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Observations on the First Movement of Hanns Eisler's *Third Piano Sonata* and his Schoenbergian Legacy¹

By Richard Hermann

When my colleague, the composer/pianist Falko Steinbach, spoke of his admiration for the music of Hanns Eisler in the spring of 2003, and asked if I would speak in a conference session about Eisler for the following Spring. I was surprised.² My knowledge of Hanns Eisler was that he was a student of Arnold Schoenberg's who had turned his back on his teacher. He soon wrote propagandist music for extreme leftist causes, wrote film music, fled the Nazis in 1933 eventually settling in Los Angeles (in May of 1942). Later, he co-authored a book with Theodor W. Adorno (*Composing for Films*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), was "voluntarily deported" (extradited) from the United States after being caught up in the anti-communist witch-hunts by the United States House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities (1947), and that he ended his life in East Germany (GDR) where he worked with Bertolt Brecht.³ I, a composer who knew members of the Schoenberg circle and a music theorist specializing in post-tonal music, knew literally no music of Eisler's at that point in time.

My comparative lack of knowledge at that time of either his life, ideas, or music is not surprising as, other than the biographical entries in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Blake, 1980, vol. 6, 89–94; Blake, 2001, vol. 8, 37–42), most of the significant histories of 20th-century music or of American music history written in English or translated into English had less about Eisler singly than I already knew of him in sum (Austin, 1966, 222, 499; Salzman, 1967, 110; Yates, 1967, 195; Stuckenschmidt, 1969, 135, 136; Machlis, 1979, 159–60; Simms, 1986, 235; Antokoletz, 1992, 37, 292, 293; Gann, 1997, 69). They even simply

- 1 Dedicated to the memory of Patricia Carpenter.
- 2 This essay was first presented on Friday, 16 April, 2004, at the 'Hanns Eisler Program,' one of the events of the Conference on "Pioneering 'German Studies' in the Trans-Atlantic Context." This conference was hosted by the 'German Studies Program' of the University of New Mexico.
- 3 The redacted files concerning the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Committee on Un-American Activities, and Hanns Eisler can be downloaded from the following web address: <http://foia.fbi.gov/eisler.htm>.

did not mention Eisler at all (Chase, 1966; Hitchcock, 1969, 1974; Hansen, 1967, 1971, 1978; Mellers, 1975; Whittall, 1977; Hamm, 1983; Watkins, 1988; Schwartz and Godfrey, 1992; Crawford, 1993; Crawford, 2001). Only the volume edited by Morgan (1993) and the reference work of Slonimsky (1994) contained more information about some aspect or aspects than I knew. Very, very little was said about the technical aspects of Eisler's music and no analyses were presented. Even the usually good but selective bibliographies of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* biographical entries list no monographs on Hanns Eisler or his music in the English language. Of Eisler's writings, only his 1935 essay "The Crisis in Music" (Eisler, 1996, 133–38) seems to have appeared in English and in a prominent source, 34 years after his death. Clearly, what little I quickly could construct of a 'reception history' in the United States for Hanns Eisler, his thoughts, and his music was dismal.

Only traces of his vital presence remain in the writing and rewriting of music history in the United States, but a reception history, while useful in setting the context, is not the main point of this chapter. When Falko Steinbach pressed me for the topic of my presentation, I recalled Eisler's study with Schoenberg and thought that the interaction of the master and pupil would be an interesting subject. Steinbach suggested Eisler's *Third Piano Sonata* as a worthy work for investigation and was kind enough to present me with his recording of the work (Steinbach, 1990). This revealed to me an important and unjustly overlooked composer on these shores.

That Eisler had studied with Schoenberg should have caused me to consider Eisler's work much earlier. While attending the New Vienna Conservatory, Eisler took private instruction from Schoenberg from 1919 to 1923. When Schoenberg went on vacation, his brilliant pupil Anton Webern stepped in to provide instruction. Eisler's rejection of the 'art-for-art's sake' call of Romanticism in the mid-1920's in favor of a music of political commitment estranged him from Schoenberg in May 1926, well before the composition of this sonata in 1943. With a roll-call of Schoenberg's students as great composers, Alban Berg, John Cage, Hanns Eisler, and Anton Webern, it is difficult to believe that this powerful influence could be suppressed for long by Eisler in favor of political songs and cantatas as a rather simple tool in the human struggle for freedom, no matter that many may now think it a misguided means to that end. The sonata of 1943 reveals the sustaining power of perhaps *the* master teacher of composition in the Western tradition. Because Schoenberg was that master teacher, his student Eisler spoke forcefully in his own voice in that work. *The Third Sonata* is a significant 'art-for-art's sake' effort. Naturally in the format of the chapter, I can only touch on a few of the ideas from Schoenberg's pedagogical legacy that find expression in Eisler's work.

I proceed by providing a brief description of three key ideas in Schoenberg's own words, and then following each idea with a specific instance from the movement. I will then finish with some thoughts on his current reputation in the United States:

Three relevant ideas from Eisler's Schoenbergian legacy

A brief note on the quotations here in English from Schoenberg's writings is apposite. Some are originally from the German, some originally written in his idiosyncratic English, and some are translations by Schoenberg from the original German to English. Those translations not by Schoenberg are by his American student Patricia Carpenter and her charge, Severine Neff.

The *Third Sonata* is, of course, not a traditional tonal work; in Schoenberg's terms it is a 'pantonal' work, namely a work of all tonalities simultaneously and not sequentially. Today, such a work is called 'atonal' or 'post-tonal.' That is without tonality – the logic is that if all tonalities are present, then none are controlling the harmonic logic of the piece – or is written after the tonal period. Schoenberg disliked the term 'atonal' and did not live to experience the term 'post-tonal'. (Neighbour, 1983, 27).

The first of the key Schoenbergian ideas that I discuss here in relation to the *Third Sonata* is that of 'the unity of musical space.' Schoenberg writes:

In formulating the notion concerning the unity of the musical space I relied on an assertion that had already been made by previous theoreticians, namely: chords are the vertical product of the overtones, but the scale is the horizontal product. I carried this thought to its conclusion and consequently arrived at the concept whereby the vertical and the horizontal, harmonic and melodic, the simultaneous and the successive were all in reality comprised within one unified space (Schoenberg, 1995, 389).

We may witness the manifestation of this idea as involving the very opening six pitches of the sonata. Here this fanfare-like 'horizontal' or melodic gesture, shown in Example 1a, may be understood as the combination of two three-note segments that are what mathematicians call 'reflections' of one another in the pitch plane and that musicians call 'inversions.'⁴

- 4 Inversion reflects the same distances between pitches above and below a central pitch location. As a practical consequence of this definition, two segments (melodies or harmonies) that have the same distances from the highest to the lowest pitches but in the reverse order, are inversions (or reflections) of one another.

Example 1b makes the “mirroring” of distances to the “point of reflection” or “axis of pitch symmetry” apparent between the two segments. This fanfare’s pitch structure, in fact, recalls a similar gesture in Schoenberg’s *Chamber Symphony No. 1, Op. 9* of 1906 for 15 instruments. Later in this sonata movement at around the 45” mark, these formerly melodic three-note fanfare-segments are now sounded simultaneously as chords in the vertical domain (circled chords in Example 2). They are all inversions or ‘transpositions’ (called ‘rotations’ in mathematics) of one another and with the two fanfare segments.⁵ Clearly, these are not the chords of traditional tonality! Nor, for that matter, are the notes of the fanfare segments those of traditional fanfares. In fact, the traditional fanfare is one of the few instances in which Schoenberg’s unity of musical space can apply simply in traditional tonal music. Otherwise, the scale-like melodic structures and the accompanying harmonic chords are explicitly not transpositions of one another as a rule. In this case, Eisler’s opening fanfare and subsequent harmonies based on it references and creates an analog to the rare simple *tonal* unity of space found in the traditional fanfare.

A second key Schoenbergian idea discussed here and appearing in Eisler’s movement is that of ‘developing variation.’ Schoenberg writes:

Variation means change. But changing every feature produces something foreign, incoherent, illogical. It destroys the basic shape of the motive (Schoenberg, 1995, 401).

Here I shall add an editorial comment: the changes of variation in the melodic or horizontal dimension tend to preserve the listener’s ability to recognize relation of the melodic variant to the original melodic model. Now, back to Schoenberg’s thought.

{In] developing variation, the changes proceed more or less directly toward the goal of allowing new ideas to arise (Schoenberg, 1995, 365).

Eisler’s use of Schoenberg’s more radical version of variation relates a melodic segment very near the opening, a tapping descent of semitones – a semitone is the smallest distance available between two adjacent notes on the piano – to portions of the second section of the movement starting around the 28” mark (Example 3a for the ‘tapping gesture’ and 3b for the similar second section). At the second section we hear some of the tapping

5 Transposition is the operation that retains the distances between pitches in a set of pitches and shifts them up or down by the same distance (interval) to a new set of pitches that maintains those distances (intervals) between the pitches.

gestures, but the descending semitone distances between notes are interrupted by other larger distances between pitches. The durations now also become unequal in places where in the opening tapping gesture the durations were equal.

The third and last key idea of Schoenberg’s to be discussed here is that of the ‘musical idea.’ The German term here is ‘Gedanke’ and not ‘Idee.’ Schoenberg writes of it:

Composing is: thinking in tones and rhythms.

Every piece is the presentation of a musical idea.

Musical thinking is subject to the laws and conditions of all our other thinking, and beyond that must take into consideration the conditions resulting from the material.

All thinking consists of essentially in bringing things (concepts, etc.) into relationship with each other.

An idea is the production of a relationship between things otherwise having no relationship to one another.

Thinking therefore searches out the relationships between things.

Thus, every idea is based on relationships, but is not thought if the relationships of the things concerned would be used for the presentation of a relationship between these things (Schoenberg, 1995, 370).

Mathematically, these musical relationships may be thought of as relations, or transformations such as functions or operations upon either the pitch or (inclusive) temporal dimensions. Note that Schoenberg would most assuredly have disliked any connection with mathematics and his theories of composition, much less with his music!

We may hear the manifestations of the musical idea in Eisler’s work through the previously introduced and related concepts of variation and developing variation. Returning to the opening fanfare and tapping gestures we may notice that each feature pitches with equal durations (Example 4). Further, the tapping gestures’ equal durations are in a ratio of 6 times the length of the fanfare’s equal durations. This temporal dimension relationship of the idea between the two opening gestures is an example of variation (and a mathematical function of multiplication on duration lengths). In the pitch dimension, the variation is of the **developing type** and is, hence, more difficult to describe and, perhaps, immediately to hear. The opening fanfare gesture may be considered as two three-note figures, that are inversions of each other, as has been previously pointed out. If we take the two boundary pitches of each three note subunit – the lowest and also first, and the highest and also last – we have a distance of 11 semitones. The distance of 12 semitones is very special to music in Western culture and the frequencies of these pitches form a 2 : 1 ratio. It is called an octave.

All musicians in that tradition recognize a kind of equivalence between pitches that are an octave apart, and they receive similar names. Pitches an octave apart typically take on boundary positions in scales and are featured in other important musical constructs. Frequently, the octave takes on special uses within compositions. Tapping gesture features descending distances of one semitone between adjacent pitches; fanfare segment's boundary pitches feature ascending distances of 11 semitones. If we add the two distances, they sum to a distance of 12 semitones or the octave. This relationship between distances, summing to the octave, is called "complementary" and is also well known to musicians. It plays special roles in theory and composition that any other pairing of distances between pitches lack. In the case of the Eisler movement and these two segments of music from it, this complementary relation between the distances of the pitches is the basis of the developing variation between the fanfare boundaries and the tapping gesture pitches. Should we move one of the fanfare boundary pitches an octave towards the other, the tapping gesture's distance, a semitone, results. By using transposition (translation) we can demonstrate and hear the equivalence of the two (Example 4a provides an example of this octave transposition applied to these musical materials). Thus, through relations, functions, and operations, we may show the musical idea is transformed from the fanfare to the 1st theme's tapping gesture and onto the 2nd theme as our examples here have demonstrated.

There is so much more to say about the details of Eisler's wonderful movement and the many other just as important ideas of Schoenberg's that find cogent and critical employment here. It is indeed one of the daily ironies that I face as a scholar of music that in describing three ideas and a small amount of this music directly but hardly exhaustively, I have already written more pages of text than the entire movement occupies, four pages! Such is the concentration of thought and relations in musical composition, especially that of masters such as Schoenberg and of his great pupil Hanns Eisler. The musical riches of master compositions are such that apparently new or unnoticed relations can be repeatedly mined by persistent listeners in either rational or intuitive ways: it takes hundreds of years of discussion and performance before the depths of such pieces are plumbed. Certainly, other works from other art forms have similar properties both in this culture and in others. That these ideas may be currently unfashionable in some circles is a pity.

Concluding observations

Perhaps following the critic Hanslick to some degree, Schoenberg's aesthetics are quite far from the beaux arts, ironies of Eric Satie, social realism, or the neo-classicism ascribed to his great contemporary Stravinsky. Schoenberg's texts and writings on counterpoint, harmony, form, and other topics are central to his conception of music. In a letter to his publisher Emil Herzka from 1911, Schoenberg writes:

All of these books are textbooks or teaching aids. They form in their entirety an *Aesthetic of Music*, under which title, I wish to write a comprehensive work (Schoenberg, 1995, xvi).

With Schoenberg passionately and highly articulately holding such beliefs, Eisler's social role of music in bettering humanity through advocating specific political beliefs in a technically simple way could only cause tension between the master and his gifted pupil.⁶

But was this estrangement the end of their relationship? Long after the May 1926 split between the two, Anton Webern conducted Eisler's chorus *Das Lied vom Kampf* in a Workmen's Symphony concert in the great hall of the Konzerthaus in Vienna on Sunday, 19 March 1933 (Moldenhauer, 1978, 395–96). Those who know of the extraordinarily close relationship between Schoenberg and Webern understand that it would have been difficult for Webern to conduct a work in public that did not meet with Schoenberg's approval (Moldenhauer, 1978, 102–03). Schoenberg was one of many heirs to the great German idealist philosophical tradition and Eisler, whose father Rudolf was a philosopher, was noted for his skill in dialectics. It is well known that these two artists were strong willed and able to stand up to enormous social and political pressure in order to do what they believed. Thus, I sincerely doubt that either bent to the will of the other. How then can we understand this apparent paradoxical behavior, Webern's conducting Eisler's work after the split?

Eisler's musical heritage (and Schoenberg's) included that of ideas promulgated by the 17th-century musician and writer, Christoph Bernard (Hilse, 1973, 1–196). His writings were thought to have circulated among the musicians around J.S. Bach, if not known to Bach himself. Walter Hilse writes that Bernard's work was known to Bach's cousin, friend, composer, scholar, and godfather to one of his children, Johann Gottfried Walther. In Bernard's writings the familiar division of musical practice of that time into the church,

6 See Schoenberg's letter of 3 and 12 March, 1926, to Eisler on the falling out (Schoenberg, 1965, 119–120+21).

court, and theater styles first revealed in Italy several generations earlier, was described to the German musical public.

This idea of several different styles having legitimate social purposes may have resonated well with Eisler. Thus, with clear conscience, Eisler could have written both musically simple political songs and 'art-for-arts sake'-music, such as the *Third Sonata*, without contradiction, because both served different and vital social functions. Early in Webern's career older members of Schoenberg's circle helped him to obtain positions as music director for various music theatres (rarely opera houses) across the German speaking landscape (Moldenhauer, 1978, 102–15), and, in fact, Schoenberg himself wrote music for cabarets (Neighbour, 1983, 5), did arrangements of Johann Strauss waltzes and performed them with his students (Moldenhauer, 1978, 236–37). Thus, this principle of music, that has different and acceptable social functions was acknowledged in practice by Schoenberg.

Perhaps Schoenberg's⁷ acquiescence to Webern's conducting Eisler's music in public (my speculation) was a sign to Eisler that he was 'forgiven' by his former teacher. Eisler fled the Nazis early in 1933, eventually making his way to the United States and the very same city in May 1942 (Blake, 1980, 90), Los Angeles, where Schoenberg was to spend his remaining days, 1935–51. Schoenberg left Berlin for France in May of 1933 (Neighbour, 1983, 14–5). Could the *Third Sonata* have been an indirect signal of tribute to his former teacher now that they were again, after so many years, in close proximity?

In a phone conversation on Saturday, 1 May, 2004, between myself and Leonard Stein, pianist, scholar, and one of Schoenberg's personal assistants in California, Stein mentioned that the two men had reconciled. Eisler had even introduced Schoenberg to Bertolt Brecht. Stein performed

7 Even at this late date in the two men's relationship, Schoenberg still grated over Eisler's political leanings. In a letter of 18 December, 1947, Schoenberg writes to Josef Rufer: "But it's really too stupid of grown-up men, musicians, artists, who honestly ought to have something better to do than to go in for theories about reforming the world, especially when one can see from the history where it all leads. I hope that all in all they won't take him too seriously here. Certainly I never took him seriously, I always regarded those tirades as a form of showing off. If I had any say in the matter I'd turn him over my knee like a silly boy and give him 25 of the best and make him promise never to open his mouth again but to stick to scribbling music. That he has a gift for, ..." Schoenberg (1965, 252). In the previously mentioned phone call, Stein mentioned that Schoenberg did not sign the petition of distinguished members of the arts community in support of Eisler's, on the grounds that art and politics should be kept separate.

Eisler's *Third Sonata* in 1945 from Stein's own hand copied score (Edition Peters copyrighted the work in 1960) and again at Eisler's farewell concert in December 1947 in Los Angeles. Stein then sent his copy of the work to Eduard Steuermann, a pianist who premiered many works of Schoenberg and his circle, perhaps for the succeeding farewell concert in New York.

Dorothy Lamb Crawford confirms the reconciliation in a recent article: "Hanns Eisler ... was a frequent guest of the Schoenbergs after his 1942 move to Los Angeles.." and "Eisler dedicated his favorite chamber work, *Fourteen Ways to Describe Rain*, op. 70, to Schoenberg, who was very pleased with it (2002, 13). Reacting to news of Schoenberg's death, Eisler wrote "Schoenberg's death shook me most profoundly. I have learned from him everything I know... It was difficult to stand up to such a master (cited in Crawford: 2002, 15)."

Thus, the picture of Eisler presented in American sources is in serious need of correction. Eisler did not forsake 'art-for-arts sake' music from the mid-1920s onwards, and his rift with Schoenberg was brief, but the master teacher's influence was lasting. The foundation of the 'International Hanns Eisler Society' (www.hanns-eisler.com) in May 1994 at Berlin, the 'North American Hanns Eisler Forum' in Cleveland, Ohio, and the *Hanns Eisler Gesamtausgabe* (producing critical editions of his scores and writings in conjunction with the music publisher Breitkopf und Härtel) should assist in rewriting Eisler's role in the musical discourses of that time for today, and in reintroducing a marvelous composer's works too long neglected in the United States.

Example 1 Opening "Fanfare" Segments to Hanns Eisler, Third Sonata for Piano (1943)

(a) = ca. 96
1st segment (p) 3 mf
2nd segment

(b) Point of Reflection or "Axis of Pitch Symmetry"
Inversion or reflection of the two segments
distance between boundary pitches for 2nd segment = 11 semitones
7 semitone distance
2 semitone distance
15 semitone distance
7 semitone distance
2 semitone distance
15 semitone distance
distance between boundary pitches for 1st segment = 11 semitones

NB: The semitone distance (interval) between pitches is the smallest available and is the lowest common denominator for all other distances (intervals).

Example 2 Around the 45" mark (measures 42-45) from the 1st Movement of Eisler's Third Sonata (1943)

Schoenberg's "unity of musical space"
"vertical" or harmonic uses as an "atonal" chord
42
fff
3 3
fanfare segment #1 fanfare segment #2
"horizontal" or melodic uses

NB: The arabic numerals between the pitches are distances (intervals) given in semitones.

Example 3 Thematic Excerpts from 1st Movement of Hanns Eisler's Third Sonata (1943)

(a) 1st Theme, "Tapping Gesture" (other simultaneous and successive musical material omitted), bars 1-3
mf
-1 -1 -1 -1

(b) 2nd Theme, "Developing Variation of 'Tapping Gesture'" (other simultaneous and successive musical material omitted), approximately at the 28" mark (measures 11-20)
pp-1
-4 +1 -2 -1 -1 -3 -1 +3

NB: arabic numerals indicate distances (intervals) in semitones where positive numbers are ascending and negative are descending.

Example 4 *Variation and Developing Variation in the First Movement of Eisler's Third Sonata*

Schoenberg's "Musical Idea"

(a)

boundary pitches of 2nd fanfare segment = 11 semitones

developing variation

Transpose (translate) down 12 semitones (P8ve), "octave equivalence"

relation: omit non-boundary pitch

-1 descends one semitone as in the Tapping Gesture, 1st theme

Repeated equal durations of the fanfare segments are 1/6th of the equal durations in the 1st theme's tapping gesture.

variation

(b) 1st Theme, "Tapping Gesture," 1st measure with omissions

When pitches of the tapping gesture change, the succeeding pitch is a semitone distance (interval) below.

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Spero Lucem und Thomasmesse: Hallelujah (4. Satz)

Eigene Kompositionen
von Falko Steinbach

Anmerkung des Herausgebers

Falko Steinbach kommt aus der Kölner Gegend. Er lehrt Klavier und Musik an der University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Er tritt oft in Konzerten auf und komponiert eigene Werke, wie die hier gebotenen. Seine viele Epochen erfassende Lehre in den Vereinigten Staaten und in Deutschland belegen ihn als einen wichtigen Vertreter des akademischen Musikgeschehens. Er arbeitet auch im Rahmen der 'German Studies' und gestaltete daher das hier vorgestellte Symposium vom April 2004 mit, indem er das Hanns-Eisler-Programm durchführte.

Editor's Note

Falko Steinbach comes to the United States from the Cologne area in Germany. He teaches piano and music at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Often he performs in concerts himself and composes his own works, as the ones offered here. His teaching in the USA and in Germany embraces many eras and makes him an important representative of the academic music world. He also contributes his work to German Studies and thus helped to organize the symposium of April 2004, introduced here, by directing the program on Hanns Eisler.