

A Music Made of Movement:

Applying Robert Hatten's concept of gesture to Webern's Op. 27

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Abstract:

Theorist Robert Hatten proposes a theoretical foundation for a musical concept of gesture, which he grounds in the study of prelinguistic physical and vocal gesture. He makes the case that one's understanding of music in such gestural terms is a "near-inevitability" contextualized by biological, social, and developmental factors. As a significant part of Hatten's analysis hinges on features that only dominate in pre-20th-century Western musical languages—for instance, the presence of a tonal centre, the thematic development of musical ideas, or an audible metric pulse—I pose the question of whether and how Hatten's framework of gesture might apply to non-tonal music. For this the purpose of this exercise, we will examine Anton Webern's Op. 27 Variations for piano, given the analytical support provided by Peter Stadlen's heavily annotated performance score and Webern's well-documented dedication to Romantic notions of expression within an atonal context.

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Background

Theorist Robert Hatten, in *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert*, proposes a theoretical foundation for a musical concept of gesture. In the process, Hatten grounds his analysis of musical gesture in the study of prelinguistic physical and vocal gesture and makes the case that one’s understanding of music in such gestural terms is a “near-inevitability”¹ contextualized by biological, social, and developmental factors. As a significant part of Hatten’s analysis hinges on features that only dominate in pre-20th-century Western musical languages—for instance, the presence of a tonal centre, the thematic development of musical ideas, or an audible metric pulse—I pose the question of whether and how Hatten’s framework of gesture might apply to non-tonal music. For the purpose of such an exercise, the serial music of Anton Webern makes a prime example for analysis, considering Webern’s well-documented dedication to Romantic notions of expression within an atonal context. Given the limited scope of this paper, we will focus on a single work for piano, the Op. 27 Variations, for which a heavily annotated performance score exists that provides significant support for this analysis.

Hatten and *gesture*

Robert Hatten primarily defines gesture—that is, any human gesture, not only musical—as *communicative, expressive, energetic shaping through time*.² As his starting point, he turns to

¹ Robert S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 95, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005zts>.

² *Ibid.*, 109.

literature concerning human development, event cognition, language, and paralinguistics (e.g., physical gesture utilized consciously and unconsciously to enhance speech)³ with the intent of establishing a basis by which musical gesture may be understood. At the risk of oversimplifying Hatten's complex work in this area, it is sufficient to understand the following for the purpose of this analysis:

- a) The way in which we derive meaning from expressive movement (gesture) is multifaceted and intermodal, engaging cognitive muscles related to both communication and (not strictly communicative) physical movement.
- b) The dynamics of a gesture are formed in its relationship to “vectoral space (whether actual or virtual),”⁴ where a gesture's expressivity emerges from the energy it appears to expend against the constraints of that space (e.g., gravity in physical space).
- c) The meaning of a gesture may be culturally determined (e.g., a shrug indicating ignorance or ambivalence; a headshake indicating yes or no), or its meaning may be more abstract, given metaphorical significance within its context (e.g., emphasizing speech through gesticulations of the hands and arms or clarifying concepts through pantomime).
- d) For a gesture to count as such, it must be foregrounded, and—at least in its most fundamental, isolable form—exist in the “perceptual present of working memory;”⁵ Hatten further defines this as an event taking place in the span of about two seconds.⁶

³ Ibid., 97–110.

⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 94.

Longer gestural flows may be seen as a continuous series of these smaller gestural “units.”

And, subsequently:

- e) Each of these principles, as they apply to non-musical communication, has a direct analogue in music. This is because, according to the implications of this model, we are socially and biologically wired to process music in a similar manner as we do non-musical communication.

To the last point: It should be intuitive to envision how a musical event in the “perpetual present” (e.g., a two-note slur) is comparable to a physical or vocalized gesture, how such a gesture can acquire semiotic meaning (e.g., the two-note slur as a *Seufzer*) and how such a gesture may sympathetically engage multiple senses in the listener, including motor senses. (Further to this point specifically, we find an articulate and fascinating perspective in Richard Taruskin’s reading of Charles Nussbaum, suggesting that music provides listeners with an “affordance” to navigate virtual spaces the same way we do physical ones.⁷) Perhaps the least intuitive—but most interesting—analogue lies in relation to b), where Hatten asks us to imagine harmonic language and metre as the “constraints” of the vectoral space against which gestures expend energy—that is, the musical equivalent of a gravitational field. In the same way that a physical gesture carries expressive potential in the energy it expends against gravity, so too does a musical gesture gain expression by the degree to which it moves against the listener’s expectations of harmony and rhythm. It is this principle that most firmly anchors Hatten’s framework to music of an 18th-century Western language and that poses the greatest challenge for

⁷ Richard Taruskin, “Afterword: What else?,” in *Representation in Western Music*, ed. Joshua S. Walden (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 303–6, Cambridge Core, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139109413.020>.

the gestural analysis of atonal music. As we will see in the following sections, the choice of composer and work for the purpose of this analysis has much to do with isolating the dilemma of harmony and rhythm in a context where other aspects of gesture are likely maintained.

Webern the romantic and Op. 27

“It is significant that [Webern’s] tastes did not extend far beyond that music which is central to the German tradition, of which he firmly believed his own work to be a continuation,” writes Kathryn Bailey Puffett in her Grove Music profile of the composer.⁸ Contrary to postwar assumptions about the aesthetics of serial music—as anti-romantic, aloof, intellectual⁹—Webern was “by nature an ardent romantic”¹⁰ and, by the accounts of his students and contemporaries, carried this emotionalism into every aspect of his composition, performance, and conducting.¹¹ A detailed testament to this effect is Peter Stadlen’s performance score of Op. 27 (which the pianist premiered in 1937), meticulously annotated with directions given by Webern himself: In addition to comparisons made to Bach’s B minor badinerie and “a Brahmsian intermezzo,” Stadlen makes note of a plethora of expressive directions, including “elegiac” (“elegisch”), “pensive” (“nachdenklich”), “with pathos” (“pathetisch”), and “coolly passionate lyricism of expression” (“kühl leidenschaftliche Lyrik des Ausdrucks”—at the very opening of the score).¹² It is this

⁸ Kathryn Bailey Puffett, *Webern, Anton*, Oxford University Press, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.29993>.

⁹ Robert W. Wason, “Webern’s ‘Variations for Piano’, Op. 27: Musical Structure and the Performance Score,” *Intégral* 1 (1987): 57–103, JSTOR.

¹⁰ Puffett, *Webern, Anton*.

¹¹ Wason, “Webern’s ‘Variations for Piano’, Op. 27: Musical Structure and the Performance Score.”

¹² Peter Stadlen, “Anton Webern: Variationen für Klavier,” Universal Edition AG, 1979.

treasure trove of performance directions that makes Op. 27 perfectly suited for gestural analysis among Webern's works.

Webern's sketches show evidence of work on his Op. 27 Variations dating back to 1935.¹³ The peculiar designation of "Variations" in this serial context, the particulars of the "theme," and the structure and compartmentalization of the variations themselves have all been the subject of debate, only elucidated somewhat by the publication of some of the composer's personal correspondence and of Stadlen's performance score in 1979.¹⁴ A comprehensive structural analysis will not be undertaken here—Wason has already done a fine job in this area—so it will suffice to note the following:

- a) The "theme," which in this case may also be understood as the purest presentation of the tone row, is presented in the first 11 measures of the third movement.
- b) The third movement clearly consists of multiple "variations"; the first and second may be standalone variations. Thematic relationships appear to occur across both adjacent and nonadjacent variations.

An entirely separate paper could be written on the symmetrical ingenuity of the row and its permutations alone; once again Wason and others have done a fine job of covering this topic. The question pertinent to us now is whether row content has any bearing at all on Hatten's concept of gesture, which must be addressed under the same umbrella as the question of "vectoral fields"—and the "virtual environmental forces" of harmony and metre—as they relate to atonal music.

¹³ Wason, "Webern's 'Variations for Piano', Op. 27: Musical Structure and the Performance Score," 67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

Musical “gravity” and atonality

If the expectations set by a stylistically coherent harmonic language and metre act as “gravitational” forces in Hatten, is the serial music of the New Viennese School effectively “weightless?” If it is, does it somehow become gesturally, and therefore expressively, deficient?

We will first address the matter of metre, which is at least marginally less complex. It cannot be said that serial music by definition, or even convention, is ametric; nonetheless, even in Webern, for whom the works of the old German masters still represented the paragon of musical artistry, it cannot be reasonably argued that a given metre is clearly audible. Op. 27 is no exception; while every variation features spurts of rhythmic continuity, downbeats are virtually always obscured, rendering invisible the metric grid and any rhythmic expectations that might derive from it. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that rhythmic expectations *are* present, even if they are not defined by a time signature. The key here lies, as previously mentioned, in *rhythmic continuity*: Highlighted by the compartmentalized nature of this work as a theme and variations, each distinguishable section (“variation”) of the work establishes, in its opening measures, clear rhythmic expectations that serve to set it apart thematically from the preceding material, be it the prosodic 16th-note “tick” of the opening movement or the “sehr schnell” sweeps of the second movement. If this interpretation can be accepted, it is already easy to see examples of gestures that “act against” this musical force of gravity: In the first movement, the opening seven measures set a pattern of four sixteenths followed by a rest; when the pattern is subtly broken in m. 8, with nine sixteenths strung together, the “gesture” (correct even by Hatten’s definition, which we will address shortly) gains expressive potential, enforced by Webern (via Stadlen) with the annotation “with new vigor” (“neu belebt”), and, when the invigorated gesture repeats,

“molto espressivo” (annotated) at forte with an accompanying *messa di voce* (annotated).¹⁵ A similar example may be found in the third movement with the arrival of what Stadlen has marked as the fourth variation (m. 45), in which, for the first time in the movement, a chain of notes occur syncopated on eighth beats—imperceptible at first, due to the accompanying change in tempo, but quickly made audible in retrospect when the following measure returns to non-syncopated quarters; as this exchange of rhythmic grids repeats through increasing dynamics up to the “climax” (“Höhepunkt”) in m. 54, the intent of the syncopation becomes clear as an expressive pull against the “gravity” of the quarter-note pulse.¹⁶

The matter of harmony as a “virtual environmental force” in Op. 27 is naturally more problematic. For purely theoretical purposes, it is possible to envision a serial work that, after an expectation of intense atonality has been set, selectively engages sonorities of the row that allude to diatonic harmony as a form of expressive resistance to the gravitational force of atonality; however, even if we were to ignore the fact that such a work would fly in the face of the aesthetics of any New Viennese serialist, Webern included, its harmonic language would still fail to generate an “environmental force” nearly as convincing as that of a Haydn string quartet. This is because serial music by nature undermines the hierarchical nature of pitch relationships necessary to establish virtual, vectoral dimension of harmony; in the pitch equality mandated by serial technique, no mode of harmony can be established where F# is more “distant” from C than F or G.

We must therefore look elsewhere for analogues to the “environmental force” of harmony. Intuition would suggest that serial technique itself, functioning as an alternative to 18th-

¹⁵ Stadlen, “Anton Webern: Variationen für Klavier,” 3a.

¹⁶ Ibid., 10a.

and 19th-century hierarchical harmony, could hold an answer; could the navigation between permutations of a row be analogous to harmonic progression? Is P^0 a kind of “tonic” from which we diverge to different permutations similarly to how we may travel from I to IV to V in Classical harmony? At face value, once again, the non-hierarchical nature of serialism excludes so literal a correlation, but the versatility of serial technique and its foundation in intervallic relationships beg that such a “virtual, vectoral space”—with P^0 as the point of origin—must at least be conceivable. Whether such a virtual space would be audible to a non-analytical listener is, however, dubious; Webern was insistent that his compositional technique need not be heard or understood as a prerequisite for comprehending his music artistically,¹⁷ but a serialist like Babbitt may not have felt the same. As there is nothing in Hatten’s framework that demands the listener’s cognizance of the aspects of a musical gesture for that gesture to be interpreted—in fact, it is understood in Hatten that the interpretation of musical gesture is largely unconscious—it may be impossible to say with any certainty whether serial technique is capable of creating an audible vectoral space for the listener.

Therefore, if the existence of “harmonic gravity” or its analogue in serial music is, at best, inconclusive, and we are still to entertain Webern in his belief of the intense expressivity of his music (as is evident by Stadlen’s score), what is it about the pitch content of a work like Op. 27 that provides expressive force? The answer, most likely, lies in the only aspect of serial technique that is unavoidably linked to both virtual and physical vectoral space—that of register. We will explore this and its complementary aspects in the last component of our analysis.

¹⁷ Wason, “Webern’s ‘Variations for Piano’, Op. 27: Musical Structure and the Performance Score.”

Hatten's *gesture* in Op. 27

Although Hatten's propositions of harmony and metre as virtual environmental forces in music initially suggest "stable tones" (e.g., a tonic) as gravitational centres,¹⁸ Hatten also goes on to suggest a much simpler interpretation of musical gravity: "Gravity suggests a pressure to descend; our sense of down versus up in pitch space is mapped onto down versus up in the lived world."¹⁹ Through this lens, *any* ascending musical line carries expressive potential; I would only add that such an ascent must at least give the *appearance* of expending energy in doing so, else it cannot be "mapped onto the lived world"; a line that leaps across pitch space arbitrarily—such as in Boulez's *Structures*—has no analogue in human gesture because it appears un beholden to any gravitational force and expends no energy in its movement. Moreover, a case can be made for a definition of "registral stability," whereby C4 becomes a "stable tone" not because it is a tonic, but simply because its frequency exists within a familiar and "nonthreatening" bandwidth of sound, e.g., the speaking voice. In this interpretation, both high and low extremes of register may appear to hold the "stable" mid-keyboard bandwidth as a gravitational centre, and this is, in fact, a tendency we see ubiquitously in music before the 19th century. The concept of registral stability also provides a "floor" at which musical gravity may come to rest, lest all musical lines be drawn down to infinitely lower pitches.

How might we view the gestures of Op. 27 in this vein? Beginning on a macrocosmic level, a few observations can quickly be made: a) the piece begins and ends in a similar middle register, b) each variation incrementally increases the pitch range, and c) in the third movement (the most extensive), high notes are almost always accompanied by a dynamic goalpost and often

¹⁸ Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert*, 115.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

an expressive annotation (e.g., “exalted” [“exaltiert”] in m. 7, “light” [“leicht”] in m. 15).²⁰ The fact alone that Webern indicated the climax (“Höhepunkt”) of the piece at the point of the highest note (m. 54, although it technically already sounds in m. 53)²¹ suggests a classical thinking, i.e., a “gravitational” model, about register and expressivity.

Having established that Op. 27 does hold virtual environmental forces and acts against them expressively, how might we view the rest of the work within Hatten’s framework? Looking only at the first page, the most densely annotated page in Stadlen’s edition, we can already say that the first movement is highly gestural by Hatten’s definition:

- a) It consists almost entirely of a single motive, first presented as four sixteenth notes, concise enough to occur in the “perceptual present.” By repetition, it becomes “foregrounded” and then “thematized.”²²
- b) The motive gains expression by pulling against the “gravity” of both the metric pulse (by an increase in the number of sixteenth notes occurring in each gesture) and the register (by gradual registral expansion).
- c) Webern’s directions, as annotated by Stadlen, metaphorize the musical material as literal vocal gestures: “subdued plaint” (“verhaltener Klageruf”; m. 1) and “echo” (“Echo”; m. 6).²³
- d) Perhaps most literally of all, *physical gesture is written into the score* by virtue of the ubiquitous (and largely unnecessary) hand crossings.

²⁰ Stadlen, “Anton Webern: Variationen für Klavier,” 3a.

²¹ Ibid., 10a–11a.

²² Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert*, 135.

²³ Stadlen, “Anton Webern: Variationen für Klavier,” 3a.

To the last point, the only rationale explicitly provided by Webern for these acrobatics is a note in m. 12 of the second movement, suggesting that the difficulty of the manoeuvre “produces just the right character” for what he intended (“die Schwierigkeit, diese 4 Noten im Tempo zu spielen, bringt gerade den richtigen Charakter heraus; unmöglich wenn bequem verteilt”),²⁴ but this comment alone suggests Webern’s intent to produce expressive character from orchestrated physical gesture.

These four observations continue to apply to every page of Webern’s score, be it in the scherzo-esque leaps of the second movement or the “elegiac” (“elegisch”) presentation of the row in the third movement: short motivic ideas are introduced, like elegant waves of the hand, and expressively rebel against the musical forces of “gravity” in their development, all the while puppeteering the pianist in physical gesticulations that accompany the musical ones. Although these gestures do not appear to have cultural meaning—as a headshake in physical gesture or a *Seufzer* in music—their thematization and expressivity are sufficient for them to carry communicative potential as what Hatten calls “iconic” or “mimetic” gesture, metaphorizing real-world movement.²⁵ Detached from the environmental forces of harmony and unburdened by stylistic tradition, Op. 27 is effectively *purely gestural*—its expressive power lies not in the engagement of Classical expectations of structure and harmony, but in its analogue to a prelinguistic, and perhaps even pre-musical, mode of communication.

Conclusion: So what?

If this cursory analysis has succeeded in its goal—to answer if and how Hatten’s concept of musical gesture may apply to music of a style wholly disparate from that of the music of

²⁴ Ibid., 6a.

²⁵ Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert*, 106.

Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, on which Hatten established his principles—what do these findings entail?

First, if gestural analysis retains coherence even in music that, at least in technical aspects, is diametrically opposed to music of the Classical period, it implies that Hatten's framework may apply to music of virtually any style, and strongly encourages further exploration. Second, if a work such as Op. 27 is, as I suggest, composed almost purely of gesture, Hatten's mode of analysis provides a new way of interpreting the music of Webern and his contemporaries that is perhaps more in line with the artistic intentions of these composers than is rigorous serial analysis. In turn, it also provides a new way of presenting and listening to New Viennese music—not as a historical curiosity or intellectual exercise, but, befitting Webern's vision, as a 20th-century heir to the expressionism of the Classical German masters that transcends tradition as a means of realizing *gesture* in its pure, primordial form.

In closing, I would encourage readers to watch Glenn Gould's legendary 1974 video recording of the work in the light cast by this paper.²⁶ Not only do we see Webern's obligatory hand-crossings orchestrated with utmost grace, but every gesture realized with tangible expressivity that leaves little doubt of the composer's artistic intent.

²⁶ TheWelleszCompany, "Anton Webern: Variations, Op 27 (1936) Glenn Gould, Piano," 1974, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEtqEzPakxA>.

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