

# Toward Abstract Expressionism: Reconciling Nature in Modernist Works of Webern and Le Corbusier

Leanne Dalke  
*Western University Canada*

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**Toward Abstract Expressionism:  
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Webern and Le Corbusier**

**Leanne Dalke**  
**Year IV – The University of Western Ontario**

Twentieth-century modernism in Europe is aptly recognized as a period in which artists and intellectuals sought to be innovative and find new ways to express themselves, all while subjected to an increasingly modernized world. With the impact of the Industrial Revolution, modernists were faced with a new, urban reality in which to express themselves. By emphasizing the exploration of technological and industrial innovation, urbanism provided a vehicle for modernists to reject themes indulging in the transcendental nature that Romanticism cultivated in the late nineteenth century. However, the reaction to Romanticism that modernism embodied did not wholly reject nature and replace it with technological advancements. Paradoxically, and in conflict perhaps with our own instinctual assumptions about modernist goals and aesthetics, modernism achieves closer proximity to the core of the philosophy and the essence of nature than its predecessor. It is important to distinguish here how nature is regarded in representation and understanding in Romanticism and modernism respectively. As suggested,

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Romanticism looks to nature to provide its art with a transcendental quality, accessed through a literal representation of the natural world. Modernism, however, uses nature as a structural model - one that has its origins in unity and symmetry. In his book, *Webern and the Transformation of Nature*, Julian Johnson outlines the distinction between nature as analogy and nature as structural representation:

It has functioned to underline the relationship of Webern's music to nature through an abstract formal analogy (that of organicism), which is of course rather different to the suggestion of representation. Music is thus 'like' nature in its processes, according to this model, but not 'about' it or necessarily evocative of it.<sup>1</sup>

An investigation of modernist works by composer Anton Webern and architect Le Corbusier provides a compelling study of the ways in which forms in nature are analogous to modernist compositional and artistic methods. I will focus specifically on two influential works, *Symphony Op. 21* (1928) by Webern, and *Villa Savoye* (1931) by Le Corbusier, as they clearly exhibit ways in which these artists expanded the use of form and structure, and propelled their respective genres into a new realm of abstract expressionism. Through the employment of the abstract creative methods of serialism

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1. Julian Johnson, *Webern and the Transformation of Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 217.

and geometric form, Webern and Le Corbusier are able to achieve a new expression of nature that highlights order and coherence, and in this way, surpass an opinion that urbanism stifles the artist's ability to locate a concrete, modernist expression of nature.

While modernism embraced technological advances and urban innovation, its emphasis on intellectualism propelled its art to explore deeper meaning in ideas such as nature and one's individual expression of it. For Le Corbusier, technological advances in fact made his architecture possible, and it was his embrace of modern technology that deemed him a pioneer in the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> These advances allowed for Le Corbusier to design architecture that exposed the functional elements of the structure – the skeleton – for the inhabitant to see and experience. Advances in weight distribution via structural supports allowed for more glass windows to be placed throughout the structure, creating more instances of transparency. The result of this innovation in design and technology is therefore not only a geometric aesthetic if you will, but the building also promoted intimate interaction with nature by facilitating more opportunities for the inhabitant to see the natural environment around them. Although Webern did not require his compositions to exist in natural environments, he was able to access a connection with nature through innovations in abstract expression in music pioneered by the Second Viennese School. Unlike Le Corbusier, Webern's compositional innovation was not dependent on technological advancements, as his music still used traditional instrumentation and even classical formal

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2. Peter Gay, *Modernism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008), 305.

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structure. For Webern, innovation came in the form of serialism and twelve-tone compositional technique in order to obtain unity and cohesion in his music. Similarly, geometric forms served as a vehicle for Le Corbusier to express greater unity and comprehensibility in his architecture. In this way, abstract compositional and architectural theories are the essential vehicles for both Webern and Le Corbusier to express elements that reflect the character and philosophy of nature.

Webern's Symphony Op. 21 is one of his later works and the first instrumental piece in which he uses the twelve-tone serial method. The analysis of an instrumental work such as this is particularly appropriate in arguing the significance of abstraction in expressing a philosophy derived from processes in nature, as instrumental, or absolute music as some may venture to call it, is often less tied to a definite program than vocal music. Again, a departure from programmatic elements may be regarded as a way in which modernism distinguishes itself from Romanticism, although this distinction does not always apply. Webern did compose vocal music and was influenced by Goethe,<sup>3</sup> and in this way was in dialogue with the past and Romanticism, but in order to focus on abstract expressionism in his serial works, a look at Op. 21 is relevant and aids in clearly highlighting how serialism is capable of expressing aspects of nature in its own right.

Webern's exploration of twelve-tone serialism in Symphony Op. 21 facilitates abstract expression and a metaphysical language in his music. In this piece, his unique orchestration, his application of one row as a basis for pitch

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3. Julian Johnson, *Webern and the Transformation of Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 33.

material, as well as his use of rhythm and duration reveal the ways in which Webern accomplishes this kind of expression. Op. 21 is orchestrated for clarinet, bass clarinet, two horns, harp, and string quartet. It is interesting that Webern chooses a substantially smaller sized orchestra for his symphony, compared to orchestras used by the maximalist nineteenth century composers such as Richard Wagner or Gustav Mahler. This demonstrates that Webern values economy and efficiency in his works, a characteristic also evident in the works and architectural style of Le Corbusier. These qualities exemplify modernist design and geometric representation of nature. The first movement of Webern's Symphony clearly exhibits the small size of the ensemble in its sparse texture, as the listener is easily able to distinguish which instruments are being played at each moment. In addition to its thin texture, the melody, or twelve-tone row, is split up and shared between the different instruments, employing *klangfarbenmelodie*, a technique created by Webern's teacher, Arnold Schoenberg.<sup>4</sup> The technique succeeds in equalizing timbre so that no instrument dominates over another but rather the ensemble works together in realizing the twelve-tone row. Webern adds an element of tension to this by developing the movement as a two-part canon, yet one where the parts are themselves are divided and distributed amongst all instruments in the orchestra. One may argue that Webern's orchestration of the row is unclear and complex, as it is difficult to distinguish which instrument is following each

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4. Julian Rushton, "Klangfarbenmelodie," in Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy2.lib.uwo.ca:2048/subscriber/article/grove/music/15094> (accessed December 5, 2011).

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specific form or inversion of the row when listening to the piece. When one studies the score, however, it is easy to determine how the instruments engage in canon and how *klangfarbenmelodie* is used in the distribution of the row. In this way, Webern achieves order and coherency in op. 21 that reflects the transcendental, ultimate coherence and order that nature embodies.

It is not the aim of Webern's serial compositions or twelve-tone music of the Second Viennese School to achieve clarity in the process of listening to the music, although extensive training in that aspect may enable it for some. Rather, serialism enables abstraction of musical elements themselves. For example, serialism displaces melodic congruency while maintaining a sense of melodic contour. Melody is not abolished but reconstructed into an abstract form. In this manner, the orchestration of Webern's Op. 21 projects an innovative method of coherence, realized through abstract means. Notice here that the emphasis is not placed on determining ways that Webern represents nature directly. It is possible to analyze Op. 21 as a piece in which the thin texture is metaphor for Webern's experience of the thin mountain air on his excursions, or distribution of melody amongst all instrumental parts serves as representation of the democracy and omnifariousness of nature. Conversely, it is the serial method itself that is analogous to an abstract understanding of nature as form and process, and subsequently how nature enters into our urbanism.

The essential musical element characteristic to serialism that Webern explores in Op. 21 is the twelve-tone row. Webern uses a single hexachord to derive all pitch

material in this piece,<sup>5</sup> using inversion and retrograde to vary representations of the row. In her analysis of Op. 21, Kathryn Bailey describes the unique properties of the row Webern includes in this piece. Bailey describes the palindromic relation between  $P_0$  and  $I_9$ , acknowledging the special ways in which the row used in Op. 21 has symmetrical properties that go beyond elements of symmetry that apply to all rows.<sup>6</sup> The concept of symmetry in Webern's work is significant due to the fact that it is an element expressed abstractly in music. Again, the listener is not immediately aware of symmetry in the piece, yet an analysis of the piece in which its symmetry is a core element is compelling and illuminates ways in which Webern composed with abstract means to express characteristics of nature.

This characteristic is also evident in the formal structures of the piece. Johnson describes ways that Webern's music may be identified as abstract:

Webern's music is often described as 'abstract', a term which seems to refer to a bundle of related characteristics and perceptions of the music... This might refer to the row itself, which is based on the abstraction of musical material to the single parameter of pitch content. But it also refers, in Webern's case, to global formal patterns like canon and palindrome which seem to take

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5. Kathryn Bailey, *The Twelve-Note Music of Anton Webern* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.

6. *Ibid.*, 19.

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precedence over the particularity of the musical detail. The concern seems to be with the form, with the quasi-geometrical patterning, rather than with the acoustic material as such.<sup>7</sup>

In Op. 21, Webern uses ternary form to create a sense of coherence and a link to geometrical patterns as Johnson suggests. Coherence is achieved through Webern's focus on form and the way in which he prioritizes symmetry, as in the pitch material of the piece as well. Here we see Webern meticulously employing serialism in more than one aspect of composition. The abstract use of formal patterns, symmetrical and geometric, which are analogous to those patterns in nature are similarly employed in modernist architecture of Le Corbusier.

In his book, *Vers Une Architecture*, written in 1928 and later translated by John Goodman as *Toward an Architecture*, Le Corbusier describes how architecture should move forward into an age of modernism. With a purist sentiment, Le Corbusier urges twentieth-century architecture to move toward recognition of form and function in the modern building so that it may express beauty that speaks to the inner individual. He calls the architect to embrace form as a way to express:

The architect, through the ordonnance of forms, realizes an order that is a pure creation of his mind; through forms, he

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7. Julian Johnson, *Webern and the Transformation of Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 215.

affects our senses intensely, provoking plastic emotions; through the relationships that he creates, he stirs in us deep resonances, he gives us the measure of an order that we sense to be in accord with that of the world, he determines the diverse movements of our minds and our hearts; it is then that we experience beauty.<sup>8</sup>

This description of the role of the architect occurs at the beginning of the book and under the heading “Aesthetic of the Engineer Architecture.” It is interesting that Le Corbusier seems to combine intellectualism with expression, and form with the experience of beauty. In this way Le Corbusier acknowledges the call for architecture to express something pure and aesthetically beautiful. He also describes architecture as having a responsibility to interact with the senses, especially visual, and to make a striking impact on them, executed in a clear and effective way.<sup>9</sup> Like Webern’s use of serialism, Le Corbusier appeals to architects to strive for coherence and comprehensibility, so that architecture may be expressive. However, Le Corbusier does not subscribe to aesthetics coming before modernism. In fact, he suggests architecture embrace technological advances so that it may achieve geometric forms in its realization. Here, Le Corbusier would seem in opposition to expressing nature, but it is my suggestion that, as Webern moves toward a new expression of

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8. Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, trans. by John Goodman (California: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 85.

9. *Ibid.*, 95.

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nature via abstraction, Le Corbusier does the same in a quest to obtain beauty in aesthetics.

Villa Savoye is a house designed by Le Corbusier that resides in the suburbs of Paris, in Poissy.<sup>10</sup> It is in many ways the epitome of his purist style, with rectangles, symmetry, cylindrical pillars, and general geometric forms. It is also pure in the sense of how it seeks to project its abstract architectural purpose directly onto human experience of the space itself. In employing geometric form, that which seems disconnected from natural experience as it is constructed and made possible by technology, Le Corbusier actually seeks to express a metaphysical reality. As he describes in *Toward an Architecture*:

...capable of sublimity, it touches the most brutal instincts through its objectivity; it appeals to the highest of the faculties, through its very abstraction. Architectural abstraction has the distinctive and magnificent quality that, while being rooted in brute fact, it spiritualizes this, because brute fact is nothing other than the materialization, the symbol of a possible idea.<sup>11</sup>

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10. Richard Weston, *Modernism* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 113.

11. Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, trans. by John Goodman (California: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 101-2.

Le Corbusier's philosophy on architecture raises the art, through the process of abstraction, to a level where it is able to express the spiritual, which he regards to be sublime. In a similar way, Webern places value on the expression of metaphysical ideas, and consequently an idea of nature, executed through abstraction in music.

It is important to note the ways in which Webern and Le Corbusier differ in their realization of abstract expressionism in music and architecture respectively. Villa Savoye executes abstract ideas in a form that is more immediately observable by the viewer, Webern's music, however, does not showcase its form as obviously to the listener, but requires further analysis to extract the rich detail and order crafted within serialism. This difference may be attributed to the inherent difference of the senses which music and architecture appeal to, aural and visual respectively. Despite these differences, both Webern and Le Corbusier, are modernists in the sense that they engage with abstraction as a means to express aspects of human experience that are more than materialistic. This expression is realized in new forms, such as serialism and the functional elements of buildings exposed. It is in this abstract expressionism that a move toward expressing qualities in nature that are beyond the material is achieved. In this sense, modernism, despite its embrace of technology and urbanism, is successful in progressing, innovating, and reconciling the ways in which nature can be expressed in art, and in particular, modernist art.

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