

# Experimentation and Process in the Music of Johanna Beyer

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The music of German-American composer Johanna Beyer (1888-1944) is no longer as unfamiliar to us as it was twenty years ago. The efforts of those associated with Essential Music and Frog Peak Editions in the USA, Musik und Gender im Internet (MUGI) in Hamburg, and the Astra Chamber Music Society in Australia - not to mention those individuals who have written about, performed and recorded Beyer's music - have brought to light the compositions and life story of this enigmatic yet fascinating composer.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as everyone who comes in to contact with Beyer's music realises, many questions about her remain unanswered, many compositions unplayed, many more unrecorded. Beyer was part of a network of experimental composers active in New York between the two World Wars, and her teachers, mentors and friends, who included Henry Cowell, Ruth Crawford, Charles Seeger, Dane Rudhyar and Percy Grainger, had a clear influence on her compositions. But what is striking about Johanna Beyer's music is not only the historical context that gave rise to it, but also its spirit of experimentation, which it shares with so much of the American modern music of that time. This experimentation is expressed in the radical approaches to sound, the overt structural devices and the compositional processes that make explicit the thinking behind the music. This, on occasion, lends the music a rawness, and even stark power.

This rawness is well-illustrated in Beyer's daring experimentation with tone-cluster harmony in *Movement for Two Pianos* (1936), a piece appropriately dedicated to Henry Cowell. The middle section of the *Movement for Two Pianos* begins with a relatively still point: arpeggiated cluster chords in the high register of the first piano give way to sustained ones, suspending the rhythmic drive that began the piece. The second piano introduces a low quiet rumble of tremolando clusters, which crescendo and diminuendo, creating a wash of harmonic resonance. Then, suddenly, the fading resonances are shattered by a crashing staccato cluster chord of two octaves in each hand ... another follows ... then a succession of struck and arpeggiated cluster-chords of up to seven octaves destroys any remaining sense of repose (Ex.1).

Example 1 – Beyer, *Movement for Two Pianos*, bars 73-84

[All Examples with Permission of Frog Peak Music (A Composers' Collective)]

It is an impressive and dramatic moment, not so much for its loudness as for its strength of expression, of presence. The force of this music is all the more surprising coming from the pen a woman who was remembered as being “self-conscious”, and “extremely quiet, almost painfully shy”. It is possible to speculate that Beyer’s apparent introversion could have been due to her social circumstances (especially as an immigrant and a single woman independently making her way in a male-dominated creative world) as much as to her personality. Beyer did, for example, perform some of her own cluster music for piano in one of the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory concerts, an initiative sponsored by the American government’s Depression-time administration.<sup>2</sup> The performance would have required extroverted and aggressive physical movements, using forearms and fists to play many of the clusters. However,

these radical techniques were met with unfavourable comments from the audience, as was much of her music; comments which on occasion targeted her gender as much as her musical style.<sup>3</sup> Ruth Crawford, Beyer's teacher and friend (and as far as we know the only other woman actively composing in the New York experimental scene at that time), had to contend with similar attitudes, particularly from men hostile to women's involvement in modern music.<sup>4</sup> Yet, Beyer is reported to have been "determined in her convictions," and "devoted to the cause of contemporary music," which shows a strength of character and dedication all the more remarkable considering only a handful of her pieces received performances during her lifetime.<sup>5</sup>

Beyer shares with other composers in the ultra-modernist circle what Joseph Straus has identified as "a common core of musical concerns," including experimentation with forms and precompositional systems; dissonance as compositional foundation; a radically expanded timbral palette; and the incorporation of quotation, collage, or dissonant reinterpretation of traditional music.<sup>6</sup> As others have noted, Beyer's early compositions, including the two Suites for Clarinet (1932), and the piano pieces *Gebrauchs-Musik* (1934) and *Dissonant Counterpoint* (early 1930s), owe much to Ruth Crawford's *Diaphonic Suites* (1930) and, like those pieces, are another excellent realisation of Charles Seeger's teachings on 'dissonation' set out in his treatise *Tradition and Experiment in the New Music*.<sup>7</sup> However, Beyer did not continue to compose exclusively along these lines, and while she clearly assimilated Seeger's dissonant principles in her writing, of particular interests are the compositional procedures that she made her own.

Many of Beyer's pieces use what I will call a process of cumulation-reduction of music elements, which often articulate her formal designs. In *Elation* (1938) for large wind ensemble and percussion, for example, this process is applied to instrumentation: instruments are gradually added to the ensemble and then fall away again. In *Music of the Spheres* (1938) for electronic instruments or strings, the process is applied to the elements of tempo and dynamics: three unbroken glissandi string lines are introduced slowly and gently, but a gradual increase in tempo and dynamics, punctuated by an accelerating rhythm played by the triangle, culminates in a frenzied climax at the mid-point. The musical motion is then reversed, following a similar but now inverted curve of decreasing tempo and dynamics until the strings come to a near stand-still on single notes and then fade away. In the pitch domain, the culmination-reduction process becomes more involved. In *Movement for Two Pianos*, a simple 4 bar melody, marked *cresc. poco a poco*, is repeated in a succession of increasingly dramatic variations, culminating in dense tone-cluster harmonisation (Ex.2). In the final section, just as in *Music of the Spheres*, the process is reversed, starting with cluster harmonisation and paring the melody back to single notes, while also slowing the tempo and reducing dynamics.<sup>8</sup>

bb. 11-24

11 15 19 23

4 bar melody harmonised displaced activated

bb. 35-48

35 39 43 47

register shift and octave doubled register shift, in octaves and harmonised register shift, in octaves and displaces register shift, activated and displaced

bb. 52-59

52 56

cluster harmonisation, register shift and octave expansion

Example 2 - Beyer, *Movement for Two Pianos*, intensification of 4 bar melody in first piano

In all these examples, the formal shape is that of an arch, defined each time by different parameters. The cumulation-reduction process as arch form is most directly represented in the visual clarity of the score for the first movement of the Clarinet Suite 1. The clarinet melody is constructed from an additive procedure: each successive phrase is a repetition of the previous phrase with additional notes inserted into the melodic line (as well as the occasional note substitution). Thus, the phrase lengths gradually increase to the mid-point, whereupon the process is reversed - notes are extracted, reducing the phrase lengths. This is seen clearly in the layout of the staves.<sup>9</sup> The contracting phrases are not literal repetitions of the expanding ones, but rather variations on them. This results in a loose symmetry around the central phrase pair (phrases (g) and (h) in Ex. 3a). The second page of the piece (not shown here) repeats this process as a literal retrograde of the first, thereby creating two symmetrical sub-sections themselves comprising an overall palindrome.

What makes this already carefully conceived design even more intricate is the way the composer takes care to control the accumulation of all chromatic pitches over the three octave range of the piece. Over the span of the first page, all pitches but one are sounded, from the notated Gb in the clarinet's chalumeau register to the G# in the clarino register (we don't hear the pitch B in the chalumeau register, but it does occur in the mid and high registers)(Ex.3b). The boundaries of this chromatic completion are linked to the formal design: the highest pitch occurs twice framing the central phrase pair and the lowest pitch occurs once in the last phrase. Here Beyer uses an approach common to many composers working systematically with chromatic saturation or aggregate completion: the last pitch that completes the chromatic collection also signals the end of a section or movement. In fact, the significance of chromatic completion is already suggested in the first two phrases of the piece, where a 12-tone aggregate is unfolded (Ex.3c).

PRESTO (♩=152)

Annotations in the score include: *f*, *sfz*, *sempre non legato*, *mp*, *mf*, *pp*, *p*, *f*, *ppp*, *a tempo*, *accelerando*, *ritenuito*, *crescendo*, *stringendo*, *rallentando molto*, *extension*, *substitution*, *\*highest note*, *variation of g.*, *variation of f.*, *variation of e.*, *variation of d.*, *variation of c.*, *lowest note*, and *Accidentals affect only those individual notes before which they stand.*

Example 3a – annotated score of Beyer’s *Suite for Clarinet 1* (Clarinet in Bb), first page, bars 1-76

phrases a,b,c & e      phrases d,f,g,h & i      lowest pitch, phrase l

Example 3b.

12 tone aggregate completed bars 1-5

Example 3c.

This is not an isolated occurrence of aggregate completion, but rather it represents another procedure that Beyer adopted in much of her music and moulded to fit her own stylistic approach. Aggregate completion is, for example, also evident on a local level in the opening of the String Quartet No.2 (Ex.4). This piece is particularly interesting for its use of quotation and collage. However, as in the Suite for Clarinet, we find overlaid designs present, which create an almost puzzle-like combination of compositional constraints. In this opening movement, the cello quotes the melody from Papageno's aria in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, which is placed in a dissonant contrapuntal environment. Up to the first beat of bar 3, the first violin plays a nine note melody without pitch duplication. At the same time, the second violin, viola and cello lines, taken together, play the same nine pitch classes. In other words, up to this point a nine note collection is in circulation. In bar 3, the last notes of each of the upper string phrases introduce new pitch classes (F# in the first violin, D# in the second violin and G# in the viola) which complement the previous nine pitch classes, thereby completing a 12 tone aggregate.

(melody from Papageno's aria in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*)

Example 4 – Beyer, *String Quartet No.2*, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt, aggregate completion in bars 1-3

Beyer's use of aggregate completion is not limited to the surface of her music; it can also be found determining large-scale progression through a piece. For example, over the duration of the second movement of the String Quartet No.2, the lower strings (viola and cello) step towards each other in chromatic contrary motion (Ex.5). After they converge on a perfect fifth (C–G), the viola and cello begin playing semi-tone clusters. They continue their contrary motion, crossing voices until the same perfect fifth is reached now with the voices inverted. At this point, the cello has completed a chromatic ascent, arriving back on the G an octave higher than where it began the piece. The viola has descended from its opening C to the C an octave below; however, it has skipped the final C# of its chromatic collection, reserving this last note for the last chord of the piece. In this final chord, the viola repeats a chromatic motive C# to C

like an echo resounding after the chord itself has started to fade. Here, the two chromatic scales shapes the background motion of the piece and chromatic completion again signals the closure of the movement.

Example 5 – bass line of *String Quartet No.2*, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt.

Beyer takes a similar approach in *Movement for Two Pianos*. The first section is underpinned by a bass motion in the second piano that descends chromatically by step starting on B. The motion is summarised in Example 6, but in the score the pitches jump between registers. At the end of the first section, the second piano finally arrives on the last chromatic note C, which then functions as a pedal for the entire middle section. The descending bass motion returns in the final section, concluding the piece on the final C.

Example 6 –reduction of bass progression in section 1 *Movement for Two Pianos*,

While Beyer’s musical materials may be characterised as minimal, this discussion of her compositional designs shows that they are far from simplistic. Kennedy and Polansky characterise Beyer’s compositional approach as “a disciplined focus on the development of single ideas and overall shapes”, an eloquent and accurate description of her technique. As more of her music is examined in detail, a clearer image emerges of how Johanna Beyer — an active participant in one of the most fertile periods of musical experimentation of the twentieth century — constructed a unique musical voice.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Johanna Beyer’s scores and recordings see <http://www.frogpeak.org> and <http://mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de/Beyer/index.htm> This article is particularly indebted to the work of John Kennedy and Larry Polansky; of Melissa de Graaf; and to insightful discussions with Allan Walker and Kate Bowan.

<sup>2</sup> See John Kennedy and Larry Polansky, ““Total Eclipse””:The Music of Johanna Magdalena Beyer, an introduction and preliminary annotated checklist’, *Musical Quarterly* 80/4 (1996), 723 and 766-767.

<sup>3</sup> Melissa de Graaf, ‘Intersection of Gender and Modernism in the Music of Johanna Beyer.’ *Newsletter of the Institute for Studies In American Music* XXXIII/2 (Spring 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer’s Search for American Music*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Joseph Straus, *The music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 206-226.

<sup>5</sup> See Kennedy and Polansky, “Total Eclipse”, 720 and 766-767.

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<sup>6</sup> Straus, *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 213-220.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Seeger, *Tradition and Experiment in the New Music* in *Studies in Musicology II*, (ed.) Ann Pascatello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> For more analytical detail on the pieces discussed here see the conference proceedings M. Boland, 'Le Language Musical de Johanna Beyer' at <http://musique.ehess.fr/sommaire.php?id=37>

<sup>9</sup> See also the discussion of this piece in Kennedy and Polansky "Total Eclipse", and in Kirsten Reese, '“Ruhelos” Annäherung an Johanna Magdalena Beyer', *MusikTexte* 81/81 (Dezember 1999), 6ff.