Vocabulary, Syntax and Rhetoric
in Thomas Wilson's *Fourth String Quartet*

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Thomas Wilson's **String Quartet No 4:** *The Aesthetic and Historical Context*

Like many composers who came to twelve-tone composition in the 1950s and 1960s, after having written a number of works in an 'extended tonal' idiom (often with a 'neo-classic' aesthetic sensibility) Thomas Wilson clearly felt himself being pulled in two different directions at the same time.

On the one hand, there came to prominence at that time a new generation of young composers, of which we may take as a representative voice Pierre Boulez, who once proclaimed all composition other than serial as 'useless' (Boulez 1968). Although we should probably interpret Boulez's dismissive *dictum* as intending something less literal than his actual words suggest, his view that the world of sensibility exemplified by the arrival of broadly serial methods during the 1950s pointed to radically new ways of thinking in – and about – music was widely shared at that time. An extreme version of this viewpoint had it that the 'serial world' had ushered in a new era in the history of music and musical culture, perhaps even wiping away practices of the past and beginning anew with, more or less, a *tabula rasa*. Possibly this attitude from Boulez and (some) other then-young composers had something to do with their view of themselves as pioneers re-building musical practice amongst the cultural rubble of an exhausted post-war world, replacing a vacuum created by the repressive Nazi hegemony of the very recent past.

On the other hand, new compositional approaches always have to find their way eventually into the canon of proven precept and practice tested by time and tradition. Those who wish to wipe the slate clean and begin anew have to meet the charge of subservience to solipsism and passing fads.

Boulez's assertion was that the problem with Schoenberg's treatment of the twelve-tone method was not that it was too radical, but that it was not radical enough to realise the implications of the idea itself. In the 1950s and 1960s, this view seemed to meet widespread assent among his peers, and it has been only in more recent 'postmodern' times that Schoenberg's practice, namely to try to integrate radically new ways of thinking into the broader stream of musical history and to reconcile them with those sanctioned by the time-honoured canon, has made something of a comeback. This may be yet another instance where the cyclic view of musical history (favoured by an earlier generation of musicologists, such as Curt Sachs (1956)) which sees the generations of the grandparents and grandchildren tending to unite against that of the parents, so to speak, proves yet again to be a view with at least a grain of truth in it.

But, despite Boulez, many composers who began composing in the 1950s and 1960s shared Schoenberg's attitude and carried it through into their compositional practice throughout the whole period of the heyday of late modernism, from about 1950–1975, during which the attitudes articulated by Boulez retained a certain hegemony. This generalisation is certainly exemplified by Thomas Wilson's *Fourth Quartet*, written as late as 1978.

Thomas Wilson's **String Quartet No 4:** *A 'Close Reading' of a Few Passages*

In order to place these very general remarks in a meaningful context, we will do well to look

at some passages in Wilson's quartet in specific detail, and since, in a general sense, the work makes reference to a twelve-tone series, I choose to begin with that. Nevertheless, even a cursory glance at a Thomas Wilson score will tell us that the role of the series in a work by Wilson is quite different from its role in a work by either Schoenberg or Boulez. In my analyses, I have not reproduced the musical examples to whose attributes I refer, since, although they would give a more specific impression of the passages in question, and some paragraphs of my discussion may appear rather abstract as a consequence, my argument can easily be followed without them.

In Wilson's quartet, we can hear the series stated in a very simple way during the very last passage of the work (bars 357–62) in the kind of bare, skeletal statement which is clearly intended to convey an impression that this is 'core' material. Viola plays the notes of the series in simple, unadorned minims, while violin 2 'shadows' it one minim behind in rhythmic unison with it. The 'harmonic' result of this is that we hear all eleven dyads between successive notes of the series in turn: 1/2, 2/3, 3/4 … 11/12.

This final passage is a clearly-recognisable restatement (simplified) of a similar passage which opened the quartet (bars 1–6). Again one instrument (violin 2) 'shadows' the other (violin 1) with the same material one note behind; the difference is that in 1–6 the statements of both instruments are embellished by little decorative figures in shorter note-values. In all cases the decoration is built essentially by 'reaching back' in the series to grab a bunch of the preceding notes (or 'reaching forward' to grab a pitch yet to appear in the main sequence), mostly in reordered sequence, before proceeding onwards to complete the aggregate. The process is summarised in the following diagram, where the bracketed pitches preceded by the '<' sign represent 'reaching back' and the '>' sign represents 'reaching forward':

Violin 1(1–6): E F D♭ E♭ D   (<F)(>G♭)(<F)   G♭   (<E♭ F E)   G B B♭ C A G♯
Violin 2(1–6): E F D♭ E♭ F G♭   (<D E♭ F♯)   G   (<D E♭ F E)   G   (>G♯)   B B♭ C A G♯

I want to look first at a passage in Wilson's quartet which develops this idea of 'reaching back' (or 'reaching forward') and 'reordering' elements of the series in ways which then converge with Wilson's practice with regard to non-twelve-tone material.

Consider what follows this opening passage of Wilson's *Fourth Quartet*: the violins sustain the last dyad of the series (G♯/A) underneath a trio of cadenzas. The first one is a viola cadenza. It too is a twelve-tone statement of a kind, except that the aggregate is spun out over 38 pitches. The spinning-out process is explicated in the following diagram. The two rows of each table denote pitches belonging to the initial and terminal hexachords of the series respectively.

D	E♭	F	D	E♭	G♭	D	E♭	G♭	F	E	F	G♭		D
													C	

E♭	E		G♭	E	F		D♭		E♭	D	E	F		
		G				B		C					A♭	G

		D	D♭				
B	B♭			B	C	A	G#

What this table points to is that the cadenza begins by highlighting (by means of repetition: 6 pitches, 13 notes) the initial hexachord of the series. This is comprised, clearly, of the so-called 'chromatic' hexachord (6 adjacent notes from the chromatic scale in a particular ordering). Then, as the cadenza proceeds, the notes of the complementary hexachord are added in, a pitch at a time at first ('reaching forward'), but always circling back on the notes of the initial hexachord, before eventually transferring the weight of emphasis to the terminal hexachord, and proceeding to completion of the aggregate.

Although this passage is clearly a development of the 'chorale-like' presentation of the series in bars 1–6, its ruminative nature, its long-drawn-out aggregate-completion process and its oblique reference to the actual ordering of the series lend it the character of a 'comprehensively chromatic' statement rather than a 'serial' one. Other passages grow out of such a statement of the series in a different way, developing the twelve-tone material in different (non-serial) musical directions (or grow into such a statement from other directions in some cases).

In other words, the passages in question show Wilson trying to place ideas derived from the 'twelve-tone world' within a broader framework of compositional thinking, and based on his established practice in other works. In Wilson's particular case, this was not so much the neo-diatonic or quasi-diatonic practice which chararacterised so much of the neo-classic repertoire, as Wilson's established way of treating octatonic material.

We might recall that octatonic materials, familiar to us particularly from Stravinsky's *oeuvre* in the twentieth century, entered the vocabulary of composers in the nineteenth-century from within, so to speak: alongside and interpenetrating their approach to traditional tonality. One thinks particularly of Stravinsky's Russian predecessors in this regard: Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Mussorgsky, et al, and of French composers contemporary with them, as well as others such as Liszt. In a way which could usefully be seen as analogous, composers of the next generation or two after Schoenberg sometimes sought to import elements of twelve-tone practice alongside and interpenetrating working methods based essentially on some kind of expanded-diatonic or octatonic practice.

The second section of Wilson's quartet (Fast: ♩ = MM 160) begins at bar 27, with a motif in violin 1 which takes the first five pitches of the series and causes them grow out of the serial context into the octatonic one (bars 27–32). It is useful here to think of this five-note group as a 'core motif' to which additional items are added. Consideration is confined to the principal motifs of the passage:

Violin 1(27–28): E F D♭ E♭ D E to which is added G A♭
Violin 1(28–29): F D E to which is added A♭ G
Violin 1(30–31): E F to which is added A♭ G B♭ B then back to C♯ D
Cello > Viola > Violin 2(31–32): F E to which is added G A♭ G B♭ B then back to C♯ D C♯ E F D C♯ D to which is added G♯ A♯

If we compare these fragments with the series (E F C♯ E♭ D F♯ G B B♭ C A G♯ A) it is noticeable that after the initial five-note statement of the 'core motif', the two pitches E and F (the 'inner core') are included in all four statements, D in three of them and C♯ in two, but E♭ is omitted after the first time. In parallel, the pitches which are added to the 'core' comprise only G A♭ B♭ and B. F♯, A and C never appear. Effectively this leaves us with the octatonic scale E F G A♭ B♭ B C♯ D as the governing collection of this passage, despite its genesis from the opening five pitches of a twelve-tone series.

This phrase (bars 27–32) is answered by a longer one (bars 33–44) which likewise grows by accretion of peripheral pitches to core ones (in this case A♯/B). I summarise without further comment (and consideration is confined to the first violin motifs of the passage). Core pitches are bracketed:

Violin 1 (33–34): (B A♯) D (B A♯)
Violin 1 (34–35): (B A♯) D C♯ G♯ (B)
Violin 1: G A♭ (B♭ B) D C♯ D (B B♭)
Violin 1: (A♯ B B B♭) D (B A♯ B) G A♭ (B B♭) D C♯ F E G♯ (A♯ B (several repetitions)) D C♯ F D C♯ F E G♯ (B)

Again the ocatonic scale E F G A B♭ B C♯ D underlies the phrase, this time with A♯/B instead of E/F as its 'core' pitches.

This is immediately followed by an 'accompanied melody' (bars 45–50), the accompaniment being a trill (viola and cello and later violin 2) on the notes E F G and A♭ and B♭, so that an octatonic framework undergirds the melody from the beginning. The melody starts from our familiar five-note 'chromatic' motif (the first five notes of the series), treated as a 'core' to which additional notes from the octatonic scale implied by the trill are added, but (crucially) from which the note 'A' (the extra-octatonic pitch) is omitted after several repetitions. This section is followed by a delicato staccato-quaver passage (bars 51–53) in which the instruments 'shadow' one another at the distance of one note (c.f. the very opening statement of the work in bars 1–6), but this time the basic material is the octatonic scale, not the series.

The dialogue between and octatonic and serial in this opening section of Wilson's quartet reaches an apotheosis some 50 bars on (bars 119–126) where the two are juxtaposed dramatically. Bars 199–120 consist of a compressed variant of the earlier octatonic passage (bars 33–44) focussing on A♯/B, linked only by a savage repeated marcato chord (a motif not discussed here) to a climactic fortissimo statement in triple-octaves of the series at its original transposition level.

Thomas Wilson's Musical Language

In a recent article, John Maxwell Geddes (2004) discussed 'The Language of Thomas Wilson' in relation to works across the whole of Wilson's career, looking at the way generic materials are handled in different works, from the early neo-classic ones to the late symphonies and concertos. A wide range of materials is identified, but only one or two works are actually described as 'twelve-tone'. Nevertheless, it seems to me that in some cases, the twelve-tone elements prompted Wilson to devise new musical structures which are deeply influenced by serialism, even though they seldom appear in an obvious or overt way. I would say they prompted him to keep pushing out the boundaries of his repertoire of compositional procedures in ever-new directions. Perhaps we can best get a handle on this interpretation by considering what the term 'musical language' might mean from a quite different perspective.In what follows, I shall draw on some remarks about 'musical language' in Edward Cone's seminal work of criticism *The Composer's Voice*, published 30 years ago.

Edward Cone, who died last year, was a remarkable figure in the history of American musical criticism. He was a friend of many poets and other literary figures on the American scene, and his book harks back in some respects to an older, perhaps rather patrician style of writing about music which prevailed before the advent of the professionalization of analysis as an autonomous discipline

in recent generations, perhaps even back to Schumann and Hanslick and others in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, this style of writing seems to have converged with and had a certain influence on the rise (amongst a recent generation of musicologists) of a new emphasis on hermeneutics and on analogies with other artforms, particularly prose, poetry and drama. This has led writers like Anthony Newcomb and Robert Hatten to pursue the insights which a consideration of the relationship between musical and literary criticism might provide (drawing on the work of literary critics such as Wayne C. Booth, Hayden White and others) and of the ways in which such a consideration might advance our ways of thinking about analytical issues in music.

Cone asserted that the way in which music is a language lies in its 'gestural' character. In his last chapter, 'Epilogue: Utterance and Gesture', he summarises this 'gestural' character as embodied in the way things stop and start, pause and continue, rise to tense moments, fall to slack ones, emphasise particular moments dramatically, whisper sotto voce in others, and so on (Cone 1974:164).

Ways of thinking about music as a 'musical language' have a long genealogy in the history of music theory, of course. But perhaps conceiving of the treatment of items such as series, collections of pitches, scale materials, metric arrangements, durations of sections, rhythmic cells expanding and contracting, and so on as the elements of a 'musical language' is analogous more to vocabulary and syntax and elements of the written forms of language, whereas Cone's characterisation of musical utterance seems also to encompass elements of the spoken form.

Cone's remarks have had considerable resonance in more recent times, leading to a new level of interest in attempts to draw out more precise analogies musical and literary processes. Is it useful (possible, even?) to find analogies between the way an author speaks through his work, and the way a composer does? When an author speaks, the voice that is heard may be his own, but may equally be that of one of his created characters or perhaps of a disembodied persona who is neither. An author may speak declaratively, or interrogatively, or exclamatorily; such ways of speaking would seem to have some relation to musical utterance. But is there any analogy in music with speaking in the past tense, as opposed to the present or future? Or with speaking in the first person as opposed to the third? If we take the analogy with the different characters of written and spoken language seriously, we might well see a musical performance as analogous with that of story-telling or drama, rather than a written work of poetry or prose. What insights can such analogies afford?

Musical Rhetoric in a Passage from Schoenberg

This brings us to the point with which we began, namely that it was characteristic of many composers of Wilson's generation to follow Schoenberg not so much for the twelve-tone aspect of his language, but for the way in which Schoenberg insisted on grounding his vocabulary and syntax in a rhetorical idiom which placed his music within a broader stream of musical history than conformity to the most novel trends of his time might have done. Let me therefore pause briefly to consider a familiar Schoenberg twelve-tone passage without referring at all to its twelve-tone aspect.

Schoenberg's *Third String Quartet*, it will be recalled, opens with a passage in which two of the instruments utter short fragments of legato melody (a 5-note fragment and a 2-note fragment) against a staccato accompanimental quaver figure of 8 or 9 notes (but only 5 pitches, ie with some repeated) passed between the other two instruments.

The whole of the opening section (bars 1–43) consists of a kind of conversational exchange between these elements, beginning in a quite formal manner. One could almost describe it in parlia-

mentary debating terms: proposition, answer, counter-proposition, counter-answer, and so on:

Phase #	Bar #	5-note melody	2-note melody	Accompanimental figure (5 pitches)
1	1	Violin 1	Cello	Violin 2 > Viola
2	13	Cello	Violin 1	Violin 2 > Viola
3	19	Viola	Violin 2	Violin 1 > Cello
4	25	Violin 2	Cello	Violin 1 > Viola
5	27	Violin 1	Viola	Cello > Violin

At bar 19, something of a change of tone ensues, perhaps analogous to the change of tone which ensues in many a song-text when the poet turns from describing a scene or situation or character to telling us how he feels about it. The original registral layout, with the melodic fragments high on the violin and low on the cello, compacts into the middle register when the viola takes up the five-note melody in a more intimate tone.

There is another change of tone again following the whole of this passage (33) when a five-pitch fragment recalling both kinds of figuration (a staccato figure of three pitches and a legato one of two) is passed from instrument to instrument in turn. This change of tone led Erwin Stein, who wrote the preface to the published score, to indicate the end of the first theme at this point.

After this, the legato figure disappears from the conversation for several bars, while the quaver figure undergoes a sort of apotheosis. Also, the legato figure turns into a series of *pizzicati*, until the legato returns as a kind of afterthought to close the section (bars 40–43) and usher in a new one. Perhaps we can see this 'neutralisation' passage, as Schoenberg might have called it, as an informal kind of conversation or argument, following the very formal 'debating' style of rhetoric with which the Quartet opened.

There are, of course, points about the twelve-tone structure to be made in relation to this passage: about – for instance – the relationship between the five-note and two-note figures and the forms of the series from which they are drawn. But it is not my purpose to go over such relatively familiar ground anew here. Rather it is to highlight the rhetorical nature of some of the processes by means of which Schoenberg's way of integrating his twelve-tone structures into a broader framework of musical history is achieved.

Vocabulary, Syntax and Rhetoric

This brings us around again to Thomas Wilson's *Fourth Quartet* and Cone's words which I have paraphrased above as referring to 'the way things stop and start, pause and continue, rise to tense moments, fall to slack ones, emphasise particular moments dramatically, whisper sotto voce in others, and so on'. The viola cadenza is perhaps a kind of 'paraphrase' of the formal twelve-tone opening, starting with its initial hexachord and running through eventually to join up with its terminal dyad G♯/A which is simultaneously being held through as an accompaniment to it. This change links up with a change in the tone: an informal, free-flowing, quasi-improvisatory, more intimate tone of voice replaces the more formal 'announcement' – more 'public' in rhetorical style – of the opening.

Later, at the beginning of the second section (bars 27–44), the rhetoric of stopping and restart-

ing, with little spasms of phrases emerging from the series's initial pentachord and growing out of the E/F dyad (bar 27), and then similar phrases growing out of the A♯/B dyad (bar 33) goes hand in hand with the rise in tension towards the point of the octatonic climax, grouped around the repeated A♯/B, in bars 38–44.

Later again, a variant of this octatonic passage is juxtaposed (save for that repeated, hammered chord) with an unadorned multiple-octave restatement of the orginal twelve-tone series in its starkest (simplest) and most unadorned form: like two characters shouting at one another, the octatonic passage confronts the serial statement laid out as twelve crotchets, fortissimo, as the first section reaches its ultimate climax.

Seen from this 'rhetorical' perspective, Thomas Wilson's cautious attitude to serialism, may perhaps better be viewed, after all, not so much as a *conservative* factor in his stylistic development – an attempt to reconcile his methods with those sanctioned by the time-honoured canon, to put it in the terms I used in the first section of this article – but, rather, as a *constructive* force, enabling him to develop a more extensive palette of technical means and expressive ends.

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