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Trauma, Anxiety (of Influence), Belatedness, and Sonata Structure in Rochberg's (Serial) Second Symphony

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Serialism is special to theorists and composers alike. For composer George Rochberg, doubly so: “I needed a language expressive and expansive enough to say what I had to. My war experience had etched itself deep into my soul.¹ This essay is an exploration of Rochberg’s Second Symphony (1955–56)—“the first twelve-tone symphony composed by an American²—analyzed as a narrative of trauma, anxiety, and belatedness that emerges from the composer’s biography, his reliance on tradition (form), and his theorizing/deployment of serialism within a mid-20th-century compositional trend. Throughout this analysis, serialism acquires agency: it drives the following interpretation and has a capacity to act on (behalf of) Rochberg.

Symphony No. 2 contains an array of thematic content that signifies trauma. The work stands as a response to World War II, therefore it makes sense to pin a biographical account of musical narrative to it. Rochberg was drafted in 1942 and his composition teacher, Hans Weisse, was driven out of Europe by the Nazi regime. In 1950, Rochberg went to Rome to study with Luigi Dallapiccola (known for his lyrical twelve-tone compositions), later telling Richard Dufallo that “one of the most powerful impulses toward twelve-tone, serialism, whatever you want to call it, was my reaction to my war experience which began to take over after the war.”³

¹ George Rochberg, *Five Lines, Four Spaces: The World of My Music*, ed. Gene Rochberg and Richard Griscom (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 14.

² Christopher Lyndon-Gee, Liner Notes to Rochberg: Symphony No. 2/*Imago Mundi*, Christopher Lyndon-Gee and the Saarbrücken Radio Symphony Orchestra, Naxos 8.559182 (2005), CD.

³ Richard Dufallo, *Trackings: Composers Speak with Richard Dufallo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 63.

His military service left an impression, and serialism was the tool that best represented the disturbances to which he was exposed.

Trauma and anxiety exacerbate one another. Harold Bloom (1973) explores the role that influence plays in creating a Freudian sense of anxiety within a poet as they engage with the past. Kevin Korsyn (1991), Adam Krims (1994), Joseph Straus (1999), Lawrence Kramer (2011), and others extend Bloom's theory into music analysis, and in Symphony No. 2 Rochberg anxiously turns toward history in two fundamental ways: (1) in search of a way to express trauma and (2) to seek an organizing principle for the “modernist” symphony. For Rochberg, the role of a modernist is “to compose a music which, because its structure is clear and directly immediate to the ear, its shapes are indelible, as perfect in their delineation as humanly possible, its emotional scenario is rich, humanly felt—humanly perceivable, *can be remembered*.⁴ I will take each up in turn.

In terms of compositional language, Rochberg conflates serialism with traditional twelve-tone methodology—his technique is better thought of as aggregate-based music where the row serves as a general palate rather than a governing entity. For Rochberg, this process of taking the “principle of the series” and making something recognizable to the listener comes from Schoenberg.⁵ It becomes increasingly clear that Rochberg’s traumatic language is rooted in a Euro-centric view of compositional technique, one that reveals what Jonathan Kramer calls a bias that caused Rochberg to look to European composition as the composers of the past.⁶ One can pull this interpretation into a larger conspiracy theory that Joe Straus calls the “myth of serial tyranny” that helps to shape a reading of belatedness in Symphony No. 2.

⁴ George Rochberg, “Can the Arts Survive Modernism?” *Critical Inquiry* 11/2 (1984), 336.

⁵ Rochberg, “Can the Arts Survive Modernism?” 323.

⁶ Jonathan D. Kramer, “Can Modernism Survive Rochberg?” *Critical Inquiry* 11/2 (1984), 344.

Claude Lévi-Strauss tells us that men do not think in myths, but rather that myths think in men.⁷ Reading that chiasmus provides pathways into interpreting this work—we are operated on by myths and structures without being aware of it occurring. The myth of serial tyranny describes how *everyone* was composing serialism in America from 1950–1970, yet Straus says that the “idea of serial domination is essentially false.”⁸ It makes sense that the “first twelve-tone symphony composed by an American” would be one that is acted upon by the myth—the composer with a “European bias” looked anxiously to the past (in the Second Viennese School), ultimately composing a work that finds itself in a fiction, out of time and place.

In addition to dodecaphony, anxiety and belatedness in the symphony emerge through Rochberg’s use of sonata form, a structure whose thematic repetition creates a clear, memorable discourse. The formal design of Symphony No. 2 is a sonata cycle, with each movement contributing to a larger sonata principle with interludes separating each movement: the symphony’s form divides into an exposition (mvmt. I), a development (mvmts. II and III), and a recapitulation (mvmt. IV).⁹ This formal organization is actualized by Rochberg’s use of the row, demonstrating that he was searching for ways “to employ a total chromatic palette, melodic and harmonic, on a large scale true to what the term ‘Symphony’ has come to mean after Beethoven, without losing a sense of proportion, continuity, [and] growth.”¹⁰ Sonata form opens hermeneutic windows in this analysis, and Example 1 lays out an overview of the entire symphony’s series

⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* [1964], trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

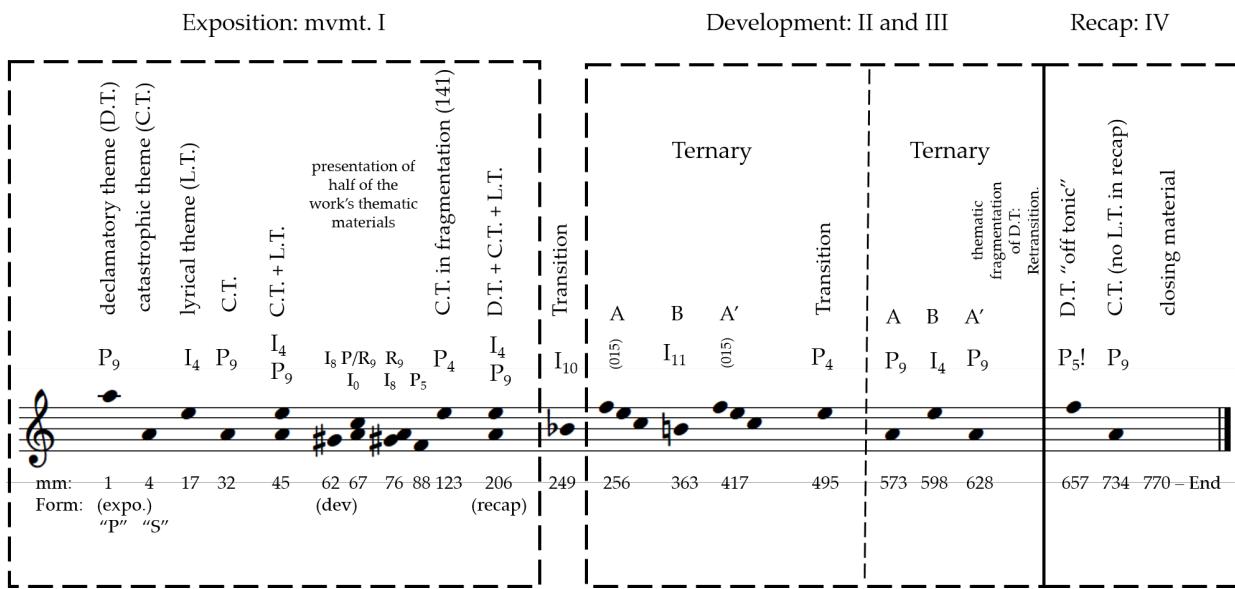
⁸ Joseph N. Straus, “The Myth of Serial ‘Tyranny’ in the 1950s and 1960s,” *The Musical Quarterly* 83/3 (1999), 302.

⁹ For more on the sonata cycle concept, see James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy’s *Elements of Sonata Theory: Types and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 318–42. For more on sonata form and its deviations, see William E. Caplin, *Analyzing Classical Form: An Approach for the Classroom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Joan DeVee Dixon, *George Rochberg: A Bio-Bibliographic Guide to his Life and Works* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1992), 155.

content and form.¹¹ By choosing sonata structure, Rochberg confirms an old method of narration that is reliant on conventional schemata. This dated formal discourse exists as a Bloomian misreading in the modernist music of the Second Viennese School, according to Straus.¹² In terms of lateness, Edward Said points to how modernist works are out of their own time, “returning to ancient myth or antique forms...for their inspiration.”¹³ Serialism and sonata form are the primary ways in which Rochberg’s Symphony No. 2 falls out of its own time, only finding itself in the right time in a mythos that emerged after the fact.

Rochberg, Symphony No. 2 Sonata Cycle



Example 1. Rochberg, Symphony No. 2, Sonata Structure.

¹¹ Much of the row-based identification comes from Yoojin Kim, “An Innovative Approach to Serialism: George Rochberg’s Twelve Bagatelles for Piano and Symphony No. 2,” PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2007.

¹² Joseph N. Straus (1990), *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 96–132.

¹³ Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 135.

Sonata theory emphasizes harmonic and melodic dialogue. In the figure, themes are clarified in terms of row selection, with each note on the staff representing the starting pitch class of the series (listed above the note for clarity). The three main themes, the declamatory theme (D.T. in the diagram), the catastrophic theme (C.T.) and the lyrical theme (L.T.) are labeled in the figure to show how this particular sonata cycle is actualized. Rochberg's employment of the form is exemplified by his way of "organizing the row based on hexachords in such fashion that its transpositions through inversion could take on an analogical relation to tonal centers through locus, ... [that is] a scheme of tonal loci ... that had the status of 'keys' in the old sense."¹⁴ In other words, themes are associated with particular forms of the series to generate the form. Over time, Rochberg maintained interest in how hexachords imply harmonies,¹⁵ but his theorizing was not always well received. George Perle criticizes the scope of Rochberg's *The Hexachord and its Relation to the 12-Tone Row* (1955), saying that it was "limited" and "restricted," thus its meaningfulness "suffers considerably."¹⁶ No doubt Perle is thinking about the extensive treatment of hexachords and combinatoriality that already existed in the scholarly literature by 1955. Perle's critique points to how Rochberg can be viewed not only as a belated serial composer, but also as a belated composer-theorist that discusses seemingly new, inventive topics after those topics have already entered the scholarly discourse.

Example 2 shows the hexachordal content for the symphony. The work is based on one of the six all combinatorial hexachords, 6–20 (014589). Rochberg's ill-received 1955 monograph focuses on a theoretical concept found in many compositions that come from the Second

¹⁴ Rochberg, quoted in Lyndon-Gee, Liner Notes to Rochberg: Symphony No. 2.

¹⁵ George Rochberg, "The Harmonic Tendency of the Hexachord," *Journal of Music Theory* 3/1 (1959), 208–30.

¹⁶ George Perle, "Review: George Rochberg, *The Hexachord and its Relation to the 12-tone Row*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 10/1 (1957), 55.

Viennese School: inversional hexachordal combinatoriality—or in Rochberg’s terms, “mirror inversion.” The two hexachords in the example, labelled A and B, comprise the complete series in which hexachord B is a literal derivation from hexachord A through inversion, both forms juxtaposed in an acoustic (and visual) mirror of their intervallic structure, which is shown by ordered pitch intervals between the staves. When Rochberg combines P₉ and I₄ row forms in the symphony’s thematic content, he relies on mirror inversion as an *a priori* compositional principle.

| | Hexachord A | | | | | | Hexachord B | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|--|----|----|----|----|----|--|----|----|----|----|----|
| P ₉ | B | A | C | D | E | G | E | D | G | A | B | C |
| ordered pitch intervals | -4 | +5 | +3 | -7 | +8 | +1 | +4 | -5 | -3 | +7 | -8 | -1 |
| I ₄ | +4 | -5 | -3 | +7 | -8 | -1 | -1 | +4 | +5 | -1 | +1 | +4 |
| | Hexachord B (reordered from top staff) | | | | | | Hexachord A (reordered from top staff) | | | | | |

Example 2. “Mirror Inversion” in the Series.

Symphony No. 2 begins at once with the declamatory theme (see Example 3) in octaves: a sonic signifier of a narrating presence is heard—all voices are as one. The *declamando* theme conjures up a narrator that reminds one of past symphonic works that begin with motivic material that is then developed throughout the course of an entire work. This theme is fiery and violent, accompanied by military percussion, fragmenting and halting in grand pauses. In the example, order numbers are shown with reiterations in parenthesis, indicating that the narrator is continuously halting its irregularly rhythmic discourse and restarting, with each restart reaching further into the series. The declamatory theme serves as a statement that begins to tell a soldier’s tale of war: a frantic and frustrated cry. The opening tetrachord, 4–19 imparts meaning through musical borrowing and influence. Straus provides some context for the role of 4–19 as “the

principal harmony associated with the character Wozzeck, the set-class from his famous declamation, “*Wir arme Leut!*” [We poor folk!]¹⁷ As if transplanted into 1955, Rochberg’s symphony opens with a T₆ variant of Wozzeck’s (1922) declamation (see Example 4), a tragedy for the common World War I soldier. This is one element of Rochberg’s belatedness: he clings to an early example of modernist music for his source material, yet that source was already over thirty years old.¹⁸

Example 3. The “Declamatory Theme” (mm. 1–4).

Example 4. Alban Berg, Wozzeck’s Declamation.

Immediately following the declamatory theme, the catastrophic theme continues the trajectory of violence and aggression (see Example 5). Developing the previous theme, its jagged contour and glissandos project a quality of wailing and shrieking. A *piano* sigh-gesture between PC₂ and PC₁ signifies added pain as the theme continues the halting rhetoric of Wozzeck’s

¹⁷ Straus, *Remaking the Past*, 76. Here, Straus is using the triadic formation of 4–19 to show how Berg is misreading the triad and recontextualizing it. For Straus, misreadings are significant to modernist music, and the same types of misreadings are significant to belatedness in Rochberg.

¹⁸ Janet Schmalfeldt offers an in-depth analysis of *Wozzeck* in which “*Wir arme Leut!*” functions as a primary motive throughout the opera. Refer to *Berg’s Wozzeck: Harmonic Language and Dramatic Design* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

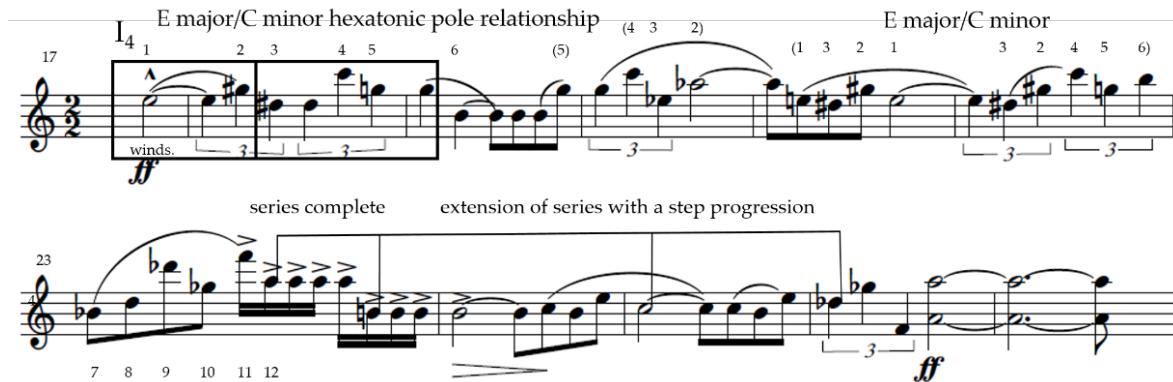
borrowed gesture. The catastrophic theme achieves series completion at its most intense point, its zenith, eliding with the following lyrical theme (the exposition's subordinate theme).

Example 5. The Catastrophic Theme (mm. 4–18).

The lyrical theme (Example 6) differs in quality from the previous themes: its *cantabile* style characterizes a new *dramatis personae*. Rather than strings dominating the scene, winds take precedence, and unlike the declamatory and catastrophic themes, the lyrical theme completes its series before its conclusion. After the aggregate is completed, an extension in the form of a contrapuntal step progression takes shape. The lyrical theme relies more heavily on the conventions of tonality: consonant melodic intervals pervade and help to project a *cantabile* quality. As shown in the example, the first six tones in the series reveal a hexatonic pole relationship between respelled E-major and C-minor outlines. Richard Cohn discusses this uncanny triadic relationship's abundance in Romantic music,¹⁹ and the direct statement of this relationship positions Symphony No. 2 as out of time and full of anxiety.²⁰

¹⁹ See Richard Cohn, “Maximally Smooth Cycles, Hexatonic Systems, and the Analysis of Late-Romantic Triadic Progressions,” *Music Analysis* 15/1 (1996), 9–40; and also Cohn, “Uncanny Resemblances: Tonal Signification in the Freudian Age,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57/2 (2004), 285–323.

²⁰ Michael Cherlin, “Schoenberg and *Das Unheimliche*: Spectres of Tonality,” *The Journal of Musicology* 11/3 (1993), 357–73. According to Cherlin, modernist music actively avoids tonal implications, thus repressing the desire



Example 6. The Lyrical Theme (mm. 17–23)

Returning to Example 1, a few comments must be made about how the rest of the work demonstrates this sense of trauma, anxiety, and belatedness cast with the myth of serial tyranny.²¹ The declamatory theme's repeated-note gesture is integral to the sonata cycle's retransition: it has been fragmented and removed from the context of the opening, and it is developed in a furious manner as the recapitulatory finale approaches. As the fragmentation of the theme is transposed throughout the ensemble in pitch space, it becomes clear that energy gain is driving the music forward. What was repressed—the declamatory theme—is emerging as uncanny through compulsive repetition in this retransition.

According to Freud, the uncanny is the “class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.”²² The uncanny effect released in the recapitulation is enhanced through compulsive repetition. Michael Klein says that “[r]epetition both conjures up the uncanny from the primal mind and forces the uncanny back down to the

to evoke such structures. Those repressed structures then arise anew at unexpected moments that are interpreted as uncanny when they cause fear or anxiety.

²¹ A full examination of the form is outside of the scope of this paper. For such an examination, see Richard Lee, “An Agential Exploration of Tragedy and Irony in Post-1945 Orchestral Works,” PhD diss., Florida State University, 2017.

²² Sigmund Freud, as quoted in Michael Klein, *Intertextuality in Western Art Music*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (2005), 78.

subconscious. The mind traps itself in cycles of repetition.”²³ Within the Wozzeck reference alone is a Bloomian misreading that makes use of repetition. Instead of simply stating the notes of the leitmotif, Rochberg repeats the initiating pitch in a repeated-note gesture. That repetition establishes the compulsive repetition of the uncanny long before it is interpreted between hexatonic pole sonorities. As the sonata form unfolds, the declamatory theme becomes repressed by the catastrophic and lyrical themes (at the end of the first movement—the global exposition). What ensues is a declamatory theme’s compulsive repetition throughout the development (approaching textural saturation of the repeated-note gesture) before resurfacing in a moment of terror.

Mvmt. IV serves as recapitulation to the sonata cycle, yet comes with a problem—it returns “off tonic” in m. 657. Marked as “Tempo Primo,” the declamatory theme returns, but rather than sounding the expected P₉, it is restated with the row form P₅. What was once familiar was then repressed and emerges anew in a moment of terror. The narrating presence, having been weakened by the development, returns after being repressed, fragmented, and compulsively revisited. Its return is Wozzeck’s return—it is the traumatic resurgence of innumerable war experiences that Rochberg conjures through that soldier.

Serialism and trauma, anxiety and sonata form, the uncanny, and Rochberg’s life experience generate a reading of lateness in the symphony. Straus tells us that sonata form in the twentieth century is “not revived, but created anew.”²⁴ The presence of the sonata principle organizes this large-scale orchestral composition, yet Rochberg misreads sonata form: he uses ideas of false recapitulation and undercuts schematic expectation, as many Classic composers have done. His reliance on traditional elements only paints him as a belated composer who is

²³ Klein, *Intertextuality in Western Art Music*, 79.

²⁴ Joseph Straus, *Remaking the Past*, 98.

caught up in following the trend of serialism—and thus contributing to the formation of the myth of serial tyranny. Additionally, Rochberg’s writing about serialism demonstrates a belatedness that spawned criticism. Many of Rochberg’s theoretical terms that set the stage for Symphony No. 2 were already expressed in theoretical discourse (using more nuanced and technical language). Being belated, in a sense, is uncanny for a “modernist” like Rochberg. In attempting to heroize the moment, he struggles to find his style and ends up being locked out of his own time as he gazes at his inversion in the mirror.

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