

Michael Cherlin. 2007. *Schoenberg's Musical Imagination*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

**Reviewed by Gordon Root**

In the introduction to his insightful new book, *Schoenberg's Musical Imagination*, music theorist Michael Cherlin describes his approach as an alternative to the kind of formalistic analyses of Schoenberg's music that once dominated the pages of American music theory journals. Considering this anti-formalist bent, readers who would anticipate a book thin in analytic detail may be somewhat surprised by the density of Cherlin's analyses, which are often comparable to even the most stringent of formalistic studies. Indeed, such unapologetic excavation of pitch-structure and form may seem to contradict an alleged critique of formalism, but Cherlin's point seems to be that an expansion of cultural and philosophical context need not altogether preclude technical analysis. In this sense, Cherlin offers a critique of formalism but not of analysis itself.

In his quest to provide a broader context for analytical observation, Cherlin argues that certain musical and dramatic conflicts form a persistent thread throughout Schoenberg's music and theoretical ideas. It is this persistence that leads him to explore the influence of dialectical thinking on Schoenberg's musical rhetoric in chapter 2. Cherlin begins this chapter by identifying two broad historical schools of dialectical thought. One branch, which includes Pythagoras, Hegel, and others, has tended to view dialectical opposition merely as an essential stepping stone along the path to higher unity or synthesis. The other branch, which includes Heraclitus and William Blake, has tended to view dialectical opposition as a state of balance between concord and discord, peace and war, and so on. In this latter view, it is dialectical opposition that maintains the precarious balance of the universe and it is only through the tension of opposition that harmony becomes possible. Consequently, harmony is considered not as a pleasing agreement of separate entities, but as a tenuous friction between opposing forces. As Cherlin explains, most musical theories have stemmed from the Hegelian, or synthetic, camp of dialectics. Schoenberg's theoretical concepts, however, seem to repudiate synthetic thinking altogether and to veer instead toward a Heraclitean conception of dialectical balance.

The Heraclitean view may bring to mind the "negative dialectics" of Theodor Adorno (1973), which shunned the positivism of Hegelian synthesis in order to reveal the tenuously balanced oppositions that he believed comprised Western society. Considering the Frankfurt critic's well-documented

relationship with the Second Viennese School and his fascination with Schoenberg's music—not to mention the fact that dialectics is the subject of this chapter—it would be reasonable to expect some discussion of his theories here. Surprisingly, however, this is not the case. Cherlin explains in an endnote that he de-emphasizes Adorno's theories because the philosopher's claims about Schoenberg's music are too general and lack the kinds of musical analysis and musicological grounding that could substantiate them (348n23). Cherlin's point is well taken, but the lack of evidence in Adorno's claims does not preclude their relevance to a discussion of Schoenberg and dialectical philosophy. Still, even with this omission, Cherlin's discussion of the place of Schoenbergian dialectics in the history of Western philosophical thought proves to be quite enlightening. While many other authors have isolated aspects of dialectical thinking in Schoenberg's music, such as the composer's predilection for inversional balance or his insistence on perpetual motivic variation, few have delved into this subject with as much depth and acumen as Cherlin does in this chapter.

Dialectical opposition seems in many ways to be at the heart of the "tropical nexus" of "conflict, flux, and imperfection" that Cherlin identifies as a constant thread in Schoenberg's music and theoretical writing. As Cherlin explains, European art music from the medieval to the late Romantic era had been based on the assumption that perfection was achievable. This is most evident in sonata form, in which thematic and tonal conflict is resolved during the obligatory recapitulation. By avoiding facile resolutions, Cherlin argues, Schoenberg's music reveals the illusory nature of the ideal of perfection.

Like his discussion of dialectical opposition, Cherlin's argument here is reminiscent of Adorno's claim that Schoenberg's music, unlike Beethoven's, points to the impossibility of coexistence between individual freedom and societal constraints. Adorno reads Beethoven's middle period works as suggesting that these two forces can amicably coexist, while he reads Beethoven's insistence on harmonious resolution during the late period as an admission that such reconciliation is ultimately impossible. For Adorno, it is Schoenberg's music that explicitly announces this impossibility (Subotnik 1991). Thus both Cherlin and Adorno claim that Schoenberg's music reveals the falsity of a deeply entrenched philosophic belief. For Adorno, this belief regards the utopian cohabitation of freedom and law, while for Cherlin it has to do more generally with Western ideas of perfection and closure. In each case, however, Schoenberg's music is the prophetic voice that unveils the illusory nature of a utopian ideal.

One of the most refreshing aspects of Cherlin's approach is the way he couches even the most detailed analyses within a larger argument about

Schoenberg's musical imagination and its significance in the context of European culture at that time. In this manner, analytical detail is used to support a broad argument rather than as an end in itself. In chapter 6, for example, Cherlin develops an intricate analysis of competing row partitions in order to demonstrate the dramatic conflict between the two protagonists in Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. Beyond the immediate manifestation of conflict between characters, Cherlin explores the idea of conflict in general as a recurrent trope in Schoenberg's music—one that is essential to the composer's views on composition and that occupies a central position in his worldview.

While interpreting the theme of conflict in *Moses und Aron* within the larger context of Schoenberg's oeuvre, Cherlin discusses some of the ways in which conflict is invoked in the ideas of Schoenberg's contemporaries, including Kafka and Freud. Regarding the latter, Cherlin cites Freud's characterization of the human psyche's competing id and ego as a quintessential example. In this way, Cherlin situates the theme of conflict in *Moses und Aron* within Schoenberg's theoretical and philosophical framework, which is, in turn, situated within the broad historical and cultural environment from which it emerges.

Readers may here be reminded of Schoenberg's bold portrayal in the *Harmonielehre* of a single tone, a seemingly unified entity, as a complex conglomeration of conflicting elements and impulses. Of course, with this statement Schoenberg may have been serving a larger agenda, that is, to defend the conflicted sound of atonality to squeamish early twentieth-century listeners. For, if even the smallest musical unit was inherently dissonant, and if dissonance therefore formed an integral part of consonance itself, then perhaps the jarring musical language of Schoenberg and his generation was not so far removed from the natural principles of tonality; perhaps dissonance could be more neutrally characterized in terms of its remoteness from consonance, and perhaps the chromatic, rather than the diatonic, collection could be more accurately explained as the true foundation of Western pitch-systems. This would all become possible if conflict were framed as an essential, albeit latent, characteristic of every isolated, apparently stable pitch. But even without this sprawling modernist agenda, so many of Schoenberg's theoretical ideas—including *schwebende Tonalität*, developing variation, and even the notion of the *Gedanke* itself—are so unmistakably imbued with the idea of conflict that Cherlin's claims regarding the prominence of dialectical thinking in Schoenberg's music may seem commonsensical to some readers.

In addition to *Moses und Aron* (a work without an opus number), Cherlin covers in detail *Pelleas and Melisande*, op. 5 (1903), *Erwartung*, op. 17

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(1909), the Third String Quartet, op. 37 (1927), and the String Trio, op. 45 (1946). One of the highlights of Cherlin's book is his insightful analysis of the seldom discussed tone-poem, *Pelleas und Melisande* (chapter 3). Cherlin remarks that this piece, completed in 1903, has been characterized as less successful than other works by Schoenberg from this period. Citing a 1918 letter from Schoenberg to Zemlinsky in which the composer oscillates exaggeratedly between disparaging the work as a flawed experiment and defending it as an unalterable organic whole, Cherlin notes that even Schoenberg himself was ambivalent toward this composition. However, in light of the composer's tendency to embrace an evolutionary view of history in which each successive generation of composers is considered to have improved upon the works of the previous generation, and in which his own earlier works were valued primarily as stepping stones to later ones, Cherlin cautions that this mixed appraisal should not be taken too literally. Cherlin attributes contemporary musicologists' lukewarm response to this transitional work to their neglect of dramatic and musical interaction in the piece. He argues that, even when taking this interaction into account, analysts from Derrick Puffet to Schoenberg's own student, Alban Berg, have tended to overemphasize the purely musical aspects of this work at the expense of its dramatic expression. In contrast, Cherlin focuses on "the correlation of drama and form," which he maintains comprises the work's central achievement (79).

According to Cherlin, the trope of conflict is as central to *Pelleas und Melisande* as it is to *Moses und Aron*, manifest most evidently in the triangular dramatic struggle between Pelleas, Melisande, and Golaud. In addition to this self-evident, inter-character conflict, Cherlin explores the internal conflicts that consume each of these characters: Melisande's passion for Pelleas versus her guilt at the thought of betraying her husband Golaud; Golaud's bitter feelings at having been betrayed versus his genuine love for Melisande despite this betrayal; and Pelleas's outwardly cavalier attitude versus his spellbound attraction to Melisande.

The bulk of Cherlin's analysis focuses on the way in which Schoenberg's complex leitmotivic language enables the portrayal of these dramatic conflicts. Perhaps the most striking sonic contrast that Cherlin notes in *Pelleas und Melisande* is the one that corresponds to the dramatic conflict between Melisande and Golaud. Cherlin observes that Golaud's harmonic language is essentially tonal and directed—despite its frequently surprising resolutions. He describes the GOLAUD motive's rhythms as emphatic yet shifty, thereby demonstrating a comparable blend of goal-directedness and surprise.<sup>1</sup> Through such apparently contradictory characterizations, according to Cherlin, the listener gets the sense that Golaud is strong-willed but impetuous and emotional.

By contrast, Melisande's musical language is essentially directionless, non-tonal, and in many ways predictive of Schoenberg's subsequent atonal idiom. For example, Melisande's whole-tone canon (mm. 20–31), which precedes Golaud's debut in m. 30, features several instances of the kind of transformational relationships that were to preoccupy Schoenberg in later years. Cherlin argues that the imitative use of the atonal Melisande motive creates a reflexive texture and that, combined with the inversionally symmetrical structure of the motive itself, the imitative passage "gives the music a self-reflective quality" that "results in a depth of complexity that seems fathomless" (102). It is this boundless effect, Cherlin argues, that indexes Melisande's mysterious character. For, in comparison to the relatively transparent musical language of Pelleas or Golaud, that of Melisande, with its self-referential "contextuality"<sup>2</sup> and organic chromaticism, can seem contemplative, opaque, and somewhat enigmatic. Therefore seemingly abstract musical elements such as free atonal chromaticism and inversional symmetry take on an expressive purpose that reaches beyond a typical formalistic description. In Cherlin's analysis, it is precisely this expressive purpose which motivates the wealth of musical variety in the work, from stark diatonicism, to tenuous tonality, to the total obscurity of tonal centers.

Like "conflict," Cherlin revisits the trope of imperfection at several points in his study, but he reserves the most focused examination of this concept for discussions of the late String Trio (1949) and the expressionist monodrama *Erwartung* (1909)—two works that, despite the large historical gap between them, feature a similarly fragmented musical language. In both works Cherlin interprets this language as a symptom of imperfection, of a concession of the impossibility of closure. In *Erwartung*, this is most clearly exemplified in the work's final measures. Here, the orchestra "plays a sweep of chromatic scales in contrary motion, at an extremely soft dynamic level," and the result is one of "vanishing upwards and downwards simultaneously" (208). Cherlin's description, which is not unlike Herbert H. Buchanan's observation that "the work virtually dissolves into thin air at its conclusion" (1967:440), is significant, but to this we might add that the effect may also be attributable to Schoenberg's failure to deliver the anticipated downbeat. Listeners are more likely to hear the lengthy chromatic glissandi of the final measure as an extended upbeat which they anticipate will be followed by a point of rhythmic repose on the downbeat of a subsequent bar. While there may be some uncertainty regarding the precise location of this bar and its downbeat, the final thirty-second-note subdivision of beat four is certainly unsatisfying in this role. Finally, as Cherlin explains, the closing words of the monodrama, "Ich suchte" ("I searched," "longed for," or "tried") suggest that "the seeking, longing, and struggle continue as all vanishes into nothing" (208). Therefore the incompleteness of the musical ending forms

an analogue to the open-ended nature of the text. The effect of this ending is indeed suspenseful, and the sense of incompleteness that Cherlin notes is quite unexpected and tangible.

In chapter 7, Cherlin considers the similarly confounding motivic language of the much later String Trio, op. 45 (1949), which he claims not only exemplifies the idea of imperfection, but treats it as a theme. While in *Erwartung* this trope seems to depict the fragmented mental state of the protagonist, in the String Trio it is programmatically related to Schoenberg's nearly fatal heart attack of 1946. This connection was explored by Walter Bailey in his 1984 dissertation, *Programmatic Elements in the Works of Schoenberg*, and was noted even earlier by Schoenberg himself in his unpublished essay, "Mein Todesfall" (Bailey 1984). Cherlin's analysis begins with an overview of Bailey's study, which relies heavily on the recollections of Schoenberg's students and friends. According to one student, Leonard Stein, Schoenberg described "the many juxtapositions of unlike material within the Trio as reflections of the delirium which [he] suffered during parts of his illness"—as "alternate phases of 'pain and suffering' and 'peace and repose'" (Bailey 1984:156).

Expanding upon this idea, Cherlin likens the fragmented musical language of the Trio to seeing one's life pass before one's eyes at the moment of death. Accordingly, for Cherlin, the Trio is as much about memory and recollection as it is about death. The focus on recollection helps to explain both the sense of fragmentation in the work and its allusions to earlier musical styles. While several authors have described this referential character, including Silvia Millstein, who has found the work's "abandonment of classical phrase-construction . . . and its replacement by a kind of musical prose" to be "reminiscent of the Expressionist period" (1992:157), few, if any, have convincingly interpreted it within the context of the Trio's autobiographical program. For this reason, Cherlin's effort to suggest a broader meaning for what might otherwise constitute a series of dry technical details is one of the principle strengths of this analysis. The point here is not merely that this work *is* formally self-referential—that it seems to borrow from each of Schoenberg's principle stylistic periods and from a nostalgically remembered European tradition—but that this self-referentiality serves an expressive purpose. That is, it evokes the image of accelerated recollection that precedes the moment of death.

According to Cherlin, these musical memories in the Trio seldom finish in any coherent way. Schoenberg achieves this sense of imperfection "by composing musical ideas that suggest a continuation that is somehow diverted, disturbed, or disrupted" (309)—a feature that Cherlin, like Dalhaus (1987) before him, plausibly links to the rhetoric of Beethoven's late period. "The real work" of interpreting the fragmented musical language of the

Trio, Cherlin explains, “lies in formulating a convincing sense of the flow of musical ideas, so that crowding-in, breaking-off and dozing-off become convincing variables in the overall flux of the work” (309). Cherlin’s analysis of the recapitulation of the “cantabile theme” during the final measures of the String Trio is illustrative. According to Cherlin, this passage strongly suggests a period structure. But unlike a typical consequent phrase whose function is to provide a relatively conclusive answer to the open-ended query of the antecedent, this self-conscious homage to classical phrase design “begins to unravel” and “never achieves closure” (328). Here, the viola’s cadential figure is elided with an imitation of the figure in the first violin. The imitation triggers a series of overlapping imitations passed from instrument to instrument such that the anticipated phrase juncture is obscured. As a result, the phrase concludes with a gesture that is more analogous to a grammatical ellipsis than a period, and in this way the consequent segment is robbed of its conclusive rhetorical function. Of course, in the music of the classical era a chain of imitations is often indicative of a phrase extension and, here too, the listener has a sense that material has been added or “tacked-on.” But the use of this phrase extension as the closing gesture of the piece is unusual at the very least. That this gesture simply dissolves, as Buchanan and Cherlin point out, contributes to the sense of incompleteness, or imperfection, that characterizes the piece. Regarding this elusive conclusion Cherlin writes, “Schoenberg composes his ‘non-ending,’ to my ear one of the most beautiful in all music, by virtuosic manipulation of his tone rows. Yet one need not be aware of the twelve-tone logic to hear the musical idea drifting from voice to voice, unable or unwilling to find closure” (328).

For those who *are* interested in exploring how the work’s twelve-tone structure contributes to this sense of imperfection, Cherlin’s analysis is revealing. Like many other passages in Schoenberg’s Trio, including the waltz segments to which Cherlin devotes a section of his study, the finale alludes strongly to tonality while simultaneously avoiding any tangible sense of resolution. In Cherlin’s analysis, this passage strongly implies a D Minor centricity, a tonal center reinforced by oblique reference to an A (dominant) sonority and a symmetrical circumvention of the D Minor tonic (i.e., surrounding of the pitch by its lower and upper chromatic neighbors D $\flat$  and E $\flat$ ). According to Cherlin, the D Minor tonic took on symbolic proportions in Schoenberg’s music, and Cherlin returns to discuss its special status at several points in his book, including the sections on *Pelleas und Melisande*, the First String Quartet, and *Erwartung*.

As Cherlin elaborates in his discussion, tonal allusions such as the finale’s D Minor would scarcely be possible if the Trio’s serial pitch structure did not itself feature a quasi-tonal capacity. Here, Cherlin relies heavily on the work of Silvia Millstein to shape his argument, and it is perhaps because he

assumes a certain familiarity with her work that his analysis can be somewhat cryptic. In describing the serial structure of the work, Cherlin reproduces Schoenberg's row sketches as transcribed in Millstein's 1992 study. Although these sketches show eighteen pitches in each row, Cherlin refers only to the "twelve-tone structure" of the passages in question, which he analyzes extensively. He annotates the excerpts in such a way that the sketches, which are meant to be illustrative, seem only distantly related to the passages in question. Nowhere does Cherlin mention that the source row of the Trio is a highly anomalous eighteen-element set, or that Schoenberg usually makes use of only the first twelve elements of this set—which is why an analysis of "twelve-tone" structure is even possible. As Millstein has noted, the eighteen-element structure of these sketches is far from intuitive, and "only those analysts who have knowledge of Schoenberg[']s set-tables" have been able to identify this puzzling feature at all (1992:169). Cherlin's analysis of the work's pitch-structure could have been clarified significantly by a more explicit summary of some of these points, but once readers are aware of this omission they should have little difficulty following the remainder of the discussion.

One of the greatest strengths of Cherlin's analytical approach is that its interpretive conclusions remain compelling even when technical details such as the one just described remain incomplete. The interpretations themselves, as Cherlin claims in his discussion of the Trio, are broad enough that they are seldom dependent upon myopic readings of technical minutiae. By the time Cherlin begins to delve into these kinds of details, he has usually made his point clear enough through an analysis of tangible, perceptible features that require very little in the way of technical knowledge. The unfinished period structure in the Trio, which helps to illustrate his larger argument regarding the work's theme of imperfection, is a case in point.

One of the most interesting features of this book, in fact, is Cherlin's general avoidance of set-class theory, which, when used without an awareness of its limitations, tends to steer analysts toward the rather bland and self-evident conclusion that works of music cohere in some way or other. Fortunately, Cherlin insists that technical analysis be used in the service of interpretation, rather than as an end in itself. For this reason alone his work deserves recognition as one of the most important contributions to the analysis of Schoenberg's music in recent years.

### Notes

1. Perhaps in honor of his teacher, David Lewin, Cherlin uses Lewin-esque capital letters to designate motives in *Pelleas*, a notation that he similarly adopted in his 1983 dissertation to label partitioning schemes in *Moses und Aron*.



2. In a well-known essay from *Words About Music*, composer and music theorist Milton Babbitt discusses what he terms the “contextuality” of modernist music. Unlike traditional pieces, new compositions shun the accepted formulae of tradition, but as a result, they forfeit the shared, familiar meaning of tonal patterning and must therefore seek meaning in their own terms. The highly motivic environment that gives each new work its unique form may be applicable only to that particular work. A motive may be described as “contextual” because, unlike tonal motives whose shapes imply harmonic functions shared by thousands of other works, it is possible for an atonal motive to reside in only one work. The work itself is contextual because its associations and its syntax are generated by motivic connections that can only be found in that particular work. Cherlin does not use this term specifically, but it is a useful adjective to describe the unique, abstract musical language that accompanies Melisande and that ultimately accounts for the enigmatic, introspective effect that he describes.

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