

The Lord Our God Is One:
Form, Technique, And Spirituality in Arnold Schoenberg's *A Survivor From Warsaw*, Op. 46

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Schoenberg composed *A Survivor from Warsaw*, op. 46, between 11 and 23 August 1947 in response to a commission from the Koussevitzky Foundation, dedicating it to the memory of Natalie Koussevitzky.¹ He was forced by poor eyesight to notate only a short score, relying on René Leibowitz² to copy out the full score. Willi Reich cites a "German newspaper" article interview with Leibowitz from 15 November 1949 as the basis for the idea that Schoenberg heard the story for the piece from a real survivor from the Warsaw Ghetto. Reich cites the story as follows:

"I cannot remember everything, I must have been unconscious most of the time; I remember only the grandiose moment when they all started to sing the old prayer. The day began as usual. Reveille when it still was dark - we were assembled and brutally treated. People got killed. The sergeant shouted that the dead should be counted, so that he knew how many he had to deliver to the gas chamber. The counting started slowly, irregularly. Then it began again: one, two, three, faster and faster, so that it sounded like a stampede of wild horses, and - all of a sudden - they began singing the *Shema Yisroel*."³

Schoenberg's text closely follows this story, except that he elaborates on "old prayer," instead writing "the old prayer they had neglected for so many years - the forgotten creed!" The added emphasis supports Schoenberg's dramatic purpose in the work.

¹ Michael Strasser provides a more detailed description of the genesis and early reception history of the piece in "*A Survivor from Warsaw as Personal Parable*," *Music & Letters* LXXVI (1995), pp. 52-63.

² Dika Newlin, a student of Schoenberg, writes that Schoenberg denied Liebowitz had any part in the orchestration, serving only as a copyist. See Dika Newlin, *Schoenberg Remembered: Diaries and Recollections (1938-76)* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1980), p. 334.

³ Willi Reich, trans. Leo Black, *Schoenberg: A Critical Biography* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1971), p. 222.

The *Shema* is one of the most sacred of all Jewish prayers, drawn from the book of *Deuteronomy* in the Jewish *Torah*. Schoenberg sets several verses after the traditionally sung *Shema* prayer.⁴ The singing of the *Shema* by the victims at Warsaw represents a heroic reassertion of Jewish identity in the face of certain destruction.⁵ Furthermore, Michael Strasser has suggested that just as the condemned Jews reasserted their cultural identity in the face of persecution, Schoenberg "finally rebelled against the humiliations heaped upon him and forcefully reasserted his Jewish identity."⁶ Although Schoenberg was born a Jew, he converted to Lutheranism in early adulthood. In a letter of 1932 to Alban Berg, however, Schoenberg reasserted his Jewish identity.⁷ By 1947, after learning of the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews, Schoenberg was prepared to create a powerful work of Jewish memorial and solidarity.

Charles Heller points out that Schoenberg's setting of the *Shema Yisroel* bears striking similarities to several traditional settings sung by European Jews.⁸ In particular, the descending minor second that ends the first hexachord of the basic form of the row is shared by much European Jewish music.⁹ As Heller notes, "Much of this derives from the use of a particular

⁴ One English translation of Schoenberg's text reads "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: [5] And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. [6] And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart" [Deuteronomy 6:4-6, KJV]. The sung *Shema* prayer consists only of verse 4.

⁵ The *Shema* as a tool of strength for Jewish martyrs is not without historical precedent. Steven Cahn, in *Variations in Manifold Time: Historical Consciousness in the Music and Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (Stony Brook, New York: Ph.D. dissertation, 1996), pp. 372-373, notes that "In the aftermath of the second revolt against Rome in 135 B.C.E., Rome condemned Rabbi Akiba, who was the foremost teacher of his day...Rabbi Akiba recited the *Shema Yisrael* with his dying breath as did the martyrs of Warsaw depicted in Schoenberg's composition."

⁶ Strasser, *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Charles Heller, "Traditional Jewish material in Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*, op. 46," *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* (USA) III (1979), p. 69.

⁹ Wilfried Gruhn, in "Zitat und Reihe in Schonbergs Ein Überlebender aus Warschau," *Zeitschrift für Musiktheorie* (Germany) V (1974), p. 32, has suggested another similarity to Jewish music in mm. 89-90 of the chorus, but Heller, *Op. cit.*, 72, discounts this on the grounds that it is not

scale known to Jewish musicians as the 'Phraigish' scale, sharing with classical Phrygian mode the interval of a minor second between the first two steps.¹⁰ This surface connection with Jewish music is clearly intended to underscore the purpose of the composition. Remarkably, however, Schoenberg's integration of Jewish spirituality extends well beyond the surface level.

Figure one presents a transcription of a bracelet Schoenberg used while composing *A Survivor from Warsaw*.¹¹ The row is combinatorial with its inversion, and Schoenberg notated each row above its inversion to make this connection obvious. Schoenberg's terminology differs from the analytical system usually associated with dodecaphony: he replaces the term "prime" with "basic," and considers each basic row B and its inversion I together as an "area" A. Furthermore, the row transpositions are designated not by half steps but rather in terms of major (+) and minor (-) intervals above B₀. As will be shown, Schoenberg's system is not arbitrary but reflects his approach to dodecaphony in the piece.

Christian Schmidt writes that Schoenberg uses the invariant trichord [048] (3-12), commonly known as an augmented triad, as a means of associating significant sets within the composition.¹² Figure one indicates the four transpositions of this trichord in the first hexachord of each basic and inverted row form using broken and solid slurs and brackets. These are not found in Schoenberg's row bracelet, but do serve an integral purpose in the music. Since each transposition of the [048] trichord is held invariant among six row forms, Schoenberg can move

placed in a prominent position within the musical context, that the passage was not included in the first draft of the work, and that the text in question is generally chanted or spoken, not sung, in Jewish worship.

¹⁰ Heller, *Op. cit.*, p. 71.

¹¹ The row bracelet is preserved at the Arnold Schoenberg Institute in Los Angeles and discussed in Timothy Jackson "'Your songs proclaim God's return': Arnold Schoenberg—The composer and his Jewish Faith," *International Journal of Musicology* VI (1997), pp. 281-317.

¹² Christian Schmidt, "Schönbergs Kantate ein Überlebender aus Warschau, op. 46," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* XXXIII (1976), p. 178.

among the first hexachords of row forms within a single invariant trichord "family" by changing the transposition of the remaining trichord [014]. For instance, in measure eleven the invariant trichord [C-E-Ab] is sustained in the lower parts while the upper parts articulate trichords belonging to all six hexachords for which [C-E-Ab] remains invariant. In order of appearance, these are: B₀, I₃, B₊₃, I₅, B₋₆, and I₊₇. The order of appearance in measure eleven is an amazing compression of the order of row appearances in measures one through ten. In other words, Schoenberg spends the first ten measures moving through all rows in the [C-E-Ab] trichord family, then summarizes this introductory section in measure eleven prior to the narrator's entrance. For reference, figure one includes a partial analysis of Schoenberg's varied and intricate row usage, and figure two reorganizes the hexachords according to invariant trichord family to further clarify these relationships.

Three row areas have a privileged position in *Survivor from Warsaw*: A₀, A₊₃, and A₋₆. The basic forms of these three rows share the invariant trichord [C-E-Ab], and Schoenberg's use of major and minor intervals to label transpositions of the row indicates that he had in mind the fact that they are separated by major thirds; B₀ begins on F#, B₊₃ on Bb, and B₋₆ on D. Schoenberg uses these row areas to help articulate a type of sonata form in the piece,¹³ in much the same way that tonal composers use tonic (A₀), dominant (A₊₃), and subdominant (A₋₆).

¹³ Beat Follmi's thematic analysis views the piece as a series of tableaux moving through levels of memory in the survivor's mind. His analysis, while providing insights into thematic development in the work, fails to account for Schoenberg's careful integration of row areas with formal divisions. See Beat Follmi, "I cannot remember ev'rything': Eine narratologische Analyse von Arnold Schönbergs Kantate *A survivor from Warsaw*, op. 46," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* LV (1998), pp. 28-56.

Instead of using pitches for these important formal pillars,¹⁴ however, Schoenberg uses row transpositions.

The piece opens with a combinatorial statement of B_0 and I_0 . As mentioned previously, the remainder of the introduction moves through all members of the [C-E-Ab] invariant trichord family, including B_0 , B_{+3} , and B_{-6} . In this way, Schoenberg establishes this family as an important foundation for the work. In measures twelve through seventeen, the narrator enters and the "tonic area"¹⁵ A_0 is emphasized again, with motions to other members of the [C-E-Ab] family in the same order as the introduction. At measure eighteen, a major design change and a clear movement to the dominant area A_{+3} indicate that a second group has been initiated. Another design change and a change in text occurs at measure twenty-two, indicating a transition to the development.

The development area begins in measure twenty-five and is marked by a return to the tonic row area A_0 , a change in narration, and a return of the opening fanfare material. The development proceeds in four main sections: measures twenty-five through thirty-one, measures thirty-two through thirty-seven, measures thirty-eight through forty-three, and measures forty-four through fifty. Measures fifty-one through fifty-three serve as a retransition to the recapitulation at measure fifty-four, and the piece ends with a powerful coda beginning in measure eighty.

Schoenberg's use of the three privileged row areas in the development and recapitulation mirror similar uses in tonal music. The development begins in the tonic row area A_0 , with

¹⁴ This does not, however, exclude the possibility that Schoenberg also uses privileged pitch classes. Indeed, G seems to hold particular importance in the piece.

¹⁵ For ease of reading, future references to tonic, subdominant, and dominant will leave off the quotation marks. The reader should bear in mind, however, that the terms tonic, subdominant, and dominant are being used in a generalized sense and that the relationship to tonal usage, though not remote, is primarily by analogy.

material from the opening of the piece, a clear reference to the "false repeat" of many classical and romantic sonata-form movements. The tonic area A_0 is maintained until measure thirty-five, where a few measures of row forms from trichord families other than [C-E-Ab] follow a movement to the subdominant area A_{-6} . Measures thirty-eight through forty-three return to the tonic area A_0 , and the piece moves to the dominant area A_{+3} at the beginning of the recapitulation after excursions into dominant (measures forty-four through forty-five) and subdominant (measures forty-five through fifty) areas.

As a reflection of the tragic nature of the situation, the recapitulation becomes increasingly unstable in terms of row usage, until "all of a sudden, in the middle of it," the chorus enters with the singing of the *Shema*. At this point a dramatic clarification of the row area takes place as the chorus sings directly through the dominant area A_{+3} (B_{+3} in measures eighty through eighty-six, I_{+3} in measures eighty-six through eighty-nine) and the subdominant area B_{-6} (B_{-6} in measures ninety through ninety-two and I_{-6} in retrograde in measures ninety-two through ninety-five) to close the piece with the tonic row area A_0 , stating the first hexachord of B_0 in measures ninety-five through ninety-seven. Throughout the coda, the accompaniment states variants of the vocal material, often using techniques such as inversion and diminution.

Schoenberg uses musical emphasis to draw directed motions out of the dodecaphonic processes.¹⁶ In particular, the pitch G seems to hold a privileged position in the piece.

¹⁶ The narrator's part articulates formal and temporal divisions in the piece and points toward important linear motions. However, it should *not* be considered to carry *any* implication of pitch in and of itself. In a November 1948 letter to René Leibowitz, Schoenberg wrote that the narrator's part "...never has to be sung, never should there be a real pitch. This means only the way of accentuation. As I said - never sing. *This is very important, because singing produces motives and motives must be carried out, motives produce obligations which I do not fulfill - because I do not know what a singer will bring to my compositions.* [my emphasis]" See Erwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser. *Arnold Schoenberg Letters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), p. 257.

Throughout most of the composition, F# and Ab interfere with the presentation of G. In a sense, the F#-Ab becomes a diminished third sonority that leads to the G from a half step above and below. What is extraordinary in Schoenberg's case is that these traditionally-horizontal tendency tones are often verticalized into harmonic simultaneities. For instance, the piece begins with F# moving to G, and by the second beat F# and Ab sound together. In the second measure, the F# sounds again, but this time the resolution pitch G sounds beneath it, buried within the texture. In measures 6, 9, and 10 the Ab surfaces as the upper pitch, and on the last sixteenth note of the first beat of measure eleven the G sounds once again. The G-Ab-F# tension complex occurs prominently in several places, most obviously at measure thirty, measures forty-one through forty-three, measures forty-four and forty-five (bass), and measure forty-five (beat four). One of the threads in the coda works upward by step from Bb in measure eighty past G in measure ninety-five to Ab; the E in measure ninety-seven moves into the accompaniment F#-G-Ab. In the final three measures, F#-G-Ab is stated in close canon and the last two pitches of the bass definitively resolve the F# up to its goal pitch G.

One objection to this type of reasoning is that the F#-G-Ab motion is built into the B₀ hexachord and therefore will automatically appear each time the tonic row is stated. In fact, this contention supports the fact that Schoenberg intentionally crafted this linear motion *by building it into the row*. Furthermore, it is important to remember that musical conditions (tessitura, doublings, etc.) determine which pitches receive emphasis in the lines, and these conditions are much more art than science. In particular, the piece ends with a strong statement of F#-G in the bass, and this does not coincide with the *end* of the row, but rather with its *beginning*.

One final consideration regards the relationship between Schoenberg's special use of dodecaphony in this piece and its possible theological significance. The text of the *Shema* begins

with the affirmation that "God is one." Incredibly, Schoenberg's emphasis on three rows sharing the invariant trichord [C-E-Ab] reflects this theological statement on a technical level. Even at the beginning of the work, when the situation seems most hopeless, the seeds of resolute cultural proclamation are sprouting in the row textures. In an interview with José Rodríguez, Schoenberg said "I compose and paint instinctively...I see the work as a whole first. Then I compose the details."¹⁷ By allowing the philosophy and theology of the *Shema* text to influence the structure and form at all levels, Schoenberg forged *A Survivor from Warsaw* into a lasting memorial of the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust.

¹⁷ José Rodríguez, "Conversation With a Legend," *Schoenberg*, ed. Merle Armitage (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1937, reprint 1971), pp. 145, 147.

Figure One. Schoenberg's Row Bracelet for *A Survivor from Warsaw*.

Note: B=Basic set; I=Inversion; -2, -3 = m2, m3, etc.; +3, +6 = M3, M6, etc.

The four transpositions of the invariant trichord [048] (3-12) are indicated in the first hexachord of each row using broken and solid slurs and brackets; these are not found in Schoenberg's bracelet.

The figure displays six rows of musical notation, each representing a different transposition of Schoenberg's Row Bracelet. The notation is written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The rows are annotated with transposition numbers and specific areas:

- Row 1:** Labeled with $+7$ and 4 . It features a dashed bracket over the first hexachord and a solid bracket over the second hexachord.
- Row 2:** Labeled with -7 and $+3$. It features a dashed bracket over the first hexachord and a solid bracket over the second hexachord, which is labeled **"Dominant" Area (+3)**.
- Row 3:** Labeled with $+6$ and -3 . It features a dashed bracket over the first hexachord and a solid bracket over the second hexachord.
- Row 4:** Labeled with -6 and $+2$. It features a dashed bracket over the first hexachord and a solid bracket over the second hexachord, which is labeled **"Subdominant" Area (-6)**.
- Row 5:** Labeled with 5 and -2 . It features a dashed bracket over the first hexachord and a solid bracket over the second hexachord.
- Row 6:** Labeled with $+4$ and 10 . It features a dashed bracket over the first hexachord and a solid bracket over the second hexachord, which is labeled **"Tonic" Area (0)**. Below the second hexachord, the labels B_0 and I_0 are present.

Figure Two. Hexachords from *A Survivor from Warsaw* arranged as unordered sets by invariant trichord. Schoenberg's designations of I for inversion, B for basic set, and +/- for major/minor are indicated.

Family 1: C-E-G#...

...Eb-F#-G → B₀
 ...F-F#-A → I₅
 ...G-Bb-B → B₊₃
 ...A-Bb-Db → I₊₇
 ...B-D-Eb → B₋₆
 ...Db-D-F → I₃

← "Tonic" Area A₀ →

← "Dominant" Area A₊₃ →

← "Subdominant" Area A₋₆ →

Family 2: F-A-C#...

...Bb-B-D → I₀
 ...C-Eb-E → B₊₆
 ...D-Eb-F# → I₊₃
 ...E-G-Ab → B₋₂
 ...F#-G-Bb → I₋₆
 ...G#-B-C → B₊₄

Family 3: D-F#-A#...

...F-G#-A → B₊₂
 ...G-Ab-B → I₊₆
 ...A-C-C# → B₊₄
 ...B-C-Eb → I₋₂
 ...C#-E-F → B₋₇
 ...D#-E-G → I₄

Family 4: Eb-G-B...

...C-Db-E → I₊₂
 ...D-F-Gb → B₊₇
 ...E-F-Ab → I₊₄
 ...F#-A-Bb → B₋₃
 ...Ab-A-C → I₋₇
 ...Bb-C#-D → B₅

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