

=====*Technique of Musical Composition*=====

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## Anton Webern and the Renaissance Tradition

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**Abstract.** The composers of the postwar avant-garde trend in music perceived Anton Webern’s music primarily as a brilliant expression of a break with tradition. Nonetheless, what was perceived upon first glance as a manifestation of innovatory radicalism, upon more careful examination revealed to a greater degree its obvious historical genesis. Entirely different ideas and values disclosed themselves beyond Webern’s serial precepts — a profound symbolism permeated with mysticism and elements of developed Medieval and Renaissance traditions of “parametric” musical thinking.

This article demonstrates in a thesis manner observations tracing out the lines of connection between the new elements of structural compositional logic of certain oeuvres by Webern and the traditional ideas of the polyphonic works by the Renaissance composers, primarily the “Great Flemish Masters,” the most sophisticated artists of counterpoint, giving special attention in their musical

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compositions to the architectonic organization of form, in whose music Webern experienced an indelibly profound interest during the course of his entire life. In the opinion of many researchers, certain aspects of Webern's music become more visible, if they become connected to his profound knowledge of and fondness for such composers from the Netherlands as Dufay, Josquin, Ockeghem, Isaac, etc.

The concept of tradition in the context of this article is not exhausted by the technological aspects of polyphony, but also presumes a mystical philosophical constituent connected with a particular system of symbolic encoding which plays a substantial role in both cases.

**Keywords:** Webern, the Renaissance tradition, the mensural principles, canon, numerical and graphic symbolism

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≡ *Техника музыкальной композиции* ≡

Научная статья

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## Антон Веберн и традиция Ренессанса

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**Аннотация.** Композиторами послевоенного авангарда музыка Антона Веберна воспринималась, прежде всего, как яркое выражение разрыва с традицией. Тем не менее то, что на первый взгляд воспринималось как проявление новаторского радикализма, при более внимательном рассмотрении все более и более обнаруживало свой очевидный исторический генезис. За сериальными установками Веберна проглядывали совсем иные идеи и ценности — проникнутый мистикой глубокий символизм и элементы развитой средневеково-ренессансной традиции «параметрического» музыкального мышления, предполагавшего определенную автономию синтаксиса и ритма по отношению к звуковысотной структуре горизонтали.

В статье тезисно представлены наблюдения, благодаря которым выявляется линия связи между новыми элементами композиционно-структурной логики некоторых опусов Веберна и традиционными идеями полифонической работы композиторов Ренессанса, прежде всего, «великих фламандцев» — искуснейших мастеров контрапункта, уделявших в своих сочинениях особое внимание организации архитектурной формы, — к музыке которых Веберн испытывал глубокий, непреходящий интерес на протяжении всей жизни. По мнению исследователей, некоторые аспекты музыки Веберна становятся намного яснее, если связать их с его глубокими знаниями и любовью к таким нидерландским композиторам, как Дюфай, Жоскен, Окегем, Изаак и др.

Понятие традиции в контексте статьи не исчерпывается исключительно технологическими аспектами полифонии, но подразумевает также мистико-философскую составляющую, связанную с определенной системой символического кодирования, играющего существеннейшую роль в обоих случаях.

**Ключевые слова:** Веберн, традиция Ренессанса, мензуральные принципы, канон, числовой и графический символизм

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Anton Webern has remained one of the key figures for comprehending the nature and genesis of the postwar avant-garde trend in music. This is testified, among other places, in the materials of the international symposium *Anton Webern und das Komponieren im 20. Jahrhundert: Neue Perspektiven*, published in 2019.<sup>1</sup> The intensive amount of research of the composer's legacy is demonstrated by the voluminous reference publication *Anton Webern: A Research and Information Guide*,<sup>2</sup> and also, among other materials, articles written in commemoration of the composer's 140<sup>th</sup> birthday [1, 6; 2],<sup>3</sup> as well as many other relevant works.

It is noteworthy that the composers of the postwar avant-garde trend interpreted Webern's music primarily as a brilliant expression of a break with tradition. Nonetheless, what in the thick of polemics was perceived as a manifestation of innovative radicalism, upon more careful examination identified its deep historical roots to a greater degree. "The spirit induces me to speak of forms reincarnated in new bodies" — this idea from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book 15) characterizes the nature of Webern's perspective of tradition [3].<sup>4</sup> Completely different ideas and values showed through Webern's serial constructions — a complex symbolism and elements of developed Medieval and Renaissance traditions of "parametrical" musical thinking, which presumed a certain autonomy of rhythm from the horizontal pitch structure.

The article presents in a thesis manner a number of observations which reveal the line of connection between the new elements of the compositional-structural logic of some of Webern's oeuvres with traditional ideas of the contrapuntal works of the composers of the Renaissance era, first of all, the great Flemish masters — the ingenious masters of counterpoint, who placed special attention

<sup>1</sup> See Cavallotti, P., Obert S. & Schmusch, R. (Eds.). (2019). *Neue Perspektiven. Anton Webern und das Komponieren im 20. Jahrhundert*. (Webern-Studien 4). Lafite. A symposium organized by Dr. Pietro Cavallotti took place on November 24–26, 2011 within the framework of the musicological seminar of the Basel University.

<sup>2</sup> See Hoskisson, D. (2017) *Anton Webern: A Research and Information Guide*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315770536>

<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that in the works of Larisa Gerver [1] and Evgenia Chigareva [2] the question lies in analysis of the compositions examined in this article.

<sup>4</sup> This thought defines the content of Laurence Earp's essay devoted to the parallels between Webern's musical works and the motet tradition from the era of Ars Nova.

to the architectonic organization of form in their works, — in whose music Webern maintained an indelible profound interest during the entire course of his life. According to Christian Mason, “certain aspects of Webern’s music become much clearer, if they are connected with his profound knowledge and love for the composers of the Netherlands.”<sup>5</sup> The latter include Dufay, Ockeghem, Josquin, de la Rue, Obrecht and, first of all, *Heinrich Isaac*.

As it is known, the basic academic schooling was received by Webern not only during his studies with Arnold Schoenberg, but also at the University of Vienna in the class of Guido Adler, under whose guidance he wrote his dissertation about Isaac. This work served as a basis during the preparation for publication of Isaac’s chief creation — the monumental cycle *Choralis Constantinus* [*Chants for the Constance Cathedral*],<sup>6</sup> which is defined by the researcher as the “*summa* of Netherlandish polyphony circa 1500.”<sup>7</sup> This work presents a compilation of polyphonic liturgical chants (arrangements of graduals) composed for the cathedral of the city of Constance and timed to coincide with the annual calendar of church holidays.<sup>8</sup>

Among the list of research texts about *Choralis Constantinus* and of the influence of this cycle on Webern’s musical output, special attention is merited by the analytical articles of Christian Mason, Katheline Schiltz [4] and Maria Clara Peinado Pereira [5] devoted to the studies of diverse forms of the *canon* present in the Second Book of Isaac’s grandiose oeuvre and their analogies among Webern’s works. It was particularly this book saturated with ornate canonical structures which was chosen by Webern as the object of detailed scholarly research, which, according to the scholars, predetermined in a natural way his unalterable adherence to the form of the canon during the course of his entire compositional activities.

It is customary to describe the specific features of a number of serial canonic structures in Webern’s music exclusively as the manifestation of *pointillism*. And, indeed, the emergence of this particular phenomenon is closely connected with his name, however, this idea, just as the elements of *total serialization* in his late compositions, at times spanning all the dimensions of the musical texture, have a much deeper historical genesis.

Thus, in the medieval practice of arrangements of the *cantus prius factus* (when the text and, correspondingly, the syntax [the practice of the so-called “counter-texture”] could be arbitrarily estranged from the chorale melody, while any rhythm could be substituted into the succession of its pitches), the source melody in a new rhythmical-syntactic setting acquired an almost undiscernible musical appearance that was not

<sup>5</sup> Mason Ch. (2005). *Anton Webern and the Influence of the Heinrich Isaac*, p. 2. Retrieved June 10, 2023, from [https://www.bestmusicteacher.com/download/webern\\_isaac.pdf](https://www.bestmusicteacher.com/download/webern_isaac.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> In the 32<sup>nd</sup> volume of *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich* published in 1909 under the direction of Guido Adler, Webern carried out the work of scholarly editing the Second Book of this work.

<sup>7</sup> Mason Ch. *Anton Webern and the Influence of the Heinrich Isaac*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Isaac was not able to complete this work in full, and the cycle was completed by his pupil Ludwig Senfl. The composition was published for the first time in 1555.

identical to itself. The situation of desynchronization of the mutual “contradiction” of the autonomous pitch and rhythmic sets in the isorhythmic structures of the motets frequently leads to a parametrical *rotation* of melodic elements. Such a system of coordination of various parameters of musical fabric is in many ways identical to the principles of serial composition of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which also pronounces the structural autonomy of all the elements of sound.

This early music also makes active use of *pauses* in certain types of transformations of melodic structures. They not only partition the polyphonic lines in the technique of the French *hocket*, but also change the scalar-temporal structure of syntactic constructions in the answers to the subjects in certain types

of canons or in the rhythmical *taleis*. Such a practice may be observed in the polyphonic compositions from the time of Perotin (the *clausula Mors*) and up to Stravinsky (*Threni, Id est Lamntationes Jeremiae Prophetiae*, reh. 360).

In Webern's oeuvre the described combinatoriality of parameters becomes a basis for a continuous metamorphosis of the serial row, while the technique of bringing in pauses in certain cases acquires a resemblance with the medieval and renaissance idea of the canon *cum pause*. Such a solution may be observed in the second movement of the *Cantata* opus 31, where the continuous serial melody in the part of the soloist (the *proposta*) generates a series of thematic answers carried out in the technique of *cum pause*. We may also consider a particular feature of this four-voice canon

II.

*Sehr verhalten* ♩ = ca 42

1 *Sehr verhalten* ♩ = ca 42

Example 1. A. Webern. *Cantata* op. 31, fragment of score

in inversion (2P + 2I) the untypical position of the thematic subject, which comes in *after* the first answer (inversion) in the harp part (Example 1).

However, with the addition of the pauses, the scalar-temporal structure of the voices of this canon does not become subject to “extension” or any other type of deformation characteristic for the “classical” canons *cum pause*. The canon, consisting of the “light” trans-instrumental lines typical for Webern, works here, according to the composer’s conception, primarily, for the sake of development of the *timbral* parameter of the score, providing for the effects of pointillism and the idea of *Klangfarbenmelodie*<sup>9</sup> intrinsic for the Second Viennese School [6].

In Webern’s compositions we can discover yet another set of principles derived from the compositional practice of the composers from the Netherlands, which base themselves on *numbers* upon the arrangement of the architectonic design of their masses. Such ideas include the well-defined observation of mathematical proportions in the correlation of the c.f. tones and the c.f. pauses in a number of cases. Not having composed in the genre of masses directly, Webern, nonetheless, perceives the constructive value of this principle and transplants it into some of his canons. In this case, we can examine examples from two crucial compositions from his musical output – the *Symphony* opus 21 (1928) and the *Second Cantata* opus 31 (1943).

Thus, in the exposition of the first movement of the *Symphony* the first subject and, correspondingly, its answer, consists of *tones* the combined duration of which is 26 “breves” and *pauses* of the combined duration of 13 “breves,” altogether comprising the proportion of 2:1.<sup>10</sup> Another example of this kind is present in the sixth movement of the *Second Cantata*, wherein each of the voices of the four-voice canon in inversion is precisely doubled ‘pointwise’ by orchestral instruments and consists of 48 “breves” in the tones and 16 ‘breves’ in the pauses in the strict proportion of 3:1. The serial-contrapuntal plan of this movement is described in greater detail in Pereira’s article [5, pp. 32–33].

When preparing Isaac’s Second Book *Choralis Constantinus* for publication, Webern could not avoid encountering the scholarly problem of deciphering the mensural notation *individually, voice by voice* and bringing together all the polyphonic voices into one full score with a unified tempo and meter.<sup>11</sup>

An undeniable testimony of Webern’s steadfast attention to this side of Renaissance polyphony is the formatting of the score of the sixth movement of the Cantata which replicates directly the mensural principles of the arrangement of the polyphonic text, a classical example of which is the double canon in the *Kyrie* from Ockeghem’s *Missa Prolationum* with the characteristic ‘dispersion’ of the measures in time (*Example 2*):

<sup>9</sup> Webern’s *Klangfarbenmelodie* technique is examined in detail by Matthew Zeller on the examples of opus 10 and 11 [6].

<sup>10</sup> Here and onwards we use for units of counting the ‘breves,’ i.e., the early type of half-notes, traditional for metrical measurement in Renaissance polyphonic composition.

<sup>11</sup> It was particularly this type of practice that Guido Adler maintained in the publication of the corresponding volume from the series *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich*.



Example 2. J. Ockeghem. *Missa Prolationum*, *Kyrie*, fragment of score

In Webern's score the *polymetry* demonstratively brought out to the forefront conceals the analogous idea of a quasi-mensural "apportionment" of the meter according to various voices and instruments (Example 3):



Example 3. A. Webern. *Cantata* op. 31, fragment of score

Here Webern turns to the "white" notation of the 'strict style' and likewise takes the traditional 'brevis' as the metrical unit. At the same time, he sets up in each voice a *retrograde* metrical structure in which three different 'mensurae' alternate in an irregular manner (2/2; 3/2 and 4/2), which completely cancels out the overall sensation of meter. The frequency of these shifts of meter and

the *retrograde* principle of their construction can be observed in the example of the tenor part of the chorus (Example 4):

Metric retrograde

Meter in breves	2	3	4	3	2	4	3	2	4	3	4	2	3	4	3	2	3
Number of measures	1	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	3

Example 4. A. Webern. *Cantata* op. 31, 6<sup>th</sup> movement

The systematic *displacement* of the measure divisions in the score increases by itself as the result of the rule itself of bringing out this four-voice canon — a 'delay' of each answer for 3 "breves."

Another idea, stemming from mensural notation, is realized in the second movement of the *Cantata*. Here, on the contrary, in all of the voices of the score





We have written before that the symbolic geometry of Webern's *Symphony* opus 21 finds its continuation in the peculiar "mystery of the number," in particular, — in the "perfect" proportion of 66:99, reflecting the 'mirror' proportion of the measures of the first and the second movements [9, p. 127].

Let us complement this idea with yet another interesting fact. The given proportion is also well-known in the symbolic tradition of the Renaissance. It is connected with the name of Mary and the plotline of the Annunciation: Archangel Gabriel's greeting *Ave Maria* which has become the famous prayer, symbolizes according to the rules of gematria<sup>14</sup> with the numbers 66 and 99:

<b>Ave</b>	<b>Maria</b>	<b>gratia</b>	<b>plena</b>
<u>1+20+5</u>	<u>12+1+17+9+17+17+1+19+9+11</u>	<u>5+11+5+13+1</u>	
	<u>26</u>	<u>40 54</u>	<u>43</u>
	66	:	99

It is important to note that this proportion is placed, for example, at the basis of the correlation of the c.f.-tones and the c.f.-pauses, in Ockeghem's *Missa "Ecce ancilla Domini,"* as well as numerous other numerical correspondences in this mass. This fact is indicated by Henze in her research work [10, p. 193].

**Ockeghem. Missa "Ecce ancilla Domini":**

<b>C.F.- Pausen</b>		<b>C.F.- Noten</b>		
660	+	990	=	1650

The sum of these numbers — 165 — comprises the *number of rosary beads* in the *Rosary* dedicated to Mary<sup>15</sup> (*figure 1*):



Figure 1

In addition to that, within the correlation of 66:99 there exists another proportion, which is concealed — 2:3, present, as has been stated before, in the second movement of Webern's Second Cantata and prevalent in the formal structures of various levels in a whole set of Renaissance and Baroque compositions (most notably, those of Ockeghem and Bach), also reflects 'Mary's number' — 5 (2+3).

It must be reminded that a well-known attribute of Mary is also a flower.<sup>16</sup> Let us bring these facts into correlation with the serial schemes presented in our previous work [9], in particular, with the scheme of the first two groups of statements of the serial row in the exposition of the *Symphony's* first movement (*Example 5*):

<sup>14</sup> Gematria in the ancient and medieval hermeneutical systems, this is one of the methods of concealing or discovering the 'hidden meaning' present beyond a number or a word. The gematria of a word is the sum of the numerical meanings of the letters comprising it.

<sup>15</sup> Besides the traditional rosary beads, the *Rosary* is the name of the prayer read according to these beads.

<sup>16</sup> In particular, the Madonna with a flower is the object of dedication of one of the most famous architectural monuments of the Italian Renaissance — the aforementioned Florentine cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore (1434).

Example 5. A. Webern. *Symphony* op. 21, Exposition

The flower in combination with the concealed name of Mary forms a single sign complex, which, in all likelihood, bears within it indications of symbolism extending back to the tradition of Rosicrucianism.

Such animage of the flower is a direct realization of Goethe's well-known idea of the "plant archetype" (*Urpflanze*). It is known that the ideas of Neoplatonism, which nourished the Renaissance era,<sup>17</sup> found their continuation in Goethe's philosophy, and by means of it exerted a decisive impact on Webern's worldview and

<sup>17</sup>One of the most important centers of Neoplatonism and a source for the ideas of the Renaissance was the Florentine Plato Academy, established in 1462 by Marsilio Ficino (with the aid of Cosimo Medici).

directly on his creative process itself, which he mentioned on numerous occasions, including his lectures *Der Weg zur Neuen Musik*.

In continuation of the assumptions stated in my previous paper [9], during the process of the subsequent serial analysis of the *Symphony*, we have been able to discover within its structure a few more important esoteric symbols in their aggregate presenting this composition as a most complex *system of graphical cryptograms*, carried out in the Medieval and Renaissance style. But this is a separate subject for another article.

When characterizing Webern's "traditionalism," which acquires more and more weighty substantiations in continuously discovered new facts of his musical creativity, one cannot do otherwise than be supportive of Mason's precise formulation: "Webern was the sole representative of the *Second Viennese School* who overcame the frameworks of the late romantic aesthetics, and it seems that this occurred not from the modernist aspiration to forge the future, but because he looked back into the distant past of the Renaissance. And this was not nostalgia, but rather a feeling of closeness and a common aim..."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Mason Ch. *Anton Webern and the influence of the Heinrich Isaac*, pp. 16–17.

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