

Brandeis University

**Arnold Schoenberg:
Analysis and Interpretation**

By

Nathaniel Eschler

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Introduction

In this paper, I will examine the structural, harmonic, and linear qualities of the first phrase in Arnold Schoenberg's piece for solo piano, *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11. The goal is to understand more clearly the behavioral musical characteristics of the first eight bars. Many different facets and techniques of musical theory will be used to accomplish this goal. Set analysis, for example, will help identify and label referential sonorities. Voice leading graphs and reductions will visually demonstrate structural pitches and their hierarchical groupings. Lastly, music examples will be utilized to show obvious and not so obvious pitch collections for easy identification and discussion. Through these means a better overall understanding of this seminal work of the twentieth century can be achieved.

The Opening Phrase: Analysis and Interpretation

Segmentation A. mm. 1-5

The image shows a musical score for the opening phrase of Arnold Schoenberg's *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11, No. 1, measures 1-5. The score is annotated with set theory examples and voice leading graphs. The examples are labeled as follows:

- Ex. #1 Set 014 (measures 1-2)
- Ex. #2 Set 0126 (measures 1-2)
- Ex. #3 Set 0146 (measures 2-3)
- Ex. #4 Set 0148 (measures 3-4)
- Ex. #5 Set 0147 (measures 4-5)
- Ex. #6 Set 0147 (measures 5-8)

The score includes a treble clef and a bass clef. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The time signature is 3/4. The music is in a 3/4 time signature. The score is annotated with red and green boxes and lines, indicating the structure and relationships between the pitch sets. Red boxes highlight specific pitch sets, and green boxes highlight other pitch sets. Lines connect the boxes, showing the voice leading between them. The annotations include labels like (016) and (014) in parentheses, and various set numbers like 014, 0126, 0146, 0148, and 0147.

The opening phrase, like the entire piece, is organized around various transpositions and supersets of 014. From measure 1 and to the downbeat of measure 2, the *primary* pitch-set of *b-g#-g natural* is followed by combinations of five different

tetrachords. In each case, the superset arises from an interaction of linear and vertical elements. The first tetrachord, *0126*, is the only sonority of this phrase not to contain a *014*. However, it does contain the interval classes of *one* and *four*. The second tetrachord, *0146*, is formed when *a* enters on the *and* of beat two in measure 2. This note, which connects back to pitch-class *eleven* from the opening, moves downward to form the second tetrachord (see reduction A). The *014* of this sonority is at transposition level or $\{T,10\}$ from the *primary* pitch-set. This phrase also has imbedded within it the trichord *024*. This trichord makes up the sonorities of the responding phrase that begins at measure 9.

Segmentation B. mm. 1-5

The image shows a musical score for measures 1-5. A green bracket labeled "Ex #2 024" spans measures 1-3. A green bracket labeled "Ex #1 024" spans measures 4-5. Red annotations include vertical lines, boxes, and arrows highlighting specific notes and intervals.

The common interpretation of the first eight bars is one in which there are two phrases. This interpretation adheres to the classic standard of statement (measures 1 – 3), and response (measures 4 – 8), with a new idea beginning on beat two of measure 4, defined only by the articulation of the rest on beat one. What then follows is the completion of this new beginning. My analysis shows that it is really a single phrase with two events.

Reduction A. mm.1-4

The image shows a musical score for measures 1-4. Red lines connect notes across staves, and red boxes highlight specific notes.

According to my reductive analysis, the first event occurs on beat one of measure 4 after pitch-class *four* moves down from the *f* on beat one. This rest does create a noticeable articulation. Rather, its role is to break the chain of events and not to define the phrase. The second event in this singular phrase is a semi-cadence on beat three of the same measure. Here, the cadence is made when the initial three pitches are verticalised. Pitch-class *seven* returns in the upper voice, pitch-class *eleven* to the middle, and pitch class *nine* appears for the first time in the bass. The varied repetition that occurs from the end of beat five to the end of beat eight is simply a cadential extension. In order to understand this phrase, it is important to be clear about its musical necessity and resultant behavior. It seems that all musical elements, with one exception, make their ways toward an end on beat three of measure 4.

Motion, or linear musical direction, in a free atonal harmonic style is created by pitch turnover. This pitch turnover that creates motion means that on a local level, returning to a given pitch or group of pitches creates stagnation. It also means that on a structural level, the pitch turnover creates a sense of return, a new beginning, or a combination of both. These voice leading peculiarities are part of what causes confusion within this five bar phrase. The fact is that two of these issues, stagnation and return, are at work, causing the phrase to end on beat four of measure 4.

These moments are:

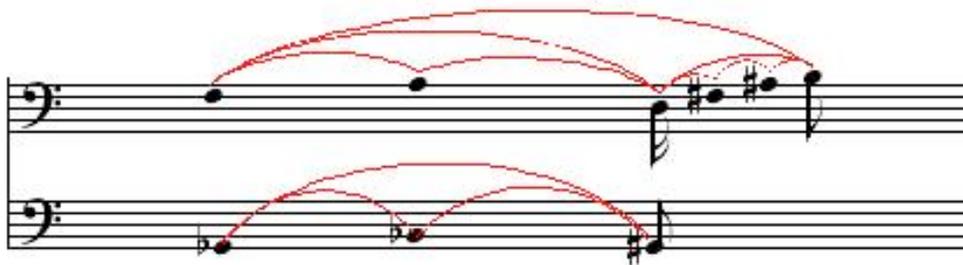
- When pitch-class *four* is picked up across the rest, thwarting the advancement of the primary musical line.
- The alto voice, which made its entrance on pitch-class *eleven*, returns to where it began (at pitch-class *eleven*). It is also important that it returned in the same register.
- When the initial three pitches are verticalised.
- The continuous rearticulations of pitch class *eleven* by both inner voices from measures 5 through 8.

With all of these factors combined, there are still other issues that strengthen my argument that the phrase ends on beat four of measure 4. These issues revolve around where musical ideas begin and end and what those ideas are.

Often, it is the case that a musical line will demonstrate more than one dimension or voice. In the upper or soprano part when the *b* moves to the *g#*, we really have the beginnings of a compound melody. In *reduction A*, the voices are separated out. The *b*, or the true upper voice, moves not to *g#*, but to the *a* in measure 2. From there, it descends to the *g natural* on beat four of measure 4. As a consequence, both voices need to be addressed clearly in some manner. In this case, each musical line reaches its goal within the phrase at different moments. The lower of the two voices arrives with the *e* at measure 3, forming the pitch-set 0147. The upper voice then makes its closure with the *g natural* on beat four of measure 4, forming another 0147. If this upper voice is heard as a step wise descent from the *b*, and was otherwise incomplete before this moment, then it is more clear where the phrase ends. This juncture, when considering the upper voices in isolation, could still be interpreted as an end and new beginning at once. The argument must look to the bottom two voices, the tenor and bass for further clarity. Their behavior will be the key to a complete understanding of this phrase.

The goal of the bass and tenor voices is beat four of measure 4. The eighth note run by the now active tenor voice is a release of energy from two bars of relative inactivity. Playing this part alone should be enough to convince the ear of this fact.

Reduction B. Alto and Tenor voices mm. 2-5



Added to that fact is its coupled interaction with the other voices. When this now active tenor voice, at its endpoint, continuously rearticulates the very same note as the alto line, it focuses the ear on note *b* from two different directions. This also helps make clear that the *d* does not belong to the sonority, leaving just the primary pitch-set *014*. This upward eighth note motion also works against the descent of the *g* in the upper voice. This contrary motion and its pent up energy is what sustains and necessitates the number of repetitions.

Conclusion

The opening phrase of Arnold Schoenberg's piece for solo piano, "Drei Klavierstücke, Op. 11" is indeed a complex musical entity. As a result, many factors have been considered in this discussion to better understand a commonly misinterpreted few bars of music. It is, however, not the single aim of this paper to merely refute what so many seem to understand. The paper's main purpose is to express and improve this author's interpretation and understanding of twentieth and twenty-first century analysis. It is the wish that whether a reader agrees with the analysis, that at least a thorough enough argument has been given to open a discussion and possible rethinking on the matter. The point of this paper is that measures 1 through 8 is a single phrase with cadential extension. Evidence in support of this analysis was that all musical direction was aimed towards beat three of measure 4. The musical reductions and segmentations were critical to reaching this conclusion.

The first key piece of evidence was in the compound melody or soprano part illuminated in *Reduction A*. To understand that two ideas were unfolding and consequently would need to be addressed, made it clear that the *g* on beat three of measure 4 was a motion down to a point of arrival. If this moment was a new beginning, or a new phrase, this pitch would need to be interpreted as a point of departure.

The second point, critical to a complete understanding of this phrase, centers around voice leading and pitch turnover. In this opening phrase, several instances occur where pitches were picked up across time or continuously rearticulated by one or more voices. The most important of these instances occurred when pitch class *four* was picked

up across the rest on beat two of measure 3. When this pitch class was picked up, the forward motion of the lower compound melody voice was discontinued. Other instances include the continuous rearticulation of pitch class *eleven* in the tenor and alto voices throughout measures 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Finally, the last issue discussed was whether or not the small eight note run that departs in the alto voice from pitch class *three* in measure 4 is the beginning of a new idea or the tail end of the lower musical layer. In *Reduction B*, it was shown that pitch-class *eleven* was the tail end and that the **d** was an active non-harmonic pitch.

In conclusion, the interpretation of the opening eight bars is critical to understanding the work as whole. It is also important for performance. Clearly every musical element draws to a close in measures 4 and 5. Therefore, what happens from the end of measures 5 through 8 is, in fact, cadential extension that prepares for the beginning of the second phrase in measure 9.