessons in harmony and counterpoint with Schoenberg in the autumn of 1904; later, he returned to study composition in the autumn 1907, which ended with the study of sonata movements.² Several drafts of sonata movements date from that period, and it could be thought that opus 1 followed from these drafts. Unfortunately, the exact date of this piano sonata is unknown, although the second reissue of the score dated 1908, the preface of the score suggest that the sonata was not composed until the spring or summer of 1909. The premiere of this piece was given in Vienna on April 24th, 1911 by Etta Werndorff. Together with other works by Berg and Anton Webern were also performed.³ After I know the background of this sonata, two interesting questions arise in my mind.

The first one: **why did Alban Berg wrote this piece, his only piano sonata, as his opus 1?**

First of all, after studying traditional composition techniques with Schoenberg, Berg

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was ready to start his opus. He stated this piece to conclude his study results into two ways: the musical form and the harmony. Like mentioned above, he studied counterpoint, harmony and theory first, after which he felt ready to go back composition, and finished with sonata form. From the harmonic perspective, only opus 1 and Four Songs opus 2 (1909-10) could be considered tonal music, although both of them have a strong chromatic inflection. If sonata form is a summary of one of the musical forms that he studied with Schoenberg, then using the nontraditional harmony to compose a tonal music is another way to conclude his learning result.

The second question: why did he choose single-movement form for the whole sonata?

At the beginning of composing this piano sonata, Berg intended to write several movements, but finished up with single-movement piece. He took Schoenberg’s advice to let it stand alone: it certainly says enough, and probably could not have been continued at a time when the composer's style was developing rapidly. Even though the sonata just has one movement, every part (exposition, development and recapitulation) was connected closely. For instance, the exposition contains three separate themes which continue in an ongoing cycle of motivic development, while strictly adhering to the overall constraints of sonata form. Berg employs the traditionally repeated exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda with, each part closely connected by motives which derive from the opening phrase.

4 Alban Berg. “Letters to his wife.” Ed. and translate by Bernard Grun,( London, Faber, 1971: 159-60.)
Analysis

This sonata does not follow the typical classical tradition of three or four contrasting movements, but consists of a single movement centered on the key of B minor. Though it has a nominal key signature, Berg used abundant chromatic and whole-tone scales, and wandering different keys, giving the work an atonal and unstable feeling, which only resolves in the final few measures.

1) Formal structure

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<td>mm.168-end</td>
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<td>(Main theme: 1-29; second theme: 30-56)</td>
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2) A cadence

The opening sentence, mm. 1-3, (Example 1) presents the “basic materials” of this piece. It contains three different motives, and the melodies and the harmonies of the whole piece are derived from them rather than just the first motive. Thus, the first phrase (three motives) forms one “Grundgestalt"6: first, each of these three motives carries a distinct harmonic implication which will be fully realized in this movement; second, the harmonic content of this sentence establishes the essential harmonic vocabulary of the complete work; and third, the initial dotted rhythm of the first motive serves the rhythmic motive through

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6 Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff “Aarnold Schoenberg The Musical Idea: and the Logic, Technique, and art of its presentation”. (Columbia University Press, New York, 1993, 12-17.) In German, Schoengerg referred to that second notion as Grundgestalt, or Gestalt; in English essays, Grundgestalt means “basic unit”, “basic idea”, or “basic motive” translated from Josef Rufer by Humphrey Searle.
the whole piece.\textsuperscript{7}

Example 1: mm.1-4

Although the key of this piano sonata is in B minor, Berg used the incomplete II\textsuperscript{7} (omitted the third) instead of the traditional tonic triad at the beginning. By examining the Grundgestalt phrase (mm.1-4), the key of the first four measures is obvious in B minor, not only the key signature but also the only imperfect authentic cadence which unfold at mm. 3-4 — dominant to tonic. Except for the reappearance of this motive in the recapitulation, we cannot find another traditional harmonic progression in this piece. The Grundgestalt phrase seems to stand alone, but this initial phrase presents itself as if it would be an epigraph. All his works begin with a phrase that functions as a Grundgestalt for the rest of the work. In this piece, the cadence was obviously related to the traditional tonal music. However, the most important thing is that Berg expressed his own unique music language and the distinction with the traditional tonal music even his opus 1.

3) Three motives

In motive ♩ (see example 1), a three-note gesture which constitutes a

characteristically arising melodic motive – initially an ascent through the leaps of perfect fourth, followed by augmented fourth. Four aspects of motive ○ will be developed. Firstly, the dotted rhythm will be transferred to other materials so that the new motive-forms will be created. Secondly, as the head motive of the main theme, motive ○ will generate the head motives of all subsequent thematic regions within the exposition part. Thirdly, the ascending-fourths feature of the motive will serve as the source of an outstanding harmonic component of the movement. Finally, motive ○ will be treated in a manner that anticipates Berg’s manipulation of pitch-class set structures in his atonal music. The example 2 shows a normal and inverted form of the triad chord.

Example 2: motive ○

Motive ○ (see example 1) responds in contrary motion to the ascent of motive ○, and it will continue to do so throughout the work. In other words, the descending progression is the most significant and constant feature, because the augmented triad consisted by motive ○ will provide the all materials of a whole-tone sonority.

Unlike motives ○ and ○, motive ○ (see example 1) reveals the process of developing variation - Schoenberg said “variation of the features of a basic unit” – already beginning within the Grundgestalt. The semitonal descent of motive ○ is the natural outcome of that chromatic motion. Moreover, the motive ○ at bar
3 also contains the rhythmic feature of motive ⊙. Therefore, four types of vertical structures G-C-F# at m.1, C-G-Bb-G, B-G-A-Eb at m.2, and the half-diminished-seventh chords (A#-E-G-D) at m.3 will recur as fundamental harmonic components throughout the rest of the work. For example, the second beat of m.13 (E-G-B-Eb) (example 3); first beat of m.33 and m. 39 the half-diminished-seventh chords, etc.

![Example 3: 11-13](image)

4) Chromatic and whole-tone scales

In the relative key system, the tonality is based on seven natural tones and five chromatic tones; equally the traditional harmonic progression is consisted by the natural tones, supplemented by other chromatic tones. In contrast to traditional relative key system, the tonal technique is a method of musical composition which based upon the mathematical logic to arrange the pitch-class devised by Arnold Schoenberg later. Hence, the division between the natural tones and chromatic tones is completely broken, meaning that each of the twelve tones is equal, which is how the atonal music is created. Examining this piano sonata from the aspect of chromatic scales, Berg’s Op.1 definitely presents a good example of his youthful period (1885-1911).

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8 Janet Schmalfeldt: “Berg’s Path to Atonality the Piano sonata, Op.1”.
a. Single-line chromatic scale

The single-line chromatic scales emerge several times through the whole piece. However, the types and the quantities of semitone are different each time. For example (example 4), the bass voice constituted by descending eight notes – G, F#, F, E, Eb, D, Db, C – was contrary to the soprano voice to show a straight line chromatic scale.

Example 4: mm. 38-39

The other type of single-line chromatic scale is circular chromatic scale which means the composer specified one note as a center, and other semitones surrounded it as wave-shape (example 5). For example, in the tenor voice, from the D (off beat of the second beat) at bar 19 to the Eb at bar 21, eight notes combined a circular line – D, D#, E, F, E, F, E, Eb. Here, E was the center, and other notes exhibited as a wave-shape. However, the three notes - E, G and Bb (bar 20) - consisted a diminished triad which weaken the key.

Example 5: mm. 17-22
b. Dual chromatic scale (example 6)

The dual chromatic scale contains two parallel scales. In the example 6, the soprano melody started G, after C, F# up to the highest note G, then down to Eb and D. At the same, in the inner voice, it also contains a quarter-note G. From the surface, it looks like an implication of G harmonic-major, but such harmonic technique belongs to the atonal area because other two voices also contained semitones. These two voices (B, Bb, A, G#, G, F# and C#, C, B, A#) are descending dual chromatic scales which progressed at the same time but different length. The interval between them is parallel minor seventh (inverted to major second) which is part of atonal pitch-class. Integrated these two voices with the soprano melody, let us return the vertical sonority of the first phrase. Like mentioned above, five vertical sonority were included in the first phrase - G-C-F# at m.1, C-G-Bb-G, B-G-A-Eb at m.2, and the half-diminished-seventh chords (A#-E-G-D), marked ①-⑤:

① b – f# is a perfect fifth, which should be implied the tonality, but two tritones c#-g and c – f# (in primary melody) were also included. Therefore, the tonality was weakened by the combination of the two chromatic tritones and the perfect fifth.

② The second beat of bar 2 is a minor-seventh chord.

③ g – a – b: major second intervals; a – eb: tritone.

④ Two tritones a# - c and g#- d interlocked together.

⑤ f#- g: minor second interval; g – a#: diminished seventh interval; g – c#: tritone.

Above all, every vertical sonority include at least one tritone, something attribute to atonal music, so that the key of the primary melody is diluted.
When Debussy used the whole-tone scale, he always employed the bass pedal (usually the tonic, or the tonic chord and the inversions in turn) to make sure the key signature. For example, at mm. 42-46 in the *Reflets dans l'eau* from *Images*, a whole-tone scale is played by left hand, in right hand part the tonic chord and an augmented chord took place in turn. However, Berg used the whole-tone scale in a different way compared with Debussy. In the example 7, two descending whole-tone scales in a major third interval constituted a duel whole-tone scale series in the left hand part. In the right hand part, a recurring A seems as a temporary tonic; however, a G augmented chord appeared in the last beat. If the A was the temporary tonic, the G should be the leading-tone; but in the traditional harmonic progression, the augmented chord would not be built on the leading-tone. Thus, Berg’s whole-tone scale is different from Debussy’s.

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Another example of the integration of chromatic and whole-tone scale is at mm.39-40 (example 8).

**Example 7: m. 8**

**Example 8: mm. 38-40**

**The influence by Schoenberg and other composers**

As one of the extraordinary students of Schoenberg, Berg definitely received complete composition techniques directly from his teacher, and the most important factors are “Grundgestalt” and “developing variation”. Schoenberg described “Variation is the most important factor in a musical work.” 10 Although Schoenberg formed the concept of “Grundgestalt” until 1919, he employed the thought at his early teaching period.11 For Berg’s piano sonata, the Grundgestalt contains three

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10 Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff, *The Musical idea: and the logic, technique, and art of its presentation* Arnold Schoenberg.
distinct melodic motives, which combined together to build up a complete “basic idea” rather just the first motive. Eventually the Grundgestalt materials were expended by means of developing variation. For example, we knew the Grundgestalt phrase is mm. 1-3, Berg introduced the “developing variation” from mm.5-8. The notes of the falling thirds of motive ○ constitute a segment of the whole-tone scale in the opening phrase. However, the thirds develop into a complete whole-tone scale figuration which unfolds at m.8 in the left hand part (see example 7). At mm.9-11 (example 9), the Grundgestalt come out again; at the same time, the first dynamic climax appeared while avoiding the cadence which already had showed up at bar 4. At mm. 30-31 (example 10), the second theme which combined motive ○ and ○ appears, and the dotted segment leads the dominant rhythm. In other words, mm. 30-35 is a variation of mm.5-10.

Example 9: mm.8-13
Example 10: Second Theme mm.29-34

Berg adopted the “developing variation” from the second sentence, and two rhythmic patterns (the dotted rhythmic segment and two eight-notes + triplet + a quarter-note) were developed into variations to build up the whole piece. Therefore, his piano sonata is a good example – the whole composition is derived the very opening quartal gesture and its opening phrase. As Schoenberg’s student, he had already taken this composition technique into his hands even in his opus 1.

Berg was a member of the second Vienna School with Arnold Schoenberg, and Anton Webern, and produced compositions that combined Mahlerian Romanticism with a personal adaptation of Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique. In his piano sonata, we could still hear the hidden romanticism. For example, the mark “Mäßig bewegt” which means at a moderate tempo is shown at the beginning of this piece. From this mark, pianists could understand the basic emotion – deepening,

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imposing, and inconspicuously sweet. Though some modernist composers viewed romanticism as drawback, the Berg scholar Douglas Jarman described him: “As the 20th Century closed, the ‘backward-looking’ Berg suddenly came, as Perle remarked, to look like its most forward-looking composer.”

**Berg’s progressive style**

Berg was a part of Vienna’s cultural elite during the heady fin de siècle period. His circle included the musicians Alexander Zemlinsky and Franz Schreker, the painter Gustav Klimt, the written and satirist Karl Kraus, the architect Adolf Loos, and the poet Peter Altenberg. On the one hand, he inherited the former Viennese cultural and the traditional composition techniques; on the other hand, he created his unique music language and style, which have been already expressed from his Opus 1.

At the beginning of composing this piano sonata, Berg had wrote several draft sketches of sonata movements. It was not a single movement originally, but took Schoenberg’s advice to let it stand alone. In this sonata, themes are very closely linked by the motives and the traditional sonata formal structure, and the division into first and second subject groups and coda themes is articulated by the different tempo associated with each theme. For instance, the opening phrase (mm.1-4) of the first theme of the first subject group is marked “Mäßig bewegt” (at a moderate tempo); then the B section (at bar 12) of the first subject group theme is showed

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“Rascher als Tempo I” (faster than tempo I); the second theme (at bar. 30) begins “Langsamer als tempo I” (slower than tempo I), and the closing coda of the exposition (at bar 50) is labelled “Viel langsamer” (much slower). Adherence to these relationships is essential. However, between each of these important structural moments in the exposition are other tempo shifts; therefore it is necessary to confirm every change with considerable care. ¹⁵ Hence, the manipulation of integrative motivic cells and the kind of thematic transformations are the features of Berg’s music.

If it is that the single-movement sonata form is one of the Berg’s original traces of traditional form, the bold harmonic progression is the other representation. As a tonal music, the innovations expressed by: only one cadence (V-i, at mm. 3-4) through the piece; the first chord started with an incomplete II₇ instead of the traditional tonic, dominant or subdominant chord; abundant chromatic and whole-tone scales included in this piece. Therefore, the use of chromatic and whole-tone scales is an important element in Berg’s music language. Moreover, the traditional key signature combined with atonal composition technique presents a contribution of musical development.

**Conclusion**

Alban Berg’s youthful piano sonata opus 1 is well known not only for its ultra-

romantic nature, but also for its “modern” harmony, with its heavily chromatic inflection. He employed the atonal composition techniques to compose a tonal music. In a letter to his wife Helena, dated July 11th 1914, he referred to this and other early works (the Four Songs, Op.2; the String Quartet, Op.3; the “Picture Postcards”, op.4; and the Four Pieces for Clarinet and Piano, Op.5) as “valid self-expression, not derivative”.16

From the aesthetic perspective, the sonata is one of the most expressive instrumental compositions of the early 20th Century. From the pianist’s point of view, this masterpiece contains remarkable intonation gestures, plenty of harmonic language, sensitive dynamics and prominent rhythms, all of which attract listeners and performers to revel in the music and to understand the nature of Berg’s music. Glenn Gould has referred to this sonata as Berg’s “graduate thesis from Schoenberg”.17 I think Gould’s statement contains two implications: on the one hand, this work is a summary of his studies with Schoenberg; on the other hand, Berg was prepared to show his teacher that he had received all classical and 19th-century traditions, but that he also had the confidence to express his own voice as a great composer in the new century. His only piano sonata opus 1 definitely is a landmark of the tonality and beyond in early 20th Century music.

16 Alban Berg. “Letters to his wife.” Ed. and translate by Bernard Grun.( London, Faber, 1971: 159-60.)
Bibliography


York, 1954.


* All the music examples in this article were derived from this book.


