

Negotiating Ambiguity: Dynamic Structure in Schoenberg Songs

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Introduction

Schoenberg's Das Buch der Hängenden Gärten (1908-9), a song cycle and one of Schoenberg's earliest atonal works, questioned functional harmony, and re-framed the concept of form and how it can work independently from traditional tonality to support a complex and subjective poetic narrative.

The form in the songs is ambiguous, which presents particular challenges to a performer rehearsing and performing them. The form in the songs is 'dynamic', which, in this case, means that as rehearsal, and therefore familiarity, develops, so does a singer's understanding of the form.

Cook (2013) reframes of music study, foreground the activity of performance. Rink et al. (2011) suggest that musical structure should be treated as a 'range of potential, inferred relationships' (p.268) and that analysts can learn much about structure from the experience of performers. A study of these 'in-between' stages of analysis, carried out not by analysts but by performers/students/listeners demonstrates this idea that analysis and musicological understanding of the songs can be enhanced through the contribution of empirical data from performance studies.

Method

Case Study

Songs IV and V were rehearsed by a singer (Elle) on four occasions, with an accompanist, and a performance of both songs was given at the end of the process.

- After each rehearsal, Elle submitted the scores she worked from in rehearsal, including any rehearsal markings made on the paper;
- she also drew, on separate scores, her understanding of the form of the piece and any sections into which she would divide it.

Thus, a picture of her developing understanding of the form and sections of the songs emerged.

Song IV Study

- 26 participants looked at the score of Song IV for two minutes and marked on the paper where they thought the section boundaries were (Score 1 in Graph 1);
- half of the participants then looked for a further 2 minutes before marking section boundaries again (Score 2 LOO);
- the other half listened to a recording of the song before marking section boundaries (Score 2 LIS).

Song V Study

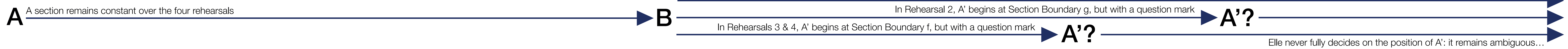
- 60 participants studied the score for two minutes and marked section boundaries (Score 1 in Graph 2);
- all of the participants then heard a recording of Song V, and then marked the section boundaries again (Score 2, Graph 2).

References

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Song IV: 'Da meine Lippen reglos sind brennen' (1908) *Choice, decision?*

Case Study Results: Elle's Perception of Form in Song IV



Song IV (n=26) Study Graph 1: No. of participants identifying section boundaries a-i



*Since my lips are immobile and burn,
I begin to observe where my feet have come to:
Into the splendid domain of other masters.
It was perhaps still possible to break away, but then
it seemed as if through high gate rails
The glance before which I knelt untiringly,
was seeking me questioningly or was giving signs.*

Discussion The symbolist poems by Stefan George tell of a Prince falling for the Beloved (Simms 2000). The garden in decline has been compared to the demise of tonality at the start of the twentieth century Brown 1995) and these songs are, in fact, the first songs in which Schoenberg abandons triadic harmony at structural moments (Haimo 2006), adding to the experience of formal ambiguity illustrated by the three studies. In 'Da meine Lippen...', the last four lines of the poem describe a

choice: a moment of decision. Does the Prince surrender himself to the garden and to the beloved? Tracking how form is experienced by participants illustrates how form directly embodies the emotional complexity of the choice, and the experience of A' is spread over these last four lines. To break away was perhaps still possible, but the Beloved's glance makes this increasingly unlikely. The decision is not made in an instant, and A' does not appear all at once.

Boundary f ('hearable') features from 'A':

- Pitch classes
- Vocal contour
- Rhythmic regularity
- Constant vocal range

Boundary g ('seeable') features from 'A':

- Dynamic marking
- Vocal range
- Piano texture

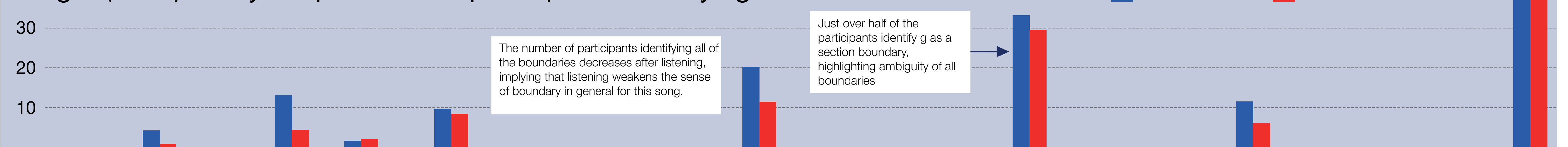
Section boundaries f and g share features of the start of the song, providing the experience of return, but not directly. Some of these features are more 'seeable' and some more 'hearable', meaning that the manner of contact with the music (visual and aural) will shape the perception of form, at least at the start of the rehearsal process.

Song V: 'Saget mir' (1908) *Resolve, separation?*

Case Study Results: Elle's Perception of Form in Song V



Song V (n=60) Study Graph 2: No. of participants identifying section boundaries a-i



*Tell me on which paths she will walk by today,
So that I can fetch soft silk weaves
From the richest chest, can pick roses and violets,
So that I can lay down my cheeks
As a footstool beneath her soles*

Discussion The experience of form in Song V is very different from that of Song IV, and these two studies highlight the difference between songs in the cycle and the insufficiency of analytical studies which treat all of the songs of the cycle as if they have a common form. In 'Saget mir', the Prince has given himself completely to the Beloved. The ambiguity of form shown in the Case study and the Song V Study, however, implies a much more complex set of emotions which echoes the symbolism

and subtlety of the poetry. Voice and piano are juxtaposed, problematising the experience of return (A) and contrast (B). Only 33 out of 60 participants identified a section boundary at g, and four of those participants changed their mind after listening. Even fewer were sure about the section boundary at f. The experience of separation and formal ambiguity hint at emotional drama later in the cycle.

Conclusions

The perception of formal structure in the songs by the Case Study singer which changes and develops over the period of rehearsal, and the range of interpretations of form in both of the Song Studies, has shown that the reality of the form of these songs, experienced through performance, listening and looking, is a more complex and interesting phenomena than might be shown in more 'traditional' analytical treatments. Not only this, but the data provided in these studies has provided new musicological insights into the songs their relationship with the poetic texts. Studying the experience of performers and listeners has informed analytical insight.

Singing teachers would have to think very carefully about the way their student singers approach these songs. The different combinations of the visual and aural experience allow the form to be experienced in different ways at different stages of familiarity. Emphasising one particular interpretation of the form could limit the student singer's ability to embody and communicate ambiguity of form which is one of the primary ways in which the story and emotion of the poetry is performed. Studies of performance use form and structure as a framework for the development of more detailed interpretation of expressive features (see, e.g., Chaffin et al. [2002]). The study here presents some possibilities for a new perspective on form in performance studies, one which may have the potential for application to traditionally tonal pieces, as well as songs from Schoenberg's early atonality.

Not only is it more accurate to refer to music's structures, but the origin and dynamic nature of those structures must be acknowledged.

- Rink et al. 2011, p.268

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