

Sieben Musikabsätze

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What is music? Most would agree that breaking glass is not music, just as most would agree that smashing a cello with a hammer is less musical than vibrating a bow across its strings. Many say that music is a series of sounds which contain the elements of rhythm and pitch, but most music we hear follows certain patterns beyond rhythm and pitch. Music as we know it contains key signatures and time signatures, chord progressions and other repetitive harmonies. This strict language that we have built for music is called tonality. So we must ask ourselves, is tonality necessary for music? This question was explored by the experimental composers of the twentieth century, including Arnold Schoenberg. The music they wrote was called atonal, without tonality. Schoenberg developed a new set of strict rules to follow, an alternative to tonality called dodecaphony, first seen in the final movement of his Op. 23. This technique led to the development of serialism, a broader, less strict style. Schoenberg's Op. 23, Fünf Klavierstücke, perfectly represents the twentieth century in music because of its newly developed techniques, discordant and atonal styles, and philosophical message of escaping tonality.

The twentieth century saw the rise of many new techniques to express the experimental philosophies of the time, leading to the unusual style of much of the period's music. In the late nineteenth century, composers began to grow bored with music as they knew it and sought ways to go further with their art. This common frustration led to many different styles, each distinct, but with clear similarities. Daniel Politoske, author of *Music*, describes the late nineteenth century as having "...expanded the limits of tonality... with unusual and rich harmonies, and different types of scales and chord progressions" (Politoske). This step away from tonality in the

late nineteenth century led to atonality in the twentieth, which leaves tonality behind altogether. From there, though, composers would face more difficulty. After all, as hard as it is to compose within the strict rules of tonality, without them it is infinitely harder. Serialism was a response to that problem. It began with Schoenberg's twelve-tone row, or dodecaphony. *The Oxford Companion to Music* defines a twelve-tone row as a strict set of rules in which one uses all twelve notes of the chromatic scale in a fixed order on repeat (Arnold and Scholes). This "series" of notes led to the term serialism, of which dodecaphony is a subset along with any other method of atonality constrained by the use of series. In addition to the compositional difficulties they faced, composers wrote experimental music for audiences who expected, and wanted, to hear tonality. Despite many complaints, composers continued writing atonal music, believing that people needed to hear music that broke away from tonality. The message of breaking boundaries is evident in the experimental style and revolutionary techniques of twentieth century music.

Fünf Klavierstücke is an entirely atonal work featuring serial themes, giving it a strange and experimental sound, in order to illustrate the obsolete nature of tonality. By the time Schoenberg wrote Op. 23, he was already deeply entrenched in atonality. In fact, this piece features not only experimental intervals, but also unusual jumps and rhythms. As previously stated, the last movement features the first twelve-tone row, containing repetition of the order of notes making it sound more orderly. Schoenberg once said that his music was "a sharing of spiritual goods, resembling the religious experience" (Schoenberg qtd. in Burkley). He felt that people needed to hear his music, as it turned its back on tonality. Stuart Ross, historian and lyricist, noted that despite protests from audiences due to the chaotic and confusing sounds of his music, Schoenberg continued to make use of atonality and then serialism (Ross). Schoenberg wanted to prove that tonality was not necessary to music, that another set of arbitrary rules would

work just as well, and that in order to hear sound, and thus music, for what it truly is, tonality must be abandoned. Atonality and dodecaphony are used to express this message of abandoning tonality in Op. 23 and throughout twentieth century music.

Serialism was a technique developed not only by Schoenberg, but also by many of his contemporaries, including Alban Berg, Anton Webern, Milton Babbitt, and Josef Hauer. Before Schoenberg had even begun writing *Fünf Klavierstücke*, something resembling serialism had already begun to appear in the works of one of his students, Berg. As Peter Griffiths, a writer known for his music history and criticism, wrote in his article on serialism for *Grove Music Online*, "Occasional systematic statements of the 12 pitch classes first appeared in the music of Berg. A 12-note series is one of the principal themes of his *Altenberg* songs, composed in 1912" (Griffiths). The *Altenberg* songs are filled with dissonant sounds and syncopated ostinati, off-beat repeating patterns, that serve as proto-series. This combination of atonal pitches and twelve note sequences contains elements of serialism which bring order to these semi-tonal pieces much like dodecaphony brings order to atonality in the last movement of *Fünf Klavierstücke*. Webern was another composer who worked with Schoenberg and serialism, progressively becoming more strict in his usage of the technique while developing its theoretical background. *The New Oxford Companion to Music* says, "The application of serialism in Webern's later work is clearer and more rigorous ... His *Second Cantata* (1941-3) is based on [a] series ... in its prime (or original), inverted, retrograde, and retrograde-inverted forms" (Arnold and Scholes). Much as Schoenberg pushed the boundary of tonality with atonality, and atonality with dodecaphony, Webern pushed the boundaries of dodecaphony through his use of variations on the basic series. His work, as seen in his *Second Cantata*, helped build serialism around the extraordinarily rigid dodecaphony. The use of the retrograde, inverted, and retrograde-inverted forms of the series

make the work no longer purely dodecaphonic, though still a form of serialism. No discussion of serialism could be complete without mention of Babbitt, referred to by Griffiths as "[t]he composer who has been most consistent in theoretically codifying and compositionally proceeding from the work of the first-generation serial composers" (Griffiths). He took the basics of atonality, solidified by dodecaphony, resting in the shell of serialism, and further encoded it. By further refining the rules of serialism throughout his work, he brought this bizarre, experimental, and somewhat philosophical form of music fully into the concrete reality of the world in which we live. He teased strict relationships from serialism in the same way Schoenberg teased strict rules from atonality. In the midst of these composers who dabbled in theory, Hauer was a theorist who dabbled in composition. Historically, none of his pieces are very significant or widespread, but his analyses and codification of music, especially of the atonal variety, are in-depth and interesting. This makes him important to serialism despite having few compositions. In an article on atonality, Paul Lansky, a professor of music composition, says, "Hauer's is the earliest known attempt at any general formulation of the resources of a 12-note sound world. His concept of hexachordal tropes was a remarkable anticipation of subsequent developments in 12-note composition and theory" (Lansky, et al). Like Berg, Hauer had developed ideas approaching dodecaphony before Schoenberg's Op. 23. Like Webern and Babbitt, his work in the developments of the theory behind serialism helped the techniques become concrete and definite in a world which rejects the abstract. All of these composers helped dodecaphony and its effects be seen, or heard, throughout the twentieth century.

Through atonality, series, and unusual structures, experimental styles were achieved by many twentieth century composers, including Berg and Webern. As Douglas Jarman of the Royal Northern College of Music says, Berg was incredibly famous for his chaotic, atonal style

since he used it in his operas, including *Wozzeck*, the first, full-length atonal opera (Jarman). Berg wrote *Wozzeck* in the hopes of this outcome, wanting to spread the style of atonality to any audiences willing to hear it. He used the story of *Wozzeck* as the vessel for this endeavor because he believed the chaos in the main character's head suited his dissonant, atonal style. The more the style fit the story, the more receptive to it people would be, and the less likely to complain at its disordered and chaotic sound. Webern, too, has an atonal, experimental style. As Kathryn Bailey, author of *The Life of Webern*, says, "The two cantatas may be seen as the synthesis Webern no doubt intended them to be: they combine the rigorous use of canonic techniques and symmetry that is fundamental to his 12-note instrumental works with the word-painting that characterizes his song-writing" (Bailey). Webern's style was equally chaotic and dissonant as Berg's and Schoenberg's, and, like Berg, he tried to find a way to let its atonality be heard without the disorder. While Berg did this through finding a fitting story to which to latch the discordant style, Webern used strict rules and techniques, similar to Schoenberg's use of series to define the maelstrom of atonality. Berg, Webern, and Schoenberg typify the chaotic and discordant style of twentieth century music.

The twentieth century was a time of questioning the nature of music and its significance in the world, a debate explored extensively by many, including Babbitt, Hauer, and Schoenberg. A possible misconception about the music of the time is that a message existed outside of the music; however, these composers intended the message of the music to be nothing more than the music itself. This was a time of meta-music. The music was atonal to illustrate that tonality is not necessary to make music musical. Schoenberg was very against analysis of his work for this very reason; to listen to his music was to understand his purpose, to analyze it was to miss it entirely. According to Elaine Barkin, composer, and Martin Brody, professor of music,

"Babbitt has extended the notion of compositional creativity to encompass the development of musical systems themselves, as well as specific compositional achievements within such systems" (Barkin and Brody). Babbitt was one who believed that the musical system was important to the meaning of music. By developing specific atonal structures, he pushed people to explore all facets of music, believing them each important. It did not matter why a composer chose to use this system, the fact that it was used is meaningful enough, reflecting Schoenberg's belief that music held significance for simply being music. While Babbitt stood for the beauty of music in all its forms, Hauer believed that some music was more meaningful than others. John Covach, professor of music theory, says, "In [*Vom Wesen des Musikalischen*], as well as in his *Deutung des Melos* (1923) and in many short articles written during the early 1920s, Hauer argues for the superiority of atonal over tonal music, grounding his claims by offering support drawn from acoustics, culture, and spiritual studies" (Covach) Tonicity is such a narrow window that anything in it was essentially the same to Hauer, and was thusly unable to contain any true meaning. Atonal music has the advantage of stylistic breadth that allows it to hold true significance. In addition, there's nothing outwardly interesting about tonal music, while atonicity has meaning just by being atonal. The message of twentieth century music was not behind the music, but the music itself.

While the atonal movement was a fairly short one, it still holds significance for humanity. Schoenberg and his contemporaries all started out studying and learning the rules of tonality, before rebelling harshly against them. After this rebellion, however, their need for order returned, and they codified even stricter rules on atonicity. These rules were then broken and reformed many more times until their popularity died away and tonality returned to its spotlight. This pattern is not specific to music; it is seen everywhere, with a common question. Avant garde

is fashion that questions, "what is fashion?" Metaphysics is physics that questions, "what is physics?" Atonality is music that questions, "what is music?" a question we all must ask.

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