

Anton Webern in 1912  
(photo: courtesy of the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basle)



## PERENNIAL QUESTIONS\*

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### Atonal Closure: Process, Completion, and Balance

In his essay 'What are twelve-note rows *really* for?' (*Tempo*, Vol. 57, No. 225, July 2003, p. 36), Michael Graubart suggests that 'twelve-note rows may give back to atonal music a goal-directed force and the possibility of closure'. He argues that by using a row, composers set up a pattern that can ultimately provide a sense of completion or closure to an atonal piece, although he admits that listeners may have trouble recognizing this completion. Closure in tonal music is in fact a powerful musical force, but one whose strength depends largely upon the hierarchy found in tonal melody and harmony. Consider the closure at the end of a piece. It is here that an authentic cadence signals the coming to rest of large-scale musical forces, both melodic and harmonic, on several levels of structure. We might make analogies, as Graubart does, between tonal closure and the pattern-completion possible with a twelve-note row, but one wonders if any row, or any twelve-note piece for that matter, can provide the type of multi-level completion that is possible within the tonal hierarchy.

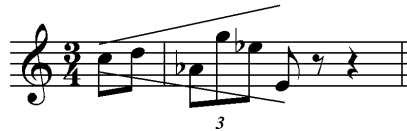
If we are to search for closure or something comparable in twelve-note or atonal music, it would be profitable to define what our expectations are. For isn't tonal closure really about expectations set into motion by the composer? A departure from the tonic key and the establishment of the dominant or mediant key area encourages the listener to expect some sort of resolution, and the more complete the better. With atonal or twelve-note music, the situation is quite different. Since the notes of the chromatic aggregate are often distributed across the musical fabric, we sense an equality among the notes that prevents them from setting up the type of harmonic departure or return that a modulation does. Similarly, melodic notes are often devoid of the musical tendencies, like a leading tone moving to tonic, that are so prominent in the tonal hierarchy and which are so important in creating the finality of closure. Should we expect in atonal music, then, with its radically different melodic and harmonic landscape, the same type of musical experience, the same solid confirmation of musical expectations? I think not.

It might be better for listeners and analysts alike to search for alternate notions of closure in atonal music. But if we do not look to harmony, melody, and voice-leading to identify closure, as we do in tonal music, what then? Shall we consider other musical elements or admit that closure, as we define it in tonal music, is simply not possible in the atonal realm? Before we resign ourselves to such a definitive statement, I would like to suggest that it is possible to retain the notion of closure in atonal music, provided we alter certain basic assumptions about which musical elements produce it. We can still concern

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ourselves with long-range processes, and the coming to rest of those processes, but in a way that is more elemental to an atonal piece. We then avoid the dilemma of trying to replicate the resolution of tonal melodic and harmonic forces.

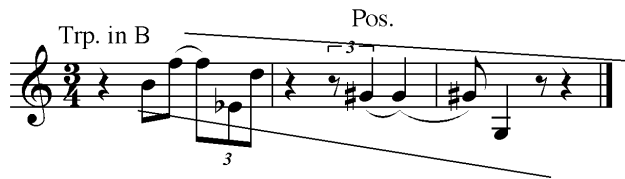
To illustrate my point, I turn to one of the classics of the atonal literature, the fourth piece (*Fließend, ausserst zart*) of Anton Webern's *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, op.10. Op.10 no. 4 is an extremely brief piece whose texture is sparse and transparent. There are musical elements here that produce a sense of finality through several processes initiated by the opening melody in the mandolin. This melody begins on C5 and opens up a wedge-shaped musical space, shown as Ex. 1.



Example 1

We will pay close attention to its shape, in particular the beginning and highest notes (a C/G perfect fifth) and the registral space it occupies (15 semitones from E4 up to G5). Given Webern's love of symmetry, it might seem uncharacteristic that the final note is not F4, since that would produce a registral balance above and below the C5 that begins the melody. As we will see, this discrepancy is resolved in due time.

This rather innocuous melody sets into motion several musical processes that eventually produce a sense of completion by the end of the piece. In tonal music, there is a 'setting in motion' of similar processes at the beginning of a piece, whether a Schenkerian *Urlinie* or a tonic key that will be departed from and then re-established later on. Here, we find a similar situation, although the elements creating this departure and return are quite different. The first melody, after opening up its wedge-shaped space, is developed and immediately heard again. As Ex. 2 shows, the second melody is heard in two timbres, both muted, and its shape has been elongated.



Example 2

Now it lasts for 13 eighth notes instead of five. It still retains some of its original wedge shape, but it is divided by rests that focus our attention on the final two notes and the descending 13-semitone span they create. And that focus is warranted, for this G3 is the goal of the initial melody's descending component. Besides the obvious spatial resemblance, there is an intervallic correspondence between the two melodies as well. The lower contour points of the first melody (C, A $\flat$ , and E) create two 4-semitone spans. In the second melody, the corresponding notes (B, E $\flat$ , and G) stretch those spans to eight semitones.

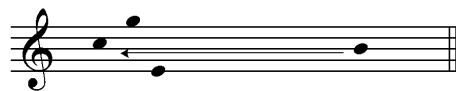
These two melodies, the second a development of the first, span the first formal section, which ends with an ensemble rest interrupted only by the snare drum. But these melodies leave us out of balance. It is true that the second melody ends on G, a return to the highest pitch of the first melody. Its register, though, seems too low to lend a sense of completion. In fact, the wedge shape of the second melody almost seems to dissolve downward, a distortion of the first melody's rather

precise shape. We could make an analogy here to the midpoint of a tonal piece in binary form, where the cadence on the V or III establishes an open section that demands the closure of the second section. Here, we are left out of balance: too much of these two related melodies is heard below the center of the first, and we are left to wait for subsequent events to restore our equilibrium.

I have talked first of closure or a sense of completion, and then later, in reference to the musical examples, the balance of the piece. I believe there is merit in linking these two concepts. In tonal music, closure is a completion, a return to a tonic key, a coming to rest of melody and harmony, but it is also a restoration of balance. The establishment of a tonic key at the beginning of a piece sets up certain expectations, one of which is that events will center around the tonic and dominant pitches. When another key is established, we hear a new centering of musical elements, but the memory of the tonic key still remains and thus a conflict occurs, since we must now reconcile this new key with the previously established tonic. At the end of the piece, closure is the final confirmation that the tonic key has in fact returned and that all interceding keys, those that ‘threw off’ the tonal center of the work, have been resolved.

Let us return to the initial melody of op. 10, no. 4. The second melody continues the descending portion of the first melody’s shape, which ‘dissolves’ and leaves us out of balance, but there are two other aspects of the first melody we have not yet considered. Its ascent from C up to G has not been developed or continued. And, recall that the registral space of the first melody, from E4 up to G5, lacks a note at its precise midpoint. If we accept that this melody sets into motion a set of finite musical processes, then we expect that events later in the piece will provide the completion of these processes.

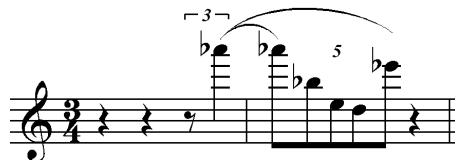
Two events at the end of the movement interact to complete these processes. First, we hear in mm. 5–6 a repeated B4 in mandolin. This pitch signals a return to the timbre that began the piece; but more importantly, the note fulfills another purpose. As Ex. 3 shows, this B4, when paired with the C5 that initiated the first melody, creates the registral center of the melody.



Example 3

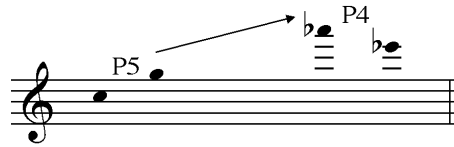
Its span, from E4 up to G5, now has its complete center, the dyad B/C, and so in a sense the repeated mandolin pitch is a return to the center of this melody. This pitch also begins the second melody, but because of its role as a ‘developer’ of the first melody the B4 in that location does not represent, to me at least, a satisfying return. It is as if Webern is teasing us, presenting us with the proper note immediately after the first melody ends, but then making it obvious that it is actually the first note of another melody and that we will have to wait for the true restorer of balance that occurs when the mandolin plays the B4.

The other event providing completion and balance is the third melody in mm. 5–6, shown as Ex. 4.



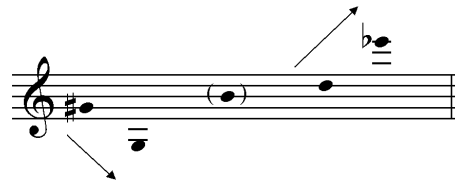
Example 4

Recall that the first melody begins the piece on C5 and progresses to its highest note, G5, an ascending perfect fifth. This interval lacks a specific meaning at the beginning of the movement, but when we examine the final melody its role as an initiator becomes clear. For it is in this final melody that the 'trajectory' begun by the C/G perfect fifth is reversed, and thus brought into balance, by its inversion, the A $\flat$ /E $\flat$  descending fourth formed by the highest notes of the third melody (see Ex. 5).



Example 5

Moreover, in this melody is another musical element brought to completion. The second melody ended with a descending 13-semitone span from G $\sharp$ 4 down to G3 that left us below any center of balance. Here, in the final melody in the movement, the final two notes, D5 and E $\flat$ 6, now produce a span of the same size in the opposite direction. As Ex. 6 shows, these two 13-semitone spans are exactly symmetrical around the B4 in the mandolin.



Example 6

Any feeling of openness created by the descending G $\sharp$ /G span is now resolved by the symmetrically arranged ascending D/E $\flat$  span that ends the piece. It should not go unnoticed that this final pitch is E $\flat$ , a note that Webern accentuated on other occasions as well, perhaps because of its significance as the 'signature' pitch of his teacher and mentor, Arnold Schoenberg.

These individual processes are all part of a larger one that spans the movement and that we can summarize as follows. At the beginning of the piece, the first melody initiates the process in three ways. First, the beginning and highest notes create an ascending C/G perfect fifth, and in doing so suggest a melodic 'trajectory'. Second, the final note of the melody delineates a registral space that lacks an exact pitch at its midpoint. Finally, this melody also establishes a clear wedge shape that will soon be developed. The second melody begins on B4, a note that would complete the dyad at the midpoint of the first melody, but it is quickly apparent that its role as melodic initiator is more vital. For it is this melody that takes the rather clear wedge of the first melody and elongates it downward, ending with the G $\sharp$ /G descent that leaves us out of balance and brings us to the division between the two sections of the movement. The B4 in the mandolin represents a return to the center of the first melody, but two other processes set into motion are still unresolved. It is with the third melody that all processes are completed. The first and final notes of the melody produce the descending P4 interval. And, the penultimate note, D, produces with the E $\flat$  the ascending 13-semitone span that reverses and thus balances the earlier descending span. It is not until the final note of the movement, then, that all processes are complete. On three separate levels, balance is restored and closure is attained.

Webern's brief piece provides evidence of an alternative to traditional ideas of closure. Some will argue that it is unlikely the music of other composers will feature the same type of clear symmetries and intervallic structure. That may be, but by examining similar types of musical elements or salient features one can arrive at, in many atonal pieces, a means by which closure can be posited. In some interpretations of post-tonal or atonal music, analysts often look first to pitch-based elements such as harmony, melody, and voice leading to identify closure. One should, however, also consider rhythm, density, register, dynamics, and so on in determining how composers tell us they are finished with a section or movement. And that is really the issue, for we seem to have a desire to know when things end, when the musical processes the composer sets into motion have reached their goals. Perhaps underlying this need is a feeling that we simply want reassurance that we are once again on musical solid ground.

I have suggested here that we look to musical elements other than the traditional ones when attempting to find evidence of closure in atonal music. It remains to be seen, however, if this type of closure is easily perceptible to the listener. Closure in tonal music is readily apparent: several musical forces come to rest at once, all of which are supported by the initial establishment of the tonic key. In the atonal situation I have described, one might ask if the same type of perceptions are possible. Do we perceive when a symmetrical arrangement of pitches is completed by the addition of its center pitch? Or when a span leaves us out of balance, do we notice when it is reversed and brought back into balance? I believe we could if we were as thoroughly trained to do so as we are in recognizing tonal closure. As Michael Graubart points out in his discussion of twelve-note rows, composers use the rows, at least in part, because they allow them to compose music satisfying to them. Should we also grant the same license to atonal composers who employ alternative methods of achieving closure? I believe we should. It is up to us as musicians and analysts and listeners to learn and comprehend how these devices produce satisfaction for the composers who use them.

Music examples from Anton Webern's *Five Pieces for Orchestra* op.10 © Copyright 1923 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien; Copyright renewed 1951 by Anton Webern's Erben.