
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

From Michael Graubart

Kathryn Puffett's analyses of some pieces from *Pierrot Lunaire* ('Structural Imagery: 'Pierrot Lunaire' revisited'; *Tempo*, Vol.60 No.237, July 2006) are wonderfully precise, formally comprehensive and illuminating. Her exegeses of the 'structural imagery' of No.8 ('Nacht') and No.18 ('Mondfleck') are convincing. But when she writes, about No.17 ('Parodie'), that '...there is no clearer form of musical mimicry than canon', the dangers of this kind of writing become apparent.

Is this a general statement about canon? Canon as such is not mimicry, let alone parody. It is the sincerest form of flattery. If Kathryn Puffett means that canonic writing *can be used* to express a parodistic kind of mimicry (especially if the *comes* is in some way a distortion of the *dux*), that is certainly true. But her assertion that in this piece the imitation 'is cruel and twisted' is surely putting the cart before the horse. The fact that in each of the canons in 'Parodie' one voice is inverted hardly makes the imitation 'cruel and twisted'; merely asymmetric, because unlike, say, in many of Webern's canons, the number of voices in original and inverted forms is not equal. When we listen to 'Parodie', it is not that, hearing the canons, we sense that the moon is mocking the Duenna. On the contrary, because we hear the words and know the title of the piece, we *infer* that the canons are intended to be parodistic.

Kathryn Puffett is on logically firmer, but also more provocative, ground when she states that 'the most brilliant parody of all is that the *Sprechstimme* takes part in all the canons. That this voice, whose pitches are fixed only on the page but not in practice and vary wildly from one performance to another, should partake of canon, a technique in which pitch is all-important, seems to me the perfect irony.'

This irony, if it is present, is so against, not in accordance with, Schoenberg's intentions. If the vocal part of 'Parodie' is parodistic, it is not because the vocalist fails to imitate the pitches of the instrumental parts correctly – which would merely make it hard for the listener to recognize the vocal part as belonging to the canons at all, but because of the tone and the slides of the 'speaking voice' Schoenberg calls for. Performances in fact

fall broadly into two camps: that in which vocalists try to follow Schoenberg's instruction to attack each note with correct pitch (though some of these sing too much as a consequence); and that in which vocalists take the difficulty of complying with Schoenberg's wishes as an excuse to ignore them altogether.

The problem of reconciling correct pitch with the speaking, as against the singing, voice has been debated endlessly and continues to be debated. A recent and very interesting contribution is Jennifer Goltz's article, *Pierrot le diseur* (*Musical Times*, Spring 2006), in which she adheres to the argument that the participation of the vocal line in the canons of 'Parodie' *demand*s correct pitch. In my letter commenting on this article (*Pierrot's speech-song*, Letters to the Editor, *Musical Times*, Summer 2006) – in which, amongst other things, I discuss the license granted to singers of tonal cabaret songs by the fact that an instrumental line usually doubles the notated voice part (which is only true in *Pierrot* in parts of No.24, 'O alter Duft') – I mention one feature of the structure of *Pierrot* that is rarely if ever discussed: the restatement of the pitches (those of the reciter as well as those of the flute) of No.7, 'Der kranke Mond', by cello, bass clarinet and flute in the link between No.13 ('Enthauptung') and No.14 ('Die Kreuze'). This piece of structural imagery really *does* call for Kathryn Puffett's hermeneutic skill, and I very much hope she will be able to shed some light on this mysterious event.

As for her regret that Schoenberg later took up his 'brand new and rather zany proposition' (presumably 12-note technique) rather than 'a stricter use of the traditional disciplines', the devil is in the 'rather than'. *Chacun a son goût*; but 'as well as' would be more apposite than 'rather than'. Not only are Schoenberg's later works full of the most consummately masterful sonata, rondo and variation forms, but *Moses und Aron*, for instance, is equally full of the most powerful fugues. The difference is that in the freely atonal style of *Pierrot* there are few if any limitations on the vertical combinations resulting from the superimposition of voices or on the voice-leading – in other words there is polyphony, but without rules of counterpoint – whereas in the 12-note works, whether the different voices are extracted

from a single set-statement by turning intervals between successive notes into vertical ones or whether they form parallel set-forms in which note-duplication is avoided by the use of complementary sets, the 12-note technique supplies the restrictions that control polyphonic imagination through contrapuntal discipline.

Why it is (*whether* it is, perhaps?) that a canon written within the hard discipline of restrictive contrapuntal rules is aesthetically superior to one written in comparative freedom is a question

worth pondering. Is 'difficult' better than 'easy'? Is that just Puritanism? Can the listener tell? Stefan Wolpe once talked to me about 'the resistance against which to kick' that he found in serial techniques. All this is worth a full and both philosophical and psychological discussion; but it is beyond the scope of this letter.

18 Laitwood Road
London
SW12 9QL