

# *“What does ‘twelve-tone’ actually mean?”*

Wolfgang Rihm

---

Wolfgang Rihm presented an introduction to Arnold Schönberg’s Variations op. 31 at the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden. We are publishing excerpts here, but you can also listen to the complete introduction with sound samples on our website. The music was performed by the Ensemble Modern Orchestra under Peter Eötvös.

“Schönberg wrote these variations for orchestra in 1928. At that time, the art world was permeated by classicistic ideals. Some music represents historical models – ‘rehashes’ them, according to its opponents. Schönberg was not unaffected by this. He responded to the trends that were typical of the era in his characteristic, highly individual way.

Variations for orchestra do not actually have a long tradition. The prototype was probably Brahms’ Haydn Variations or perhaps the finale of Symphony No. 4, a chaconne. In Schönberg’s circle, there were very strong links to this late work by Brahms. Anton Webern’s opus 1, Passacaglia, reflects these styles of composition very precisely. But that came before these orchestral variations. Max Reger wrote great cycles of variations for orchestra, always with a fugue. And there is a very popular piece in the English-speaking world, which is a true masterpiece – namely Edward Elgar’s Enigma Variations – which Schönberg also studied in depth. I recently discovered a notebook in which Schönberg had played around with Elgar’s theme. That must have been during his American period.

So he definitely had the piece in mind. But opus 31 is about variations – not on a theme supplied by someone else but, as in Elgar’s case, on a theme written by the composer himself.

It is a twelve-tone piece, something that can still make people shiver today. They envisage something that explodes immediately when it comes into contact with air or water □

What does ‘twelve-tone’ actually mean? To Schönberg, it never meant a list of tones that had to be counted off and added to the score. Instead, he saw them

as themes, as structures, as musical forms.

Looking at this row now, with its transformations – retrograde, inversion, retrograde inversion – it sounds complicated, but it's child's play really. One simply keeps on rearranging elements on a flat surface. For Schönberg, however, it was never merely a game of abstract symbols – it always involved flesh and blood and nerves. Just the way in which he invented a row was true composition.

I haven't changed anything. I have only added fermatas. The structure is basically that of a song:



The second part answers the first. This makes it a little musical form. It is not just an idea; it is actually already like a little invention. These were thematic forms. When played from the end to the beginning – in other words in retrograde – the row sounds as follows:



It is almost Bach-like in style. And the inversion:



And from this inversion comes the retrograde inversion:



Something can be done with this. But, as always in art, it doesn't mean anything yet. In the right hands, it can become art. It is the same with scales. Mozart made something of them. But Dittersdorf? In other words, a row can be transformed into music or into something dull. (1)

The theme is a structure with manifold substructures, a lovely piece of music which offers many options. It has a drive for change in it. It soon begins varying itself as the articulation becomes eloquent, then ever more eloquent and ever more expressive. This now serves as the basis for a sequence of nine variations.

Taking the work as a whole, with its introduction, theme, variations and finale, it also has twelve parts. It is therefore clearly a musical form based on numbers.

Any music can be expressed in numbers – even Mozart. It doesn't mean that working with numbers automatically results in music. But Schönberg always proved the contrary, with everything he produced in such a seemingly intellectual way. In the 1920s and '30s, discussions revolved around whether

Schönberg was merely an ‘intellectual musician’ who only continued something that his emotional and artistic energy had set free in the first place.

Of course, inventing a system is ultimately a conservative act, psychologically speaking. One is trying to preserve something. By inventing a system, Schönberg firstly wanted to counter all the animosity that had accused him of caprice – wanted to reassure people that everything was being done correctly. It was the law that prevailed.

On the other hand, he wanted to further codify the state of freedom which he had achieved around 1909 or 1910 – in other words, working totally chromatically and freely without being bound by keys. He wanted to make it subject to a law, as a language, and thereby to save or preserve it. The fact that this can lead to problems is not our concern at present – but is something we should remember.

I am someone who doesn’t really think much of introductions to art, because I believe that art cannot ultimately be understood in the sense of a puzzle where the solution can suddenly be found. Art is not a crossword puzzle. Art is not suddenly revealed by adding or explaining something. The best approach is to play a piece twice and then it generally explains itself. (□)

“□ *The theme soon begins varying itself.*”

Today, there is a lot of talk about networking. People say they can get from A to B at the speed of light. One only has to press a button and whole realms of opportunities open up. But what is the point of that? It is only relevant in any kind of way to someone who has an overview, who is able to organise things, who has an aesthetic overview with respect to art.”

Rihm then played the opening bars of the variations. He sees them as character variations, as shown by his comments. The start of the first variation demonstrates “nervous counterpoint”. The second variation has a canon form with a “very chamber music-like tone”, while the third variation, which responds, is “definitely to be understood as a derivation from a baroque

suite, a variation with a dotted rhythm.”

The fourth variation, on the other hand, expresses the elegant tone of a waltz – “albeit with a broken tone, very Viennese, very ‘Schrammel’-like □ with great elegance.”

The fifth variation has “a symphonic tone in a varying sense: the developed variation is an element that conveys something. Schönberg is thus familiar with these forms of development from tiny parts and the development of large structures.”

The sixth variation is classic chamber music: “The chamber music parts always stand in contrast to the orchestral developments. The seventh variation is dominated by a very elegant bassoon part, which plays around with the theme. The whole thing is playful, light and bright.”

In contrast to this lightness, the eighth variation consists of “rhythmic, hard, powerful music. Instrumented almost clashingly, as though armed.”

“Then comes the greatest possible contrast – the ninth variation consists of solos, and is very transparent. There is almost a shadow of a Mahler-style march. This variation builds up at the end and makes way for the finale. Why didn’t Schönberg write a fugue in the tradition of Reger? He didn’t write one because polyphony is in evidence from the beginning. An atmosphere of methodical polyphony pervades the entire piece. The polyphonic sound does not need to be highlighted again by a fugue. The whole piece is polyphonic and the finale references the ‘master of polyphony’ at the very beginning: Bach.

The Bach monogram originates in the row, but not directly. It is constantly present in the row through semi-tones – somehow it is always there, but never mentioned directly. And then suddenly it is mentioned directly. Just as the introduction gradually presents parts of the theme, the whole cycle of variations gradually moves towards this B-A-C-H (B flat-A-C-B in English notation) as though it has already been heard the whole time. But it is not heard before. There seem to be hints of it, but it first appears high up and flickering and then on all different levels.

“Why didn't Schönberg write a fugue in the tradition of Reger?”

B-A-C-H (B flat-A-C-B) therefore appears in several places and is no longer contained within a cycle of variations. Instead, it introduces a symphonic movement which is structured with varying parts like a type of sequence. The principle, however, is that the fast element becomes ever faster and the slow chamber music element ever slower and ever rich. Throughout the whole of the finale, the fast element becomes stretto-like and the slow element

increasingly polyphonic. Building up, releasing. Building up, releasing. A rippling motion, which pervades the whole movement.

After the motion, there is a sudden pause that builds up like a wall of sound. And, after this wall, comes the greatest contrast of all – the gentlest part of the whole piece: an adagio, which introduces the final stretto, in which the theme is present on many different levels, and which shows the whole piece in a different light, as though looking back.

There you find the twelve tones of the theme in inverse order. It is simply there, but is answered or rather accompanied: by the cor anglais, among other instruments, which plays with the theme in ever new forms. A wonderful creation.

In the harp part, we can hear the B-A-C-H theme again, but transposed. It is a moment of tranquillity before the final storm, a stretto, which seems to summarise everything. The final recapitulation is a chord, a closing chord formation, during which one has the feeling that all the energy that came before and the whole development of the theme seem to be bundled into the one chord, creating a symbolic moment.”



## SOUND SAMPLES

You can find the complete introduction with sound samples at [www.universaledition.com/rihm-schoenberg](http://www.universaledition.com/rihm-schoenberg)