

The Twilight of the Tonal System

INTRODUCTION

Before beginning our study of the materials of twentieth-century music, we should first look back at what happened to the system of triadic tonality, the primary organizing force in the music of the preceding three centuries. Tonal music and the principles that govern it did not develop overnight, of course, nor did they decline overnight. In fact, tonal music still abounds today in music for television and film, commercials, jazz, popular music, and so forth. But it is safe to say that by around 1900 the tonal system had been so strained by chromaticism and by the desire for originality that further development of the system seemed impossible. The situation was not unlike the one that prevailed around 1600, when the intervallic modal system of the Renaissance had run its course and was giving way to a new emphasis on harmony and what eventually emerged as triadic major/minor tonality. At both points in music history lively debates occurred in print and in person, and at both times there were composers who faithfully held to the older style while others rushed to develop the new. The cause of this crisis at the beginning of the modern era—the decline of the tonal system as an organizing force—is the subject of this chapter.

DIATONIC TONAL MUSIC

Almost all of the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is essentially diatonic on all levels.¹ Diatonic tonal music does not, of course, lack accidentals or altered tones; after all, there exists hardly any tonal music of any length that does not contain altered tones. But in diatonic tonal music the difference between diatonic and altered tones is