Why is op. 6 still so difficult to understand?

Among composers who hold that complexity alone is certain good, Alban Berg’s *Drei Orchesterstücke* are often invoked as a kind of foundational scripture. A glance at almost any page of the note-dense score would appear to support their view. Passages like bars 90–95 of the second movement, Reigen, or the climactic *Höhepunkt* of the third movement, Marsch, (bar 126) leave the advocates of complexity in no doubt: Berg has penetrated to the dark centre of the expressionist labyrinth.

But how justified is this idea? In this essay, I will suggest that other aspects of op. 6 contradict it. For instance, Berg’s H and N signs, denoting main and subsidiary themes, run almost continuously throughout the work. This Ariadne’s thread (when it is made clear by the performance) makes listening to op. 6 surprisingly straightforward, at any rate melodically. In plain language, there is always a tune to hang on to. Furthermore, a short-score version of the work reveals a four-voice texture not more complicated for much of its duration than the orchestral textures of Mahler or Strauss. My observations here grew out of making a two-piano version of op. 6, and I would like to elucidate especially, though not exclusively, points that become clearer from examining the work in two-piano form. ¹

The case for a basic simplicity may be overstated also, and one can begin by conceding that in some instances Berg’s relish for piling up notes has got the better of his musical

---

¹ Alban Berg, *Drei Orchesterstücke* op. 6, arranged for two pianos and percussion by Kevin O’Connell (1985–2011), Contemporary Music Centre, Fishamble Street, Dublin. This version was made from the UE miniature score (Philharmonia no. 432). The work has not appeared in the Berg Critical Edition from UE, and my readings of some unclear notes and accidentals are conjectural.
judgment. One of these is the climax to the Präludium, where the six horns play ff the movement’s Haufrhythmus figure (played first at bar 9 by a very high trombone):

Ex. 1  Präludium, climax with Haufrhythmus in horn section

In none of the performances that I am familiar with is this figure at all clearly audible. I suspect that Berg has made the elementary error of treating the horns as the dynamic equivalent of trumpets or trombones. Horns in fact carry only about half the dynamic force of the other brass. We should remember that Berg was not quite thirty when he
wrote these pieces and an almost complete orchestral tyro. The miscalculation matters, because the three main appearances of this *Hauptsrythmus* motive (at bars 9, 36 and 42) are the pillars that support the movement’s structure. As I shall explain below, Berg may have reasons for making sure that they clearly register at this early stage of the work.

Yet what a storehouse of orchestral riches op. 6 is. The last major recurrence of the Präludium *Hauptsrythmus* at bar 42 (see Ex. 12 below) is an electrifying sound, with four flutes, three bassoons and a harp (playing *bisbigliando*) all intoning the unison E♭4. (The subject of unison doublings in op. 6 would by itself furnish material for an essay.) And the whispering chorus of percussion noises at the start of the work is one of the most justly famous and imitated effects of the past century, a kind of primeval rumble in which noise slowly gives way to sound. In the Marsch, from bar 155 (the movement’s catastrophe), the sepulchral brass scoring is another extraordinary sound, as is the ensuing chain of six-note chords (bars 161–164), closing on the pitch D4 at bar 164 (see Ex. 5 below). As the chords close in upon the D, they gradually shed notes, in a kind of progression-by-elimination. No one had imagined music like this before. Also startling is the end of the work, where the trumpets play a composite ascending scale, the pitches coalescing at the peak of B♭ flat 5 (reinforced by a clattering xylophone), at precisely which point the bass instruments deliver the *coup de grâce*.

Of course, op. 6 permits many ways of hearing. Much the most prevalent, if the literature is anything to go by, is to trace the derivation of musical motives one from another. This

---

2 The history of the composition of the pieces and of their performance is complicated. Reigen was composed last. Präludium and Reigen were premiered in 1923 and the work did not receive its integral premiere until 1930, by which time Berg had revised it. Whether or not Berg felt any doubts about the passage under discussion, he appears to have made no adjustments.
method is to some extent dictated by the way in which the work is composed, for in studiously deriving his motives from one another, Berg outdoes his teacher Schoenberg by a wide margin. A good example of this kind of analysis is Mark DeVoto’s discussion of the Marsch, where motives and their derivations are chased through almost sixty pages of examples and text. This kind of analysis can be useful, but I wonder how adequately, beyond a certain point, it reflects our way of absorbing this music. Exclusively motivic analysis turns the piece into a huge mosaic, as if Berg were incapable of thinking in stretches of more than two bars. A familial likeness between the motives of a symphonic work should not come as any surprise, or not since Beethoven anticipated the Ode to Joy theme of the Ninth Symphony in the second subject of the first movement. And in a work as tightly knit as op. 6, detecting motivic derivation can at its worst become as trivial as spotting car registrations. Of the finding of motivic offshoots in op. 6 there is no end.

Another strand in the literature gives up almost altogether any attempt to understand op. 6 as a piece of music. As so often, where musical insight fails, existential profundity tumbles in to fill the gap. In this reading, op. 6 becomes the auditory portent of wars and rumours of wars. The stridently percussive parts of the Marsch lend some force to this interpretation; rather less so, one would think, the waltz-based Reigen, on which Berg was working well after the start of European hostilities.

In the remarks below, a different approach shall be attempted. I have found it useful to take tiny cell-like ideas and trace their path through a movement or a large stretch of

---


4 A fold-out table of thematic and motivic derivations for the whole work can be found in Melchior von Borries, *Alban Berg’s ‘Drei Orchesterstücke’ als ein Meisterstück Atonaler Symphonik*, Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisterwissenschaften, 1996 (Tafel XV).
the entire work. By tiny ideas, I mean a group of pitches, or even a single pitch. The reader is of course free to disagree with my readings of individual passages, but I hope this method will help to illustrate some of the deeper processes that connect large stretches of the work and illuminate the symphonic dimension of op. 6 that so many listeners feel.

A good example is what I call the Np and np (neapolitan) relationship or nexus that is particularly strong in Reigen. Some commentators have remarked on the significance of the tonal centres of D and G in this movement, D being the predominant one. The movement begins in D (firmly established at bar 6) and ends in G, and the recurrences of both tonal centers are too pronounced to be accidental. The entire piece articulates these centers with a strong ‘neapolitan’ bias of E♭ and A♭ respectively. The first of these two relationships to be heard is not in fact the primary one of E♭ (Np), but the G-based neapolitan of A♭ at bar 1 (np). (Berg confusingly counts the upbeat as a bar.) As the first chord moves to the second (bar 2), another significant point arises: the A♭ progresses directly to the ‘leading tone’ of F♯ via a diminished third (i.c. 2). In fact the np ‘tonic’ G is not sounded as part of this nexus until bar 6 (Ex. 2a). This diminished third (i.c. 2) melodic step occurs throughout Reigen and applies equally to the E♭ – C♯ (Np) nexus associated with the movement’s overall D ‘tonic’. The first explicit occurrence of this Np pairing is at bar 7 (Ex. 2b).

Dave Headlam finds these two tonal areas featuring prominently in the Präludium as well, and also elsewhere in Berg’s music. See The music of Alban Berg, Yale University Press 1996, pp. 138 and 189. Np and np are of course mere shorthand, the analogy being to the ‘flat-II’ scale degree. A different discussion could be had about why these tonal analogies seem so often to suit Berg’s music better than, say, a thoroughgoing Fortean approach, to which the music can seem resistant.
Ex. 2a and 2b np and Np pitch collections

In bar 12 occurs the most dramatic presentation yet of Np, with a two-octave skip from C♯3 to E♭5 (Ex. 2b). It is clear from the orchestral score that Berg means this to lodge firmly in our ear, for the wide leap is given to the distinctive sound of the violas (bar 12). This leap will be emphatically taken up later in the movement.

A beautiful statement of Np occurs at bars 36–42. In this passage, Np is elaborated into a contrapuntal skein, the D-resolution at bars 41–42 being arrived at as if by installment (Ex. 3). The E♭ is first heard in bar 36 in the bass, prolonged to bar 39 where it falls to C♯, finally closing on D at bar 41. The upper voices also chart a Np path at different speeds. The viola and horn motive at bars 38-40 undergoes a typical foreshortening, its Np provenance becoming clear as it dovetails into the muted trumpet entry with E flat–D flat at bars 40–41. Although this entry is quiet, Berg instructs three of the F trumpets to play it in unison and marks it with a H sign, underlining its crucial function. (In Ex. 3
it occurs in the left hand of Piano I, bars 40–41). Significantly, the gesture is not completed in this register (or colour) by resolution to the D. This detail emphasises the point that the i.c. 2 component of Np and np sometimes functions independently, without need for local resolution to D or G respectively, though at bar 42 the resolution to D in the bass is emphatic.
Ex. 3 Np closure on D, Reigen bars 36–42

Np prolongation
This passage has more than a hint of a prolonged plagal cadence (with the G, however, in the top voice), bringing together the two main tonalities of the movement.

The Np nexus plays a crucial role in the central passage of the movement, bars 47–54 (Ex. 4). This passage is a variation of bars 6–15. But as Ex. 4 shows, bars 52 and 53 have no parallel in the earlier passage. The C#5 at the downbeat of bar 52 is clearly the same melodic component as the C#3 at the downbeat of bar 12. But the C# at bar 52 takes the music in a different direction, functioning in this new context like a pivot chord. Bars 52 and 53 (the most Mahlerian music in Reigen) are in fact a parenthesis, re-emerging into parallel mode at bar 54, which explicitly picks up the wide Np viola leap, C#3 to E♭5, from bar 12. The broad tonal context at bar 12 was D; at bar 54 it is explicitly G.

The G minor cadence at bar 55, which puzzled Derrick Puffett, is in fact the restating of an originally D-centered idea within a G context. This harmonic shift from one of the movement’s main tonalities to the other is effected by the traditional means of invertible counterpoint, with metric diminution: the descending descant of bars 12–13 becomes at bars 53–54 a tenor voice (in half-values) which pushes the music to the bass

---

6 Bruce Archibald points out the parallel between these two passages in his essay, ‘The Harmony of Berg’s Reigen,’ Perspectives of New Music, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 73–91. The parallels are discussed in detail in Kevin O’Connell: ‘Mastery of the smallest links: another look at Reigen,’ unpublished (2009). This paper includes a diagram of all such parallel passages in Reigen. These passages show that the many variation exercises Berg wrote for Schoenberg were not wasted. Yet Berg’s use of this technique in op. 6 is original.

7 See ‘Berg, Mahler and the Three Orchestral Pieces, op. 6’ in Derrick Puffett on Music, ed. Kathryn Bailey Puffett, Ashgate 2001, p. 646. Puffett calls the cadence ‘disconcerting.’ It will be clear from my analysis here that I do not agree with Puffett’s assertion that structurally op. 6 is concerned with avoiding repetition.
note G at bar 55. The parallels between these two passages are a brilliant illustration of what might be called Berg's technique of embedded variation.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{8} One should also mention the casual virtuosity with which the earlier 4/4 passage is recast in 3/4.
Ex. 4 Embedded variation: Reigen, bars 6–13 and 47–54 compared

In a way that is characteristic of op. 6, this Np nexus reaches a kind of abstract synthesis in the ascending chord chain already referred to, near the end of the Marsch (Ex. 5).
George Perle has shown how Berg from almost the beginning of his career understood the possibilities of axial symmetry in the pitch domain. But seldom in Berg’s music is this principle made so plainly audible as in this passage (Marsch, bars 161–164). The chord-chain peaks at the third crotchet beat of bar 163. Thereafter it squeezes inwards by creeping chromatic steps until only the axial pitch of D4 remains (bars 164–170). The outer pitches at which the inward wedging process begins are conspicuously C♯3 and E♭5, a minor ninth on either side of the axial D4 (bar 163, third crotchet beat), and therefore the pitches played by the violas in bar 12 of Reigen. By octave transfer, they are also the only two pitches of the wedge remaining before it finally settles on the D4, bar 164, third crotchet beat. In other words, they are a prolongation of the Np nexus.

---

Ex. 5 Prolongation of Np, Marsch, bars 161–164
It will be observed that the E♭ 5 of the theme in muted trumpet (bar 163, third crotchet beat) neatly coincides with the peak E♭ flat of the chord chain. Adorno’s description of Berg as a ‘master of the smallest link’ is one of the key imaginative insights into Berg’s practice as a composer, and op. 6 is full of examples of it.¹⁰

The opening of Reigen and its central climax provide another example of a small idea used to help articulate an extended passage. Here I would like to focus on the pitch F5 in particular, which is first heard as part of the descending chord sequence at the start of the movement (bars 2–5).

Ex. 6 Descending chord motive at opening of Reigen
These descending chords in strings and woodwinds (bar 4, second crotchet, to bar 6, first crotchet, marked with a bracket) are the most important idea in Reigen, though initially they have N rather than H status. They, or their thematic outline or its inversion, mark every significant structural moment in the piece. This F5 becomes crucial in the climactic passage of the movement. This is the famous accumulation of fourths, climaxing in a twelve-tone chord at bar 66. The melodic expansion of fourths begins with G4, C5, F5, bars 60–61, and reaches E♭6 at bar 63, repeated at bars 64 and 65. At bar 66, E♭6 projects to A♭6, which is followed by the final push to the climactic C♯7 (marked by a cymbal-crash, bar 66, second crotchet).

The descending whole-tone scale beginning C♯7, bar 66, banishes the stacked fourths in a single gesture, in its turn giving way to the thirds-dominated texture at bar 68, incidentally including the F5 (bars 68–69). But as this process (bars 67–68) has been unfolding, the horns in syncopation quickly rebuild the ascending fourth collection (bars 66–67, Piano II, left hand) to climax also on the F5 at bars 67–68.

Ex. 7: Reigen, climax, bars 65–73
The ‘exit’ bar of the climax (69) recapitulates the ‘entry’ bar (60). The melodic apex in each case is F5, which by a neat Bergian symmetry is the peak of the initial fourths collection at bar 60, and at bar 69 the peak of a thirds collection.

Ex. 8 F5 supported by fourths (bar 60) and by thirds (bar 69), Reigen

Ex. 9 summarizes the function of F5 in this climactic passage. It illustrates another telling detail. Bars 60–68 are a nine-bar phrase (divided in metric accelerando as 3321: the second of these subdivisions consists of the three E♭6s). This isolates bar 68 as an ‘insert’ or upbeat bar to bar 69, which is exactly how one senses its function, as its aspiring thirds seek culmination in the emphatic F5 of bar 69.

It is intriguing to plot the further progress of F5 from bars 69 to 73. From bar 69, second crotchet, the H voice in violins spells an impassioned descending line, marked by very wide leaps, of F5, E♭5, B3 (bar 70), A3 (bar 71), A♭3 (bar 72), F♯3 and G3 (Ex. 9).
Ex. 9 Bars 60–68 of Reigen as nine-bar phrase with role of F5 summarized:
It might be stretching a point to suggest that this theme (bars 69–73) is a variation of the chordal-thematic descending motive from the start of the movement (see Ex. 6 above). If it is, the substitution of E♭5 for the expected D at bar 69, last quaver, intriguingly alters the feel of the descending line from its original i.c. 3 to a whole-tone (i.c.2) character. I will say more about the role of intervals in op. 6 below. Also characteristic is the rhythmic accelerando (illustrated by beaming) in bars 69–73, which is a kind of helter-skelter continuation of the metric accelerando in this passage referred to above.

Enough examples have so far been cited to illustrate another principle that permeates Op. 6. This is what might be called intervallic modulation. By this term I mean the shifting of the harmonic colour by a form of progression that owes more to type of interval than to bass progression. The status of F5 in bar 60 compared with 68 of Reigen is a good example (Ex. 8 above), where the first instance is supported by fourths and the second by thirds. This same contrast finds a wider application in Reigen, where the two twelve-tone chords are built first from fourths at bar 66 and then from a stack of mixed thirds at bars 119–121.11

A very felicitous example of intervallic modulation occurs in Reigen at bars 5–6. Like Präludium, Reigen has a slowly evolving upbeat phrase, reaching the first downbeat proper only at the start of bar 6, marked emphatically by the move from C♯ to D in the bass. The upper parts complement this move beautifully, as the A♭4, tied over, subtly shifts its function across the bar line. At the last crotchet of bar 5 it forms part of a whole-tone configuration with the other voices; at bar 6 this shifts to a thirds-based

11 C♯ is the only pitch missing from the second of these chords.
sonority which is in fact the ‘tonic chord’ of the movement. \(^{12}\) (See Ex. 6 above, boxed progression.) Again the musical gesture is beautifully pointed by Berg’s imaginative unison doublings: the antecedent phrase emerging from E4–F4 in bar 3 is carried by bassoon in unison with muted trumpet; the consequent, launched by the E4–C5 ascending sixth just after the tied A♭ 4, is heard in two flutes echoed by horn.

At the climax of Reigen (bar 66), the stacked fourths that result in the twelve-tone chord are quickly dispelled by a descending whole-tone scale (bar 67; see Ex. 7 and Ex. 9 above), in its turn giving way to the thirds of bar 68. These rapid changes of interval-type are a key element in the restless energy of this passage.

The closure at the end of Marsch to the D4 unison via Np (already discussed) is also a neat example of intervallic modulation imposed by the inward wedge-shape, as whole-tone becomes semitone becomes unison in consecutive steps; and one of the most beautiful moments of op. 6 is the continuation from this point, which leaves only the three constituent Np pitches quietly pulsing in the bassoons, harp and timpani (bar 170):

\(^{12}\) There is a more extended discussion of this chord in O’Connell (2009).
Ex. 10 Marsch, Np at bar 170

It is as if the DNA structure of op. 6 is momentarily laid bare. This is the last explicit appearance in the work of the Np nexus, and it neatly closes a circle which I believe may take us all the way back to the opening bars of op. 6. I have already mentioned the first appearance of the *Hauptrythmus* at bar 9 in the high trombone. This sensational sound is accompanied by a chord that is the fourth in a cycle of ten chords that form the harmonic underpinning of this movement:¹³

---

¹³ Derrick Puffett reproduces these chords, which Berg in his sketches labels a–j. Puffett (2001), p. 638.
Ex. 11 Chord $d$ of Präladium as source of Np

This chord with the high trombone E♭ is the first sounding in the work of the Np sonority (as incidentally the first chord of the cycle at bar 6 is of np). Our ears have no difficulty in picking it out in this static context: Berg almost freeze-frames it. And later in the movement we hear the chord again when Berg redeployes the chord-sequence at Präladium’s other most sonorously astonishing moment, the unison doubling in flutes and bassoons, already referred to, that restates the *Hauptrythmus* at bar 42:
Ex. 12 Chord d, second occurrence with *Hauptrhythmus*, bar 42

This statement of the motive is coloured by the small tamtam and a swelling dynamic. At this point also the tempo of bar 9 returns, making explicit the structural parallel between the two moments. Every detail counts. The listener cannot hope to be aware of
the structural implications of the sonority so early in the work. But there is no reason to suppose that the composer may not have been. The beginning of op. 6 contains its ending, as well as much of its substance.  

The musician who attempts an analysis of op. 6 is in much the same position as the conductor of a performance, torn constantly between attending to the lively detail while remaining faithful to the overall structure. This raises the question of the form of op. 6. Pierre Boulez denies the work the status of symphony, arguing that the brevity of the first two movements results in a structural imbalance with the long Marsch that cannot be considered symphonic. Präludium, which has received a considerable amount of analytic attention for only 56 bars of music, draws a satisfying arch shape that is nonetheless inconclusive, in fact preludial, in character. Reigen, although it is a much more fully developed structure, is scarcely longer than some Chopin waltzes. The Marsch, not without the help of some thumping military rhetoric, almost dwarfs these two movements. Berg elsewhere constructed long works on an accumulative basis, intensifying the argument through several movements. In the Kammerkonzert, the third movement adumbrates the other two, and the Lyric Suite consists of two interlocking cycles of accumulating intensity. I think that op. 6 is really this kind of accumulative structure.

---

14 For a discussion of the orchestration of this chord at bar 9, see Adorno (1991), pp. 77–78. Its recurrence at bar 42 is much more gently orchestrated, with a warm string sound to accommodate the lower pitching of the E♭. My somewhat circular reading here may appear to play fast and loose with the sequence of events in the finished score. But this sequence owes little to the convoluted way in which Berg actually wrote op. 6, with the Marsch and Präludium being completed before Reigen. The work in general shows how circular patterns of thought can still result in through-composed structure. The composer, after all, holds the entire picture in his head.

In performance, most of the detail flies by quickly. It might even be asked what point there is in focusing on details such as the above when they occur so fleetingly in the execution. Yet one wonders if an intelligent performance of this music can be possible without some auditory awareness of its inner processes. Underlying even the opening percussion music we may discern the hand of Berg the pattern-maker. This passage teases out a five-quaver talea over a four-crotchet written meter. This pattern explains why the first impulse on the large tam-tam happens at the sixth quaver of bar 1, and why the downbeat of bar 6 is the first real downbeat of the piece: five times 4/4 bars = twenty crotchets or forty quavers = eight cycles of the five-quaver pattern. This opening is also an example of Berg's wit, for the first ‘statement’ of the five-quaver cycle is completely silent: not only does sound emerge from noise, but noise emerges from nothing. Incidentally, Berg's only previous orchestral essay, the *Altenberg Lieder* op. 4, begins with the same metrical schema. 16

The opposite danger lies in playing op. 6 too ‘knowingly’ and cautiously. The main interest of the work is its flowing discourse and expressive momentum. For the conductor, a compromise between these and the minute particulars must be found. The H and N signs are crucial to making this possible, and I would like to linger for a moment on Berg's employment of this device. Schoenberg had invented it as a method of clarifying the voices in densely polyphonic textures. But in op. 6 Berg uses it as a compositional tool in its own right. In op. 6 the H line, continuous for almost the entire

---

16 The opening of the *Altenberg Lieder* states 5 quavers across a 4/8 timeframe. Of the many commentators on Präludium, only Headlam (1996) appears to have noticed this 5-quaver cycle (p. 188).
work, defines a Bergian version of *undendliche Melodie*.\(^{17}\) We always know where the main voice lies because Berg himself clearly needed to: composing op. 6 would have been impossible otherwise. And op. 6 is above all a melody-driven score.\(^{18}\)

I have tried to suggest an approach to these fascinating pieces different from the traditional motive-based one. A close motivic taxonomy too often makes the music appear ponderous. There must surely be room for more varied approaches. A novel reading of op. 6 might explore its debt to *La Mer*. This subject is sometimes mentioned in an oblique way when influences on op. 6 are discussed (Schoenberg, Mahler). My instinctive, if unsupported, theory is that op. 6 enacts a creative contest with Debussy's masterpiece, and that the relationship between them is a classic case of the anxiety of influence. One has only to compare Figures 39–42 of Jeux de Vagues with bars 42–48 of Reigen, or the beginning and end of Dialogue du Vent et de la Mer with the corresponding places in Marsch, to see that Berg’s ear is haunted at every turn by *La Mer*.

Puffett’s analysis of Präludium is astute, partly because it is so obvious. He transcribes the entire H line from the score, thus demonstrating that the movement is a heavily ornamented melody. This analysis does justice to the movement’s momentum and shape. His approach would not work so well for Reigen, which is a much more polyphonic texture. If Präludium is a chorale prelude, Reigen is more like a fugue.\(^{19}\) The Marsch is the most conventional movement, although it also includes some of the most

\(^{17}\) Only bars 1–5 of Präludium are entirely without H and N indications. This interestingly suggests that a performance of this passage that is too clear may actually contradict Berg’s intentions.

\(^{18}\) A conversation with Julian Horton helped me to clarify the idea presented here.

\(^{19}\) O’Connell (2009) has a *Haupt-* and *Nebenstimme* diagram for Reigen. Despite levels of complexity that trump anything else in the work, Reigen also has the most consistent (and classical) four-voice basis of any of the movements.
original ideas in the work. The note-count for the denser passages is frightening – Adorno talks of the music’s ‘vegetative force’; and this may give the listener (or the piano arranger) pause. A march after all is outdoor music designed for concerted movement rather than furrow-browed parsing. One might be forgiven for thinking that John Philip Sousa did it better with a fraction of the notes.

This brings us back to the question of complexity. Puffett says that after these pieces became well known in the 1960s every composer’s scores for a while were thickly plastered with notes. One wonders what these composers were hearing, or whether they were using their eyes rather than their ears. To listen to op. 6 repeatedly is to become alert to its basic simplicity of musical thought, a musical thought that is, however one seeks to define the word, tonal in character. Our understanding of Berg has been clouded by insistence upon an absolute division between tonal and atonal language, placed in irreversible historical time-sequence to one another. One reads repeated descriptions of his music’s ironic or atavistic use of tonality in ‘popular’ or ‘banal’ contexts. Even Perle treats these supposedly alien elements as anachronisms within the always assumed context of the ‘collapse of tonality’. Against this cold-war thinking we should place Berg’s response when George Gershwin queried Berg’s admiration for his (Gershwin’s) work: music is music. The historicist explanations are in fact flatly contradicted by much of Berg’s output. For example, how can they explain the music becoming more tonal-sounding after Berg started using twelve-tone technique?

When one acclimatizes to it, the density of information in op. 6 comes to impress one less than Berg’s ability to control the demands of the clamant detail by means of basic harmonic strategies. I have tried to suggest here that these are often simple and clearly

---

audible. Far from sanctioning a kind of chimpanzee's tea party in the harmonic domain, Berg's *Drei Orchesterstücke* suggest ways of organising the harmonic and melodic dimensions that remain, a century on, rich in suggestive possibilities for other composers.