

“Blues” through the Serial Lens: Transformational Process in a Fragment by Bruno Maderna

by Christoph Neidhöfer

Thanks to his many talents and a multiple career as composer, arranger, conductor, and educator, Bruno Maderna was fluent in a broad range of musical styles, extending from Renaissance polyphony to the latest developments in serial composition. Maderna made use of tonal, modal, neoclassical, and jazz materials as well as dodecaphonic, integral serial, and aleatoric procedures. Not only was he at ease with a large number of individual compositional techniques, he frequently synthesized them. For instance, he often incorporated procedures from tonal and neoclassical music in his serial works and fused jazz and related idioms with serial elements.

Maderna integrated jazz and serialism in a range of genres, from works for the concert stage (e.g., *Dark Rapture Crawl*, 1957) to radiophonic compositions (e.g., *Don Perlimplin*, 1962), film sound tracks, and music for documentaries.¹ The Bruno Maderna Collection of the Paul Sacher Foundation includes a fragment that offers a glimpse into the procedures the composer used to fuse jazz, blues, and serialism. Although incomplete, the sketches of this fragment represent a coherent body of materials consisting of one page of serial derivations (*Example 1*) and eight pages of compositional realizations.² Of these eight pages, five form a continuous draft (not shown here) in which a jazz-like excerpt marked “Moderate Hot” for electric guitar, piano, and double bass is superimposed with a serial contrapuntal texture derived from *Example 1*.³ The remaining three pages, one of which is reproduced in *Example 2*, present three independent and incomplete drafts that realize and expand the serial materials from *Example 1*.⁴

The composer did not attribute any of the nine pages of this fragment to a particular composition or project. A comparison with sketch materials from other jazz-inspired works reveals, however, that the opening gesture in *Example 2* closely resembles the opening of an unpublished, undated, but otherwise complete *Blues* for piano (*Example 3*). In addition, some of the same harmonic and melodic materials also occur in a four-page fragment (not shown here) from his music for a documentary entitled *Rialto*. Neither the names of the producers nor the date of this documentary are known

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Bruno Maderna's "Piece for ensemble" (around 1952). The score is a sketch of serial derivations and includes the following elements:

- Rhythmic Patterns:** At the top, there are rhythmic notations such as $2+$, $3-$, 6 , $4+$, and $7+$ with arrows indicating their placement on a staff.
- Pitch Series:** Two series of notes are shown on staves. The first series is $2+ 3- 4+ 6- 6+ 7+$. The second series is $2+ 3- 4+ 2+ 6+ 3- 7+ 6- 2+ 3- 4+$. A large oval is drawn around the second series.
- Instrumental Parts:** Below the series, there are staves for various instruments with notes and accidentals. Above these staves are some numerical notations like $10 \begin{smallmatrix} 7 \\ 4 \end{smallmatrix}$, $5 \begin{smallmatrix} 3 \\ 11 \end{smallmatrix}$, $12 \begin{smallmatrix} 9 \\ 6 \end{smallmatrix}$, $8 \begin{smallmatrix} 7 \\ 4 \end{smallmatrix}$, $12 \begin{smallmatrix} 9 \\ 6 \end{smallmatrix}$, $8 \begin{smallmatrix} 7 \\ 4 \end{smallmatrix}$, and $12 \begin{smallmatrix} 9 \\ 6 \end{smallmatrix}$.
- Flute Part:** Labeled "serie mel.", it shows a melodic line with notes and accidentals.
- Oboe Part:** Labeled "serie oboe.", it shows a melodic line with notes and accidentals.
- String Part:** Labeled "serie str. ins-mel.", it shows a melodic line with notes and accidentals.
- Formal Elements:** The score includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). There are also some handwritten annotations and a signature.

Example 1: Bruno Maderna, Piece for ensemble (around 1952). Sketch of serial derivations (Bruno Maderna Collection).

A

3
4

Sr.M

Sr.A

Chel

Pf

M

A

sax

chc. - e Pf. Chel sola

Intrusio M → A, A → M

1103
CZVVA

Example 2: Bruno Maderna, Piece for ensemble (around 1952). Realization of “melodic” and “harmonic” series (Bruno Maderna Collection).

(circumstantial evidence suggests 1952).⁵ *Blues* and the nine-page fragment (*Examples 1–2*) may date from the same period.⁶

Blues (*Example 3*) is a non-serial piece of forty-four measures in E minor.⁷ It is probably an original composition as it lacks features characteristic of blues – such as the turn to the subdominant in the fifth measure (or sixth measure if the first measure is a pickup) – essentially rendering “blues” a misnomer. At the same time, the opening motive shows a striking resemblance to the opening motive from the blues tune “If I should lose you” by Wes Montgomery (1923–68).⁸ The first signs of Maderna’s serial reading are evident in measure 5; Arabic numbers indicate the pitch classes used (pitch class *A* is assigned number 1, pitch class *B*, number 2, etc.).

Blues either predates the nine-page fragment partially reproduced in *Examples 1* and *2* or shares with *Example 1* a common source currently unknown. At the top of *Example 1*, Maderna analyzes the interval content of the pitches played by the right hand in measure 1 of *Example 3* (possibly including the $F\sharp^4$ from measure 2).⁹ He measures the intervals diatonically (e.g., in *Example 1* the interval between C^4 and B^4 is labeled a major seventh, “7+,” instead of eleven semitones, etc.). He makes no effort to account for *all* the intervals found in the pitch collection, labeling only six out of the ten intervals. More specifically, he does not label the perfect fourth between B^4 and $F\sharp^4$, thus omitting the only perfect consonance present, but otherwise accounts for each interval size found in the pitch collection exactly once. These intervals are reassembled in succession on the third staff to form a seven-note segment. Overall, the transformation produces a new collection of pitches, but preserves the *directed* intervals, that is, Maderna not only uses the same interval sizes the same number of times but also in the same direction as at the top of the example.¹⁰ The intervals are placed in order of increasing size, forming a wedge that begins from the second pitch, thus ensuring that no pitch class will be repeated. The composer next takes the six types of intervals and strings them together to form a twelve-tone series, shown in the circled area to the right on the third staff. The series starts with the same four pitches as the seven-note segment to the left, but then uses the six intervals in free direction and repetition to complete the aggregate. Maderna has now generated a twelve-tone series from the interval content of the opening of *Blues* (*Example 3*, measure 1, right hand).

On the fifth staff of *Example 1*, he divides the aggregate into four trichords and shows them both in musical and integer notation. The numbers represent the pitch classes of each trichord (e.g., *C*, *E_b*, *G_b* are listed as 4, 7, 10 respectively) and the intervals between adjacent chord members, this time measured in number of semitones, rather than as diatonic intervals (e.g., the two stacked minor thirds in the first trichord are each shown as “3,” not as “3-”). Clearly, a shift from diatonic to chromatic thinking has taken place. Yet the first two trichords are still of diatonic-tonal provenance, as they are taken directly from the opening of *Blues* in *Example 3*, where

Blues f .

Example 3: Bruno Maderna, *Blues* (around 1952). Score, p. [1] (Bruno Maderna Collection).

they occur as the lower trichords of the first two chords in the right hand. On the fifth staff of *Example 1* Maderna has thus generated a partially ordered twelve-tone set (i.e. a succession of four trichords forming the aggregate) from the opening chords of *Blues*. On the sixth staff of *Example 1*, he transposes the four trichords up a semitone and rotates them two positions to the right (or to the left).

In the lower half of *Example 1* Maderna superimposes the serial materials created thus far. The twelve-tone series from the third staff is labeled “melodic series” on the eighth staff (“serie melod.”) and notated above the eight trichords labeled “harmonic series” on the ninth and tenth staves (“serie arm.”). The vertical dotted line separates the two groups of trichords; the first group appears in the same order as earlier – with a few pitches moved to different octaves – whereas the second group is reordered (also with several pitches moved to different octaves). As will become apparent, the composer intends the “harmonic series” to accompany the “melodic series.” This might explain the reordering of the second group of trichords, as the original ordering would have produced a few pitch class duplications with the “melodic series.” On the bottom two staves he reverses the function of the two series, transforming the “melodic series” into a “harmonic”

one (“serie mel. trs-arm”) and vice versa (“serie arm trs-mel.”) with one trichord of the new “harmonic series” accompanying six pitches of the new “melodic series.”¹¹

The draft reproduced in *Example 2* shows the compositional realization. The excerpt begins with the original combination of “melodic” and “harmonic” series, realized in triple meter, followed after the double bar by a version of the combination that exchanges the two series (“Inversio M→A, A→M”). Underneath this serial texture in triple meter, Maderna works out a texture in 4/4-meter for electric guitar (“Chel”), piano, and later saxophone, that is loosely based on the serial harmonic and melodic materials. The result is a quasi-serial texture inspired by jazz and blues created by way of a twofold transformational process: pitch materials from the non-serial *Blues* (or possibly another source) are transformed into abstract serial combinations, which are in turn freely realized in conjunction with newly added rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic features characteristic of jazz and blues.

As the transformational processes documented in *Examples 1* and *2* and elsewhere in his oeuvre confirm, Maderna did not conceive of serialism as a replacement for musical idioms of the past – as many of his contemporaries in the Darmstadt School did – but as a lens through which he viewed and reinterpreted older idioms. For Maderna, serialism was an attitude, a way of thinking, that by no means restricted his musical imagination or stylistic choices.¹² His compositional approach remained flexible and inclusive, incorporating on equal footing with abstract serial structures materials as diverse as jazz harmonies, folk genres, and partisan song melodies.

¹ See Maurizio Romito, “I commenti musicali di Bruno Maderna: radio, televisione, teatro,” *Nuova rivista musicale italiana*, 4 (2000), no. 2, pp. 235–36. Maderna grew up performing as a child prodigy in his father’s jazz band.

² All nine pages use the same kind of music paper (23.5 × 32.5 cm, 12 staves).

³ Each of the five pages – which are labeled A through E in the upper right hand corner – contains six measures in 4/4. Page A carries the indication “Arrangement ①.” Following a double bar at the end of the fourth measure of page C, the non-serial texture continues with a free retrograde of itself, labeled “Arrangement ②Я.” The serial materials starting on page A are notated in a weaker pencil (as is the double bass part) and break off at the end of page B.

⁴ One of the other two drafts contains a passage of six measures in 4/4, marked “Andante scorrevole,” that superimposes the melodic series and its retrograde with the harmonic series of *Example 1* (to be discussed below). The other draft superimposes various transpositions of the opening two chords and melody from *Example 2*, to be scored later for a larger ensemble as Maderna’s instrumental labels indicate.

⁵ See *Bruno Maderna documenti*, ed. by Mario Baroni and Rossana Dalmonte (Milan: Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, 1985), pp. 328–30. The authors conjecture that *Rialto* might be from the same period as another documentary entitled *Porto nel tempo* (1952) and the score for a film entitled *Il moschettiere fantasma* (1952), because the incomplete sets of parts for the three works deposited at SIAE (Società Italiana degli Autori ed Editori) were written by the same copyist. No sketches for the latter two scores are preserved at the Paul Sacher

Foundation. Aside from the incomplete parts, SIAE houses another 11 pages from the autograph score for *Rialto* (ibid.).

⁶ The manuscript of *Blues* is briefly mentioned in *Bruno Maderna documenti* (see note 5), p. 332, and is listed as an independent composition in the inventory of the Bruno Maderna Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, by René Karlen and Maurizio Romito; *Bruno Maderna: Musikmanuskripte (Inventare der Paul Sacher Stiftung, vol. 6)* (Winterthur: Amadeus, 1990), p. 11. Baroni and Dalmonte suggest the early 1960s as a possible date, a time when Maderna made several of his recordings of jazz and other arrangements. Karlen and Romito date the piece “around 1960?”.

⁷ The last twelve measures are in 3/4, entitled “English wals” (*sic*).

⁸ I am indebted to my colleague Gordon Foote from the Jazz Area at McGill University for a stylistic assessment of Maderna’s *Blues* and for drawing my attention to Montgomery’s blues.

⁹ The upper half of *Example 1* is to be read in treble clef.

¹⁰ The top of *Example 1* does not suggest a particular direction for the initial major seventh.

¹¹ In the first half of this new combination, the trichords of the new “harmonic series” do duplicate pitch classes from the new “melodic series.” The duplication is statistically less significant, however, as each of the first two hexachords from the new “melodic series” still contains four or five pitch classes not shared with the corresponding trichord.

¹² See Bruno Maderna, “La révolution dans la continuité,” *Preuves*, 15 (1965), no. 177, pp. 28–9, and Nicola Verzina, *Bruno Maderna: Étude historique et critique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003), pp. 14–5.