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The Atonal Music Of Arnold Schoenberg, 1908-1923



Synopsis

Between 1908 and 1923, Arnold Schoenberg began writing music that went against many of the accepted concepts and practices of this art. Largely following his intuition during these years, he composed some of the masterpieces of the modern repertoire--including *Pierrot lunaire* and *Erwartung*--works that have since provoked a large, though fragmented, body of critical and analytical writing. In this book, Bryan Simms combines a historical study with a close analytical reading of the music to give us a new and richer understanding of Schoenberg's seminal work during this period.

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Customer Reviews

"[T]he work of a scholar who not only knows the music he is writing about very well but has strong ideas about its historical position....mastery of source materials."--*Music & Letters*"[A] significant amount of information about Schoenberg's atonal compositions--their historical background, choice of texts, relationship to the composer's biography and much else besides. Any subsequent scholar who wishes to examine any of these pieces will shorten his or her work considerably by beginning with Simms's discussions. Indeed, anyone wishing a good general introduction to the compositions and their historical background should start here."--*Current Musicology*"...exhibits the rarest insight that only an author with intimate understanding and sympathy toward both Schoenberg's life and work could bring together...this study assesses Schoenberg's creative impulse and makes it understandable for perhaps the first time. Simms's seamless blend of an awareness of the

composer's life with concise abstractions of his theories....makes this book a true achievement, one worthy of not only the scholar and student, but the lover of modern music as well."--Choice"[T]he work of a scholar who not only knows the music he is writing about very well but has strong ideas about its historical position....mastery of source materials."--Music & Letters"[A] significant amount of information about Schoenberg's atonal compositions-their historical background, choice of texts, relationship to the composer's biography and much else besides. Any subsequent scholar who wishes to examine any of these pieces will shorten his or her work considerably by beginning with Simms's discussions. Indeed, anyone wishing a good general introduction to the compositions and their historical background should start here."--Current Musicology"....Thoroughly researched and meticulous in detail....The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg is a highly useful addition to the literature on Schoenberg. It provides an accounting of Schoenberg's development during the atonal period that is especially rich in biographical detail and historical context. The context that Bryan Simms unfolds here will be indispensable for all theorists and musicologists who wish to interpret these works and their history."-- Music Theory Online"I would recommend this as an essential purchase - reliable, readable, enhanced by dozens of music examples and very reasonably priced. To others unconvinced of Schoenberg's many faceted genius I would equally recommend MacDonald as a most persuasive advocate and guide."--Classical Music

Bryan R. Simms is at University of Southern California.

Locating a genesis of atonalityIn the introduction and first chapter of *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg, 1908-1923*, Bryan Simms shows us that Schoenberg's creative development unfolds a series of tight correspondences between composition and academic theory: theoretical assertions closely mirror his changing compositional approaches, in what appears to be a radical ambivalence. From early in his career, what Schoenberg writes about music seems to apply to his compositions from around the same time, but not as easily to his earlier or later work. More than just loose aesthetic parallels, the connections suggest a composer dominated by an urgently evolving, yet highly isolated, internal thought process. Simms does acknowledge explanations, from Adorno and others, that Schoenberg's revolution is part of a "resounding echo of...social antinomies", but he then turns our attention productively toward the tendencies of Schoenberg the individual. Simms supports this overall impression with evidence from the *Harmonielehre* (1911), echoing Ethan Haimo's apt hypothesis that "it is in Schoenberg's conception of tonality that the most useful clues for the origins of atonality can be found." Even more than Haimo, Simms carefully interprets the

composer's views on harmony, and connects them to specific compositional tendencies. In pedagogical examples of harmonic progressions, we find a "defective theory" that favors interchangeable 'successions', sometimes at the expense of determinate, cadence-directed progressions ; Schoenberg regards "vagrant chords" (including fairly conventional chromatic harmony) as fragmented suspensions of tonal thinking, rather than subordinate participants in a tonal structure. (Tangent: Haimo's analyses of the Opus 6 songs and the Opus 7 string quartet likewise reveal a composer uniquely predisposed against "progression"--against structurally functional, integrated tonal unity. For Haimo, these predispositions are part academic eccentricity, and part personal manifesto--Schoenberg's evolution, he concludes, is "not so much the product of anonymous historical forces as it was the specific notion of a single thinker.") Both scholars also find fault in Schoenberg's understanding of tonal progression. In contrast to Haimo, Simms is more concerned with complex interplays of influence, but while Schoenberg's shift away from key was "a symptom of a larger historical evolution," he asserts that without the specificity of Schoenberg's tendencies after 1908, atonality as we now understand it through Webern, Messiaen, Boulez, and others, would be impossible. Both scholars offer much more to the conversation than what these summaries suggest, but from these isolated points, we can gather a distinctive sensibility about innovation in music history: that composers' beliefs about music are an impetus behind their practices, and those practices, if successful, bring about a larger set of shared beliefs--in this case, our social history of atonality--beliefs that might have gone another direction. The epistemology of this view is elaborate: Simms really cares about the chronology of Schoenberg's writing, and brings the implications of that chronology to the foreground. But this line of argumentation may be deceptively efficacious, drawing clarity from an orderly timeline, at the expense of a broader, but less explicit, genealogy of aesthetics and musical practice. We should consider that practices, like dissonance treatment and the assembly of chord progressions, make for an easier taxonomy than the ideas and social forces that they accompany. Once we identify, for example, the practical difference between the inchoate harmonic 'successions' found in the *Harmonielehre*, and the more directed progressions underlying Schenker's (1910) *Kontrapunkt*, the notion of opposition between them seems to help distinguish between subtler categories of desire, aesthetics, and ideology, among artists and audiences (even if what really motivates compositional practices like "atonality" is more complex). In Haimo's case, we are even able to localize the origin of a tradition, so that we might wonder whether "without Arnold Schoenberg, we would have seen the emergence of music that we would define as atonal," implying that only Schoenberg's idea of tonal harmony could generate the practice of atonality that Schoenberg and his circle--widening throughout the 20th

century--initiated. That atonality would have been different without Schoenberg is clear enough. But what of the divergent social and intellectual contexts in which Schoenbergian atonality has resonated, without Schoenberg's help? And what of musical practices that might undergo socially driven recombinations throughout music history, regardless of their origins?

Certainly the most serious, scholarly, and musicological study of Schoenberg's early, atonal work. For those interested in less of an introduction and more in depth analysis, this book is the key for its subject area. Lucidly written, the ideal first step beyond so many biographical-introductions to this great composer.

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