

More Variation than Theme: On *Poikilia* in Musical Aesthetics from Plato to Schoenberg

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Plato's banishment of the poets and certain kinds of music from his ideal city-state is notorious. Less well known is his attack on *poikilia*, which is also developed in the *Republic*. *Poikilia* means "variegated" or "multicoloured" but extends to all kinds of "variety," "diversity" or "variedness."¹ It is both an important and an elusive term in Ancient Greek philosophy and aesthetics. It has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. On the one hand, *poikilia* has not been carefully studied simply because it is difficult to translate. Since the term does not lend itself to one-to-one rendering into modern languages, it lurks behind the surfaces of translations. *Poikilia* can in various contexts be translated by a broad range of modern language terms such as "embroidery," "embellishment," "ornamentation," "manifold," "subtlety," "complexity," "deceit," "intricacy" and so on. Even an experienced classicist will only spot the avatars of *poikilia* in modern language translations with difficulty. On the other hand, the concept of *poikilia* has also resisted commentary because of its complex and dubious status in questions of both moral and aesthetic value. In certain periods and contexts, it had positive value. It was associated with order, craft, complexity, wondrous variety and dazzling beauty. In other contexts, however, it was associated with superficiality, vulgarity, dishonesty and trickery. In Plato *poikilia* has overwhelmingly negative connotations. Indeed, *poikilia* has for Plato the status of, as it were, a demi-concept referring to something that does not belong to the realm of form. Plato construes *poikilia* in the psychology of desire of the *Republic*. *Poikilia* appeals to the lower parts of the soul while reason strives for what is simple. Plato associates *poikilia*, the "variegated," with bad souls and, it turns out, with bad music.

Yet *poikilia* shows up – rather inconspicuously – in a later Platonic context, namely, in the work of Plotinus (204–270CE). Although he never explicitly criticizes Plato on any question, Plotinus silently breaks with him on the question of the value of *poikilia*. Plotinus generally has a positive view of the world of sense, including the value of sense-perception and the beauty of the sense world. Pressed to distinguish his thought from Gnostic Platonists who rejected the sense world as evil, Plotinus draws on Aristotle and the Stoics in his account of the sense world as well-ordered, good, and beautiful. Although Plotinus adopts the basic structures behind Plato's theory of art, he interprets them such as to arrive at certain conclusions that are contrary to Plato's. This is most obvious in his understanding of *poikilia* which takes on an overwhelmingly positive role in Plotinus' metaphysics and, if we extrapolate, in his theory of art. Where Plato advocates for an aesthetic of austerity and simplicity in the *Republic*, Plotinus develops an aesthetic that praises variety, diversity and colour.

Although *poikilia* lacks an exact equivalent in modern languages, it has much to contribute to themes that become important in the context of 19th and 20th century music and music theory, namely: colour, unity and variation. In this paper I attempt to show how the notion of *poikilia* might contribute to 20th century discussions in music aesthetics. I do so by bringing the notion of *poikilia* into conversation with early twentieth century German theories of music aesthetics developed by Ernst Kurth (1886–1946), Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935) and above all Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951). Aspects of Kurth and Schenker's respective criteria for musical value can be seen to run

parallel to or even draw *in nocte* on the Platonic rejection of *poikilia*. Schoenberg, by contrast, makes some innovations that are best understood as positive reappraisals of *poikilia* in a musical context that was in some sense still under that influence of a broadly Platonic rejection of *poikilia*. In other words, on questions of colour and variety, Schoenberg stands in relation to his fellow theorists as Plotinus stands to Plato on *poikilia*. Where Plato thinks that variety is inimical to the unity of form, thinkers like Kurth and Schenker think that colour and variety are inimical to musical unity. Where Plotinus tries to show that form is expressed in all of the multifarious variety of the world, Schoenberg thinks that the unity of a musical work can develop in colour and continuous variation. In his notions of *Klangfarbenmelodie* and developing variation, Schoenberg employs what I call an “expansive” view of form, one which embraces the “colour and rich diversity” that Plotinus understood in the notion of *poikilia*.

I cannot argue for all of the steps in my reading of Plotinus on *poikilia* in this context. Even less can I argue for the historically distant connection between Plato’s view of “colour and variation” and a late 19th or early 20th century musical aesthetic thought. (My view is that certain key Platonic ideas are operative in 19th century Neokantianism and were very important in all fields of German science, including music theory; the key idea here is that unity and form are seen to trump diversity and colour.) I will be content if I manage to communicate the main point of this speculative comparative argument in this study.

This paper is structured in three parts. In the first, I outline and discuss the implications of Plato’s critique of *poikilia* as it applies to music. In the second part, I compare Plato’s and Plotinus’ notions of *poikilia*, beauty and metaphysics. In the third part, I address Schoenberg’s notions of *Klangfarbenmelodie* and Developing Variation as instances of music theory that can be understood in terms of the Ancient philosophical concept of *poikilia*. I suggest that Schoenberg goes beyond theories by his contemporaries Kurth and Schenker that more exclusively emphasize unity. I argue that Schoenberg’s positive valuing of colour and variety in music can fruitfully be understood as parallels to Plotinus’ positive appreciation of *poikilia*.

In this study I maintain the Greek notion of *poikilia* untranslated because 1) it cannot be reduced straightforwardly to any contemporary concept; 2) its history involves moments that are essential to its meaning and significance and 3) it can function as a kind of ‘focal’ concept around which other related concepts can be more clearly understood.

I. Plato

In the *Republic* Plato thoroughly developed his theory that music plays a key role in maintaining the correct balance between the parts of the soul, and is thus crucial in ethics. Plato’s basic model of moral psychology asserts that of the three parts of the soul – reason, spiritedness, and appetite – it is the “highest” part, reason which ought to govern. Four basic virtues emerge in the well-functioning soul: the virtue of reason is wisdom; that of the middle part of the soul is courage; that of appetite is moderation and, finally, the virtue of the tripartite soul as a whole is justice. Plato associates certain musical modes with ethical dispositions. He suggests that some modes are suitable for dirges and lamentations, others for drinking parties, none of which are suitable for philosophers (*Rep.* 398d). It is the strong war-like modes which Plato recommends for philosophers who in the *Republic* are guardians of the city-state:

The Ionian and those Lydian modes are said to be relaxed.

Could you ever use these to make people warriors?

Never. And now all you have left is the Dorian and Phrygian modes.

I don’t know all the musical modes. Just leave me the mode that would suitably imitate the tone and rhythm of a courageous person who is active in battle or doing other violent deeds, or who is failing and facing wounds, death, or some other misfortune, and who, in all these circumstances, is fighting off his fate steadily and with self-control. (*Rep.* 399a–b)

Accordingly, Plato restricts the pitch material that may serve in the creation of melodies. Plato also recommends that music be purged of rhythmic complexity. He explicitly proscribes *poikilia* in metre:

The next topic after musical modes is the regulation of meter. We shouldn't strive to have either subtlety (*poikilous*) or great variety (*pantadapas*) in meter. Rather, we should try to discover what are the rhythms of someone who leads an ordered and courageous life and then adapt the meter and the tune to his words, not his words to them. (*Rep.* 399e-400a)

Plato goes beyond pitch material and rhythm to discuss *poikilia* and how what we might call “melodic shape” has an impact on the moral character of listeners. Plato writes,

Just as embellishment (*poikilia*) in the one gives rise to licentiousness, doesn't it give rise to illness in the other? But simplicity in music and poetry makes for moderation in the soul, and in physical training it makes for bodily health. (*Rep.* 404e3)

What precisely does *poikilia* refer to in this passage? In fact, it is not clear that “embellishment” is the best translation in the passage just cited. Surely, Plato is not thinking in narrow technical musical terms.

In fact, Plato's complaints about music refer to a whole range of musical developments, including the domination of music of poetic text, the deviation of instruments from the vocal line, and variation of melodies by reproducing them with different scales, rhythmic licence, exploratory sounds and ornate melodic lines.² All of this points to the so-called “New Music” which emerges in Athens roughly around 420 BC. Plato seems to have had nothing but contempt for these new musical developments and advocated not even for a return to older Greek music, but a return to what was believed to be the 10,000 year old music of Ancient Egypt! To be sure, Plato's views of music softened with age. His objections to *poikilia* are tempered in his late work the *Laws*. But he never does arrive at a truly positive evaluation of *poikilia*.

Plato's objections to *poikilia* in music are not simply the rumblings of a conservative perturbed by changes in musical taste. His objections to variety in art are in fact rooted in his metaphysics and epistemology. The intelligible is, according to Plato, literally without colour. He writes of the realm of forms, “What is in this place is without color (*achrômatos*) and without shape (*aschêmatistos*) and without solidity (*anaphês*), a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul's steersman” (*Phaedrus* 247c6). Of course, the account of the intelligible in the divided line and the analogy of the cave of the *Republic* does suggest that the realm of forms is of overwhelming and radiant beauty. Nevertheless, Plato represents math, which he sees as a realm of abstract formal relations, as paradigmatic for the way that forms are abstract in contrast to the confusing multiplicity of physical reality.

Poikilia is related to the distinction Plato makes in the *Republic* between, on the one hand, “philosophers” who love the truth and, on the other, “lovers of sights and sounds” who fail to grasp or even seek out the forms which are behind sensible reality. Plato writes,

So, I draw this distinction: On the one side are those you just called lovers of sights, lovers of crafts and practical people; on the other side are those we are arguing about and whom one would alone call philosophers.

How do you mean?

The lovers of sights and sounds like beautiful sounds, colors, shapes and everything fashioned out of them, but their thought is unable to see and embrace the nature of the beautiful itself. (*Rep.* 476a-b)

Here it is evident that the philosopher should not be distracted by what might broadly be referred to as *poikilia*. In this context, *poikilia* does not directly corrupt the soul as Plato suggests that it does in music. Rather, it is simply distracting and superficial.

Plato's rejection of *poikilia* should be seen in the context of his more general critique of mimetic art. Plato sees representative art as an imitation of an imitation. Insofar as it leads us away from the truth and goodness of the intelligible – from the forms which are grasped by the mind – it is morally dangerous. Plato's suspicion of sense-perception reinforces this critique of mimetic art. In the

Theaetetus Plato reduces the Protagorean dictum that “man is the measure of all things” (152a) to the idea that ‘perception is truth’ (152c) and then conflates it with the Heraclitean doctrine that all is in flux (152e). The senses never grasp anything that is what it is. Rather, they present a pseudo-reality which is subject to no universal criteria for truth. Although Plato does not clearly establish a connection between his critique of sense-perception and his critique of the notion of *poikilia* it is clear enough that the basic epistemological and metaphysical structures behind his suspicion of both are the same.

The term *poikilia* figures at the centre of Plato’s critique of democracy. He sees it as a form of government in which individuals compete with one another to satisfy their lowest desires. For Plato democracy is only a few steps from tyranny. He writes,

You’ve perfectly described the life of a man who believes in legal equality.

I also suppose that he’s a complex man, full of all sorts of characters, fine and multicolored (*poikilos*), just like the democratic city, and that many men and women might envy his life, since it contains the most models of constitutions and ways of living.

That’s right.

Then shall we set this man beside democracy as one who is rightly called democratic? (*Rep.* 561e1-562a)

So, not only does *poikilia* threaten the unity of form, and corrupt individual souls, but it undermines the state.

I have so far sketched an unflattering picture of “Platonism.” Plato in the *Republic* seems to instrumentalize music, making it completely subservient to ethics and politics. His view of art approaching the puritanical is potentially even iconoclastic. But there is another Plato, the author of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, the Plato who inspired artists of the Florentine Renaissance. This Plato sees continuity between the intelligible world (the world of forms) and the sensible – sometimes even sensuous – world. The *Symposium* is an eulogy to the power of worldly beauty to turn us towards higher goods. The *Phaedrus* praises divine madness as a state of mind of the person who is oriented towards the highest truth, goodness and beauty. Indeed, in the *Phaedrus* we encounter an evaluation of music which is at odds with the account of the *Republic*. Here Plato suggests that at some level music and philosophy aim at the same end. According to a myth that Socrates recounts, music and philosophy are partners. We read,

Everyone who loves the Muses should have heard of this. The story goes that the cicadas used to be human beings who lived before the birth of the Muses. When the Muses were born and song was created for the first time, some of the people of that time were so overwhelmed with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink; so they died without even realizing it. It is from them that the race of the cicadas came into being; and as a gift from the Muses, they have no need of nourishment once they are born. Instead, they immediately burst into song, without food or drink, until it is time for them to die. After they die, they go to the Muses and tell each one of them which mortals have honored her. To Terpsichore they report those who have honored her by their devotion to the dance and thus make them dearer to her. To Erato, they report those who honor her by dedicating themselves to the affairs of love, and so too with the other Muses, according to the activity that honors each. And to Calliope, the oldest among them, and Urania, the next after her, who preside over the heavens and all discourse, human and divine, and sing with the sweetest voice, they report those who honor their special kind of music by leading a philosophical life. (*Phaedrus* 259b-d)

The author of the *Phaedrus* does not, unfortunately, tell us how this re-evaluation of music might impact his appreciation of *poikilia*. It is as if at some level Plato realized that all music necessarily involves *poikilia*, but did not arrive at a theoretical grasp of this insight. It is at this point that it is interesting to see how another Platonist dealt with *poikilia* in the spirit of the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*.

II. Plotinus

Plotinus’ thought on art and beauty has had an important impact on the history of visual art. The Florentine Platonist Ficino served as a conduit of Platonian thought into the world of Renaissance

art. The basic notion developed at length in Plotinus *Ennead* I, 6 (1) is that art can be seen as a means of return to the intelligible world (the Platonic world of forms, the realm of truth and goodness). This contrasts with the notion developed in Plato's *Republic* that art further distances us from intelligible reality. Plotinus asserts that the true artist does not imitate sensible realities when producing art, but rather looks to the intelligible, i.e. the higher true, good, and even divine realities. In this sense the artist is like a philosopher.

It turns out that Plotinus' apology for artistic production is in fact rooted in authentically Platonic ideas. Although it is overshadowed by his polemics against mimetic art, in the *Republic* Plato himself does suggest precisely the model of art that Plotinus develops at length. Moreover, the model of the creation of the world by the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* involves exactly the structure of production that Plotinus works with. Furthermore, Plotinus was an avid reader of the *Phaedrus* and he often cites or alludes to a phrase from the dialogue which explains that the intelligible and sensible worlds are linked.³ The *Phaedrus* inspired model is the basic structure which determines Plotinus' thought on *poikilia*.

If Plotinus' philosophy of art has been quite well studied, his contributions to thought on music have not. I suggest that Plotinus' philosophy of art can be better understood if we get a better grasp of how he employs the notion of *poikilia*. The role of *poikilia* in Plotinus' philosophy of art is easy to overlook, since Plotinus tends to use the term in contexts where he is dealing with metaphysics of nature and of the soul, rather than discussing art per se. However, I suggest that an analysis of *poikilia* should play a key role in understanding Plotinus' philosophy of art. The notion of *poikilia* is crucial in Plotinus' explanations of how the sense world is related to the intelligible world and for Plotinus, art is a tangible demonstration of this exact relationship. Therefore, introducing the notion of *poikilia* into explanations of Plotinus on art helps flesh out what is otherwise a rather abstract metaphysical account of the connection between art and the highest levels of reality. Furthermore, the notion of *poikilia* also provides more concrete vocabulary by which both critics and musicians might apply Plotinian insights in their work.

The term *poikilia* (and its cognates) in Plotinus generally serves to explain how the diversity or rich variety in the sensible world is grounded in the diversity and rich variety in the intelligible. It has, then, overwhelmingly positive connotations in Plotinus. Plato's concerns that rich diversity somehow leads us astray are generally absent in Plotinus. Stoic inspiration is clearly behind much of what Plotinus says about *poikilia*. Very generally, Stoics see the universe as a well-ordered whole behind the surface of which is a rational structure (*logos* "rational principle"). The optimistic cosmology of the Stoics rings through in contexts where Plotinus addresses the nature of the cosmos. He writes, "The universe is full of the richest variety (*poikilôtaton gar to pan*): all rational formative principles are present in it, and an unbounded sort of varied powers (*dunameis apeiroi kai poikilai*)" (IV 4, 36, 1 trans. Armstrong modified). Plotinus addresses *poikilia* as an object of wonder and admiration. *Poikilia* is here, and in many other passages, the source of the wonder (*thauma*) that Plato and Aristotle saw as the beginning of philosophy.⁴

Plotinus frequently addresses questions of theodicy, i.e. of evil in the world in Stoic terms. Plotinus addresses evil in various ways, but very often he turns to a classical Stoic account, which he illustrates in the language of *poikilia*. According to the Stoic, much of what appears at first to be evil is ultimately to be understood as a part of a bigger picture. A shift in perspective is required in order to see this picture. Plotinus adopts precisely this Stoic strategy. He incites his reader to adopt a more inclusive vantage point by insisting that we pay attention to the rich diversity, *poikilia*, in the world. To be sure, Plotinus – unlike the Stoics – sees the sensible world as grounded in a higher transcendent reality, but all of the diversity of the sense world can be traced back to the intelligible world. The intelligible is not an austere realm of abstracted forms. Rather it is every bit as rich and diverse as what we encounter in this world, if not even more. Invoking art to explain the nature of the cosmos, Plotinus writes,

But are all individual things as they are by natural necessities and causal sequences, and excellently disposed in every way that can be? No, but the rational forming principle (*logos*) makes all these things

as their sovereign, and wishes them to be as they are, and makes the things which are called bad according to reason, because it does not wish that all should be good, just like a craftsman who does not make everything eyes in his picture; in the same way the formative principle did not make everything gods but some gods, some spirits (a nature of the second rank), then men and animals after them in order, not out of grudging meanness but by a reason containing all the rich variety (*poikilia*) of the intelligible world. But we are like people who know nothing about the art of painting and criticize the painter because the colours are not beautiful everywhere, though he has really distributed the appropriate colours to every place. (III 2 (47), 11, 1–16)

Elsewhere, Plotinus likens the dynamic processes of the cosmos to a dance which is richly diverse. He writes,

The heavenly circuit has nothing casual in it, but goes according to the rational principle (*logos*) of its living organism; there must therefore be a harmony of action and experience and an order which arranged things together, adapting them and bringing them into due relation with each other, so that according to every figure of the heavenly circuit there is a different disposition of the things which it governs, as if they were performing a single dance in a richly varied choreography (*poikilē chorea*). (IV 4 (28), 33, 1–7 trans. Armstrong modified)

Plotinus adopts the Stoic language of *logos* “rational principle,” in order to explain how the platonic forms are present in the physical world. In III 8 (30) *On Nature and Contemplation* Plotinus makes it clear that he does not think that the rich variety of colours and schemas in nature arises by mechanical processes, but is a manifestation of the living form in things.⁵ He explains this idea in terms of *poikilia* in IV 3 (27), writing,

The fullness and completeness of souls is not the same for all. But if the whole structure in which they exist is complex (*poikilon*) – for every single rational principle (*logos*) is manifold and complex (*poikilon*) – if this is really so, there is a structural organization, and the realities are not completely cut off from each other, and there is nothing random among the realities (as there is not even among bodies). (IV 3 (27), 8, 16–21)

By way of the notion of *logos* (rational principle) Plotinus shows how form (*eidōs*) or idea (*idea*) – conceived by some thinkers as abstracted and static – is in fact also immanent and dynamic. And the form itself, although one, is also manifold. As we saw above, Plotinus writes, “every single rational principle (*logos*) is manifold and complex (*poikilon*).” Plotinus also ultimately accepts the idea that there are forms of individuals. That is, he thinks that not only is there a form of “human” but that there is even a form of individual people like “Socrates” at the level of the intelligible.⁶

Plotinus’ conception of forms has implications for art, especially music. If the task of art is to imitate the intelligible such as to lead the viewer or listener to the highest levels of reality, and if this highest level of reality contains all the details of individuals, then art should seek to reflect all of the complexity of the world of form. Plotinus himself does not spell all of this out. But it certainly follows from the structure of his thought. Art then should not be reductive or restrictive, but rather should aim to reproduce the richness and variety of what is really in form. One might go so far as to assert that Plotinus’ notion of form is not “formalist.” That is, what is often dismissed as “accidental” as opposed to “essential” and what is often described as “content” as opposed to “form”, is in Plotinus’ view in fact part of the form. Indeed, in I 6 (1) *On Beauty* Plotinus argues that the theory according to which beauty can be reduced to proportion is false. Plotinus even suggests that colour is part of form (I 6 (1), 3, 19ff.).⁷ In sum, according to Plotinus’ expansive notion of form, *poikilia*, that is, colour and rich diversity, should be understood as part of the intelligible.

III. Schoenberg

It was common in late 19th century musical nationalisms and in early 20th century modernisms to turn to colour and variety as an antidote to the “Germanic” prioritization of form and structure. One

might point to Russian composers from Glinka through Mussorgsky to Stravinsky in this regard. French impressionists such as Debussy and Ravel who were inspired by painters clearly gave precedence to colour over form. Debussy's interest in the arabesque as a substantial element in composition also challenged notions of musical discourse which devalue the "ornamental." Czech composers from Smetana through Dvořák to Janáček are another case in point. Indeed, Janáček's deep interest in the Czech language as a source for composition can be construed as an interest in "local colour." Hungarian composers like Bartok and Kodaly are also important in this context. Almost all of the aforementioned composers drew on the colourful variety of folk musics and – in a move that goes straight against the restrictions on modes in the *Republic* – sought out various scales beyond major and minor. All of these composers and movements might thus be seen to reappraise that *poikilia* which had been proscribed by Plato and were in some sense devalued by mainstream theory of European art music, beginning at least in the mid-18th century and rooted in Pythagorean inspired tendencies towards musical formalism which go all the way back to Antiquity.⁸

But the notion of *poikilia* fits particularly well with two major musical theoretical notions introduced by Schoenberg: *Klangfarbenmelodie* and Developing Variation. It is not just that Schoenberg as a modernist – like many of his creative contemporaries – explicitly and even provocatively challenged established artistic norms. In many ways a rebel, Schoenberg was also a traditionalist. Much of his work as a theorist attempts to understand established musical thought and develop it further in ways that often end up contradicting the starting point. For example, Schoenberg forged his notion of "developing variation" by analysing the work of Brahms, who is often seen as the arch-conservative of late 19th century European art music. Indeed, if other musical modernists created alternatives to German music, Schoenberg was a reformer who changed things from within the German tradition. In this sense, he is perhaps something like Plotinus in relation to Plato. Schoenberg was committed to key elements in the German music and music theory tradition: organicism, formalism (of some kind), and emphasis on organized (a)tonal structures. Schoenberg's famous "emancipation of dissonance" can be understood as a way of working out ideas that were already latent in German musical thought. Schoenberg's internal reform of German musical thought runs parallel to Plotinian adjustments of Platonic notions of form. Plotinus saw beauty in variety and diversity, in *poikilia*, by applying Platonic structures in a more encompassing way than Plato did himself.⁹ Both of these thinkers worked with what could be called "expansive" understandings of form.

While many German music theorists of the early twentieth century were preoccupied with explaining unity in music, Schoenberg was, I argue, more successful at dealing with diversity and variation than many of his contemporaries. In works of plastic art, unity is created by continuity in space. Works of literature are unified by the continuity of characters or, to follow Aristotle, by unity of action, time and place. In music, however, the problem of explaining why or how a work is one is problematic.¹⁰ Much of the broad literature on musical form is in fact so many attempts to answer the question concerning how a collection of sounds over a period of time constitutes a unified whole.¹¹ Schenker's theory that behind a work of music there is an *Ursatz* ("fundamental structure") although by far the most influential, is only one such attempt.¹² Other thinkers of the early 20th century develop approaches which Lee Rothfarb quite appropriately groups together under the label "energetics." Such approaches attribute central importance to the way that music manifests energy (often thought ultimately to be rooted in human psychology). Given the generally vitalist paradigm, one might expect such thinkers to make more room for the liveliness of variety and colour. Yet, Kurth – perhaps the most important "energetics" theorist – develops an approach which, although very compelling, is "reductive." It ends up excluding a great deal of music that deserves attention and appreciation. Kurth's analyses of Bruckner and Bach emphasize a kind of musical "will" which drives the melodic lines and shapes. Unlike Schenker's, this approach seems to put less emphasis on overall form. The energetics approach grounds the unity of a work in the unity of the energy or will of the creator of the music. Although arguably less formalist than Schenker's, this approach ultimately makes no more space for timbral colour.¹³ Kurth explicitly rejects colour as a key component of good music.

If theorists as diverse as Schenker and Kurth fail to make adequate space for variety, colour and timbre in their accounts of music, Schoenberg is more successful because he manages to balance the demands of unity and diversity in music in a manner that is much less exclusive. Music is for Schoenberg fundamentally an idea (*Gedanke*).¹⁴ Accordingly, we can legitimately call his music theory “formalist,” even “Platonic.” Music for Schoenberg appeals to what Plato would call the rational soul. It is thus clearly distinct from entertainment. It is not aimed at Plato’s “lovers of sights and sounds.” However, even the somewhat superficial label “expressionism” which is often applied to Schoenberg’s music reveals that Schoenberg is not exclusively a formalist and that he values the emotional in a way that Plato does not. What we get in Schoenberg is something closer to the Plotinian notion that all levels of experience – including the extraordinary diversity of the sense world – are ultimately connected to the highest levels of reality.

Klangfarbenmelodie (“Sound colour melody”)

In the *Five Orchestral Pieces* (*Fünf Orchesterstücke*) op. 16 (1909) number 3 entitled *Farben* (Colours), Schoenberg employs methods of composition that put diversity in timbre – i.e. sonic colour – at the very centre of musical importance. This approach to composition, though satisfying his own criteria for musical idea, would not satisfy those of theorists such as Schenker or Kurth. Only after the composition of op. 16 no. 3, that is, in his *Harmonielehre* (1911), did Schoenberg explicitly formulate his theory of *Klangfarbenmelodie*. The term *Klangfarbenmelodie* is composed of three terms: *Klang* meaning “sound,” *Farben* means “colours” and of course *Melodie* which simply means “melody.”¹⁵ So *Klangfarbenmelodie* can be translated literally as “sound colour melody.” Such a melody is constructed not by variation of pitches, but by variation in timbral colour.¹⁶ Schoenberg explains,

In a musical sound (*Klang*) three characteristics are recognized: its pitch, color [timbre], and volume. [...] The evaluation of tone color (*Klangfarbe*), the second dimension of tone, is thus in a still much less cultivated, much less organized state [...]. Now, if it is possible to create patterns out of tone colors that are differentiated according to pitch, patterns we call ‘melodies’, progressions, whose coherence (*Zusammenhang*) evokes an effect analogous to thought processes, then it must also be possible to make such progressions out of the tone colors of the other dimension, out of that which we call simply ‘tone color’, progressions whose relations with one another work with a kind of logic entirely equivalent to that logic which satisfies us in the melody of pitches. (Schoenberg 1978 p. 421)

According to this passage, melodies created primarily out of tone colours do follow a logic. In fact, Schoenberg seems to be committed to the idea that music does or even *must* contain the dimension of melody. But he opens the door to melody being understood in a very broad sense. Moreover, few listeners of Schoenberg’s op. 16 no. 3 would recognize anything that corresponds to what is usually referred to as melody. Clearly Schoenberg entertains here a very expansive and inclusive notion of melody.

The music theorist Ernst Kurth insisted that melody is the most fundamental phenomenon in music. Notes are arranged in a “line” and become that through which the melody flows (Kurth, 1917 p. 14–15). For Kurth melody is, then, *strömende Kraft* (“flowing power or energy”: Kurth, 1917 p. 10). Kurth thinks rhythm and harmony derive from melody (Kurth 1917 p. 11ff.). He insists, moreover, that it is the melody as “line” that provides unity to music. The unity of this line is ultimately to be traced back to a musical energy or power and even to “will.”¹⁷ But Kurth’s exclusive insistence on melodic line as the key to music is problematic since it allows little room for other musical means.

It is in any case clear that Kurth’s approach to music as melody would not work if applied to Schoenberg’s *Five Orchestral Pieces* (*Fünf Orchesterstücke*) op. 16 (1909) number 3. Although there are great differences between Heinrich Schenker and Ernst Kurth, their theories do overlap in certain ways. Since Schenker thought that what was important in music could be accounted for in the single dimension of pitch, I take it that Schenker’s *Ursatz* and *Umlinie* would be similarly embarrassed in attempts to take account of a music which makes contrasts in tonal colour the key operative

dimension.¹⁸ Ultimately Schenker's approach attempts to present compositions such that they can be seen as a whole as if from some vantage point above. The essence of music is not details of ornament, colour and variation. These are not essential components of music. Kurth and Schenker work with ideas of structure, expression and form which reflect something like a narrow interpretation of Platonic notions of form. Indeed, both Kurth and Schenker might have difficulty defending themselves against accusations of the musical equivalent of "Chromaphobia."¹⁹ According to the argument I develop here, Schoenberg – like Plotinus – develops a more expansive understanding of form, one which is able to do justice to a much broader range of colour and diversity while nevertheless maintaining high criteria of intelligibility and unity.

Entwickelnde Variation ("Developing Variation")

Schoenberg discusses the notion of developing variation in various writings, some theoretical, others pedagogical and others critical.²⁰ In one important talk (1931) Schoenberg defends his *Orchestral Variations* op. 31, by showing how it incorporates a basic procedure which Schoenberg shares with Brahms. Instead of repeating melodies exactly or in parallel, Developing Variation – "a stricter style of composition" – "demands that nothing be repeated without promoting the development of the music, and that can only happen by way of far-reaching variations".²¹ Schoenberg contrasts this approach to composition by what he seems to take as a more facile creation of memorable melody by repetition such as one finds in Johann Strauss and even Wagner (although Schoenberg certainly admired Wagner).

Schoenberg thus eschews one of the basic means for creating musical unity: repetition. In its place he suggests that there must be continuous development. In *Coherence, Counterpoint, Instrumentation, Instruction in Form* Schoenberg provides further insight into his meaning when he makes a distinction between two methods of variation in musical composition. He writes,

One can distinguish two methods of varying a motive. With the first, the variations usually seem to have nothing more than an *ornamental* purpose; they appear in order to create variety and often disappear without a trace (seldom without the second method!).

The second method can be termed *developing variation*. The changes proceed more or less directly toward the goal of allowing new ideas to arise. (Schoenberg 1993 p. 39)

In this passage Schoenberg points out how developing variation allows new ideas to emerge. Or more modestly, it allows the idea of the work to emerge fully. There is of course some element of the organicist model of music here, i.e. the understanding of a musical work as like a biological organism which grows following an inner plan, rather than one imposed from outside. Schoenberg implies that melody that does not vary is less rich in ideas; we might even say "less intelligible," to construe the matter in Platonic terms.

In a much later essay Schoenberg applies the notion of developing variation to Bach in terms that are very close to *poikilia*: "contrasts, variety ... ever needed differentiations." He writes,

Music of the homophonic-melodic style of composition, that is, music with a main theme, accompanied by and based on harmony, produces material by, as I call it, developing variation. This means that variation of the features of a basic unit produces all the thematic formulations which provide for fluency, contrasts, variety, logic and unity on the one hand, and character, mood, expression, and ever needed differentiation, on the other hand—thus elaborating the idea of the piece. ("Bach" (1950) in Schoenberg 2010 p. 397)

It is significant that a key model for developing variation, for an appropriate balance of "logic and unity on the one hand and ... expression, and every needed differentiation, on the other hand" is Bach. Bach's work is usually classified as "Baroque" which is associated with deep colours, intricate ornamentation, exuberant detail and so forth, all of which, needless to say, qualifies as *poikilia*.

It might be objected that what I am suggesting are deep parallels to Plotinian thought on *poikilia*, in Schoenberg's work, are merely superficial similarities arising from Schoenberg's modernist search for novelty in his artistic production. In fact, Schoenberg thinks that the variety, variegation and diversity that his composition seeks is a reflection of reality. There is some kind of metaphysics behind Schoenberg's compositional theory. To be sure, the reality that he aims to capture in his music is an inner reality. Schoenberg wrote to Busoni in terms that seem to be searching for the term *poikilia*,

This variegation, this multifariousness, this *illogicality* which our senses demonstrate, the illogicality presented by their interactions, set forth by some mounting rush of blood, by some reaction of the senses or the nerves, this I should like to have in my music. It should be an expression of feeling, as our feelings, which bring us in contact with our subconscious, really are, and no false child of feelings and 'conscious logic.' (Schoenberg to Busoni, August 1909, in Busoni 1987 p. 389)²²

Lest this statement – a compressed expressionist manifesto – sound far from the Plotinian idea that it is the cosmos – both the sensible cosmos and its intelligible source – which is varied and diverse rather than some subjective realm, it is worth recalling that for Plotinus the subjective and the objective worlds are to a large extent contiguous and are always present to one another.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Schoenberg scholarship has turned to the French Philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) as a possible source for his thinking about time and development variation (Salley 2015). For Bergson was deeply influenced by Plotinus on whom he lectured on various occasions. Indeed, there can be no doubt that Bergson's approach to time was nourished by Plotinus' III 7 (26) in which Plotinus attempts to refute mechanistic notions of time in favour of time as the "life of the soul."²³ Plotinus not only sees intelligibility as penetrating the entire natural cosmos but also the psyche, that is, the "soul." Precisely that subjective element – even the irrational – that Schoenberg so passionately wishes to express (by means of the most demanding and often strict musical technique) is according to Plotinian thought also somehow ultimately intelligible. *Poikilia* became for Plotinus a key instrument for talking about the connection between the wondrous variety that is present in the physical and psychic worlds and the ultimate unity and intelligibility of all.

Heraclitus has been invoked in attempts to characterize Schoenberg's musical approach (Cherlin 2007 pp. 46–47). The fact that Plotinus also believes that Heraclitus' notion of continuous change is compatible with his view that the ultimate source of everything is the One or the Good is striking. He writes, "Heraclitus also knew that the One is eternal and intelligible: for bodies are always coming into being and flowing away," (V I (10), 93–5). Plotinus thus interprets Heraclitus in a Platonic manner which is nevertheless far from the Heraclitus that we find in Plato himself. The Platonic attempt to find transcendent intelligibility behind reality is combined with the universalizing Stoic movement of *oikeiosis* or "appropriation" which sees everything in the cosmos as ultimately related. This (small "c") catholicity is something that can be discerned in Schoenberg's intentions even if he does not entirely realize his "emancipatory" project in music.

Conclusion

If it is in some sense possible to philosophize in music as a medium, then Schoenberg philosophizes in a manner which mirrors Plotinus. This is not without some historical foundation since Neoplatonism was indeed an important influence on German Idealism which was part of the "common currency" in fin-de-siècle Vienna.²⁴

Schoenberg did at a certain point in his career take a serious interest in Jewish musical traditions and even reconceptualized his own musical identity in contrast to German musical history (Friedmann and Guest, 2021, pp. 80–84). However, as a teacher, theorist and critic of popular music, he seems generally to have entertained what might be characterized as a "euro-centric" (even "germano-centric") conception of musical value. Often the creator of a theory does not see how far reaching its implications are. Schoenberg's "emancipation of dissonance" is related to what one might argue is in

part an “emancipation of music theory.” In fact, by understanding his *Klangfarbenmelodie* and Developing Variation under the broader concept of *poikilia*, i.e. as a positive valuation of variety and diversity as a reflection of a deeper, variegated structure of reality, we are better positioned to appreciate musics which are not structured like the music of the European “common-practice” repertoire which still dominates in concert halls and in music education. One example is the way that variation takes place in the improvised musics of the Middle East. The *taqsim* (improvisation) of middle eastern musicians often eschews repetition of melodic phrases in favour of more radical variation in ways that are very reminiscent of Schoenberg’s Developing Variation. Another example is the way that Japanese Shakuhachi music works with timbre. There is certainly something akin to *Klangfarbenmelodie* here. In fact, there might even be reason to see the extension of this approach to rhythm – not in the way that “total serialism” extended the logic of 12-tone serialism to duration – but to see rhythm as “emancipated” from melody.

By pursuing expansive understandings of form, conceptions which do not suppress or sacrifice but rather promote *poikilia* “rich variety,” both Plotinus and Schoenberg open doors for creativity and even intercultural understanding in ways that other theoretical approaches do not.

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Notes

¹ See GrandClément 2015 for a detailed investigation of *poikilia* in the context of Ancient aesthetics.

² See Wallace 2009 for a detailed study of Plato on *poikilia* in music.

³ *Phaedrus* 246b. See Plotinus *Enneads* II 9 (33), 18, 38–40; III 2 (47), 7, 23–28; III 4 (15), 2, 1–4; IV 3 (27), 1, 30–37; IV 3 (27), 7, 8–15; and IV 8 (6), 8, 13–23.

⁴ See Plato *Theaetetus* 155d and Aristotle *Metaphysics* 982b.

⁵ See III 8 (30), 2.

⁶ See Plotinus V 7 (18) *On the Question Whether there are Ideas of Particulars* and Rist 1963.

⁷ Plotinus does, however, cite *Phaedrus* 247c6 in I 6 (1), 5 suggesting that form is colourless.

⁸ Wagner’s ‘New German Music’ has traits that might be seen to violate Plato’s restrictions on *poikilia* (e.g. the dominance of music over text), such that one might attempt to transpose Hanslick’s formalist ideas on the musical beauty (outlined in his famous book from 1854) back into a kind musical Platonism. Then again, Nietzsche in his preference for Bizet after his break with Wagner seems to assert a colourful vitalism – some variety of *poikilia* – against what he takes to be the dreary and ultimately hypocritical music dramas of his former mentor. So, clearly *poikilia* is a flexible and in some sense relative concept, the meaning of which needs to be handled with care lest it become too hazy.

⁹ These developments could of course be understood in Hegelian terms.

¹⁰ The question of musical unity is not simply a problem for music theory or criticism. As a composer, I can attest to the fact that one of the greatest challenges particularly in longer works, consists in maintaining coherence and unity in a piece.

¹¹ See Caplin, Hapokoski and Webster 2002.

¹² Schenker, 1979, pp. 10–11.

¹³ Kurth does talk about harmonies in terms of “colour” and “shading” particularly in Wagner. See Rothfarb 1991 pp. 100–109 and 123.

¹⁴ See Schoenberg 1995.

¹⁵ See Cramer 2002 p. 8ff for a nuanced examination of what Schoenberg means by *Klang*.

¹⁶ See Schmidt 2003.

- ¹⁷ Kurth's debt to Schopenhauer is obvious. See Rothfarb 1991 p. 28.
- ¹⁸ See Morgan, 2014 p. xv on Schenker's exclusive interest in pitch.
- ¹⁹ See Batchelor, 2000 who discusses the rejection of colour as "other" or foreign; Something quite evident in 19th century resistance to admitting the polychromy in ancient plastic art (See also Panzanelli et al. 2008).
- ²⁰ See Frisch 1984 pp. 2-15. It should be noted that the term "developing" is in the German *entwickelnde* which is not the term used to denote what in English is referred to as the "development" section in Sonata form theory. This is in German terminology the *Durchführung*.
- ²¹ Quoted in Frisch 1984 p. 4.
- ²² See also Cramer 2002 p. 9.
- ²³ See Beierwaltes 1995.
- ²⁴ See Beierwaltes 2004 on the Neoplatonic sources for German Idealism. See Cook 2007 Chapter 1 on the intellectual climate of fin-de-siècle Vienna.

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