

# Skalkottas's First Suite for Piano, First Movement (1936): From First Ideas to Realization

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Even if, in retrospect, one finds too much of a naive pride in Schoenberg's belief that he had given a new supremacy to the German-Austrian tradition for a hundred years to come, it is more and more obvious that he did in fact force everybody to think *after* him. He made it absolutely impossible to compose at all without taking his discoveries into account.

Thus a contemporary composer acknowledges Schoenberg's impressive impact. Pierre Boulez later goes on to suggest that though

mannerism *after* Schoenberg is absolutely dead in its very beginning. . . invention *through* Schoenberg is the only vital solution. [1] [FN](#)

Although the precise nature and extent of the influence of Skalkottas's encounter with the Austro-Germanic tradition, and Schoenberg in particular, is open to debate, it has been well-chronicled, [2] so without wishing to test Skalkottas's originality of invention, or to engage in direct comparisons, in this instance, the unmistakable affinity of thought between Schoenberg and Skalkottas cannot be ignored – indeed, an approach that acknowledges this background seems apposite. [FN](#)

Like that of Schoenberg, Skalkottas's intense creative impulse found expression not only in direct musical involvement and composition, but also in intellectual endeavours and theoretical writings. [3] Some of Skalkottas's articles appeared in print: as the Berlin correspondent, he contributed critical music reviews to the journal *Musical Life* [Mousiki Zoi], occasionally commenting on the state of the Greek music scene, [4] and addressing some of his own critics. [5] In addition to these contributions, however, there is a wealth of unpublished, unedited writings, including a large number of 'Musical Articles' [Mousika Arthra], and his treatise 'The Technique of Orchestration' [Techniki tis Enorchistroseos]. [6] [FN](#)

The articles, in particular, explore a wide variety of topics, but Skalkottas's propensity for abstract thought apart, what is of great interest is the emergence of certain salient ideas, prominent throughout his writing. Despite his idiosyncratic, and at times taxing writing style – a problem also encountered in Schoenberg – [7] Skalkottas's pervasive preoccupations point to an idealized, yet methodical, and unified perception of musical expression. [FN](#)

For Skalkottas, originality was a sign of quality; in 'Originality and Imitation' [Prototypia kai Apomimisis] he hailed the originality of modern music and urged composers to strive for new forms and styles, though without severing their links with tradition. Skalkottas's evident interest in contemporary developments – musical progress in general, and the future of the Greek national school of composers more specifically – was coupled with a high regard for the Western European musical tradition and the great composers of the past. He frequently cited the music of Bach, Beethoven, Mahler, Wagner, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Debussy, looking to their achievements for inspiration and instruction, and emphasizing the integrity and real substance of their musical ideas. [8] [FN](#)

Skalkottas viewed contemporary musical developments as part of an unbroken and ongoing evolutionary

process. He spoke of the 'simplification and dissemination of the great musical Idea', [9] believing that with sufficient effort on the part of the composers, modern music, however difficult or adventurous, could be comprehended and appreciated by the public. In 'Symphony' [I Symphonia], Skalkottas noted the development of symphonic forms, and stressed that, rather than be revealed by analysis, these should be discernible by the naive listener. According to Skalkottas, such processes are the outcome of the composer's inspired, yet coherent [noitos] expression, made manifest as 'musical logic'. The musical work is the imprint of the composer's imagination, yet in his frequent references to it, Skalkottas never failed to highlight the necessity of clarity of thought and 'musical order'; logical and careful distribution and organization of material; and considered and economical utilization of musical means. The intention of the various compositional techniques is not to obscure, but to illuminate the 'higher ideal' [apoteri idea], the 'meaning of musical content' [noima tou mousikou periechomenou] of a work, so that it becomes accessible to the listener. [10] [FN](#)

Skalkottas considered composition to be a response to an inner need, [11] and in his article 'Thematic Development' [Anaptyxis Mousikon Thematon], he specifically considered the nature of the creative impulse that led to the conception of a musical theme. He maintained that the theme must be inspired by a 'musical event [mousiko gegonos], or even a higher cause [anoteri aitia]' which this theme will seek to reveal, and equated it with the essence of a movement or the entire work, and the determinant of its success – virtually the same expression of this notion is found in Skalkottas's 'observations for the piano works' [Merikai paratiriseis eis ta erga gia piano] which prefaces the 32 Piano Pieces. [12] In his article on thematic development, Skalkottas also explained how the theme may be developed through varied repetition, the use of variants [metallages] in episodes, and he related the manner of thematic development to its 'character' or 'style' [yphos], as well as the overall form. [FN](#)

Elsewhere, seeking a definition for 'good style', [13] he concluded that, though vital and immediately perceptible by the listener, this was an abstract quality that emerged from the totality of the musical work. Whilst Skalkottas thought that the homogeneity of musical devices [omoiomorpha mousika technimata] contributed to a good style, the concept of 'transformation' enjoys far greater prominence in his writing, and recurs in varying contexts: development and repetition, and elements of music such as melody, rhythm, harmony – even two parts sounding in unison constitute harmony – and counterpoint. [14] [FN](#)

This brief survey sheds some light on Skalkottas's thoughtful perspective. For all their shared concerns, Skalkottas, unlike Schoenberg, does not appear to experience any conflict between his dual role, theorist and composer. [15] On the contrary, inspiration and logic, artistry and intellect seem happily and securely reconciled in his mind, united in their complementary functions. [FN](#)

It could be that Hans Keller, renowned for his fascination with psychoanalysis, was responding to the composer's healthy psyche when he wrote of Skalkottas's Second Piano Concerto:

Passionately dramatic and lyrical, heroic and tenderly submissive in turns, the Concerto is an immediately fascinating work whose strong and spontaneous masculinity contrasts vehemently with the sadistic masculinity complex, intrinsically flaccid, of much contemporary music.

Keller continues:

There is new and incisive thought, a novel developmental idea, an unsuspected textural perspective at every corner, and eventually you realise that this music has solved six burning modern problems without you having been aware of them: the sonata problem, the question of asymmetry-versus-or-cum-symmetry of rhythmic structure, the concerto problem, the sore question of modern piano writing, the puzzle of dodecaphony-

versus-or-cum-tonality, and the historical dilemma of anti-romanticism or romanticism. It 'solves' them as instinctively as a healthy constitution solves the problems of growth in adverse circumstances of upbringing. [16] [FN](#)

This oft-quoted review is not only a testament to the qualities of Skalkottas's music, but also reflects some of Keller's own preoccupations.

A unique figure, an influential, multi-faceted – if eccentric – personality, and an impressive intellect, Keller's initial musical activity was that of a string player, chamber musician and orchestral player, although it soon grew to embrace writing, criticism, teaching, coaching, analysis, broadcasting and producing. [17] [FN](#)

Born and educated in Austria, Keller was a direct descendant of the line that represents the great Austro-Germanic tradition, so that his first-hand experience and profound knowledge of the repertoire was combined with Freudian insight and organicist ideals. Keller recognized Skalkottas as one of the few 'masters', a rare example of a modern composer who retained continuity with tradition, and his repeated epithets for the composer were, invariably, 'genius', or rather 'symphonic genius', and 'master of symphonic thought'. [18] [FN](#)

What did Keller mean by 'symphonic thought'? Keller's concept of symphonism was by no means confined to symphonies; [19] rather, it followed from his predilection for detecting the signs of organicism, and an increased sensitivity to contrasts and their integration, 'the *latent* unity of the *manifest* contrasts' – ultimately, the unity of contrasts. [20] Symphonism and symphonic thought, were recurring themes, [21] at the heart of which lay, the 'contrast between statement and development, between stability and... lability... together with its unification' [22] on the one hand, and the contrast between 'statement and statement' on the other. [23] In 'Schumann was a Symphonist', Keller made reference to 'symphonic thematicism – the wide-ranging integration of themes and, yet more important, more positively decisive, of contrasts'; subsequently, he identifies 'the symphonic test – development' and admires the rolling of 'expository material and working-out into one', before commenting on 'the symphonic breath as such – the development of the four movements into a consistent and consistently contrasting whole'. [24] Considering Schoenberg's case, Keller related symphonism to developmental procedures and forms, namely sonata and sonata-rondo, identifying the 'symphonic (rather than sectional) growth of the variation form' – the obvious difficulty in atonal music being the relinquishment of tonal contrast, and the inevitable reliance on other means of differentiation. [25] [FN](#)

Skalkottas's First Suite for Piano is an extended work in four movements (Prelude, Serenade, Menuetto & Trio and Finale), and certainly one of his most substantial for the instrument. [26] The ensuing discussion focuses on the first movement which, though not of 'symphonic dimensions' in itself, may, nonetheless, be shown to exemplify, in fair measure, both Skalkottas's compositional requisites, and Keller's 'symphonic thought'. [FN](#)

The Suite is composed in an idiosyncratic, yet consistent, twelve-note idiom. [27] The opening Prelude employs eight discrete sets of twelve pitch-classes – labelled Ia to Ih in [Example 1](#), with 'I' signifying the movement number. With the exception of sets Ia and Ie, which are related to sets Ic and Ig respectively at T8, these are not derived through conventional dodecapronic means. The sets are introduced in pairs in the first four bars, and are partitioned so that the whole of the pitch-class material of each set is assigned to either the right- or the left-hand part, with each successive, parallel statement being completed within the span of a bar. [FN](#)

In the course of the Prelude, this manner of synchronous unfolding of pairs of sets is contrasted by instances of successive statements of single sets. In the latter case the pitch-classes are obviously distributed between the right- and left-hand parts, although interchange of material between the two parts, when two sets unfold simultaneously, occurs only once. However they are presented, complete statements of sets invariably span a bar, or an even number of beats or bars.

A wide array of horizontal and vertical configurations are not utilized, maximal exploitation of their intervallic potential is achieved through subtle re-ordering of the pitch-classes. This device tends to be confined within tetrachordal or trichordal segments, although it can be freer, whilst complete segments are occasionally re-ordered. In general, the hexachordal segments and, of the tetrachordal, the final segments in particular, are the most stable.

Despite Skalkottas's systematic treatment of the material, its apparent volume and diversity might be thought to compromise the attainment of integration and coherence. The hexachordal segmentation in [Table 1](#), however, immediately reveals the close relationship and symmetrical construction of the eight sets; each one consists of two complementary hexachords, the total number of distinct hexachords being six. (If you have any problems viewing the Tables, please contact the [Editor](#).)

The tetrachordal segmentation in [Table 2](#) yields a similarly symmetrical set structure, that comprises just eight tetrachords, in four combinations ([Table 3](#)). The tightness of internal structure is maintained when examining larger collections: segmentation into octachord/tetrachord ([Table 4](#)) and vice versa ([Table 5](#)) show each twelve-tone set to consist of complementary sets.

The unfailing consistency of the set structure would indicate some pre-compositional strategy. The absence of extant sketches has been seen as affirmative of Skalkottas's extraordinary inner ear, and powers of imagination and mental elaboration. [28] Indeed, when Keller discusses 'pre-composition', he notes Skalkottas's and Schoenberg's 'elemental belief in the primacy of inspiration'. [29] He continues with the observation that whether the row is 'abstracted... or pre-composed, serialized' is not necessarily a determinant of its quality, and draws attention to Schoenberg's declared inspired, thematic conception of the basic set, which he himself, however, moderated by allowing for conditions that an 'experienced composer' cannot foresee, and 'rectifications in the order of the tones' which may 'become necessary'. [30] Schoenberg's plans and drafts evince a pre-compositional investigation of the properties of the row, particularly with regard to similarity relations. [31] It would be hard to imagine that Skalkottas did not engage in any preliminary organization of material, particularly as an even greater degree of structural cohesion is unveiled. [FN](#)

The predominant manner of presentation of the sets is in pairs, as in the beginning. In the course of the Prelude, six such combinations occur – shown in [Table 6](#), together with the implicit hexachordal pairing. Out of a total of forty-four occurrences of paired set statements, of the six pairs of sets the first is encountered most often, appearing sixteen times, the second and third combinations occur ten times each, the fourth five times, the fifth twice, and the last appears only once. The symmetry of the three distinct hexachordal arrangements is striking. The homogeneity of the last combination, in particular, is so complete – the same set appears four times – that it accounts, perhaps, for its infrequent use.

Considering the synchronicity of the parallel projection of sets, it will not be surprising that the examination of the sets that are derived from superimposed segments of the original eight yields similarly uniform findings. Looking at the initial – and most prominent – first four pairs, the superimposition of trichordal segments results in one tetrachord and seven hexachords (shown in [Table 7](#)). Four of the hexachords are new (6-Z3, 6-Z44, 6-12, 6-Z13), although these feature in subsequent movements. Finally, tetrachordal segments examined in the same manner ([Table 8](#)) exhibit analogous symmetry, with the exception of the combined last segments of Sets Ic and Ig, which produce the set 8-25, rather than the symmetrical 7-15.

[Table 9](#) displays methodological correspondences in the set structure of all four movements of the Suite.

The overall organization is an admirable demonstration of compositional logic and economy, and would certainly satisfy Keller's requisite of 'latent unity'. It would be tempting to proceed to an examination of the local, as well as the broader consequences of Skalkottas's method in set-theoretical terms. For the purposes of the present argument, however, it would be more pertinent to look to the musical surface as perceived by the listener for more evidence of the essential

qualities that Skalkottas and Keller have identified.

The first eight bars ([Ex. 1, bb. 1-8](#)) are of an expository nature. The paired set presentation establishes – and consolidates through repetition – the unified intervallic background, against which the rearrangement of tones and the manipulation of rhythmic figures is perceived as a progressive developmental process when motivic continuity is maintained – in the last beat of bars 1-4, for instance – or as more overtly contrasting, as in subsequent presentations. The opening is characterized by stable dynamics, whilst the chordal configurations remain largely subordinate to the linear movement – which causes such instances to feel stable, as opposed to contrasting or digressing, primarily chordal textures, and dynamic variation.

The first bar carries the main idea, which serves as a unifying agent, reappearing transformed, yet always immediately recognizable, and assigned to the same sets – Ia/Ie rather than the transpositionally equivalent Ic/Ig. Instances when the contour is largely adhered to emphasize the 'similarity' of the statement ([Ex. 2, bb. 1, 9-10, 30, 32, 45, 68-69](#)), whereas more elaborate transformations seem more 'different', and the semiquaver variant, in particular, might seem a secondary idea ([Ex. 3, bb. 5, 7, 22, 26, 28, 41, 55](#)). The fixity of pitch aids recognition and memorability, although the 'thematic' sets are also employed in other contexts. Again, the pitch-classes of discrete sets may be arranged so as to maintain contoural homogeneity and to forge motivic relationships. Finally, whilst rhythmic patterns may be used in a unifying capacity, it is primarily through changes of rhythm, meter and accentuation, together with changes of tempo, register, texture, dynamics and articulation that contrasts are effected, tension is heightened or dissolved, and sections delimited ([Ex. 4, bb. 35-45](#)).

## Footnotes

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- 10 Skalkottas, Musical Article: 'The Power of Symphonic Concerts' [I Dynami ton Symphonikon Synaulion].
- 11 Skalkottas, Musical Articles: 'Compositional Details' [Synthetikai Leptomereiai], 'Orchestration' [I Enorchistrosi], 'Theory and Practice of Musical Rules' [Theoria kai Praxis ton Mousikon Kanonon], 'The School of Modern Composers' [I Scholi ton Modernon Syntheton]; *Treatise on Orchestration*, pp. 1, 43, 46, 47, 49, 50, 56, 59, 40-3. [Back](#)
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29 'Principles of Composition', Keller, *Essays on Music*, p. 215.

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