

Binary Principle in Two Pieces: Bach's Partita No. 3, and Webern's Variations for Piano, op. 27

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Partita No. 3 in A Minor, IV. Sarabande, by J.S. Bach

Bach's Partita No. 3 in A minor (BWV 827) movement IV, Sarabande displays linear chromatic harmony with the intent to tonicize key areas moving away from, and eventually back towards the home key of A minor. By using secondary dominants, achieved by chromatic alteration, Bach delineates the beginning and ending of phrases which make up larger sections of the piece. When analyzed as a series of phrases, it is clear that this movement from Partita No. 3 is in binary form.

We begin in A minor where the sixteenth note triplet motif is introduced in a four bar phrase which ends on the dominant of E, leading to minor tonic again at the outset of the next phrase. This second phrase moves uses successive ascending sequences of the sixteenth note triplet motif to move towards the dominant of the major three chord in A minor. In the third and last phrase of Part One of this piece in binary form, Bach moves the sixteenth note triplet motif downwards over a sustained dominant pedal tone of G to tonicize C major. Measure twelve realizes this tonicization, landing on a C major chord as a result of a perfect authentic cadence. So in summary, we have an A section consisting of a phrase group of three four-bar phrases, moving from A minor towards C major, with the primary harmonic impetus being the G pedal tone in the last phrase.

After the repeat of Part One, we are lead into Part Two where immediately Bach continues in the dominant of our new tonic of C major, but uses the dominant of the minor two

chord at the end of the four bar phrase to bring us to D minor at the outset of the next phrase. This second phrase is four bars in length, and clearly establishes D minor throughout, most strongly evidenced by the perfect authentic cadence at its close, landing on a D minor chord. The following phrase utilizes the dominant seven chord of major seven (in our new key of D minor) to move to C major as shown by a perfect authentic cadence from a G dominant seven chord to a C major chord, landed on in measure twenty-two. But Bach does not dwell long on C major – he quickly and abruptly uses chromatic alteration in the same bar to move through a diminished seven-six chord to weakly tonicize A minor, and he spends the next two bars moving through the chromatic alterations provided by the A melodic minor scale to approach an E (dominant) pedal tone. This pedal tone undergirds the sixteenth note triplet motif which prolongs dominant and cadential six-four chords until we finally have a weak presentation of dominant with a diminished seven chord, then a weak one-six tonic chord, a cadential six-four, and a perfect authentic cadence from five-seven landing on one in the final measure. In summary, we have a section which consists of four phrases, whose harmonic direction takes us from C major to D minor, then finishing in A minor through a brief cadence on C major. This makes up Part Two of the binary form.

This is indicative of Binary form for several reasons. First, Part One's harmonic motion leads us from A minor to a secondary tonic of the parallel major key, C major. Essentially leading us from tonic to "not-tonic" in the A section. Wallace Berry suggests that in binary form, when the primary key is minor, the ending of the first section often ends in the relative major key – as it is in this case. I make the case that the first section is a phrase group of three four-bar phrases. While all three utilize the sixteenth-note triplet motif, their continual harmonic motion and varying development of the motif do not provide direct antecedent and consequent

relationships. Each phrase begins and ends with a different chordal center, eliminating a sense of consequent resolution.

Part Two's beginning is much the same as Part One's – the only difference in the first motivic statement being the key. This further supports the assertion that this piece is in binary form – the piece's division emphasizes a motivic statement which creates, in the words of Berry, “a pervasive unity to the form.” The second part is longer in duration than the first, which is to be expected due to its development of motivic elements in closely related keys. The return of the original key of A minor is the final affirmation of binary form in this piece, as it completes the typical cycle of a two-part form with Part One beginning in tonic, ending in a secondary tonic, and Part Two developing motivic content through the secondary tonic and closely related keys culminating in a return of the original key with enough time to firmly establish its finality through strong cadential motion.

Variations for Piano Op. 27, Mvt. II, by Anton Webern

Anton Webern's Variations for Piano is written in a strict twelve-tone method. It utilizes various forms of a prime twelve-tone row to move through each section of the piece, of which there are two. By utilizing rows whose beginning and ending pitch classes converge, Webern is able to delineate phrase endings and move from one row form to another. He keeps a consistent split eighth note motif throughout, as well as a few more subtle recurring ideas. When each phrase is analyzed in context, it is clear that this piece is in symmetrical binary form.

Part one opens with two variations on the prime twelve-tone row. The rows used are P_8 and I_{10} , and they are split between right and left hands. The opening two pitch classes of 10 and 8 are important to the form of the entire piece as we will see. The rows cross, switching from

right hand to left hand at the occurrence of pitch classes 8 and 10, taking place at the tenth pitch class of each row. Both rows then end on pitch class 3, which serves as a common pitch class with the beginning of the next rows. This simultaneous conclusion of one set of rows and beginning of another set is accented with a *ff* dynamic marking, which further serves to delineate a new phrase. The second phrase of part one utilizes the P_3 and I_3 row forms, with P_3 in the right hand and I_3 in the left hand. These rows cross hands at the eighth pitch class of the rows, which are pitch classes 8 and 10 again. This time, the rows crossing are accentuated with trichords with prime forms of (0,1,6) and another accented fortissimo dynamic level. These two rows end on pitch classes 10 and 8, at the same dynamic level as the opening statement, and in the same register.

In summary of part one, the two phrases can be distinguished by the row forms used and by the common pitch classes used to move from one set of row forms to another. Row forms P_8 and I_{10} share their ending pitch classes of 3 with the beginning of row forms P_3 and I_3 . So phrase one of part one ends in “tonic”, but simultaneously transitions to “not tonic” for phrase two. In phrase two, P_3 and I_3 share ending pitch classes of 10 and 8 with the beginning pitch classes of P_{10} and I_8 , which are the row forms used in the opening of part two. Phrase two then ends on pitch classes which act as a sort of common-chord between part one and part two of the binary form. Pitch classes 10 and 8 are treated as a secondary “tonic” in that although they are the same pitch classes used in the “tonic” row form of part one, they are utilized as an ending to “non-tonic” row forms, which move to new but closely related “non-tonic” row forms.

Part two begins with row forms I_8 and P_{10} in the right and left hands, respectively. These, of course begin on pitch classes 8 and 10, and we move through each row form without crossing hands until the last pitch classes in each row. This is a departure from part one, in that Webern

does not use the convergence of pitch classes 10 and 8 to move the current row forms into different hands. The row forms end on pitch classes 5 and 1, which are simultaneously used as the beginning of rows I_5 and P_1 at the start of the last phrase of the piece. Webern crosses hands at the convergence of pitch classes 10 and 8 in these two row forms as he had done in part one, but not in phrase one of part two. He uses rests to create finality in his statement of the final pitches in these row forms, pitch classes 10 and 8.

In summary, part two takes from rows I_8 and P_{10} , which are closely related to row forms P_8 and I_{10} (the original row forms presented in part one) and moves further from these closely related rows by means of I_5 and P_1 , only to bring us back to pitch classes 10 and 8 at the close of the piece. Webern has presented “tonic” in part one, moved away from “tonic” in the second phrase by using row forms P_3 and I_3 , then presented the same motifs in closely related row forms to start part two, moved further away from those “tonic” row forms in phrase two of part two, and then used rests and dynamics to emphasize the return of our “tonic” pitch classes of 10 and 8. This model is consistent with binary form. Furthermore, this particular piece is in symmetrical binary form – both parts are equal in length, both consisting of five and a half-bar phrases, both parts being eleven measures in length.