[AN OVERALL SOUND PROCESS] Becoming Neoclassical: Instrumentation in the Sketches for Webern's Concerto, Op. 24

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I. In September 1928 Anton Webern wrote to his publisher, Emil Hertzka, to report on the composition of a work win the spirit of some of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos» [Moldenhauer 1979, 422]; in June 1934 that work stood completed as the Concerto for Nine Instruments, op. 24. The Concerto's Bachian and thus neoclassical origin may come as a surprise. As Charles Rosen notes, «neoclassicism and serialism (or twelve-tone music)[1] are often considered polar opposites» [Rosen 1975, 72]. Rosen goes on dispute that notion, claiming that serialism was «specifically a move to resurrect an old classicism as well as to make a new one possible» [*ibid.*, 73]. Still, the serialism of the Second Viennese School is a system of organizing pitches and it is precisely the pitch content of serial works that can make it difficult to associate them with neoclassicism. While the very name of "twelve-tone music" suggests pitch content as its defining feature, however, pitch is of course just one of many musical parameters. In evaluating Rosen's claims about the relationship between serialism and neoclassicism, might some other parameter serve as a productive point of entry?

As is often the case with serial works, most secondary literature discussions of Webern's Concerto have focused on the work's pitch content. Of particular note is its «derived» [Straus 2005, 217] twelve-tone row, what Ernst Krenek referred to as «an apex of constructive density» [Moldenhauer 1979, 432]. Less frequently discussed is the fact that all three of the Concerto's movements engage with historical formal models, from sonata form to rondo to variations [Bailey 1991]. The Concerto's instrumentation[2] has received even less attention, but it played a crucial role in the early stages of the work's development. While the first sketches for op. 24 employ its trademark twelve-tone row, they also feature instrumentation that has much in common with Webern's pre-World War I and pre-serial orchestral works. A move away from that instrumentation was a key step in forging the Concerto's eventual identity as a neoclassical work. Furthermore, an investigation into Webern's compositional activities in the years preceding op. 24 demonstrates how instrumentation was a primary means by which Webern articulated his version of neoclassicism during the 1920s and 30s.

II. Tab. 1 lists the instrumentation of Webern's large-scale instrumental works up to and including op. 24.[3]

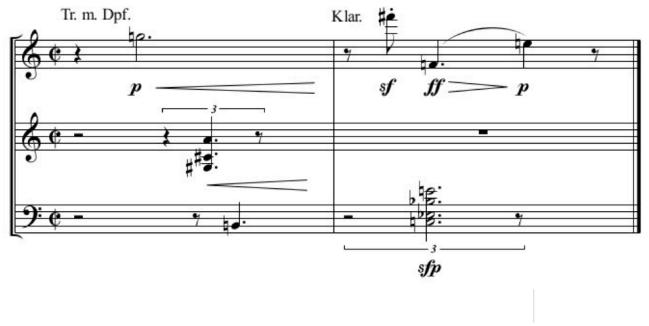
	Im Sommerwind (1904)	Passacaglia, Op. 1 (1908)	Six Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6 (1909)	Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 10 (1911–13)	Symphony, Op. 21 (1927– 28)	Concerto, Op 24 (1931–34)
Piccolo		1	2*	1*		
Flute	3	2	4	1		1
Alto flute			1*			
Oboe	2	2	2			1
English horn	1	1	2			
Clarinet	4	2	3	1	1	1
Eb clarinet			1*	1	3	
Bass clarinet	1	1	2	1*	1	
Bassoon	2	2	2			
Contrabassoon		1	1*		3	
Horn	6	4	6	1	2	1
Trumpet	2	3	6	1		1
Trombone		3	6	1		1
Tuba		1	1			
Keyboards			Celesta	Celesta, harmonium		Piano
Plucked strings	2 harps	Harp	2 harps	Harp, mandolin, guitar	Harp	
Percussion	2 players + timpani	2 players + timpani	7 players + timpani	4 players		
Violin	2 sections	2 sections	2 sections	1 solo	2 sections or 2 solos	1 solo
Viola	Section	Section	Section	Solo	Section or solo	Solo
Violoncello	Section	Section	Section	Solo	Section or solo	
Double bass	Section	Section	Section	Solo		

Table 1. Webern's large-scale instrumental works up to and including Op. 24 (asterisk indicates doubling)

Three general trends emerge. First, the ensembles grow smaller over time. Second, later works frequently employ one-on-a-part «soloistic instrumentation» [Meyer 2000, 455]. Finally, later works generally feature less diversity of instrumental color, often due to the absence of instruments that had become a part of the orchestral palette over the course of the nineteenth century. Included in this category are auxiliary wind instruments such as the English horn, Eb clarinet, bass clarinet, and contrabassoon, keyboard instruments such as the celesta and harmonium, plucked strings such as the harp and mandolin, and many percussion instruments. For Webern, many of these instruments held powerful associations with music of the previous generation, particularly the works of Gustav Mahler. Julian Johnson argues that Webern's «most obvious musical debts» to Mahler come in the realm of instrumentation and orchestration, citing Webern's frequent employment of an instrumental group consisting of harp, celesta, guitar, mandolin, and harmonium as one prominent example [Johnson 1999, 40]. And while it may amount to no more than an anecdote, I find it difficult to imagine that Webern did not learn something from the experience of playing the celesta part in multiple performances of Mahler's Eighth Symphony. [4] Taken as a whole, these trends in instrumentation divide the six works into two groups.

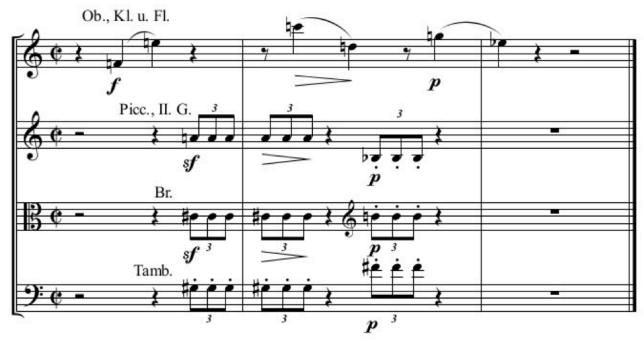
Im Sommerwind and opp. 1, 6, and 10 occupy the first group and opp. 21 and 24 the second, with well over a decade and, of course, the First World War between them.[5] Op. 24, with its small, conservative ensemble, seems to epitomize the post-war group of compositions, but the earliest sketches for the work tell a more complicated story.

The first sketch associated with op. 24 consists of two measures of music dated January 19, 1931 (Ex. 1).[6]



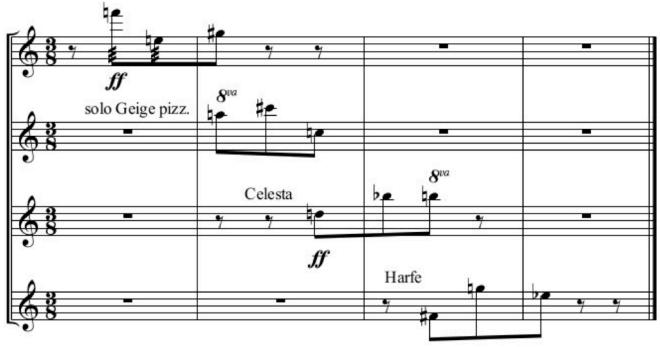
Example 1. January 19, 1931

It bears the title *Orchesterstück* ("Orchestra Piece"), bringing to mind other Second Viennese School *Orchesterstücke*, including Webern's Six Pieces for Orchestra, op. 6 and Five Pieces for Orchestra, op. 10, composed between 1909 and 1913, as well as Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra, op. 16 and Alban Berg's Three Pieces for Orchestra, op. 6, from the same period. As these associations suggest, the first sketches for op. 24 call for an ensemble that is larger than that of the final version and that features many instruments frequently found in Webern's pre-war works. Compositionally, the *Orchesterstück* fragment more closely resembles the style of the pre-war orchestral pieces than that of the eventual op. 24, as is the case with many early sketches for the work. A sketch from February 1931 (Ex. 2), for example, is one of several early sketches featuring homophonic textures, repeated notes, and instrumental doublings, all characteristic of an earlier style.[7]



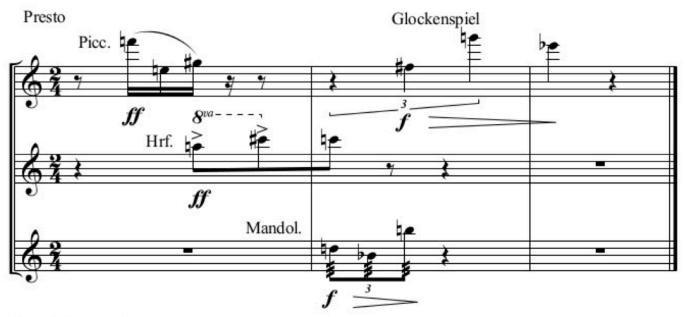
Example 2. January 19, 1931

A sketch dated February 21, 1931 (Ex. 3) arrives closer to the lean, contrapuntal texture of the final version of the Concerto's opening bars, but it also calls for celesta and harp, two instruments strongly associated with Webern's pre-war works.



Example 3. February 21, 1931

Many more instruments with similar associations feature in the numerous versions of the opening measures Webern composed in early July 1931, by which time the work was titled "Concerto." In one instance, Webern composed a version of the opening that matches the final version's texture and rhythmic profile but is scored for the remarkable combination of piccolo, harp, mandolin, and glockenspiel (Ex. 4).



Example 4. Early July 1931

Finally, on July 20, 1931, Webern composed what would become the final version of the Concerto's opening, scored for oboe, flute, muted trumpet, and clarinet.

Webern added piano to the ensemble on the following day, July 21, and thereafter none of the instruments typically associated with his pre-war music reappear in the sketches. In fact, while Webern was still more than three years away from completing the Concerto, the work's instrumentation remained almost completely stable after the addition of the piano. This fixing of the instrumental palette seems to have contributed to a turning point in the compositional process; while the sketches I have just described come from six pages in Webern's sketchbook consisting entirely of attempts at the Concerto's opening measures, beginning on July 21 Webern finally moved forward and the form of the first movement began to emerge. Six months into its composition, then, what began as a colorfully diverse work for large orchestra had become a Concerto for nine players inhabiting an utterly different sound world, mirroring trends found across Webern's orchestral output. Furthermore, as the sketches for the work suggest, the dramatic transformation of the sound of op. 24 was fundamental in shaping the identity of the work as a whole.

III. In the years following the First World War, Webern and other members of the Second Viennese School promoted an approach to composition that emphasized clarity of expression, comprehensibility, and the mastery of traditional musical parameters, all of which served as a «counterbalance» to the «extreme expressiveness» and «extraordinary shortness» of pre-war works [Schoenberg 1975, 217]. The most (in)famous product of this new approach was Schoenberg's twelve-tone method of composition, but new attitudes towards instrumentation also emerged. Webern's decision to abandon the approach to instrumentation found in the early sketches for op. 24 is best understood within this broader aesthetic context and relates in particular to two formative experiences in the years preceding its composition. First, from 1918 to 1921, Webern produced arrangements of several orchestral works for piano or chamber ensemble in preparation for their performance at Schoenberg's Society for Private Musical Performances. Second, beginning in 1920 and continuing throughout the following decade, Webern revised many of his pre-war works prior to their publication, which had been delayed by the outbreak of the war.

Arrangements of orchestral works for piano or chamber ensemble were a core part of the repertory of the Society for Private Musical Performances, a practice initially motivated by the financial difficulties the Society faced in post-war Vienna. In its statement of aims, Alban Berg describes how the Society lacked the resources to hire a full symphony orchestra, although they planned to do so once financial conditions improved [Berg 1971, 1308]. But, as Berg writes, «the necessity becomes a virtue,» and the arrangements were thought to be not only practical but also of real aesthetic value [ibid., 1308]. As Berg argues, the arrangements allowed for the opportunity to «hear and judge a modern orchestral work divested of all the sound-effects and other sensuous aids that only an orchestra can furnish,» thereby shifting the force of the composition away from «opulent and effective instrumentation» and towards «the qualities that were hitherto considered characteristic of good music – melody, richness of harmony, polyphony, perfection, architecture, etc» [ibid., 1308]. Schoenberg, too, believed that «the presentation of large works in arrangements for reduced forces allowed for a clarity of presentation and a simplicity of formal enunciation often not possible in a rendition obscured by the richness of orchestration» [Allen Smith 1986, 85]. Webern arranged works by Schoenberg and Johann Strauss for the Society, as well as three of his own compositions: the Passacaglia, op. 1, the Six Pieces for Orchestra, op. 6, and the Five Pieces for Orchestra, op. 10. Webern's experience producing these arrangements, in particular his exposure to «soloistic instrumentation,» was crucial to an aesthetic shift away from «an 'expressionistic' concept of sonority [and] toward one determined by the 'classicist' ideal of 'Fasslichkeit'» or "comprehensibility" [Meyer 200, 455].

That same shift is evident in the numerous revisions to his pre-war compositions that Webern produced during the 1920s. Webern made minimal changes to pitch or rhythmic content as part of these revisions, instead focusing on instrumentation, orchestration, and performance directions. The revisions Webern made in 1928 to the Six Pieces for Orchestra, op. 6 are typical, and a comparison of the instrumentation of the two versions of op. 6 is illustrative (Tab. 2).

	1000	1000
	1909	1928
Piccolo	2*	1*
Flute	4	2
Alto flute	1*	
Oboe	2	2
English hom	2	
Clarinet	3	3
Eb clarinet	1*	
Bass clarinet	2	
Bassoon	2	2
Contrabassoon	1*	1*
Horn	6	4
Trumpet	6	4
Trombone	6	4
Tuba	1	1
Keyboards	Celesta	Celesta
Plucked strings	2 harps	Harp
Percussion	7 players + timpani	5 players + timpani
Violin	2 sections	2 sections
Viola	Section	Section
Violoncello	Section	Section
Double bass	Section	Section
		1

Table 2. The two versions of Webern's Six Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6 (asterisk indicates doubling)

The orchestra called for in the 1928 version is certainly both massive and diverse in comparison to post-war instrumental works such as op. 24, but when compared to the 1909 version the later version follows the same general trends as the post-war works: fewer instruments and relatively less diversity of color. In the case of op. 6 that means the removal of auxiliary wind instruments such as the alto flute, English horn, Eb clarinet, and bass clarinet, as well as a reduction in the overall number of brass and percussion instruments. The timbral palette of the 1928 version (as well as that of the arrangement of op. 6 Webern produced for the *Verein*) is restricted even further by the removal of instrumental "special effects" common to the 1909 version, including *col legno*, *ponticello*, and flutter-tonguing. In a letter to Schoenberg, Webern described the revision of op. 6 as the removal of «everything extravagant» from the work [Moldenhauer 1979, 128] and he later described it to Berg as resembling «an old Haydn score» [*ibid.*, 129]. Thus, like the arrangements he produced for the Society for Private Musical Performances, the revisions Webern made during the 1920s were the product of a new aesthetic of instrumentation, one that indeed preferred the clarity and transparency of old Haydn scores to the richness and color of Webern's pre-war works.

IV. Viewed in relation to the arrangements and revisions Webern produced in the years leading up to op. 24, his decision to turn away from the size and color of the ensemble found in its early sketches is hardly surprising. Like the arrangements and revisions, it was a product of Webern's new aesthetic of instrumentation, which employed smaller, less diverse ensembles in an effort to increase clarity and comprehensibility. These qualities were associated with neoclassicism at the time [Messing 1991, 481-497], even if Webern did not use the word "neoclassical" to describe his newfound approach to instrumentation. Furthermore, Webern's post-World War I aesthetic of instrumentation exemplifies an emphasis on «purity, order and objectivity» that, as Gianmario Borio argues, is a hallmark of serialism and neoclassicism alike [Borio 1996, 371]. While Webern's arrangements and revisions show how this aesthetic was applied to previously composed works, the sketches for op. 24 offer a glimpse of its influence in the formation of a new work, and demonstrate how a consideration of the instrumentation of op. 24 can serve as a window into its neoclassicism.

If the instrumentation of op. 24 in its final version is no surprise, the timing and nature of its composition may be. As Julian Johnson argues, the early sketches for op. 24 are striking not simply because they employ so many instruments not found in the final version, but more specifically because many of those instruments «recall so vividly the highly particular use of such a group [of instruments] in the pre-war orchestral pieces» [Johnson 1999, 192].[8] By the time Webern began work on op. 24 in 1931, most of his pre-war pieces were over twenty years old and the shift in his compositional aesthetic had been underway for at least a decade. That he nonetheless began work on the Concerto by revisiting the instrumental forces of his pre-war compositions suggests that those instruments held powerful and resilient associations. Perhaps the appearance of instruments like the harp and celesta in the early sketches for op. 24 is evidence in favor of the idea that, regardless of widely varying aesthetics and compositional techniques over the course of his career, certain ideas, subjects, and themes recur time and time again in Webern's music. Or put another way: the sketches for op. 24 can help guard against «the tendency to separate the early from the late, and to treat them as essentially unconnected,» helping to cultivate a more complete understanding of early and late alike [Johnson 1997, 68]. We might even view these sketches as a sign of things to come, as many more instruments associated with Webern's pre-war compositions reappeared in the years following op. 24. In *Das Augenlicht*, the two cantatas, and the Variations for

Orchestra, the trends in instrumentation that preceded and included op. 24 are reversed (Tab. 3); the ensembles grow larger and more diverse, even if not they do approach the ensembles of the pre-war orchestral works in these ways.

	Das Augenlicht, Op. 26 (1935)	First Cantata, Op. 29 (1938-39)	Variations for Orchestra, Op. 30 (1940)	Second Cantata, Op. 31 (1941-43)
Piccolo				1
Flute	1	1	1	1
Oboe	1	1	1	1
English horn				1
Clarinet	1	1	1	1
Bass clarinet		1	1	1
Alto saxophone	1			1
Bassoon				1
Horn	1	1	1	1
Trumpet	1	1	1	1
Trombone	1	1	1	1
Tuba			1	1
Keyboards	Celesta	Celesta	Celesta	Celesta
Plucked strings	Harp, mandolin	Harp, mandolin	Harp	Harp
Percussion	1 player + timpani	1 player + timpani	Timpani	1 player
Violin	8 solo players	2 sections	2 sections	2 sections
Viola	4 solo players	Section	Section	Section
Violoncello	4 solo players	Section	Section	Section
Double bass			Section	Section

Table 3. Post-Op. 24 works

Thus, if its twelve-tone row marks op. 24 as an apex of Webern's serial invention, might its instrumentation make it an apex of his neoclassicism?

However we choose to answer that question, the fact that a single composition might be considered a high point of both serialism and neoclassicism supports Rosen's claim that the two are far from opposites. This will come as no surprise for scholars well acquainted with the period; Ludwig Finscher, for example, memorably described Schoenberg's third and fourth string quartets as «zwölftönig und zugleich streng klassizistisch» [Scherliess 1996, 171]. But Finscher's frank acknowledgement of the coexistence of serialism and neoclassicism may be more the exception than the rule. Take, for instance, the Wikipedia page on neoclassicism in music, which barely mentions Webern while featuring a portrait of (who else?) Igor Stravinsky. This is an anecdotal example, to be sure, but one that seems nevertheless to be the product of particular conceptions of serialism and neoclassicism—conceptions that can be fruitfully complicated by considering non-pitch-based musical parameters like instrumentation.

Of course, in emphasizing instrumentation at the expense of pitch I do not mean to overcorrect and suggest that it was more central than pitch to the formation of op. 24, or that of any other of Webern's serial works. In fact the opposite may have been true. In a 1929 letter to Berg, Webern claimed that «the instruments become more and more immaterial to me» [Moldenhauer 1979, 424], and public lectures he gave in 1932 and 1933, later published as *The Path to New Music*, emphasize topics of pitch above all else. Perhaps Webern was following in his teacher's footsteps; Rosen views Schoenberg's serialism, which «exalted pitch,» as «a grave step backward from the vision of his early work, when he had seen that timbre, tone color, and texture were not merely accessories but could be as fundamental to music as pitch» [Rosen 1975, 96]. Even if it was not on equal footing with pitch, however, the sketches for op. 24 suggest that instrumentation was an integral aspect of Webern's neoclassicism, particularly when considered alongside the arrangements and revisions he produced in the preceding years. Furthermore, for those less familiar with the music of the Second Viennese School, focusing on instrumentation could serve as a more effective means of demonstrating neoclassicism in serial music than attempting to explain the neoclassical ideologies behind the twelve-tone method. And understanding Webern's serial music as neoclassical could, in turn, make more accessible music whose pitch content continues to dissuade many from approaching it. As I see it, the possibility of rendering Webern's remarkable music more accessible in itself justifies the exercise of viewing that music through a neoclassical lens.

But what does it mean to understand Webern's music as neoclassical if we are operating, as I have done here, without a single definition of neoclassicism? In keeping with Scott Messing's view, I understand "neoclassicism" as a concept whose ambiguity, though frustrating, is both «the source of its attraction» and «the reason for its survival» [Messing 1991, 497]. If in the 1920s it was «a term [characterizing] Stravinsky in opposition to Schoenberg» [Taruskin 2010, 386], today its meaning is variable enough to be applied to the music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, and many others. As Borio argues, we need not get lost «in the description of countless individual phenomena, all unique, all of equal

importance,» but can instead choose to «group events and ideas around *foci*» that help to explain «even the most remote circumstances» [Borio 1996, 38]. "Neoclassicism" can serve as one such "focus," a tool capable of bringing highly contrasting musics («remote circumstances») together within a single discourse, thereby enriching our experience of any individual neoclassical work.[9] The American composer Henry Cowell used the term in precisely this way in a 1933 article from *Modern Music*, comparing the neoclassicism of the Second Viennese School to that of Stravinsky by stating, rather bluntly, that «with Stravinsky, the return to the old is easier to hear, for he began to use old types of chords and tunes» [Cowell 2002, 153]. Cowell's claim may remain true today, and perhaps no amount of methodological reorientation will change that. Yet musical neoclassicism is ultimately defined not by words but by music, and one of music's most wondrous qualities is its mutability. If we begin by focusing our ears on instrumentation, we can hear in Webern's music just as in Stravinsky's what Rosen calls «the elegant surface of the past» [Rosen 1975, 78], and we can understand that there are as many forms of musical neoclassicism to consider as there are musical pasts to remember.

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- [1] Following Rosen here, I will treat "twelve-tone" and "serial" as synonymous.
- [2] The concerto is scored for flute, oboe, clarinet, French horn, trumpet, trombone, violin, viola, and piano.
- [3] Op. 6 is shown in its original, 1909 instrumentation. The revision Webern made to op. 6 in 1928 is discussed in section III of this paper.
- [4] For a discussion of these performances and their significance for Webern, see [Bailey 1998, 60-61] and [Johnson 1997, 93].
- [5] These groupings are interpretations and there are, of course, exceptions; op. 10 in particular is closer in size (although not in character) to the post-war works than to the other pre-war works. World War I serves as a useful chronological marker, but I would be cautious about assuming that it holds any greater significance. Still, I find myself agreeing with Johnson's assessment, that «it is surely no coincidence that one of the principal divides in Webern's *oeuvre* occurs in 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War» [Johnson 1997, 70]. Gianmario Borio goes even further: «neoclassical objectivity was almost predestined to serve as aesthetic compensation for the spiritual and material exigencies of the present» [Borio 1996, 369].
- [6] I transcribed all sketchbook examples at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, Switzerland. My thanks to everyone there, especially Sabine Hänggi-Stampfli, Claudia Grzonka, Carlos Chanfón, Johanna Blask, and Dr. Felix Meyer.
- [7] These features are prominent throughout op. 6 and op. 10. For a memorable example of repeated notes serving as a key compositional feature, as well as the harp/celesta/guitar/mandolin/harmonium group referred to above, see op. 10, no. 3.
- [8] It is no coincidence that the instruments referred to here—harp, celesta, mandolin, etc.—are the same instruments Johnson cites as evidence of the influence of Mahler's music on Webern in the above-quoted passage.
- [9] To cite just one of many possible examples, consider the intriguing pairing of Webern's op. 24 and Stravinsky's Concerto in E-flat, Dumbarton Oaks (1938) as two neoclassical takes on Bach's Brandenburg Concertos.