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Rob Ainsley, of the Breaking the Rules website, talks about the manuscript of Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces*

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For details see http://www.bl.uk/breakingtherules

My name is Rob Ainsley. I'm part of the web team for the Breaking the Rules exhibition, and I'm going to talk about a manuscript from a work that helped start a musical revolution in the 20th century: Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces* from 1909.

Schoenberg was a remarkable man. He grew up in a house without a piano and didn't go to music college: he taught himself music from books. One was a partwork sent in the post, and when he wanted to write a sonata, he had to wait for Volume S to arrive to find out how to do it. But thanks to his extraordinary talent and self-belief bordering on arrogance, he became a composer. By the time he was 30 he was conducting various local ensembles, getting his works performed in public, mixing with other famous musicians, and teaching composition privately.

Schoenberg had written pieces in the high Romantic style of the period, but felt music was in something of a dead end. The problem was tonality, the underlying structure of all western music until then. What is tonality? Well, take a tune, any familiar, singable tune. If you were playing a bass guitar to accompany it, then you'd be playing some notes much more than others. In C major for example, then you'd be playing mostly C and G, and playing other notes, D and F perhaps, less frequently, and others such as D flat and F sharp, very rarely. Tonal music has a clear hierarchy of notes, with one particular note, called the tonic − in this case C − that feels the most natural, home note..

And it's that pattern that helps us know what's going on the music: you know for instance that if play F then G then C, it sounds like an emphatic finish, and you know you've come to the end of a section or perhaps the whole piece. Change an E to an E flat, and you feel a sudden sadness as you turn C major into C minor, and so on.

That principle had been the basis of pretty much everything since Mozart or Beethoven's time. But composers had been stretching the system ever since, delaying and blurring all those signposts in their efforts to find more interesting tunes and harmonies. Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* famously delays any final-sounding sequence for a whole five hours. The trouble was, Schoenberg thought, this approach to composing had been pretty much done to death. The system suffered, he said, from inbreeding and incest. What was needed was a new way of writing music that didn't depend on all those signposts.

What he came up with was atonality, or as he then called it pantonality. In other words, that familiar hierarchy of notes and comfortable patterns has gone. If you play your bass guitar to an atonal piece, there's no most-likely or least-likely notes. Every note is now as important or as likely as any other. It's a bit like the difference between rhyming, scanning poetry, and blank verse.

Schoenberg was convinced that this new approach was a natural evolution from the old system of tonality, a historical inevitability. And one of the first pieces that explored this approach, where the old signposts and most-likely notes are thrown away, was the *Five Pieces for Orchestra*.

The Orchestral Pieces came in 1909. It had been a tough time personally for Schoenberg. Not long before, his wife had been having an affair with a painter called Gerstl, who hanged himself when she went back to Schoenberg. He said the pieces were written straight down spontaneously, as a direct expression of his subconscious emotional state; you could almost call it musical Surrealism, and certainly call it Expressionist.

The *Five Pieces* are quite short, between two and five minutes each, and are intensely coloured − from the same strident, almost lurid world of Georg Heym's *Umbra Vitae*, the Expressionist poems from that period. And, through their 18 minutes or so, they seem to trace a path from the old world of tonality to Schoenberg's fearless new atonal future.

In the first whirlwind piece, later subtitled by Schoenberg reluctantly but appropriately, *Premonitions*, you can hear Schoenberg in a frenzy, throwing tonal phrases around as if angry with them. The illustration here shows you part of his manuscript from around bar 39, and I'm fascinated to imagine this meticulous, assertive man writing down these boldly inked phrases in his blaze of creative energy.

The second piece, *The Past*, suggests another backwards look to the old ways. It's haunted, rueful, slow, and very emotional.

The third piece, *Colours*, occupies a strange timeless world of its own, all based on one shimmering chord. Various instruments start off playing notes from that chord and then drift gradually at different speeds up or down until you get back to the same chord. This is a characteristically modernist way to write a piece of music: not thinking of a tune or harmonic progression, but working with a formula unique to that piece. But it doesn't sound mathematical and formulaic: it actually sounds quite Impressionistic.

And then, in the fourth and fifth pieces, Schoenberg takes us into the world of atonality. They're full of abrupt, almost violent contrasts, and the music rushes around but gives us no familiar signposts as to where it's going next. It's bewildering but heady stuff.

Like many of Schoenberg's pieces, the *Five Orchestral Pieces* caused uproar. It was premiered in England, at a Proms concert on 3 Sep 1912. Next day, the Times said:

> "It was like a poem in Tibetan; not one single soul could possibly have understood it at first hearing. There was not a single consonance from beginning to end."

The acerbic critic Ernest Newman was also perplexed. He wrote:

> "It is not often that an English audience hisses the music it does not like; but a good third of the people the other day permitted themselves that luxury after the first performance of the five orchestra pieces of Schoenberg. Another third of the audience was not hissing because it was laughing, and the remaining third seemed too puzzled either to laugh or to hiss ... May it not be that the new composer sees a logic in certain tonal relations that to the rest of us seem chaotic at present, but the coherence of which may be clear enough to us all some day?"

Schoenberg certainly thought so. He was convinced that his was the music of the future, and went on to develop what's usually called 12-tone music. Here, to ensure that all 12 notes have equal prominence, the composer has to follow certain guidelines. You start with a sequence of 12 different notes, you can use the sequence forwards, backwards, upside-down and backwards-upside-down; but you mustn't use one twice until all have been used; and so on.

The future of music turned out not to be atonality, but a bewildering mix of genres generated by changes in culture and technology that nobody could have envisaged in 1909: jazz, world, pop, film soundtracks, electronics and so on.

However, Schoenberg did have a massive impact on music. His atonality may not have become the way of all serious music, but it's become a very useful item in the composer's toolbox. Even in the work of composers such as Shostakovich or Malcolm Arnold, who wrote essentially traditional tune-and-harmony, you can find 12-tone passages.

Well, despite Schoenberg's belief that he had discovered some sort of historically inevitable future of all music, public attitudes to atonal music haven't changed much from those early reviews of the *Orchestral Pieces*. The problem is that, by removing all those tonal signposts that tell us when the music is getting happier or sadder or when an idea has finished, atonal music, unless a composer really is very inventive with it, tends to express only a kind of grey feeling of disorientation and anxiety.

About the only place you'll hear atonality in mainstream music today is in films, to express fear and threat, such as in Bernard Herrmann's score for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. And so perhaps one of the biggest surprises about the *Five Orchestral Pieces* is how much they can resemble that sort film music, particularly Nos 4 and 5. Here's Schoenberg writing what sounds like a modern film score in 1909! As Europe's astonishing Avant Garde art scene between 1900 and 1937 showed, when artists break the rules, we can be in for some exhilarating surprises.
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