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“Unentrinnbar” (op. 27 no. 1) – Schoenberg

Arnold Schoenberg’s serial chorale “Unentrinnbar” offers a clear example of the importance of row choice upon serial composition. The row forms that comprise “Unentrinnbar” lend a great deal of coherence to the strictly serial work, and Schoenberg’s deliberate utilization of rows that feature multiple invariances is evident. The voices present row forms in an imitative fugal canon mm. 1-23, following the pattern P6-R6-I11-RI11 for the soprano/tenor lines, and I11-RI11-P6-R6 for the alto/bass lines. The last unison section mm. 24-31 also features the pairing of soprano/tenor and alto/bass sounding one distinct row form (P6 for the former, I11 for the latter), but perhaps in order to avoid unisons, the rows are presented in order 1-12 in the outer voices, and in the order 7-8-9-10-11-12-1-2-3-4-5-6 for the inner voices.

The entire chorale features only four forms of its row – P6 <65287134t9e0> and the reverse R6 <0e9t43178256>; I11 <e039t4217865> and its reverse RI11 <5687124t930e>. Examining these rows, one finds a number of invariances. The largest is the unordered hexachords {125678} and {0349te}, each of which comprises the 6-5 set (012367), related at T5I. Breaking into smaller groups, one finds the invariant unordered tetrachords {1278} and {349t} paired with the ordered dyads <65> and <e0>, as well as the unordered trichords {178} and {49t}. Other unordered dyad invariant pairs are {17}, {4t}, {78}, and {9t}. As the two basic row forms presented (P6 and I11) are also presented in their reverse, the dyads appear in either “order” twice.

Focusing on Schoenberg's use of the ordered dyads <65> and <e0> shows a tendency to avoid clear aural association. The first appearance of the <65> dyad, the first notes sung in the soprano line (later by the tenor in the same fashion), are set as a descending m9 – to contrast, the alto/bass appearances are a descending m1. What seems a more audible feature of “Unentrinnbar” is the inversion of the row form between the successive voice entrances - Schoenberg uses exact interval inversions between the soprano/alto and tenor/bass, highlighting the inverted relation of one voice to the other.

Returning to the hexachord invariances – the 6-5 nature of the unordered hexachord pairs seems to be highlighted in this chorale. There are several instances of 6-5 sets (012367) as conglomerates between lines. For instance, m. 3 comprises the set {349te0}, shared between the soprano and alto parts, and m. 4 comprises the same set between the same two parts. Because of the exact-imitation of the lower lines, these same associations are found in the tenor/bass later on.

The order of row appearance in “Unentrinnbar” encourages some interesting features. The row forms always occur in pairs of form-retrograde (P/R and I/RI), sharing a last-to-first “pivot pitch”. In this chorale the pivot pitch is always repeated a few times, rather than ever being shared between two forms of the row. The transition between the prime and inverted forms of the row seems to be emphasized – the voices spell the same pitches (6 going to e in the soprano/tenor, e going to 6 in the alto/bass) and the flip is made in the same register soprano/alto and down an octave for tenor/bass.

This cursory exploration of Schoenberg's op. 27 no 1 "Unentrinnbar" is only a surface study, and does not begin to explain every important feature.