

# A. SCHOENBERG

## **DESTRUCTIVE DISSONANCE:**

### **A JOURNEY THROUGH ATONALITY AND 12-TONE COMPOSITION**

“With the renunciation of the formal advantages inherent in tonal cohesion, presentation of the idea has become rather harder; it lacks the external rounding-off and self-containedness that this simple and natural principle of composition brought about better than did any of the others used alongside it....For in a key, opposites are at work, binding together. Practically the whole thing consists exclusively of opposites, and this gives the strong effect of cohesion. To find means of replacing this is the task of the theory of twelve-tone composition”.

A. Schoenberg

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Arnold Schoenberg: One of the most controversial composers of our times. One that was mercilessly criticized and cut down by some, praised by others. Until this day, opinions on Schoenberg vary greatly. However, everyone acknowledges that the dawn of a new era was marked with this composer, who laid the foundations for a whole new compositional style. The old Vienna school was giving its place to a new, more radical one and significant changes were about to occur in the music world, that was witnessing the rise of atonality. But where did this idea of atonality come from?

The term “atonality”, to many, means simply a piece that has no key signature. This explanation, however, tends to be a little bit too simple and does not explain the term in its full potential. Like all things, the birth of atonality was not sudden; it did not emerge complete from the beginning. Schoenberg did not abandon all aspects of tonality between one composition and the next. There was quite a long period, during which the characteristics and features of tonal music slowly disintegrated and gave their place to non-tonal features and functions. This is all part of the music evolution, that so many historians have talked about throughout the centuries. There are various reasons why there was such a turn to atonality. A helpful explanation is that by 1900 many composers felt that tonality had been used at its full and there was no more to be done in that area. Therefore, they had to turn to new directions and explore new ideas and possibilities. With Schoenberg, new scales of modes, new definitions of dissonance, new kinds of harmonic progressions emerged.

The rise of atonality is widely attributed to Schoenberg. There are several ways in which Schoenberg’s theory of tonality can make the origins of atonality better understood. Schoenberg, in his *Theory of Harmony* (or *Harmonielehre*) expresses his concepts of harmonic progression, through what he perceives as the hierarchy of the diatonic collection, and through his procedures for chord formation. His theory is founded on three types of chord progressions: *strong* (or ascending), *weak* (or descending) and *over-skipping* (or superstrong). His initial approach does not differ greatly from the more classical approaches, but in his post-1900 music few of the restrictions that he

mentions in his Theory hold; Schoenberg's harmonic progressions frequently lack strong sense of tonal identification, becoming "successions" of chords, without being interested in achieving tonality. This theory of harmonic progressions/successions represents an essential aspect of Schoenberg's thinking: it is very helpful for the understanding of the origins of atonality. What is very interesting is that most of the traditional trends of tonality are used (such as triads, seventh chords, proper resolutions, no parallel fifths etc), but there is no establishment of a tonality. Schoenberg's earlier music is constructed this way, also making very frequent use of chromaticism, which he is very fond of. In fact, he justifies the use of the five chromatic tones as functionally equivalent replacements for any of the seven diatonic tones at any time and in any place. A lot of information on chromaticism and on how to connect distantly related chords to one another is also included in his Theory of Harmony. In order for one to understand Schoenberg's liking to chromaticism, one has to keep in mind that Wagner was of a major influence to the composer.

The dissonance applied in Schoenberg's music (after the 1900s) is made complex, with the intention of making it cease having a functional role. This whole procedure, labeled "*nonfunctionality of dissonance*" can be explained better if one thinks about two chords both containing dissonances, but in neither of the chords can the actual dissonances be really defined. The whole procedure was successfully called the "*Emancipation of Dissonance*", referring to some sort of musical liberation, most likely from the stricter context of earlier times. So one can see that Schoenberg was not looking for stable intervals when he started expanding the harmonic system; he wanted to make it impossible to identify which tones needed resolution, like in "normal" chords.

All the above was leading faster and faster to pure atonality, which Schoenberg preferred to think of as "pantonal", meaning that there was a relationship among all keys. The period during which Schoenberg's atonal works flourished was 1908-1923. It coincided with various new movements in Europe, such as expressionism, cubism and futurism. Artists everywhere were trying to find new ways of expression through art and spirituality. Schoenberg was also trying to discover new aesthetics in music, and turned

his quest towards atonality. There have been a lot of attempts to divide various stages of atonality in Schoenberg, but only certain tendencies can be recognized regarding form, technique and content in various of the works he composed during the specific period. Generally, there is a movement away from thematic structure in the early atonal works, which still have some characteristics of the preceding tonal period, but are “athematic”, and then there is a gradual return to more regulated “classical” forms, which also include repetitive dance forms. Each of the works however, is unique in style, form and colors.

Dissonance, according to Schoenberg, could be understood in the same manner as consonances and could be used similarly. He was looking for new resources, both structurally and expressively. When it comes to the structural level, he was trying to achieve more irregular, asymmetrical types of construction, and as far as the expressive level was concerned, he was trying to achieve a variety of emotions, with sudden changes that would have the maximum effect. Historians tend to believe that the atonal period of Schoenberg was an experimental one, a “transition” between tonality and twelve-tone composition, which started around 1921. This is true up to a point: during the atonal period, the ground was prepared for twelve-tone composition, as certain features used in his works imply (such as the use of the chromatic scale at its fullest, the “emancipation of dissonance” etc). All this was leading to what was yet to come: the evolution of the twelve-tone method of composition.

After the transition from tonal music to atonal, new horizons were open and seeking exploration. Schoenberg did not stop at atonality; a new method of composition emerged. According to Adolph Weiss

*The twelve-tone series is a definite arrangement of all tones of the chromatic scale in a set order. It is applied in all the forms of variation, harmonically or contrapuntally, horizontally or vertically, to the construction of every detail of a twelve-tone composition....Any tone of series may be used in any octave position, according to the discrimination of the composer.*

This system, made widely known by Schoenberg, has the chromatic scale as its foundation, in contradiction to the diatonic, which is bounded by the use of major, minor and other modes. Schoenberg believed that there were unlimited possibilities to this

method, because of the many combinations one can use. The characteristics of his twelve-tone method emerged gradually, through a process of trial and error, research and modification. A twelve-tone composition could also be defined as a work in which every note belongs to at least one statement of a twelve-tone set, but that is just a narrow definition of what is included in this method. There are many important features in twelve-tone compositional method.

A most important feature is Schoenberg's custom of presenting a linear statement of the set as a theme and placing that theme at the beginning of the work. This linear set statement presents the basic material and by doing so, Schoenberg establishes a focus for the developments to come. After the initial statement of the set, more linear statements are used for the underlining of important structural points. This is often achieved by repeating the basic material, only this time transposed.

There is also certain terminology used for this type of compositions. The first complete appearance of a set in Schoenberg's serial compositions can be named P-0. This means that the first appearance of the set is the prime form (P), and because it is at the original pitch level, a zero (0) is used to indicate this fact. So, "P-0" means the untransposed set. "P-1" means the prime form, transposed up a half step. "P-2" means the prime form transposed up two half steps etc. Another symbol used is "I", which indicates that the set-form employed is an inversion of the prime form. Again here, as with prime forms, the second part of the label indicates how many half steps the inversion has been transposed. I-0 indicates that the form of the inversion has the same beginning note as the original prime form, I-1 is the transposition up a half step etc. Schoenberg however did not want to limit himself only to serial ordering, and in many of his works of the specific period show his intention to take his art even further, by using non-serial passages as well.

As time went by, Schoenberg grew to be more and more mature in his twelve-tone compositions and decided to base all his works on sets with twelve-tones. He was trying to learn how to make all events in the composition have a set as their main start

point, but he did not want to give emphasis on any one of the twelve tones. His twelve-tone technique evolved and changed throughout time; new trends would emerge and he would find new ways of dealing with the patterns he had created.

In his earliest twelve-tone works, there was no systematic method as to how set forms should be combined. One of his concerns was however to avoid octave relationships between voices. He gradually created a system for the combination of set forms in his twelve-tone music. This was one of the most significant advances towards his more mature twelve-tone works. He came to the conclusion that the sets he would use had to be very specific, meaning that if a form of the set were combined with a specific transposition of the inversion, the combination of pitches in the corresponding hexachord would consist of all twelve tones. This set of all twelve tones was called *aggregate*. From this emerged another important term, *hexachord inversionsal combinatoriality*, which was called this because by combining hexachords of inversionally related set forms aggregates are produced. This IH combinatoriality meant a great deal for Schoenberg's work, because it gave him a consistent, systematic basis for the combination of set forms in polyphony. It also meant that aggregates would result in several dimensions, between sets and within them. The gradual discovery of this compositional method can be traced back to Schoenberg's early twelve-tone works.

Schoenberg's methods of composition were as hard for composers and musicians to accept as they were for the broader audience. This is why opinions regarding his work were so controversial. His music was rejected numerous times, but the truth is that he left a great legacy behind, in many aspects of his work – as a teacher, theorist, writer, lecturer and above all as creator of the twelve-tone method (or, as he preferred to call it, “method of composing with twelve tones which are related only with one another”). His compositions influenced many prominent musical figures. The truth is that out of many different 20<sup>th</sup>-century systems of composition, Schoenberg's twelve-tone system is the one that has survived the best and has been expanded and extended to a great degree. It is undeniably important and should be examined objectively and closely, in order for one to understand the true value of Schoenberg's discovery.

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