Old School for the New School: Discussing the Importance of Motown Records in American Music History

Crystal Darcell Birdsong

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations

Part of the Composition Commons

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/4868

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
OLD SCHOOL FOR THE NEW SCHOOL: DISCUSSING THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTOWN RECORDS IN AMERICAN MUSIC HISTORY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Music

by

Crystal Darcell Birdsong
B.M., Centenary College of Louisiana, 2012
M.M. Louisiana State University, 2016
May 2019
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank Dr. Dinos Constantinides, who has provided a stellar academic experience for me from start to finish, as well as pushing me to be a better composer and scholar each and every day. I would also like to thank Professor Michael Gurt for shaping me into a better pianist and performer, as well as providing insight and encouragement every step of the way. A special thank you goes out to Dr. Alison McFarland for being a most excellent example of representation, and reminding me that I can one day go above and beyond in the world of academia just by being myself. I would also like to thank Dr. Carmela Mattza for your positive feedback and encouragement. Lastly, I would like to thank God for my incredibly gracious and loving parents. I am not the person I am today without the love and support that blooms from them. I am a strong, proud, African American woman because they raised me to be. I am forever grateful.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS...........................................................................................................ii

ABSTRACT............................................................................................................................iv

CHAPTER 1. MYSTERY SYMPHONY NO. 1 BY CRYSTAL BIRDSONG.........................................................1

CHAPTER 2. INTRODUCTION AND BRIEF COMPARISON OF TWO NOT SO DISTANT WORLDS..............................................................68

CHAPTER 3. THE SCHOOL THAT PAVED THE WAY.........................................................72

CHAPTER 4. THE INCEPTION OF MOTOWN’S VOICE...............................................80

CHAPTER 5. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION WITHIN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT.........................................................86

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION AND FINAL REMARKS.......................................................92

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....................................................................................................................94

VITA..................................................................................................................................96
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to look at the contribution of Motown Records within music history and American history, as well as why it should be of great importance to those who study 20th century music. It tends to be overlooked in the world of academia, despite efforts to bring the subject to the forefront of today’s classwork and courses at the collegiate level. It is not so much that it does not exist, but it is not nearly as prevalent as it should be, seeing as its contribution to music history and history in general is so innovative. The goal is to find parallels between this subject matter and that which is heavily discussed in academia: Schoenberg and his cultural contribution to 20th century music. It is extremely important that his methods of composition and cultural background be discussed. However, if similarities are made and proven that certain struggles are apparent, and that art was the means to break those molds, then it would be a step in the direction.
CHAPTER 1. MYSTERY SYMPHONY NO. 1 BY CRYSTAL BIRDSONG

The Mystery Symphony No.1 is a body of work that was influenced by bridging the gap between multiple influences. The main influences for this piece include the flare of Ludwig van Beethoven, Edward Elgar, and Igor Stravinsky. There are also subtle hints of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s Scheherazade. The inspiration of Beethoven was acquired by studying various works, specifically his piano sonatas through years of piano research. One thing Beethoven is admired for is the subtle changes he makes in the recapitulation sections of his works. They are not always full on variations, but the changes (key structure, slight rhythmic changes, addition of a coda, etc.) are a nod to the original exposition. This symphony is mostly a free form, but there is a reinstatement of the “exposition” in the “recapitulation” section at the end. Edward Elgar’s influence is shaped by the Enigma Variations. The entire piece itself is not in fact a variation, but it was always believed that a hidden message or theme took residence within Elgar’s varied masterpiece. Because scholars are not one-hundred percent sure just what the hidden message could be, it could also be interpreted as an “enigma.” Furthermore, one of the enigmas in this symphony includes a few musical homages, or “nods” to other famous pieces if observed. The most obvious enigma is Igor Stravinsky’s Dance of The Adolescents from the ballet, Rite of Spring. That is not to say that it quotes Rite of Spring, but it provides a satirical approach to the era in which it was written. The rest of the enigmas within the piece remain hidden, which bows its head to honor Elgar’s Enigma Variations. Rimsky-Korsakov’s influence is mentioned because of the similar tonal and rhythmic relation between the first movement of the Scheherazade. Again, nothing is actually quoted from these great works; it simply honors them in a satirical way. That is a huge part of the enigma. Mystery Symphony No. 1 is 20 minutes in length. Instrumentation is as follows:
Piccolo
Flutes 1 and 2
Oboe 1 and 2
English Horn
Bb Clarinets 1 and 2
Bass Clarinet
Bassoons 1 and
Contrabassoon
Horns in F 1 and 2, 3 and 4
Trumpets in C 1 and 2
Trombones 1 and 2
Tuba
Timpani
Percussion (Large gong, snare drum, triangle)
Harp
Piano
Violins 1 and 2
Violas 1 and 2
Cello
Contrabass
CHAPTER 2. INTRODUCTION AND BRIEF COMPARISON OF TWO NOT SO DISTANT WORLDS

When researcher dives into the topic of 20\textsuperscript{th} century music, one would immediately reference one of the most affective blueprints of modern music: \textit{The Second Viennese School}. If quantitative research on music students at the collegiate level of their studies in regards to music history is taking place, a deduction could be made that 20\textsuperscript{th} century music could not be properly taught without mentioning the era of the Second Viennese school.\textsuperscript{1} Technique, sound, and a rich history of the composers that made the Second Viennese School possible is one of many paths that help shape and bridge the gap between music history, music theory, and music composition.\textsuperscript{2} How could this be compared to a later, but distinct sound of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century within another culture? How can the rhythmically rich and unique sound of Motown fit into music history and composition today?

The purpose of this study is to take a look at Motown Records and view it as a viable subject of study within composition and music history because of its contribution to an entire culture, much like what Schoenberg did with the Second Viennese School. Also, it is important to look at Motown Records and its place in 20\textsuperscript{th} century music history.

What exactly is the “Motown sound?” How is that sound organized and can it be organized? How does it stand out? Unfortunately, due to the cultural majority that is immersed within Motown Records, it could be believed that some perceive it as something that is not important enough to study or review. It is not just because it is linked to what others believe to be as popular music. This is certainly not the case. The argument made is to prove that just

\textsuperscript{1} Smith, Joan A. \textit{Schoenberg and His Circle: a Viennese Portrait}. Schirmer Books. Pg. 15

\textsuperscript{2} Smith, P. pg. 21
historical context alone would worth exploring, as well as Motown Record’s contribution to a very specific era in the 20th century. Scholars have many examples of musical schools of sound and tonality, considering the great success of research involved with the Second Viennese School. To a researcher, this should be an excellent place to start, as well as format characteristics of how tonality and traits of a time period are organized. Because of this potential model, one can deduce that this model could shape other possible traits unique to not only musicality itself, but an entire culture.³ Although some strides have been taken on the subject matter, the same rules should be applied to Motown Records, as well as expressing its importance and place in American Music History.

The opportunity to look at Motown Records in the 20th century (specifically in the late 60’s, early 70’s) and view it as one of the greatest culture movements in the 20th century also immerses itself into African American history and culture, therefore should be included in American music history as a whole.⁴ One of the main objectives includes studying the culture surrounding the “Motown Sound” and its legacy.⁵ The legacy itself is something that is of great importance to not only American culture of the 20th century, but specifically the African American culture. Motown Records is more than a record studio. It has birthed some of the greatest tonal structure and composers of the 20th century, and an even more important message of individuality and boldness.

The study takes a look at the Second Viennese school of the early 20th century and see how it is structured, seeing as it was a successful model for outlining not only the prolific

⁵ Singleton, Pg. 254
composers involved, but their distinct characteristics of sound. Furthermore, a brief look will be taken at Arnold Schoenberg himself, as his journey to America. Then, it can be concluded that it goes beyond music theory. It is simply a legacy that Schoenberg left behind because of its culture history. There is a parallel that can be made from Arnold Schoenberg’s story of freedom of expression and that of Motown Records. This explanation will help bridge the gap between the uniqueness and importance of Schoenberg’s Second Viennese School and the freedom that Motown Records offered its artist, especially throughout the decade of the Civil Rights movement. Thus, through looking at the composers of the early 20th century, the study will also focus on the composers of the mid-20th century, specifically those involved heavily with Motown Records and its legacy. Unlike the Second Viennese School, there is no real way to narrow down just three main composers to describe the sound. Instead, one should narrow down the unique sound and message that was produced by many who are linked to the iconic “Motown Sound.”

A look into the world of Motown Records would mean to look at its history in depth. It is an opportunity to bridge worlds that, at first glance, would not have much in common, but in fact are more related than one might think. Discussing the groundwork for 20th century music should include the importance of Motown Records and its overall message to the world. Pointing out the strong need for musical expression and bravery from Schoenberg and his experience of escape could help aid in the importance of the innovation of Motown Records and what it meant to an entire culture, which was also fighting for freedom.

---

CHAPTER 3. THE SCHOOL THAT PAVED THE WAY

To utter the worlds “Schoenberg was a genius” is a grand understatement. It can easily be argued that one of the most influential composers of the early twentieth century is in fact Arnold Schoenberg. The contribution made to the world of music history within that era is vast, and fortunately, still taught in universities around the world today. The Second Viennese School was credited to the great Arnold Schoenberg, along with his pupils Anton Webern and Alban Berg. Various labels to what academia typically describes as the Second Viennese school includes Young Viennese School, the Twelve-Tone School, the Central European Group, the Schoenberg School, or the Atonal School. It serves an even greater purpose, not just because of the theoretical techniques that have paved the way for many theorists and composers alike, but it shows the resilience of Schoenberg and his fellow pupils and colleagues fighting for their freedom to stay alive and create.

With the Second Viennese School came a series of new ideas of composing for that particular time period. Arnold Schoenberg is credited as the creator of what music scholars would call the Twelve Tone method, which would be somewhat of a far cry from some of Schoenberg’s earlier (and still very important) works, such as “Transfigured Night.” Figure 1 is one example of many works composed by Schoenberg that includes chromaticism. Figure 2 is an example of a urtext of “Transfigured Night,” or “Verklärte Nacht.” These two examples are depicted in a way to show the stages and evolution of Schoenberg’s style of composition over a span of about a decade. For what researchers throughout the years would clearly consider twelve tone characteristics, it is important to note historical context for the years

8 Ibid., 3
in which Op. 19 would have been written. According to first person accounts and letter accumulated over the years, Schoenberg was slowly creating a personal library for himself.\footnote{Stuckenschmidt, pg. 183} Infused with the planning of free concerts around this estimated time, he would begin extending his catalogue of books, perhaps as a form of therapy from the previous time period before or around Op. 19 was completed. This is important to note because of the social climate and change that perhaps influenced him to continue with atonality for this work.\footnote{Stickenschmidt, pg. 181}

Discussing twelve tone and the Second Viennese school would be remiss without discussing its influence from Vienna in general. Vienna as a whole was not merely a location, it set the precedent for how the school of sound would be organized culturally.\footnote{Simms, pg. 23} Bryan R. Simms, author of “Schoenberg, Berg, And Webern,” discusses in his literary companion how Schoenberg really regarded Vienna and his roots to the musically historic location, saying, “Let us show the world that music, if nothing else, would not have advanced if it had not been for the Austrians, and that we know what the next step must be.”\footnote{Simms, pg 23}

This profound quote was taken from a letter written to Josef Hauf in 1923, in which he expressed his concern and opinion for what would be considered new music on a scale of national identity.\footnote{Simms, pg 23} It is important to note the contrast between this quote and some of the hardships that all members of the Second Viennese School itself. There was a constant struggle between the revolution of evolving compositional techniques and the idea of traditions passed down through the “first” Viennese School.\footnote{Idib., 22}
Figure 1. First movement of the “6 Little Piano Pieces” by Arnold Schoenberg (1913)
Figure 2. A holograph manuscript of “Verklärte Nacht, Op. 4 (1899)
Figure 3. A generic and original twelve tone row by Crystal Birdsong

Figure 3 is an example of pitches chosen at random. As stated, any of these pitches can appear in any way, shape, or form throughout a body of work based on Schoenberg’s method. It is only successful when absolutely no pitches are available to be repeated in the original tone row. This further proves that any tone row with pitches selected at random can create a new composition depending on the many combinations and key structures, as well as how they’re presented within a work. This method would go on to become one of the most innovated ways of composing throughout the early 20th century. It would later be adapted by Schoenberg’s pupils, Berg and Webern. In today’s methods of composing, one of the most functioning and plausible ways to compose successfully and efficiently.
This not only shows the influence of Schoenberg’s theory methods, but it also shows Berg’s personal style of composing. When played on an instrument, it almost does not seem to have the “traditional” sound of a twelve tone because it imitates tonal qualities, which is what makes this row so unique. However, some would argue that the Second Viennese School was sometimes viewed as problematic due to the personality clashes of Schoenberg and his pupils Webern and Berg. Berg was actually the only one of the three who was a lifelong citizen of Vienna. The other two traveled mostly, with Schoenberg travelling more within the last decade or so of Berg’s life.\textsuperscript{15}

However, Schoenberg always had ties to the non-musical, including his getting acquainted with the poet Karl Klaus. Before the war began, Klaus found ways to attack the propaganda by using satire in his writing, in hopes that corruption within politics would be unveiled to the public eye.\textsuperscript{16} Unfortunately, this would not solve all of the cultural problems and relationships that would soon come with the reign of Hitler.

The lectures and performance tours of Schoenberg would briefly come to a halt. Schoenberg would later discover around 1933 an insanely impactful shift in his life and career. This would mark the year of Adolf Hitler and his power.\textsuperscript{17} Although the inception of World

\textsuperscript{15} Smith, J. pg. 23  
\textsuperscript{16} Smith, J. pg. 22  
\textsuperscript{17} Stuckenschmidt, pg. 365
War II was not until 1939, Arnold Schoenberg became more vocal about the “Horror Propaganda” he witnessed due to his cultural background. Of course, he was warned by Kolisch, his brother-in-law, not to use certain rhetoric depicting his disgust for the mistreatment of people with Jewish heritage. There was a reasonable fear that Schoenberg could lose his entire family, as well as his own life, simply for standing firm on his beliefs. In the days of the Prussian Academy of Arts, there were obvious conflicting views between artists and residence alike due to the rise of Hitler. The president of the academy at the time, Max von Schillings, was a composer who declared himself an anti-Semite. His thoughts and views on the freedom some Jewish composers should have were boldly stated on numerous occasions. Schillings idea of a perfect world of composition included the omission of Jewish composers and their influence altogether. He simply wanted the session at the academy that included Jewish composers along with their influence to be broken.

Due to these views and the environment surrounding the Prussian Academy of Arts at the time, Schoenberg voluntarily sent in his resignation from the academy. Hard times begin to fall upon Schoenberg as the political climate became increasingly negative. However, there were others who understood the importance of freedom of expression. Schoenberg would first flee to Paris with his wife and daughter before eventually escaping to America. As he reconverted to Judaism, he became more vocal of the issue that arose in Germany concerning the

---

18 Stuckenschmidt pg. 366
19 Stuckenschmidt pg. 366
20 Stuckenschmidt pg. 366
21 Stuckenschmidt pg. 366
22 Stuckenschmidt pg. 366
23 Stuckenschmidt pg. 366
24 Smith, J. pg. 149
Jewish people. With the rise of boldness for his culture and faith, the move to America was inevitable.²⁵

It would go without saying that Schoenberg’s first year in America proved to be a feat. His health at this point was very poor, and the work schedule he developed seemed to work against his already declining health at the time.²⁶ With English not being his first language, Schoenberg struggled to keep his life maintained while traveling back and forth from Boston the New York for his teaching obligation.²⁷ Still, his resilience persisted. He worked until his body finally gave out. He did not leave the world without strong pedagogical teachings that are still being used today, which were birthed out of a struggle to create art in a destructive society.

---

²⁵ Simms., pg. 149
²⁶ Simms, pg. 149
²⁷ Simms, pg. 150
CHAPTER 4. THE INCEPTION OF MOTOWN’S VOICE

One might be curious as to know what the parallel is between Schoenberg and Motown Records. Several terms come to mind when comparing seemingly juxtaposed topics, one word shining above the rest: Freedom. To truly understand the importance of Motown Records and its rightful place in American music history of the 20th Century, its inception as its own record company and studio must be discussed. Motown Records could not be mentioned without the name of one man: Berry Gordy.

The scene is set in Detroit, Michigan. Much like the sound and flare of Motown, Detroit was resilient in its efforts of to be the leader of one of the most booming cities across the United States of America. Most of the detail accounts that surround the inception of Motown Records was not only from Berry Gordy himself, but another hidden driving force behind the record company: Raymona Gordy Singleton, Berry Gordy’s late ex-wife. Her story is by far one of the most interesting and complex, seeing as she was present for the eclectic history surrounding the music culture. She recalls upon meeting Berry Gordy for the first time, describing him as calm, cool and collected individual, with a certain charm about him.

“Berry, Me, and Motown” is included with the accounts of Raymona’s experience getting to know the man behind the force that is Motown, as well as insight within the studio. Singleton was a young woman with a dream of becoming what most artist of the 1950’s wanted to become: a star. There have been several accounts from various people of Motown Records; singers, songwriters, dancers, tour managers, etc. However, one of the most intriguing come from a fellow native of Detroit would provide context into the type of man who is a resilient as the city

---

28 Singleton, pg. 20
29 Singleton, pg. 20
Motown Records was created. In this book, she was described as a relatively unknown songwriter, who would later on reveal that she was capable of providing instrumentation and lead sheets for studio purposes. This would actually pique the interest of Gordy, as it would anyone with a budding music studio.\(^{30}\)

According to the accounts of Singleton, Berry Gordy is described as a man willing to fight for what he believed in, both figuratively and literally. He wanted to pursue a career in boxing, and later left to enlist in the army. However, Gordy later realized that music was his true calling. 1950’s was surely a decade of a budding musical heyday for African Americans in America, despite the treatment that was endured solely based on race across America.\(^{31}\) The 1950’s produced musical legends within the African American community, including the charismatic Jackie Wilson. He is certainly worth mention due to the fact that in 1956, he decided to make a solo career, which included insight from his manager Al Green, who also shares the same name with a future rhythm and blues star not affiliated with Motown Records.\(^{32}\)

Coincidentally, Berry Gordy was looking to fully advance in the music business as an entrepreneur. In 1957 of the following year, strides were made to ensure the success of Gordy’s future business when Jackie Wilson performed the first big hit of the label, “Reet Petite.”\(^{33}\)

Although this was a step in the right direction, more needed to be achieved in order to make Motown Records a household name. Meanwhile, Raymona Singleton remained a pivotal player in collaboration with other artists, known as the Five Stars at the time.\(^{34}\) She mentions in her book that although there was not a dime to Gordy’s name at the time from the humble songs

\(^{30}\) Singleton, pg. 21  
\(^{31}\) Singleton, pg. 25  
\(^{32}\) Singleton, pg. 25  
\(^{33}\) Singleton, pg. 25  
\(^{34}\) Singleton, pg. 28
that he wrote, he still had the drive to push forward. Eventually there was a light at the end of the tunnel as the Miracles enter the scene. The Miracles were a singing group that included one of the most prominent singer/songwriters of Motown Records, as well as rhythm and blues as an entire genre: Smokey Robinson.\textsuperscript{35}

The Miracles at the time included members Bobby Rogers, Ronnie White, Pete Moore, and Claudette Rogers, who was Smokey Robinson’s girlfriend at the time.\textsuperscript{36} The beginning of a long and successful professional relationship began between Gordy and Robinson in the summer of 1957. This would soon blossom into a friendship that would soon become similar to family. Smokey Robinson had the voice and showmanship, as well as the ear and songwriting skills. Paired along with Gordy’s phenomenal ear and stellar songwriting skills, this was a force that would soon help Motown Records blossom into what it is today. At this point, Motown Records was still just a dream. Most of the records done by the Miracles was done under the watchful eye of the Label Records, which was a small New York label at the time.\textsuperscript{37}

One of the most interesting factors that is not always discussed in documentaries is how involved the rest of Gordy’s family was in making music and history happen. There was a constant and rapid need for the “black sound” to be pushed through the radio. This was not just because of the increase in the population of African Americans in specific areas such as Detroit, Chicago, or even New York. This was also because of the growing trend for the want of black music within the white American community as well. Berry Gordy’s sister, Anna, would create her own record label called Anna Records. She eventually made the decision to collaborate with Leonard and Phil Chess, two Jewish entrepreneurs from the Southside of Chicago who also saw

\textsuperscript{35} George, pg. 22
\textsuperscript{36} George, pg. 23
\textsuperscript{37} George., pg. 24
great and untapped potential and talent that laid dormant in the Detroit region. Because of the business savvy intellect that Anna Gordy possessed, she was able to solidify a deal that would involve her reaping the benefits of return sales in opposition of records being leased to other labels. However, the power of Berry Gordy’s songwriting and management still reigned supreme with his original song, “Money (That’s what I Want).” This particular song was leased to Anna by her brother Berry, and would prove the longevity of Berry Gordy’s talent and career, as well as becoming one of the most successful songs in African American music history.

At this point, the bulk of sales created by Berry Gordy and the collaboration of his sisters and other small music labels throughout the northeast region of the United States were mostly original songs leased by Berry Gordy himself. The success of “Money” with its unique groove and chorus provided by both Berry Gordy and Raymona would become a stable in households everywhere. The song had such a profound effect on popular music that John Lennon would later create his own version for the Beatles on *The Second Album*. However, Gordy did not realize what Smokey Robinson would later bring to light: the goal of creating for themselves and for an entire culture to enjoy.

Smokey Robinson was well aware of what could be on the horizon for the start and future of Motown Records. It was time to create a fully functioning record company. Eventually, a building was found by Raymona Singleton which would soon become the location of one of the most iconic corporations in music history: 2648 West Grand Boulevard, still standing tall today in Detroit, Michigan. Berry Gordy’s mission became clear to provide a safe space for young,

38 George, 25
39 George, 26
40 George, 26
41 George, 26
42 George, 28
African American songwriters and musicians to come together and create. It could be considered a new and innovative wave of music and culture within the mid-20th century. Due to the treatment of many African American artists and African Americans in general, Berry Gordy made sure the way his business ran was strict in terms of finances. This would provide opportunities for many up-and-coming African American artists to thrive and have a voice in the world. This would mean that major influences of black culture would come to the forefront in terms of its unique stylistic traits that set it apart from other genres of music.

Quite of few of the traits include but are certainly not limited to: the genre of gospel, classic call-and-response originally derived from African culture, syncopated rhythms, improvisation of jazz influence or otherwise, just to name a few. Although more can be done in terms of studying patterns of African American music within the realm of academia beyond specialty classes, one thing remains: there will always be a great interest in the way that sound shaped a culture. In Jon Fitzgerald’s article about the stylistic traits of black songwriting between 1963-1965, he gives an extensive breakdown of what it means to create a melting pot of rhythmic variations and influences within global black culture to create a distinct sound that should be considered a standard American sound within the 20th century. In the section concerning rhythmic tempos, a typical song from this era of music could be anywhere between 120-139 bpm. Also, a popular tool within the confines of techniques found within popular music of this era includes strong emphasis on the back beat, to the “two and four.” In terms of instrumentation, there could be anything from a standard rhythm section of drums, bass guitar, lead guitar and voices to a full orchestra. One thing is for certain: Motown Records was known

43 Fitzgerald, pg. 132
44 Fitzgerald, pg. 113
45 Fitzgerald, pg. 113
for making some of the most iconic basslines in history with artists from The Temptations to the Supremes.⁴⁶

Between 1963 and 1964 alone, there was evidence of a distinct shuffle rhythm, which is ideal for a jazz/swing rhythm. However, it is noted that Smokey Robinson eventually deviates from this trait and incorporates straight eighth notes.⁴⁷ Could it be due to the content that was produced as the years inch closer to the era of civil rights? It is quite possible that rhythmic changes (and also the message within the lyricism) began to imitate the life that surrounded many black artists nearing the end of this decade, which was definitely hostile and race driven. Whatever the case may be, the “Motown Sound” was a signature all on its own; the lighthearted lyrics, the driving funk rhythm associated with black culture, and distinct tonal harmonization of voices on each and every track listing.⁴⁸

---

⁴⁶ George, pg. 110
⁴⁷ George, pg. 113
⁴⁸ Smith, S. pg. 154-155
CHAPTER 5. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION WITHIN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Motown Records continued to make great strides in the midst of culture movements of music and art. One of the most pivotal moments in African American history was the release of the first spoken-word recording under Motown’s label.49 August 28, 1963 marked the release of the album, *The Great March to Freedom*, which was unlike anything Motown Records ever produced at the time.50 It was also strategically released the same day as the Martin Luther King Jr.’s iconic and historical March on Washington. Prior to the March on Washington, Detroit formed its own march known as the Great Detroit March, which took place on June 23, 1963. Its goal was to raise funding for the Birmingham, Alabama’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, also known as SCLC.51 It was in Detroit that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was given the opportunity to present an early or modified version of the famous “I Have A Dream” speech.52 If anything, art and music within the black community was need now more than ever, even if it was a brief escape for the cruel treatment of their culture.

Several events catapulted the need for the black voice within music in 1963. These events included the assassination of Medgar Evers, as well as the church bombing of Birmingham. Was the demonstration in Detroit something that was prominent at this time? It certainly was in its own way, despite seeing most of the hostile depictions of race relations in America focused on the Southern region of the United States in the news media, even though it was extremely glaring everywhere else in the nation, and was certainly not mutually exclusive to the south. This seemed to be one of the best ways to aid in standing up for a greater cause, while

49 Smith, S. pg. 21
50 Smith, S. pg. 21
51 Smith, S. pg. 21
52 Smith, S. pg. 21
simultaneously raising funds for SCLC. However, Detroit’s history still has an ugly past concerning race in America. Taking a look into the past of 1946, the urban renewal program essentially destroyed black owned businesses and neighborhoods, all whilst the plight of police brutality and segregation was at an all-time high.\(^5^3\) The March happening in 1963 over a decade later would serve a greater purpose, insuring that the past would not be forgotten, but encouraging those to move forward and fight for their rights as human beings. This is why the first spoken-word recording under the Motown label served a much greater purpose in the Civil rights era.

Due to this, the civil rights movement and those involved recognized that Motown records was more than just a label that produced “popular” music, it was a means to create a platform for voices that would otherwise be ignored. It was a beacon of hope, but a reminder that the fight against injustice did not cease after one crossed the Mason-Dixon line.\(^5^4\) Despite the somber surrounds, Motown Records was still able to provide a positive voice, no matter how stern or thought provoking. One of the hits to elevate the charts and give the world an example of the black musical sound was Stevie Wonder’s song *Fingertips*. It was a live recording that included everything there was about the cultural sound of black people; call and response, improvisation, and an all-around joy in the midst of negativity.\(^5^5\) Berry Gordy released the audio recording of Stevie Wonder’s live debut in two parts, which would include a B-side on most records. Eventually, it peaked at No. 1 on the Billboard charts, as well as becoming the second song after the Marvelettes’ “Please Mr. Postman” under the label to peak at No. 1. Through the music of Motown and unified marches through the streets of Detroit, the black community felt as

\(^{53}\) Smith, S. pg. 23  
\(^{54}\) Smith, S. pg. 25  
\(^{55}\) Smith, S. pg. 36
if they could be represented to the world through art. Through the sound of Motown, an invisible symbol of unity would appear as causes continued to be promoted in the Detroit area.\textsuperscript{56} Within the year of 1963, Motown Records was a beacon of hope for what was possible within the Detroit community. At this point, Motown Records was a self-sustaining, self-sufficient, black owned operated business that not only was a pillar in the African American community, but it began to bridge the gap between black and white listeners through its commercial use, as well.\textsuperscript{57}

The success of young artists at the time under the Motown label paired with Great Detroit March only began to scratch the surface. Motown Records became increasing involved in the civil rights movement. The company continued to persist, despite the odds being stacked against them for simply being a black owned business in America. However, the perseverance continued as race relations became more hostile across the country. The people of Motown Records to press forward and elevate their platform to relay a message across the country. The sound of Motown Records would begin to shift. The bigotry grew, but so did the message of Motown.

There was a distinct commitment to nonviolent protests and approaches, which was extremely important for relaying the message of equality. However, ongoing violence would continue to threaten that ideal.\textsuperscript{58} Motown Records would come to use what is known now as some of the most iconic soul songs in American history (“Nowhere To Run” or “Shotgun”) and infuse their meaning to mirror what black voices described as their struggle to obtain equal

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{56} Smith, S. pg. 37
\textsuperscript{57} Smith, S. pg. 55
\textsuperscript{58} Smith, S. pg. 138
\end{flushright}
rights. However, commercial success was still important in terms of keeping the company in the forefront of race relations, as well. One of the most popular acts under the Motown label, the Supremes, would go on and achieve both commercial success while simultaneously integrating the audience of America by continuing the signature “Motown sound.”

1968 was one of the years Motown Records was put to the ultimate test. Increase in hostility within the civil rights movement and politics appeared to be reaching its peak. President Lyndon B. Johnson would begin to respond by stating his domestic policy describing the current state of race relations in America, while discussing his foreign policy regarding Vietnam. The news of Johnson not seeking reelection was followed by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. For a brief moment, it seemed as if the nonviolent approach was shrouded in an environment where violence ran rampant.

After a chain of the most violent events in history took place, the strong need for a voice within the civil rights movement was needed more than ever. That injustice experienced by African Americans during the civil rights movement, as well as Vietnam, would eventually find its voice again in the Motown artist, Marvin Gaye. He is quoted saying, “I always knew I was an artist…and not the cog in some machine. To be an artist is a blessing and a privilege. Artists must never betray their true hearts. Artists must look beneath the surface and show that there is more to this world than meets the eye.”

The above quote is from Marvin Gaye, an artist who would later create one of the most influential albums of all time, “What’s Going On?” Gaye was the songwriter who would

---

59 Smith, S. pg. 165
60 Smith, S. pg. 167
61 Smith, S. pg. 214
62 Smith, S. pg. 236 by Marvin Gaye
eventually infuse the newer Motown sound with the turmoil of 1968. Marvin Gaye created a song cycle that described his indirect experience involving his brother Frankie’s return from the Vietnam War. The entire album was a metaphor for the experience that most black men experienced upon their return home to war: being met with hostility. Frankie Gaye’s experience including difficulty finding steady work, as well as the blatant disrespect solely for the color of his skin. It was an experience that far too many could relate to, not just in Detroit, but across America. Because the span of composition of Marvin Gaye’s album was over the course of several years, that music provided a backdrop that transcended beyond the plight of the Vietnam, but also focused on the rise in urban violence, as well as the perpetuation of the mistreatment of black people in America. Marvin Gaye’s new album broke creative ground, seeing as it gained not only commercial success, but the political impact was on the rise. This album raised Motown Records to new heights with its underlying orchestration and improvisatory seamlessness, mixed with Gaye’s signature smooth voice. The success of the album would soon encourage other artist, such as Gladys Knight and the Pips and the Temptations to ban together for the Save The Children fundraiser, with Gaye’s title track, “What’s Going On?” The issues surrounding the urban areas of the North were addressed through music as a means of creative outlet. It was a way to continue the idea of equality in a nation that was still so divided. Motown Record’s timing since its inception was key. The events that took place up to this point were leading up to an election year, symbolizing that Motown Records still had more to say, as well as an entire cultural population to represent.

63 Smith, S. pg. 237
64 Smith, S. pg. 238
65 Smith, S. pg. 239
66 Smith, S. pg. 239
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION AND FINAL REMARKS

If by chance one reads research on Motown Records, one should simply come to the conclusion that even still, there is not enough research. Understandably, popular music is not the “go-to” for a stereotypical academic setting. However, the history behind Motown Records is rich with historic context that transcends music history. If this is the case, why is this era of music not being talked about as much? This is not to say that Schoenberg’s experience with fleeing to America to continue his journey of composing great music does not count for something within culture, but there is a parallel that can and should be drawn. That is the purpose of this research; to take was is so astonishing and moving about Schoenberg’s experience fleeing to create. It did not matter that English was not his first language, or that his work schedule worked against his health all in the name of keeping his family afloat. Schoenberg did what he felt he must do to maintain a life for his family, but to also keep a legacy intact that he created. It was a legacy in which blossomed in the midst of war.

When discussing the parallel of finding escape within art for Schoenberg and finding the black voice through Motown Records, special attention must be paid to both context. They should share equal importance in the classroom without dimming its importance to history. However, the research continues to grow involving Motown Records above a historical sense, but within the lane of music. The knowledge and discovery of what Motown Records still has to offer continues to bloom within the realm of academia.

Again, this is not to say that Schoenberg’s contribution to 20th century music is worth more or less. His legacy and experiences is one of the most riveting aspects of 20th century music. He will always remain one of the main standards academia upholds to further the teachings of music theory and pedagogy.
The depths of 20\textsuperscript{th} century music theory as it pertains to the Second Viennese school was groundbreaking and radical for the time period, and it continues to remain one of the most practical ways to compose even today. Understanding the plight of Schoenberg and what surrounded his life, family and culture is to also understand the parallel within Motown Records. The culture at first glance may seem widely different in comparison. However, when freedom of expression is the means to escape racism, both cultural experience walk hand in hand towards a common goal: for their voice to be heard through their art.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Smith, Joan A. Schoenberg and His Circle: a Viennese Portrait. Schirmer Books


VITA

Crystal Birdsong (1989-) is a Louisiana native composer and pianist. She is currently studying music composition at Louisiana State University. She is in the studio of Dr. Dinos Constantinides, who was also her major professor throughout her Master’s degree at Louisiana State University. Ms. Birdsong is also working towards her piano minor degree and is a member of the piano studio of Professor Michal Gurt. Ms. Birdsong is also a member of Louisiana State University ensembles, including the LSU Chamber Singers choir, with whom she has collaborated with on many occasions with performances of her original choral works. She expects to graduate with a PhD in Music Composition with a minor in Piano Performance in May of 2019.