

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Symphony No. 1: Developing Variation in the 1980s

Julie Schnepel

In 1983, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich became the first woman composer to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in music for her Symphony No. 1 (1982), originally titled "Three Movements for Orchestra." This work was commissioned jointly by the American Composers Orchestra and the National Endowment for the Arts, although she began the piece before she actually received the commission. The American Composers Orchestra, conducted by Gunther Schuller, premiered the symphony on May 5, 1982.

Critical response to Zwilich and the symphony has been positive and comments have focused on the "decidedly romantic" and immediate appeal of her music.¹ The tonal idiom of the symphony and the use of principles of thematic contrast and return reveal its debt to 19th-century musical traditions. However, Zwilich does not merely pour pseudo-tonal contents into a pre-cast form. Rather, she takes the concepts of traditional formal models and molds them through constant manipulation and organic development of thematic materials. Even the tonality evolves organically out of

¹For a brief summary of attempts to categorize Zwilich's music, see Ken Terry, "Ellen Taaffe Zwilich," *BMI: The Many Worlds of Music* Issue No. 2 (1983): 46.

the thematic content. One can invoke Schoenberg's concept of "developing variation" to describe the principal compositional process of the symphony.² Zwilich begins with a limited amount of material, most of which is presented within the first 15 bars of the piece, and elaborates upon it throughout the three movements, creating a large-scale unified work.

Almost every musical parameter is affected by this organic approach to composition, including harmony, rhythm and tempo, melody, and orchestration. This paper focuses on the manipulation of pitch materials in both melodic and harmonic structures (using both tonal and non-tonal approaches to pitch), and the effect of this organic process on overall form. The author has found that a complementary application of both pitch class and motivic transformation analysis allows one to identify the unifying aspects in the realm of pitch as well as the less readily analyzed realms of rhythm, articulation, and contour. Thus, one may account, at least in part, for the aural impact of the piece, an aspect of central concern to Zwilich.

Form

Zwilich successfully integrates formal procedures based on traditional concepts of departure by contrast and return with a process of continuous variation in such a way that thematic recurrence is recognizable, though rarely exact. The first movement, the least conventional in formal design, is in two parts, the first of which is marked by a series of *accelerandi* building to the second part, an Allegro. The principle of developing variation operates in this movement as the primary formal process. More attention will be devoted to this movement and to the organic process below. She casts the other two movements in traditional molds (song form in

²For a brief summary of Schoenberg's concept, see Walter Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*, California Studies in Nineteenth-Century Music, 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

movement II and rondo form in movement III), both of which involve thematic repetition.³

Her use of the label "song form" (ternary or ABA) for the second movement may be intended to underline the lyrical, often vocal quality of this movement. She creates contrast in the middle section (mm.32-53) through a marked change in character from the lyrical, tranquil opening A section to a highly dramatic recitative-like section. Contributing to the sense of urgency in this B section are the quickly arpeggiated harp chords, the unison strings (playing on the G-string), the accumulation of sound in vertical structures (building to the climax in mm.48-53 where an 8-note sonority is sustained), and the interruptions by quotations from the first movement (mm.22-25, 35-38) and by the wind "solo" (mm.41-47), a "calm before the storm" of the ultimate climactic section of this movement.

Example 1a. Movement II, mm.56-73, violin I



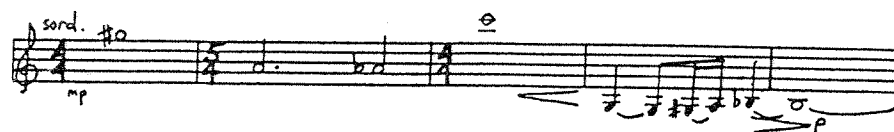
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The tranquility of the opening A section is only partially recaptured in the return of A at m.54. The minor third (C-sharp4–E4) that opened the movement has been altered to include both the minor and major third (C5–E-flat5–E4). The timbral character of this sustained third has changed subtly from the soft tones of the vibraphone and muted violas and cellos to the brighter sound of muted trumpets mixed with the flute and piccolo in their lower registers. The theme of the A section appears in a varied restatement (mm.56-67) a major seventh higher, with an extension shared by the crotales. See Example 1a. This extension floats higher, seemingly indefinite in pitch and rhythmic direction, while the

³She uses these labels in the preface to the score, *Symphony No. 1* (Newton Centre, MA: Margun Music, 1983), 2.

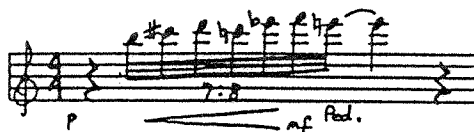
original theme, shown in Example 1b, falls into the lower register and closes with a clearly defined rhythmic figure.

Example 1b. Movement II, mm.3-7, violin II

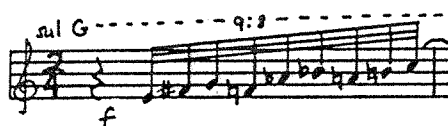


Example 2. Transformations of Septuplet Figure in Movement II. 2a) m.14, vibraphone; 2b) m.29, violin I; 2c) m.62, violin I.

a) m. 14, Vibraphone



b) m. 29, Violin I



c) m. 62, Violin I



The various characters of this movement may be traced by observing the transformations of the septuplet figure that occurs in all three sections. See Example 2. In m.14, the vibraphone plays this figure supported by a 4-note sonority (0,2,5,7) in the strings, as indicated in Example 2a. The septuplet appears twice in the string recitative, once (extended to nine notes) in m.29 (Example 2b) accompanied by the harp on a 5-note sonority (0,2,4,6,9), and again in m.40 with a 6-note sonority (0,2,3,4,6,9) sustained in the brass. In the return of the A section, the septuplet is transformed, not only by the addition of crotales to the theme and the augmentation of note values (Example 2c), but also by the change in interval pattern.

The rondo form of the third movement does not conform to the classical rondo model where the A material typically returns in the tonic key. As Diagram 1 shows, the A section appears four times, of which the first (mm.1-78) and third (mm.137-205) statements are the longest. The brief second A section (mm.95-123) presents fragments of the original: the use of the timpani in mm.95-99 clearly recalls the opening of the movement (even though the pitch differs); the arpeggiated theme in mm.104-106 outlines not only the same sonority (0,1,3,5,6,8) as that of mm.8-10 but the same pitches as well (the orchestration has changed from winds to brass); and an altered form of one of the principal motives of the A section appears in m.113. The final A section, also brief, functions as a coda, rounding off the movement with a return (in m.209) of the timpani at its opening pitch level (A-flat3) and a subsequent rounding off of the whole symphony by the rather immediate shift down to A2 in m.213.

Diagram 1. Formal Design of Movement III

	A	B	A	C	A	(B)	A
mm.	1	79	95	124	137	206	209

The longer third A section (mm.137-205) follows the structure and repeats almost exactly the succession of motivic ideas in mm.17-78 at a pitch level up a perfect fifth. The motives retain the same intervallic content as do the vertical sonorities. In fact, the only variation takes the form of subtle changes in orchestration, especially the reinforcement of key motives by the flute and/or piccolo (mm.139-42, m.146), or brass (m.151) and the rescoring for winds of chords previously sustained by the brass (compare mm.50-65 to mm.170-85). In some cases, the trumpet plays material that was played by the bassoon in the opening section producing a brighter timbral quality (compare mm.46-49 to mm.166-69 and mm.62-65 to mm.182-85).

The B section (mm.78-94) provides a complete contrast by the dramatic change in texture and timbre (violin harmonics doubled by

the orchestra bells) and the suspension of rhythmic activity. The character of this section is evoked again in mm.206-208 by the reappearance of the orchestra bells and by the sudden interruption of the activity with the fermatas. This passage could also be viewed as an extension of the articulation at m.78. The listener anticipates the return of B (thus, B is in parentheses in Diagram 1), but A returns instead.

The C section, a quotation from the first movement, also contrasts with the prevailing rhythmic activity in its shift from ternary to binary pulses (6/8 to 2/4 meter) and in the tempo change (from ♩ = ca. 144 to ♩ = 72). Zwilich makes a smooth transition to this section with the *rallentando molto* that accompanies a varied presentation of a motive from the first movement (referred to below as motive z), in which the pulses are grouped in twos (mm.117-23).⁴

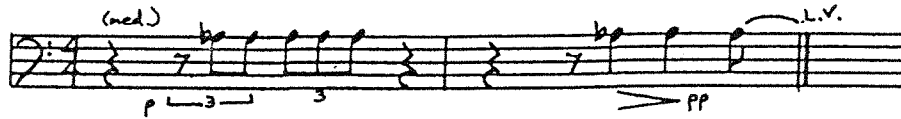
Thus, the type of contrast associated with these formal molds is achieved by change of character, timbre, and rhythmic activity, and thematic recurrence is accompanied by variation of one or more parameters. Even the most exact repetition of thematic material (the third A section of movement III) has been carefully shaded with different orchestral timbres.

In two instances, the contrasting sections of movements II and III include a direct quotation from the opening measures of the first movement: the B section of movement II (two brief quotes) and the C section of movement III. Even in this context of large-scale cyclic return of thematic material, variation plays a role. For example, the quotation in movement III (mm.124-28) is based on mm.2-6 of movement I: the scoring duplicates the *divisi* violas (doubled by harp) and the cello response, but the wind doubling is missing; the initial tempo marking is the same, but it does not include the *accelerando*; the pitch classes are the same, but sound an octave lower; and a sustained D-sharp⁷ in the violins has been added. Nevertheless, these quotations contribute to the overall unity of the symphony.

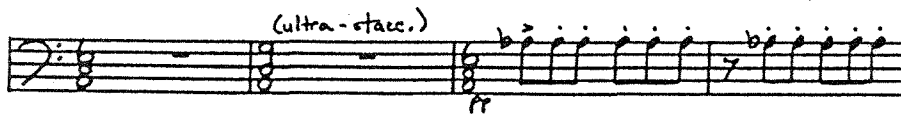
⁴Compare this passage to mm.9-12 of movement I.

Example 3. Connection between Movements II and III. 3a) Movement II, mm.66-67, timpani; 3b) Movement III, mm.1-4, timpani.

a) Movement II, mm. 66-67, Timpani



b) Movement III, mm. 1-4, Timpani



The work is also unified by immediate links between movements, these connections being harmonic, rhythmic, and timbral in nature. The minor third (C-sharp4–E4) sustained by the violas and cellos and articulated by the harp in mm.235-43 of movement I is the same interval (at the same pitch level) that begins movement II, here sustained by muted violas and cellos and articulated by vibraphone. The timpani provides the link between movements II and III, the former ending on A-flat3 and the latter beginning on the same A-flat3, the former even anticipating the rhythm of the latter. Examples 3a and 3b show the connection between the two movements.

Thematic/Organic Unity

Although the direct quotations and links between movements contribute to the overall design of the symphony, Zwilich goes much further in creating a large-scale unified composition by the organic development of thematic materials. As she states in the preface to the score:

Throughout the entire symphony, the melodic and harmonic implications of the first fifteen bars of the first movement are explored. My aim was to create a rich

harmonic palette and a wide variety of melodic gestures, all emanating from a simple source.⁵

The key element of this "simple source" is the interval of a third in both its major and minor inflections, which may also be represented by the set type (0,1,4). This set is a crucial component of both horizontal and vertical structures throughout the work.⁶

Example 4. Movement I, mm.1-3—x motive in the violas.



The minor third (A4—C4) appears first in a "tolling" motive (labelled x) with an anacrustic rhythm (a short pick-up to a long note), as shown in Example 4. This motive establishes the tonal center of the work (A) and suggests the modal identification as minor; however, the x motive becomes part of the (0,1,4) structure which implies a combined major and minor modality. The tonal implications of the x motive and the (0,1,4) set are dramatically established in m.16 where A major and A minor are mixed, the low instruments on motive x (C-sharp3—E3) alternating with violins and viola on a compound version of x (A3—C5). See Example 5.

As shown in Example 6a, the (0,1,4) set first appears in mm.3-4 when motive x (A4—C5) is joined by its upper and lower neighbor notes (C-sharp4 and G-sharp4). This results in a vertical structure containing two (0,1,4) sets within a larger composite (0,1,4,5) set, or

⁵Zwilich, preface, 2.

⁶A previous encounter with this set was mentioned in the discussion of the varied return of the A section in movement II at m.54, where the opening minor third (C-sharp4—E4) was altered to include the major third as well (C5—E-flat5—E4).

Example 5. Movement I, mm.16-17

two major thirds in the span of a perfect fourth. See Example 6b.

Example 6. Movement I. 6a) mm.3-5, violas and cellos; 6b) composite set (0,1,4,5) with embedded (0,1,4) sets.

b)

Another version of two embedded (0,1,4) sets, this time combining as (0,1,3,4), appears in mm.7-10 (Example 7a) played by the harp/english horn and flute/oboe in a motive which figures promi-

nently throughout the movement, here labelled y. As shown in Example 7b, the motive contains two minor thirds (or their compounds) in the span of a major third. The rhythm of this version of y continues in the anacrusic pattern of motive x; thus, this y motive may be viewed as the combination of two x motives. Later in the piece, y will adopt its own rhythmic character. In mm.9-10, the overlapping minor thirds are presented in linear form (motive z), one minor third ascending stepwise from G3 to B-flat3, the other falling by leap (a compounded minor third) from B-natural4 to G-sharp3. See Example 8a. The clarinet and english horn answer this motive with a slightly reordered version in mm.10-11 (the notes of the second minor third are reversed). This is demonstrated in Example 8b.

Example 7. Movement I. 7a) mm.7-10, English horn and oboe—y motive; 7b) Components of the y motive.

One other component of these opening fifteen measures which should be mentioned is the theme in mm.13-15 (Example 9a), which may be viewed as the source of the lyrical theme in movement II. Refer back to Example 1b. It also reappears at the end of movement I (mm.227-33) where it has been transformed from the passionate outburst of mm.13-15 to a warm, resigned statement in the cellos. See Example 9b. Like other examples of thematic recurrence, this return is marked not only by a change in character, but also by a change in rhythmic values and timbre.

Example 8. Movement I—z motive. 8a) mm.9-10, violin I; 8b) mm.10-11, Reordered z motive, English horn.

a)



b)

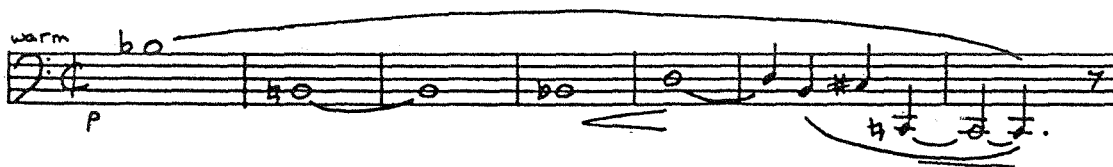


Example 9. Movement I. 9a) mm.13-15, violin I; 9b) mm.227-33, cello.

a)



b)



These first fifteen measures provide the basic materials upon which the entire symphony is based, their "melodic and harmonic implications" being developed most extensively in the first movement. As previously mentioned, the first section of this movement (mm.1-77) features a series of *accelerandi* which increase the tempo from $\text{♩} = 36$ to $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 124$ at the opening of the Allegro (m.78). The *accelerando* is indicated each time the x motive appears and, thus, functions not only in the structural design of the movement, but also in the organic development of this motive. The opening bars (mm.1-7) recur twice in this section, each time with a different character resulting from the accelerated tempo and from timbral and

motivic manipulation. In mm.46-53, the trumpets play the x motive (F-sharp5–A5), but the answering motive (played by piccolo, flute and violins) does not consist of the upper and lower neighbors of this motive. Rather, they play another minor third (F6–A-flat6), thus recalling the y motive. See Example 10. The second reference to the opening, in mm.57-65, retains the intervallic content (the x motive plus its upper and lower neighbors), but displays a much more aggressive character due to the rescoring for brass and the faster tempo. See Example 11. It is this version of the theme which is quoted in movement II (mm.22-24).

Example 10. Movement I, mm.46-48 (picc., fl., tpt.)—x motive

Throughout the first part of the first movement, the three principal motives (x, y, and z) appear in various combinations and transformations and generate almost all thematic material. A complete account of all the appearances of these motives would be tedious; therefore, this discussion will focus primarily on the transformations of the y motive. The impact of this motive and its many different transformations cannot be accounted for solely through analysis of pitch materials. Zwilich manipulates various elements of the y motive, including its interval content; yet, somehow, it is still aurally identifiable as a transformation of this motive.

As previously mentioned, the y motive consists of two minor thirds within the span of a major third. See Example 7. Its first appearance in mm.8-10 is somewhat concealed due to the simultaneous entrance of motive z and also due to its rhythmic similarity to motive x. In m.26, motive y is transformed and displays its own rhythmic identity and articulation (staccato eighth notes). See

Example 11. Movement I, mm.57-59 (brass)—x motive

Example 12a. The contour has changed but the interval content, two overlapping minor thirds or set type (0,1,3,4), remains the same. Refer to Example 12b. In m.35, another transformation of this motive retains the rhythm and contour of the version from m.26, but changes interval content and articulation (accents rather than staccato). See Example 13. Several other occurrences of this motive illustrate the changes in interval content (m.52, m.67, mm.70-72) and contour (m.73).

Example 12. Movement I. 12a) m.26—y motive; 12b)
Components of y (m.26).

a)

b)

The y motive continues to function as a key element of the Allegro; however, it returns to its original intervallic structure (0,1,3,4), appearing primarily with the staccato articulation. The

contour varies, the most common contour being that of m.114 (Example 14a) where the second minor third is below the first. In m.125, shown in Example 14b, the second minor third is above the first. The contour reminiscent of the transformed y motive from m.26 returns in m.126 (Example 14c), although the second major seventh is inverted. In all of these transformations, the y motive retains the (0,1,3,4) interval structure.

Example 13. Movement I, m.35 (piccolo)



Example 14. Movement I—Transformations of y motive. 14a) mm.114-15, piano; 14b) m.125, basses; 14c) m.126, flute; 14d) m.131, violas.

a) b)

c) d)

Another version of y in m.131, seen in Example 14d, reveals an important variation of interval content, where the second third is compressed to a major second creating an (0,1,2,4) set. This transformation appears only once in the first movement, but figures prominently in the third movement (maintaining its rhythmic integrity of duples within the context of triples) where it undergoes further transformations. (See, for instance, m.14 and m.46 of movement III).

Example 15. Movement I, mm.78-85 (brass)—Allegro

The musical score for Example 15 shows the brass instruments (Horn, Trumpet, Trombone, and Tuba) playing the principal theme of the Allegro movement. The score is written in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Horn and Trumpet parts are marked with dynamics like *ff* and *f*. The Trombone and Tuba parts are marked with dynamics like *ff* and *f*. The score includes a $(0,1,4)$ framework annotation above the first three notes of the theme in the Horn part and below the first three notes of the Trombone part. The score is written in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#).

The principal theme of the Allegro, shown in Example 15, is derived from the $(0,1,4)$ framework of the linear z motive, the first three notes of this theme even displaying the same leap of a minor ninth. See Example 8a. In fact, it is the first three-note segment $(0,1,4)$ of this theme which dominates the Allegro in both horizontal and vertical structures. The theme is accompanied by the harmonic version of this $(0,1,4)$ motive in the trombones in mm.81-85 and in the trumpet and trombones in mm.88-91.

The rhythm of this opening motive is changed to sixteenth notes in m.86 and, in a fragmented version, in m.92, and to eighth notes in m.100 and mm.106-107. These latter two examples include an extension that develops the minor ninth interval. See Example 16. It is this extension which provides the motivic material for the coda (especially mm.214-38). The character of the $(0,1,4)$ motive is

Example 16. Movement I, mm.100-102, (violin I)



altered in m.116 due to the different articulation, rhythm, and the use of the G-string for the entire passage. See Example 17.

Example 17. Movement I, mm.116-18 (violin I)



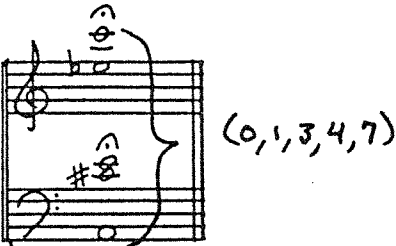
All the significant transformations are introduced before m.132, a turning point in the Allegro, after which there is a brief transition (mm.132-42), followed by a recapitulation of ideas (in reorganized order) and of the "tonic" key.⁷ Although the double return of the first theme of the Allegro in the tonic key does not occur until m.172, slightly varied segments of the first part of the Allegro return prior to this point. Upon comparing mm.143-157 to mm.99-113 and mm.162-71 to mm.114-23, one observes that there are some subtle differences in orchestration and that the key differs, but the succession of ideas is essentially the same. The basic materials are not being developed, just restated.

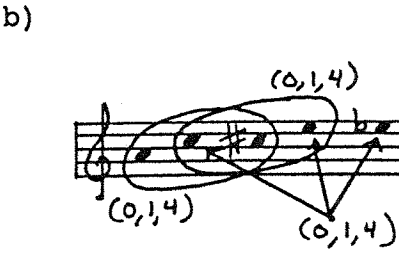
The end of the first movement not only realizes the harmonic implications of the opening but also foreshadows events of subsequent movements. As shown in Example 18a, the final sonority of the movement (0,1,3,4,7) features both the major and minor modes of the A tonality of the symphony (A3, C6, C-sharp4 and E4), and contains several (0,1,4) sets. In addition, the slow portamento of the

⁷The term "recapitulation" is not used here to imply a sonata design for this movement, or even for the Allegro. It merely refers to the restatement of materials with little or no development and only subtle variations.

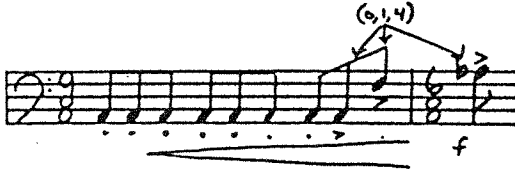
first violin up to the "dissonant" E-flat5 provides yet another (0,1,4) set (C6–E-flat5–E4). See Example 18b. Recall that this is the same set which introduces the varied return of the A section in movement II (m.54).

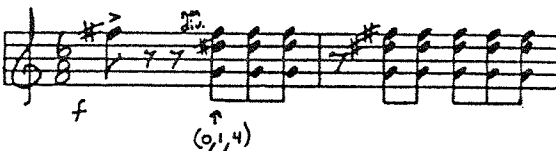
Example 18. Movement I—Final Sonority. 18a) m.243; 18b) Components of Final Sonority.

a) 

b) 

Example 19. Movement III. 19a) mm.16-17, timpani—(0,1,4) motive; 19b) mm.29-30, violin II—(0,1,4) verticalized.

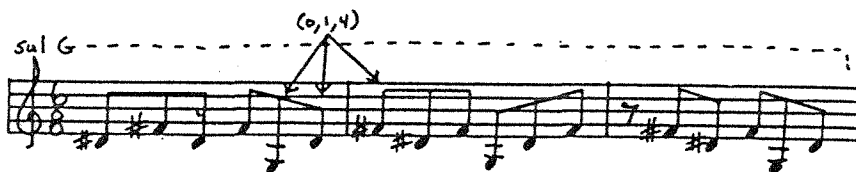
a) 

b) 

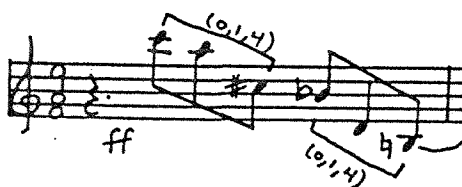
The (0,1,4) set also forms the basis of motivic material in movement III, especially the motive first introduced in mm.16-17 in the timpani (Example 19a) and its vertical form, first seen in m.29 in the second violins. See Example 19b. Both of these forms hark back to their models, the theme and its accompaniment, in the Allegro of movement I (mm.78-85). Refer to Example 15. The (0,1,4) motive is also found as a variation on the characteristic rocking-third accompaniment in movement III in mm.43-45 (Exam-

Example 20. Movement III. 20a) mm.43-45, violin I accompaniment figure; 20b) m.35, violin I—(0,1,4) retrograde.

a)



b)



ple 20a) and appears in retrograde as a linking device in m.35 (Example 20b). Many of the key structural articulations of movement III feature the vertical (0,1,4) sonority, played by the tubular bells in m.78 and m.123 and by the orchestral bells, trumpets and winds in mm.206-207 (Example 21).

Example 21. Movement III, mm.206-207 (orchestra bells)



Thus, the three principal motives of the opening of the symphony and their transformations throughout the work are all generated from the (0,1,4) set as are the key harmonic events. Zwilich subjects this basic unit to the same process of "developing variation" described by Schoenberg in his essay on Bach, a statement which just as appropriately describes the principal compositional process of the Symphony No. 1:

. . .variation of the features of a basic unit produces all the thematic formulations which provide for fluency, con-

trasts, variety, logic and unity on the one hand, and character, mood, expression, and every needed differentiation, on the other hand—thus elaborating the ideas of the piece.⁸

⁸Schoenberg, quoted by Walter Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*, 1-2.