

"The Problem of the New Music" (1920)

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The Problem of the New Music

[ 1920 ]

The music of our times strives decidedly toward atonality. Yet it does not seem to be right to interpret the principle of tonality as the absolute opposite to atonality. The latter is much more the consequence of a gradual development, originating from tonality, absolutely proceeding step by step—without any gaps or violent leaps.

Schoenberg says in his *Harmonielehre* that the 'development' section of sonata form is to be interpreted in some respects as the origin of atonality. By this is implied the following: the 'development' eliminates the exclusive rule of two keys (as in the 'exposition') or of one (in the 'recapitulation'), and in a certain way they are substituted for by a freely-chosen sequence of different keys which are perceived individually, no matter how transient the key. In other words, a kind of equality of rights among the twelve keys prevails in the 'development'.

The increase of altered chords in the post-Beethoven period (Wagner, Liszt), then the continually freer use of non-harmonic and passing tones above chords which for the most part have tonal functions (Strauss, Debussy) are two important transitory stages from tonality to atonality. Already in the music of Strauss (for example, the 'Antagonists' in *Ein Heldenleben*), and even more so in the post-Straussian music, one might find in tonally-characterized works isolated parts in which there is a decided preparation for the abolishing of tonality. The penultimate step toward atonality is demonstrated in those works which produce an atonal effect irrespective of their tonal point of departure and their return, at the end, to that very point (whereby the intention is—according to the old pattern—to obtain a homogeneous effect, create a solid framework).

But the decisive turn toward atonality began only when—after the above-described preparatory phases—the need was felt for the equality of rights of the individual twelve tones of our dodecaphonic mode: when the attempt was made to avoid arrangement of the twelve tones according to certain scalar systems or to attribute to the individual tones greater or less value in conformity with this arrangement, so that use could be made of the individual tones in any optional combination, horizontally as well as vertically, irretraceable to any scalar system. It is true that certain

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tones in the combination also gain by this procedure a relative predominance; this difference of importance, however, is not based on a certain scale pattern but is the outcome of the occasional combination; just as the individual members in the combined groups have a different value and intensity in relation to each other. The possibilities of expression are increased in great measure, incalculable as yet, by the free and equal treatment of the twelve tones.

Previously, fourth chords at the most were fashioned, and those, too, in a certain permissible combination only; nowadays one may even sound all the twelve tones simultaneously in the most varied combinations. We have at our disposal a previously undreamed of wealth of transitory nuances, from the peculiar blankness of a triad such as this



or the sonorous daintiness of this chord:



to the shrill forcefulness of a chord like this:



The close position of three or more adjacent tones have the effect of a 'stylized' noise, sounding more or less resonant according to pitch position. The slightly narrower position used in lower registers, as in this example:



is near in sound to a noise-like effect; transposed higher by two octaves, its character alters and becomes more ethereal—its effect approaches that of our second example, above.

One works in homophonic music—so to speak—with tonal masses that sound simultaneously or in a more or less quick succession, and with dense or airy, massive or thin tone-patches whose features depend on the number of tones used, the absolute pitch, the relative (that is, open or close) position, and so forth. By means of these tone-patches, which have an intensity of varied gradation that corresponds to the way in which they are combined, and whose single tones have different importance in accordance with the role they play in the vertical grouping, the consequence of those very differences makes possible the plan of the 'horizontal line' of atonal music. The perfection of the form of the entire work depends solely on whether the rise and fall of this line represents an harmonic entity.

The force of the content, hard to express in words; the freshness of—making use of Schoenberg's expression—the 'first inspiration'; the harmony of the voice-leading: these three factors yield the work of art. But did not these factors also exist in older works of music? The principal requisites definitely have not changed; the change is only in the use of the means: in the past one worked with more restrictions, nowadays with broader possibilities. The future will tell whether the free use of richer possibilities can lead to works of art just as great as those created by musicians of the past.

In the consideration of atonal music it is very confusing that we have nothing to go by that is expressed in works, no 'rules' to establish satisfactory, harmonious voice-leading. Composers as well as audience, too, are dependent only on their instinct in that regard. The time to establish a system in our atonal music is not at all here as yet (there are some interesting although timid attempts in Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre*,<sup>1</sup> p. 49). This newest phase of musical development has but hardly begun, and there are too few works of this kind on which to base a theory at this time. And when in the course of time a theory does emerge, it can have for posterity only the same meaning as any of the old theories had in their time; that is, it will be at most a basis to work on, enlarging it to arrive ultimately at something quite new—which again will stimulate the construction of a new theory.

As regards the homophonic and polyphonic trend I, for my part, would agree to a blend of both kinds, that is, a procedure which permits more diversity than the exclusive limitation to one of them. For similar reasons, since we do not have to deal here with two, totally opposite principles, it seems to me that a deliberate (not too frequent) use of chords of older tonal phrasing within atonal music would not be in

1. [Vienna, 1911.]

bad taste. An isolated triad of the diatonic scale, a third, a perfect fifth or octave amidst atonal chords—certainly limited to quite special places which are suitable for the purpose—do not give an impression of tonality; furthermore, these means already withered by long use and misuse, acquire from such a totally new surrounding a lively, quite special effect arising just from the contrast. Yes, even whole sequences of such triads and intervals, if they do not have a tonal effect, might be perceived as quite in style. An unconditional elimination of these old sonorities would imply the disclaiming of a—not even inconsiderable—part of the means of our art; however, the ultimate objective of our endeavours is the unlimited and complete use of all extant possible tonal material. Certain connections of the above-mentioned sonorities, of course, particularly those progressions reminiscent of the alternations of tonic and dominant, are wholly contrary to the music of our times. (In some works which try so much to be modern, one meets these progressions disguised in the attire of pompous dissonances.)

The fear that atonal compositions would present a shapeless mass as a consequence of relinquishing the symmetric scheme founded on the tonal system is unjustified. First of all, an architectonic or similar scheme is not absolutely necessary; the construction of the line born out of the different degrees of intensity that are inherent in the tonal succession would be completely satisfactory. (This structural method is somewhat analogous to that of works written in prose.) Secondly, the atonal music does not exclude certain exterior means of arrangement, certain repetitions (in a different position, with changes, and so forth), the previously-mentioned progressions, refrain-like reappearance of certain ideas, or the return to the starting point at the end. All these procedures, of course, recall the architectonic-symmetrical less than poetic versification.

I do not consider it appropriate to base the character of atonal music on the overtone system. Although one might explain by the phenomenon of the overtones the diversity of character and the effect of the intervals, this still does not offer a very satisfactory explanation concerning the free use of the twelve tones.

One might perhaps comprehend the process of development toward atonality in the following way: the eventual material of music consists of an indefinite number of tones of different pitch, from the lowest to the highest perceptible tone. (We shall disregard here rhythm, tone colour, and dynamics as indecisive elements in the discussion of this issue.) Our ideal goal now is: to utilize as means in art works an ever-increasing number of elements of this material. From this immense row, originally, only a small number of tones was chosen as usable in the overtone system; the diatonic scale was set up, transposed into twelve different pitches on the basis of the

overtone system, and thus the entire diatonic system was created. This system soon proved to be inadequate in consequence of the impetus for development (toward freer modulations); force was applied and nature was violated by splitting the octave into twelve parts; and thus the artificially-tempered dodecaphonic system came into being, advocated and propagated by artificially-tempered keyboard instruments. Yet the musical mentality, despite this excessive departure from nature, proceeded on a diatonic basis for centuries until, finally, after the above-described developmental process, the musical sense awoke to the equal treatment of the twelve semitones of similar importance. This new procedure contains enormous possibilities, so that Busoni's wish for a third- or quarter-tone system seems to be premature. (The works of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, composed after his *Entwurf einer neuen Aesthetik*, prove that the semitone system has not yet pronounced its last word.) The time for a further splitting of the semitone (perhaps infinitely!) will ultimately come, perhaps not in our time but in future decades or centuries. But it will have to surmount immense technical difficulties, such as the modification of the structure of keyboard and percussion instruments, not to mention the intonation difficulties for the human voice and all those instruments whose tones are partly produced by fingering. These difficulties will in all probability prolong the life of the semitone system for a greater length of time than will be artistically needed.

In conclusion, just a word about our notation. It was created on the basis of the diatonic system, and—exactly for this reason—it is utterly unfit for the written reproduction of atonal music. The accidentals, for instance, mean an alteration of the diatonic degrees. Here, now, it is not a matter of alternation or non-alternation of the diatonic degrees, but of twelve semitones of identical value. Furthermore, it is rather difficult to observe consistency in the method of the notation; for instance, one often hesitates whether to pay attention to an easier legibility in the vertical or in the horizontal sense.

It would be desirable to have at one's disposal a notation with twelve similar symbols, where each of the twelve tones would have a comparably equivalent symbol, in order to avoid the necessity of notating certain tones exclusively as alterations of others. Meanwhile, however, this invention awaits its inventor.

A teoria dos conjuntos, desenvolvida para a música nos anos 1950, parece atender a essa demanda feita por Bartók em 1920...