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| Atonality |
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| Atonality refers to the complete absence of tonality in a musical composition. Yet atonality may also involve the increasing enrichment of diatonic tonality with chromatic elements that undermine or reinforce the structural stability of diatonic fundamentals. |
| Atonality refers to the complete absence of tonality in a musical composition. In music, it is often claimed that modernism stands in opposition to classicism or romanticism, even though music from late Beethoven (1820s) to early Schoenberg (1900s) sees elements of modernist disjunction emerging from, interacting, and conflicting with, elements of classicism and romanticism. By the same token, atonality stands in opposition to tonality, even if atonal music involves the increasing enrichment of diatonic tonality with chromatic elements that, particularly from Liszt and Wagner onwards, tend to undermine or reinforce the structural stability of diatonic fundamentals.  Music theorists since Schoenberg have been divided over the validity of atonality as a meaningful concept. Schoenberg himself rejected the term on the grounds of its negative connotations, and his own music demonstrates how difficult it is in practice to make hard and fast distinctions between compositions in which no suggestion of tonal formations of any kind can be distinguished and those which demonstrate the kind of passing allusions that Schoenberg identified as ‘suspended tonality’ and ‘pantonality.’  Theorists who use ‘atonality’ tend to do so either because it is a conveniently pithy term whose definition can involve constructive critique, or because their understanding of tonality is based on the rigorously diatonic concepts of Heinrich Svchenker; from that perspective it certainly makes sense to define all compositions that cannot be shown to conform to Schenkerian principles as atonal. There has nevertheless been considerable support for attempting to distinguish between unambiguously atonal compositions, such as Schoenberg’s String Quartet No. 4 (1936), which uses twelve-tone technique in ways that fit well with Schoenberg’s own understanding of suspended tonality or pantonality. Whether or not a systematic analytical method can ever be devised for definitively proving the presence of such post-tonal elements, the use of essentially hierarchical modes of thought by leading modernist composers in the years since 1960 lends support to the view that atonality, while not impossible, is not simply to be equated with the absence of the kind of tonal structures that predominated in music before the twentieth century. |
| Further reading:  (Forte)  (Kurth)  (Perle)  (Roig-Francolí)  (Schuijer)  (Straus) |