

## FORUM: TALKING ABOUT MUSIC

### SOME CURRENT TERMS

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I PROPOSE to examine some current terms with regard to their usefulness in a publication of the type of PERSPECTIVES. The following assumptions have to be established:

1. The periodical is aimed at a readership of "educated" musicians interested in problems beyond the trivia of the trade. I presume that the majority of its readers consists of such people.

2. By "educated" musicians, I understand here an individual who has absorbed knowledge of music theory and history on the graduate level prevailing at the (intellectually speaking) upper half of our colleges and universities and has retained this knowledge in such manner that it can be readily activated.

3. When verbalizing about music, individuals of this kind will share a terminology that may be called a "jargon," which, according to Webster, is a particular language of a group of people engaged in the same trade or profession.

Obviously it would be difficult to circumscribe this jargon in terms of a comprehensive glossary, because, on the one hand, it is in constant flux as new terms are evolved and more or less generally accepted, and, on the other hand, the accepted terms are variously defined by different groups within the profession. Sixty years ago, such terms as "atonal," "polytonal," and "twelve-tone row" would not have meant anything at all; today they evoke in every "educated" musician a conceptual image, although such musicians may not agree on precise definitions of those terms. We know that even such time-honored concepts as "counterpoint" may become open to discussion when changes in aesthetic consciousness and compositional techniques make the traditional definitions appear too narrow or wrongly tied up with assumptions no longer valid.

The standard dictionaries (Harvard, Grove, etc.) are not of great help because, in a nontotalitarian society, they carry only as much authority as we grant them according to the focus of our interest. While I may not quarrel with the encyclopedia about its discussion of

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"Balinese scales," I will probably disagree with most of what it has to say about "Atonality," because I feel that on this subject I have a great deal to say myself. For a student of Far-Eastern music, it may be the opposite. Nonetheless, the terms making up the *lingua franca* of the "educated" musician will generally be understood by his partners, although it would seem advisable even among colleagues to attach a precise definition to any terms loosely bandied around (such as, for instance, "rhythm" and "meter") if the disquisition on hand centers on a distinct meaning of such a term.

Some frequently encountered terms seem to lie at the borderline of the generally accepted technical language, such as the sequence "dyad, trichord, tetrachord, pentachord, hexachord." As it stands, it is ambiguous and confusing. The newfangled "dyad" evokes the familiar "triad." Apparently because conventionally "triad" is too narrowly defined as a three-tone chord consisting of two superimposed thirds (minor, major or both), the term "trichord" is introduced to designate any three-tone combination. However, in traditional language "triad" may mean not only the simultaneous, but also the consecutive ("arpeggio") sounding of its three tones. Is this double meaning, by analogy, also applicable to "dyad"? And equally to "trichord"? Or do the "-chord" terms designate only tone clusters, in association with the familiar term "chord"? Logical as they sound in this sequence, the terms "tetrachord" and "hexachord" are confusing because historically they are attributed to scalewise arrangements of the elements of a musical idiom (e.g., Greek, medieval).

Some other terms are not meaningful per se, but it may be assumed that their significance will transpire from the context in which they appear. For instance, "precompositional," "adjacency," "polarity," and "center of inversion" do not by themselves carry that kind of precise connotation which we expect of the accepted technical language of music. They seem to have been coined *ad hoc*, and they are probably clear enough in their particular situations.

But many terms currently in use belong to a vocabulary lying outside of the scope of usual musical terminology. For all we know, they belong to the jargon of the special branch of mathematics known as set theory. The application of this language to musical matters can be understood only by individuals who are at home in both fields. This group is limited to those graduates of Princeton University who have attended the courses of Milton Babbitt, who is in the enviable position of being an eminent musician as well as a distinguished scientist. Obviously he is aware of the difficulties besetting the efforts of a simple musician who wishes to understand his communication, and he

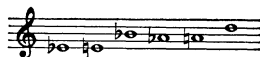
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tries to assist the ignorant. Unfortunately, the explanation of his terminology given on page 52 (especially footnote 3) in *PERSPECTIVES*, Vol. 1, No. 1, is not very helpful, because it is (if this were possible) even more hermetic than what it should explain. Apparently only diligent study of this rarefied mathematical discipline will break the deadlock. Unavoidably, at one time or other, we begin to wonder whether it is really necessary to undergo such rigorous training in order to understand serial music. Since the language used to elucidate the musical problems is not understandable, the problems remain unsolved, and consequently it is rarely possible to surmise whether a different approach might have been more useful.

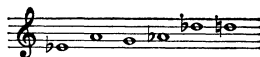
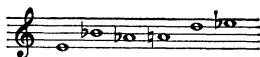
In a few cases such a test is feasible. I beg to be allowed to discuss the following passages from Babbitt's essay "Remarks on the Recent Stravinsky" in *PERSPECTIVES*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 53.

Here . . . the collections are those which Stravinsky terms "alpha," "beta," "gamma" and "delta" collections. Each such collection is composed of six hexachords, derived by successive order transposition (rotation) and pitch transposition (by the transposition number equal to the mod. 12 complement of the pitch-class number of the element which, as a result of the rotation, occupies the initial order position in the so derived hexachord) of the elements of—respectively—the first hexachord of the set, its inversion, the final hexachord of the set, and its inversion.

Fortunately, a brief glance at the music example printed a few lines further below makes immediately clear that what Stravinsky did was to derive from his first "hexachord"



five additional ones by putting the first tone at the end and transposing the resulting group of six tones to the pitch level of the original group:

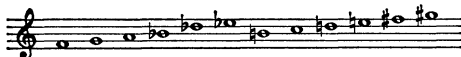


It so happens that I did exactly the same thing about twenty years before Stravinsky in my *Lamentatio Jeremiae Prophetae*. Here is my explanation of this procedure (from my essay "Extents and Limits of

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Serial Techniques," in *Musical Quarterly*, XLVI [April, 1960], 211ff.):

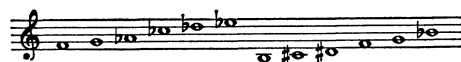
The twelve-tone series of this work reads thus:



Each of its constituent six-tone groups is progressively modified by making the first tone the last:

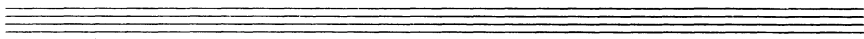
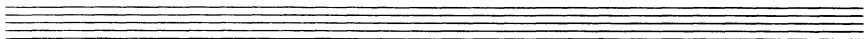
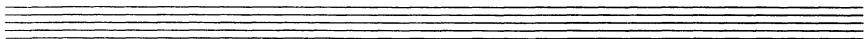
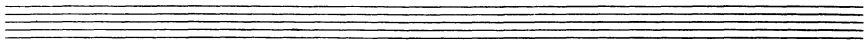


. . . The roster of patterns is doubled by transposing all those of the left column . . . to begin on F, all those of the right column to begin on B.

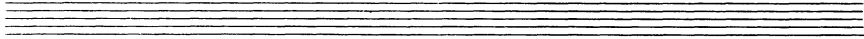


Of course, Stravinsky is as welcome as anyone else to use an idea of rotation and transposition which to think up and to apply I perhaps happened to be the first. The example is quoted only in order to suggest that many of the affairs of advanced music may still be described in terms belonging to the equipment of the "educated" musician, without resorting to a language that is beyond his grasp.

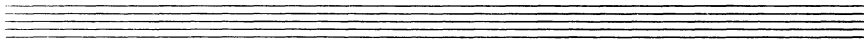
To add a personal note: after assiduously studying Babbitt's essay "Twelve-tone Invariants . . ." *Musical Quarterly*, XLVI [April, 1960] 246-59, I have covered several sheets of music paper with experiments, exercises, and examples trying to penetrate the meaning of his discourse, and finally approached my learned friend by letter for more information. It was of no avail, and I gave up in frustration since I did not wish to encroach further on his time. I am afraid that the use of this language in PERSPECTIVES has reached a point of diminishing returns: the possible increment of scholarly prestige (not to speak of snob appeal) is compensated by the loss of communicability.



DIRECTED MOTION IN TWO BRIEF PIANO PIECES



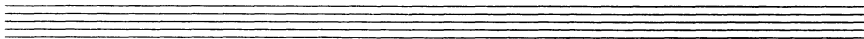
BY SCHOENBERG AND WEBERN



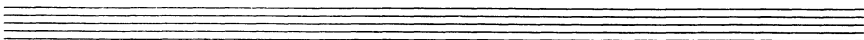
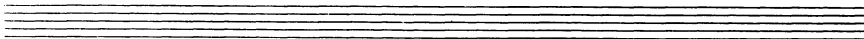
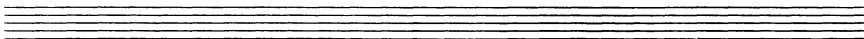
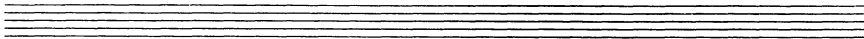
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ROY TRAVIS



Musical Examples



Ex. 1

Identical chord-form,  
built on V and I respectively

Tonic-sonority (In C) =  $\begin{matrix} \#7 \\ \#5 \\ \#3 \\ \flat 3 \end{matrix} V + \begin{matrix} \#7 \\ \#5 \\ \#3 \\ \flat 3 \end{matrix} I$

Ex. 2

Sost. Ped. ----- ]

Ex. 3

Ex. 4

Bb

Schoenberg. Sechs Kleine Klavierstücke, Op. 19, No. 2.

(Copyright 1943, Universal Edition, Vienna)

Detail: Derivation of espressive melody, mm. 2-3:

Ex. 5a plus Ex. 5b becomes Ex. 5c

Anticipation (on detailed level) of structural outer-voice progression.

Beginning of passing motion of Ex. 6c (middle-ground level).

Introduce octave transpositions.

Let a single "polyphonic-melody" do the work of four voices, resulting in successive rather than simultaneous intervals. (Now play mm. 2-3).

Annotations:  $c\#$ ,  $e\flat$ ,  $d\sharp$ ,  $g\flat$ ,  $f\sharp$ ,  $e\flat$ ,  $d\flat$  (phryg),  $E\flat$ ,  $C$ .

Other markings:  $(f\sharp)$ ,  $poco rit.$ ,  $6$ ,  $7$ ,  $8$ ,  $9$ .

passing

Ex. 6: Bartók: 4th String Quartet (Boosey and Hawkes, N.Y., 1939)  
(Simplified reduction)

N.B.

Measure: 5

chromatic cluster (from c)      whole-tone cluster (from Bb)

"X" → "Y"

chromatic clusters

(from Eb)      (from Cb)

(x' → y)      (x' → y)

(x' → y) progression in diminution

whole-tone cluster (from Bb)

"Y"

Summarizing chord, containing both clusters (x+y)

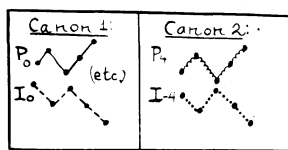
(and also Bb, N, or pt. to Bb)

(I have borrowed the "x" and "y" designations for the chords underlying Ex. 6 from Mr. Perle's article)



Ex. 7: Webern: *Symphony*, Op. 21 (mm. 1-11)

$P_0$  in compact registration ( $P_0 = R=6$ )



Fixed System of Registration:  
(In p. 4ths)

(Copyright 1929, Universal Edition, Vienna)

Ex. 8: Webern: Piano Variations, Op. 27 (2nd mov't) (Copyright 1937, Universal Edition, Vienna)

Dyads and Row-Forms:

Sehr schnell ♩ = ca 160

Measure: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

Four Systems of P<sub>0</sub> and I<sub>0</sub> Registration:

Ex. 9

Ex. 10

I N. N. N P double N

I Polar I (passing) Polar (passing) I