

TWENTIETH CENTURY MUSIC: EXTENDING THE DEFINITION OF MUSIC (4)

TWELVE-TONE TECHNIQUE, ATONALITY & SERIALISM

INTRODUCTION & DEFINING TWELVE-TONE TECHNIQUE

The concepts behind twelve-tone technique and its extensions (atonality and serialism) are difficult to grasp. I have included this brief page to provide an introduction to these techniques to show that it is used in compositions, both Classical and Non-Classical.

Twelve-tone technique is a method of musical compositions devised by Arnold Schoenberg. The technique is a means of ensuring that all twelve notes of the chromatic scale are sounded as often as one another in a piece of music, while preventing the emphasis of any through the use of tone rows, orderings of the 12 pitch classes. All 12 notes are thus given more or less equal importance, and the music avoids being in a key. This also means that compositions which use this technique do not have a proper tonal center or through analysis of the music, no tonal center can be realized. The technique was influential on composers in the mid-20th century.

DEFINING ATONALITY AND SERIALISM

The root word of atonality is "tonal." Atonality refers to a method of composition which does not focus on a tonal center. Twelve-tone music is usually atonal, but there are exceptions. Serialism or serial music is an extension of twelve-tone music, where aspects other than the pitches of notes are controlled. Total serial music includes control of all elements of music, including melody, harmony, pitches, form and rhythm.

WHAT ARE ENHARMONIC EQUIVALENTS?

An enharmonic equivalent is a note, interval or key signature that is equivalent to some other note, interval, or key signature but "spelled", or named differently. Thus, the enharmonic spelling of a written note, interval, or chord is an alternative way to write that note, interval, or chord. With the exception of one note (per octave) on the piano, each note can be written and spelled 3 ways. The understanding of the application of sharps and flats is crucial to the full understanding of twentieth century music in regard to microtonality, atonality and serialism.

DEFINITIONS RELATING TO TWELVE-TONE TECHNIQUE

Polytonality or Polyharmony: The musical use of more than one key at the same time

Polyrhythm or Cross-Rhythm: The use of two or more independent rhythms at the same time

Polychords: Imposing one tonal chord on top of another

Polymodality: The use of two different modes at the same time

Bi-Tonality: The use of two different keys at the same time

Tone Cluster: A musical chord made up of at least three consecutive tones in a scale. For example, the notes C-D-G made up a tone cluster, as do the notes C-F-B

Equal Temperament: Making all semitones the same size.

Quarter Tones: Intervals smaller than a semitone. Also called Micro Tones. By using quarter tones, equal temperament in music cannot be realized or even possible

Extended Techniques: Performance techniques used in music to describe unconventional, unorthodox, or non-traditional techniques of singing or of playing musical instruments to obtain unusual sounds or interesting timbres

Total Serial Composition: A complete rejection of all of the elements found in traditional Western Music.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TWELVE-TONE MUSIC

1. No clearly defined key (no key signature used)
2. Cadences are not always used; if they are, they are difficult to analyze
3. Very difficult in and of itself to analyze, even for some professional musicians. It is purely based on a branch of advanced Mathematics, known as Set Theory
4. Other notable composers who have made contributions and carved their respective niches are:
 - a. Olivier Messiaen
 - b. Anton Webern
 - c. Karlheinz Stockhausen
 - d. Alban Berg
 - e. Igor Stravinsky
 - f. Charles Ives
 - g. Bela Bartok
5. Some 20th and 21st C. music composers are turning away from serialism/twelve-tone technique, and back to prior eras of music

I will be learning the knowledge and concepts I need to as much as I can given the theoretical knowledge I have with my own Classical training and attempting to compose a small number of serialism/twelve-tone technique as well as phasing and Chance music. That being said, for the sake of this website however, I will not be uploading said audio. My focus is on traditional Western music, up to and including the Post-Romantic/Impressionist Era. The documents in this section and the one following are intended to be a guide only and I do not give enough data to analyze nor fully understand musical works of this sort.