

The Music of Prose - Formal Subversion in Schoenberg's *Piano Suite Op. 25* and
Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*

Easton Page

Form and content within a novel are ever in a symbiotic relationship. Particularly within the sphere of what one would call modernism, the form of a piece of work can convey and resonate in incredibly significant ways. The same fundamental principle takes place in modernist music, with composers pushing away from, or discarding, tonal hierarchy and the traditional forms that once formed the basis of what was expected in an art music setting. These newfound forms are incredibly communicative, allowing composers not only to subvert the past, but to subvert the social power that form holds over artists and music itself. Modernist Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) and his innovative 12-tone method of composition is one of the most significant examples of this subversion taking place. His 12-tone system not only discards tonal hierarchy, doing away with major and minor keys and treating each pitch of the chromatic scale with equal weight, but it is a replacement system for tonality, so that composers may operate in a coherent manner without the tyrannical guise of hierarchy. Modernist author Ernest Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* bears striking fundamental similarities to Schoenberg's efforts; he is both subverting formal elements of traditional prose writing, and utilizing repetition and other strategic formal elements to form a destabilizing structure for his work. Both artists' efforts are rooted in attempting to subvert power and structure, of social authority and the hierarchical structures upon which literature and music are based, while at the same time relying on the very foundation that the traditions provide. This complicated, dynamic relationship demonstrates the interdisciplinary similarities between literature and musical composition, specifically anchored in two controversial, highly-innovative artists.

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To begin, in order to fully grasp the rest of the paper, one must understand the basis of what the 12-tone method of composition is. The 12-tone method, or what Schoenberg originally called “composition with 12 tones”, is a form of composition that involves using predetermined sequences of notes to form the basis of the piece of music. Called tone rows, each sequence must employ every note of the twelve note chromatic scale once before any repetition can occur. Whereas some modernist composers do completely away with theoretical basis and structure, such as French composer Claude Debussy, who said that “There is no theory. You merely have to listen. Pleasure is the law”, Schoenberg has created a formula of sorts to allow for a systematic communication of music, rather than a solely interpretive one (Burkholder 794). These tone rows, once created, can be played not only start to finish, but also inverted and played in retrograde, or both, therefore creating four distinctly different possible combination of any single tone row. The starting note of each tone row can also change, as long as the sequence is played through as written; if a row begins on C, for example, and then moves to a B, then a B-flat, and so on, one can start the tone row on a B as well as the C, shifting forward the row by one note. Therefore, there are forty-eight distinct possibilities with each created tone row, and this is not including the rhythmic freedom with which a composer can employ each tone row; the only rule is that one must use each note once before repeating a given row. For Schoenberg, this was a systematic way to integrate “harmony and melody by composing with a limited number of sets” (Burkholder 820).

This systematic innovation manifests itself within the first sentence of *A Farewell to Arms*, in which Hemingway’s sentence structure and lack of specificity introduces the reader to an environment not only of the setting of the novel, but of the form of the prose; the prose setting, if you will. Hemingway writes that “In the late summer of that year we lived in a

house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains” (Hemingway 3). The first prominent feature of this passage is in its lack of specificity; there is no specific location, no specific year, as if the reader is assumed to have already grasped the sense of the time and place, the setting of the narrative. By generalizing the location and temporality of the setting, he allows the reader to infer the narrative’s setting; it affords the reader a freedom that an authoritarian author who solidifies these details would not allow. The same interpretive freedom is communicated through the lack of punctuation. Hemingway’s sentences are not broken into neat phrases, divided by commas into a prescribed form, but instead are left free, even to the point of being termed ‘run-on’ or improperly structured. This, of course, is intentional; by breaking the form of what can be considered standard grammatical rules, Hemingway is able to subvert the authority that those rules and structure hold over prose. In the same manner as free-verse poetry subverts the constraints of poetic form, so to is Hemingway subverting sentence structure, reforming the definition of what prose structure ‘must’ contain.

Schoenberg takes a very similar approach in his subversion of tonality. 12-tone composition is, of course, a structure, but unprescribed by the authority and history of tonally-oriented music. Instead of rejecting form altogether, as composers like John Cage do, Schoenberg recognizes that structure, in a broad sense, is important in crafting a music that can still be understood. His *Piano Suite Op. 25* is structurally-based upon the 12-tone method, but sounds as if it has very little structure holding it together. Upon first listen, one might even say that Schoenberg has simply played random notes in random patterns and written it down. This is the exact same principle as the form of Hemingway’s sentences, for his prose reads almost as if it is a first draft. It seems as though there is little by way of ‘proper’ sentence composition or specificity, resulting in a vague collection of fragmented

nouns that seem to be improperly constructed and difficult to understand; nouns like 'summer', 'plain', 'mountains', 'house' and 'river' are strung together with little more than a few conjunctions to form them into a complete thought. Both artists are intentionally taking structure and reapplying it, modifying it in order to subvert the control of that which is traditionally seen as 'correct', for lack of a better word. Hemingway's nouns are the notes with which he constructs his repetition; what Schoenberg is doing with pitch, Hemingway is doing with grammar.

Interestingly, Schoenberg did not see tradition and innovation at odds with each other. Rather, innovation is an extension of tradition; tradition is, to Schoenberg, "a legacy of innovation, and it was his job as a composer to weave threads from the past and the present into something truly new" (Burkholder 815). In this sense, his push away from tonality and his innovative new forms not a complete rejection of history, but rather an extension of the innovation of tradition, in much the same way as Beethoven before him; those seen as tradition from the modernist perspective were, in fact, as innovative as those who are rejecting those traditions. To remain stagnant in the guise of tonal tradition would fail to grasp that which created what is seen as tradition in the first place: innovation and progress. It is evident through Hemingway's prose that the same concept of progress is at the heart of *A Farewell to Arms*' form. Consider the prose of Fredric Henry as he is blown up eating a meal; there was the sound of "a cough, then came the chuh-chuh-chuh-chuh - then there was a flash, as when a blast-furnace door is swung open, and a roar that started white and went red and on and on in a rushing wind" (Hemingway 47). The repetition of single-syllable words pushes the sentence forward, mirroring the defamiliarized visual momentum of an explosion in a way that Viktor Schklovsky writes is "pricking the conscience", changing "its form without changing its nature" (Schklovsky 16) Hemingway,

instead of distancing the reader from the sensation of being subjected to the force of the explosion, repurposes grammar to portray the force with which the explosion washes over Fredric Henry. This is particularly evident in the latter part of the sentence, which sees both the word 'and' and the word 'on' repeated several times. Not only does this explicitly mirror the sound of the guns "chuh-chuh" that happens just prior, which is intertextually significant for its ability to connect onomatopoeia and conjunctions to express sonic phenomena within prose, but it also acts as a rhythmic pulse to the sentence (Hemingway 47). Instead of expressing forcefulness through eloquence and perfection, Hemingway turns to simplicity and those words that make the most impact upon the ear. He relies on the essentials of language, repurposing them to communicate the way that he wants them to, as opposed to the way that convention would prescribe. In the sense of the tools with which he is composing, the words, the simplicity, Hemingway's innovation stems from the very tradition of narrative he is subverting.

The subversion of standardized sentence structure also serves to mirror the unconventionality of Fredric Henry and Catherine's relationship. As Fredric Henry is courting Catherine Barkley, Henry says "And then you are so very beautiful." to which Catherine replies "You don't need to say a lot of nonsense" (Hemingway 23). Further into the conversation she tells him "You are sweet... You are a dear. I'd be glad to kiss you if you don't mind" (Hemingway 23). The banter is a mere guise, an illusory effort to justify the blossoming sexual relationship between them. Catherine explicitly acknowledges this, not only by telling Fredric that he needn't bother telling her these sweet things, but also by stating that they are "going to have a strange life", the beginnings of a destabilizing, unconventional relationship (Hemingway 23). Catherine and Fredric are both subverting structure and convention while repurposing elements of that same social structure; the

'sweet talk' exchanged between the two of them is not of genuine origin (though Fredric does in fact see Catherine as beautiful) but instead functions much the same as Schoenberg's use of chromatic pitches. Chromatic pitches are necessary for the creation of music, since they are the foundation upon which pieces of both tonal and atonal nature are composed. The conventional nature of this exchange between Fredric and Catherine is being used as a fundamental element to the creation of a relationship, regardless of the atypicality of the relationship in this case, in much the same way as the words Hemingway is using to communicate said relationship. This parallels the afore-examined short, punctual elements of prose through the explosion passage; Schoenberg and Hemingway both turn to the foundations of language, musical or otherwise, to reshape the structure of the art they construct.

This explosion passage brings forth another incredibly significant aspect to both Hemingway's prose and Schoenberg's compositional methods, and that is the art of repetition. Both artists are using repetition to create and to subvert structure within their works. Hemingway employs what Gertrude Stein terms "insistence" in addition to pure repetition (Kidd 2). Insistence is the art of employing repetition with slight variances in order to procure meaning and evolution in the phrasing. As Henry is blown up, he "tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind" (Hemingway 47). The slight differences between 'breathe' and 'breath', and between "a rushing wind" and "in the wind" from the sentence before adds a depth that one does not get with straight repetition, both in content and in form; there is a noun, and the noun is then enacted as a verb (Hemingway 47). Again, this passage demonstrates the rushing of the force of an explosion through its repetition of short, single-syllabic words and their change of form, which mirrors the change of state that

occurs with an explosion, but perhaps more significantly, it allows Hemingway to break the traditional forms of “literature based on time and memory” which Stein says is “neither exciting nor interesting because it merely repeats that which has already happened” (Kidd 2). Hemingway is using the form of his prose, the repetition of syllables and words, and the slight variances, to create momentum not just within the narrative, but structurally. He is subverting the more typical time- and historically-based narrative form by pushing forward through insistence. Schoenberg’s work rests on the same principles of insistence, of imperfect repetition. His 12-tone method as employed within *Piano Suite Op. 25* is not merely a recitation of tone rows as they would appear if mathematically calculated, but layers upon itself. Schoenberg uses the tone row not only rhythmically, but also harmonically, with notes of the tone row played overtop of each other, and some notes even rhythmically repeated before moving forth to the next notes of the row. The visceral density created by this method of overlap is paralleled by the seemingly overlapping prose of Hemingway’s use of ‘on and on’ and ‘out and out and out’, creating the exact same repeated fragmenting that Schoenberg employs when repeating notes within the tone row; as long as he does not progress to the next note of the row and move backward, this is still well within the rules of 12-tone composition, but here he is pushing even his own compositional methods as far as they can go (Hemingway 47). This is a subversion of a subversion, which demonstrates not only that traditional forms are designed to be broken and innovated upon, but that even those innovations can never be static.

Interestingly, there is tension between the straight repetition of Hemingway’s phrasing here (words such as ‘and’ and ‘out’) and the concept of insistence and variance. Hemingway’s use of both forms of repetition (plain repetition and Stein’s methodology of insistence), I would argue, is intentionally employed not only to formally support the chaotic

nature of the text's explosion, but to subvert even the nature of Stein's conception of what repetition cannot be. The imperfection of insistence is juxtaposed with what one can only describe as pure repetition (the same two words repeated multiple times in a row). While Hemingway's style of prose is evidently influenced and, arguably, based off of Stein's methodology, Hemingway himself "disparaged Stein for writing nonsense ever since 1910" the year following her release of *Three Lives*, the short story that most influenced Hemingway's prose (Ryan 230). The evidence of tension between the two distinct styles of repetition is rooted in not just a subversion of the repetition of Stein, but a furthering. As Schoenberg has argued, tradition and innovation coexist, and those who crafted the foundations upon which modernism is built were, at one point, radically innovative. Hemingway, then, is channeling the claimed stasis of plain-style repetition as a way to demonstrate that subversion and the subverted can coexist, that structural underpinnings and foundational methodology are still significant even in one's subversive efforts.

The final, and perhaps most poignant, parallel between Schoenberg and Hemingway that this paper will deal with is the tension between the tradition of the sacred versus the modernism of the secular. Consider the routine of the men in Henry's company: "That night in the mess after the spaghetti course, which everyone ate very quickly and seriously... the captain commenced picking on the priest" after which they "go whorehouse before it shuts" (Hemingway 7-8). The significance of this is twofold. Not only is the company picking on the priest, symbolically renouncing structure and hierarchy of religion, but they themselves are establishing a routine. The routine of food, teasing the sacred, and attending the whorehouse (if attending is the right term for such a venture) is a replacement for the structured attendance of mass. The company has secularized religion, a replacement instead of a renouncement. The same thing happens structurally with Schoenberg; instead

of renouncing structure, as others will do or have done (Debussy, for example, while still tied to the rhythmic and notational nature of composition, renounces theory and structured composition, relying instead on the ear and the sonics of the chords being crafted), Schoenberg replaces the structure of tonality with a structure of atonality. In rejecting the 'church' of his forefathers in Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, and others, Schoenberg establishes a musically-secularized system of composition that takes the place of the sacred.

The same replacement phenomenon occurs with Catherine and Fredric, as they 'marry' each other. Upon discussing the formalities and roadblocks in front of them if they were to try to actually marry, Catherine says that "We're really married. I couldn't be any more married... I am married. I'm married to you. Don't I make you a good wife?" (Hemingway 99). She claims "there is no way to be married except by church or state. We are married privately. You see darling, it would mean everything to me if I had any religion. But I haven't any religion" (Hemingway 100). In the face of structural prevention, Catherine replaces marriage via church or state with 'private' marriage, one that is illegitimate in the eyes of anyone but Fredric and Catherine. They are inventing a system that both subverts and mirrors that of the church, in the same way that Schoenberg creates a system that both subverts and mirrors the systematic prescriptions of traditional compositional forms. Schoenberg explicitly "sought to re-create the forms of tonal music in an entirely new language", rather than renounce them completely (Burkholder 823). Again, innovation through the foundation of tradition. Catherine and Fredric are both innovating the methodology with which marriage can occur, yet retaining the necessity of considering themselves to be married in the first place, the foundation of the structure they are subverting.

Both Hemingway and Schoenberg evidence subversion through the paradox of tradition and innovation; the basis of their artistic innovation and authoritarian rejection is rooted in tradition, while at the same time pushing distinctly away from it. Schoenberg's 12-tone method, particularly as employed in his *Piano Suite Op. 25*, evidences this rejection of traditional form using replacement, repetition, variation, and unconventional structure. The same can be said of the form of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, whose basis for the formal aspects lie in the subversion of formal traditions and the embrace of innovative forms. The dialogue between these two distinct products of modernism demonstrates not only the connections in thought pattern between forms of artistic expression, but ultimately that structure is replaced rather than discarded, resting on the foundations of tradition, even when that tradition and its forms are what is being subverted. It is an inescapable dichotomy, one that these artists express in tandem with one another, an eloquent conversation of innovation.

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