

Anton Webern's Late Music in the Context of Postmodern Modernism

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Musical modernism, associated with music of the early twentieth century, carries with it shades of meaning that range broadly from the historical to the aesthetic. Disengaging radical changes in treatment of musical materials and harmonic language from attitudes within modernist thought brings with it the understanding that modernism is an unstable, sometimes self-contradictory concept without a fixed timeline. In a similar fashion, postmodernism, often understood as a reaction against modernism, when viewed as a manner of thought rather than a set of characteristics of works of art, likewise is revealed as unstable. Under both modernist and postmodernist perspectives, what is original or new cannot be sustained as such.

The music of Anton Webern, an indisputable protagonist of musical modernism, was reevaluated in the 1950s through the lens of what we might call mid-century modernism, and then again in the 1990s, a period in which postmodern thought was prevalent in many disciplines, including musicology. In this paper, I explore selections from Webern's late music, particularly the First Cantata, Op. 29 (1938 – 39), the Variations for Orchestra, Op. 30 (1940), and the Second Cantata, Op. 31 (1941 – 43) through the lens of postmodern modernism, a framework that recognizes modernist thought as dynamic and responsive to new cultural and intellectual considerations, in contrast to modernism's conventional closed, immutable image. This study takes into account the poorly acknowledged impact of poet Hildegard Jone, the author of the texts for all of the composer's late vocal works, and identifies the late music of Webern as exemplary of the continuing importance of new modernist studies.