

What Is Atonality and Serial Technique?

Atonality in music means there is no single “home” note or key center. Imagine walking on a path that never leads back to your house – the music wanders around instead of returning to the same place. Serial technique is a way of composing that uses a fixed pattern or set of rules instead of a normal tune. In other words, atonal music feels free and unpredictable, while serial music is built by following a particular sequence of notes.

Part 1: Technical Explanation for Advanced Learners

Tonal vs. Atonal. In most familiar (tonal) music, there is a note or chord that feels like “home,” called the tonic or key. A melody or harmony often resolves there, giving a sense of rest or completion. **Atonal music avoids that home base entirely.** It does not settle on one pitch or scale; no single note acts as the center ¹ ² .

- **Home base (Tonic):** In tonal music, many sounds lead back to one central pitch. In atonal music, no note acts as home ¹ .
- **Tension and Resolution:** Tonal music builds tension (dissonance) and then resolves it to a consonant chord. Atonal music often stays in tension, using dissonant (clashing) intervals that do not resolve in the usual way.
- **Sense of Key:** Tonal pieces stay in a key (like C major), so the ear perceives a pattern. Atonal pieces use notes more equally, so you don’t feel a single key pulling things together ¹ ² .
- **Melody and Harmony:** Melodies in tonal music often sound like singable lines. Atonal melodies can sound jagged or unpredictable. Harmonies in tonal music follow familiar recipes (major/minor chords); atonal harmonies mix many intervals, often creating an abrasive texture.

Because atonal music does not return home, it can feel **unsettled, suspenseful, or surprising**. It might even sound eerie or abstract. For example, a rock musician Kim Gordon noted that “extreme noise and dissonance can be an incredibly cleansing thing” – using harsh, atonal sounds to express strong emotions ³ . In atonal music, every note is on its own, which can make it feel chaotic or, to some listeners, exciting and raw.

Why avoid a home base? Some composers felt that a fixed key could not express the full range of modern emotion. Historically, in the early 20th century, World War I and social turmoil inspired artists to break traditional rules. Atonality grew from this desire for freedom and realism in music. One source explains that after the war artists “crushed the old system of an organized and clean canvas,” and atonality spoke of “a lack of stability and peace” ⁴ . By not having a key, music could wander freely, reflecting uncertainty or intensity.

Serial (Twelve-Tone) Technique. A prominent method of atonal composition is serialism (often called twelve-tone technique). In serial music, the composer selects all twelve notes of the chromatic scale and arranges them into a specific sequence, called a *tone row*. This is like lining up twelve colored blocks in a particular order. The piece is then built by using those notes in that order ² ⁵ . Key rules are: use each note of the row before repeating any, so no note sounds like a home base ² .

For example: 1. **Choose a series of notes.** Pick any group of notes (usually all 12 distinct pitches) ⁵ . 2. **Form a fixed sequence (“note row”).** Rearrange the chosen notes in the order you want ⁶ . 3.

Compose using the row. Play those notes one by one in that order. After you play all of them, you might repeat the series or play it backwards or upside-down, but always using the same set ⁵ ⁶ .

Because the series includes every note, the music “avoids being in a particular key” ² . Arnold Schoenberg, who invented this in 1920, explained it was a way to give equal importance to all twelve notes ⁷ . In practice, this means the melody and harmony follow the rule of the sequence, resulting in music that can sound very structured (since it follows a pattern) yet very different from ordinary tunes.

Pattern and Movement in Serial Music. Serial compositions often have an internal structure (the ordered row), even if it doesn’t sound like a traditional melody. You can think of playing this music as stepping on tiles in a fixed pattern: if the tiles are numbered 1–12, you step on them in a set order. This gives a kind of pattern, but because the steps cover all numbers, no single step feels like “home.” Some serial pieces use techniques like inversion (flipping the order of intervals), retrograde (playing the row backwards), or combining them ⁵ ⁶ . These are variations on the same ordered series, adding interest without establishing a key.

Emotional and Aesthetic Effects. Atonal and serial music can evoke a wide range of feelings. It might sound **confusing or chaotic**, especially at first, because the ear can’t rely on a familiar key or melody. That can make it feel **scary or tense**, like an unresolved question. But it can also be **fascinating or emotionally powerful**. Listeners often compare it to abstract art: at first glance strange, but revealing subtle structure on closer look. For example, guitar band Sonic Youth used noisy, clashing chords and alternative tunings to create a rich wall of sound ³ . They saw dissonance as a way to “express visceral emotions” beyond regular tunes.

Real-World Examples. Some modern musicians play with atonality. Sonic Youth (alternative rock) often built songs from feedback, unusual tunings, and overlapping guitar lines. They wanted their music to feel raw and “filled with extremes” rather than sweet and consonant ³ . The Beatles even ventured into this world: their track “*Revolution 9*” is essentially a collage of sounds and voices, with no melody or key. John Lennon said it was meant to “paint a picture of a revolution using sound” ⁸ . In other rock songs, you’ll find hints of atonality: Pink Floyd’s experimental noises and ticking clocks in “*Time*”, King Crimson’s jagged chords in “*21st Century Schizoid Man*”, Frank Zappa’s wild instrumentals, or the Velvet Underground’s droning guitars in “*Heroin*” all show nontraditional, dissonant approaches. These examples show how atonal techniques can appear outside the concert hall.

In summary, **atonal music** is music without a clear key or home note ¹ ² . It often uses dissonance and avoids traditional resolution. **Serial (twelve-tone) technique** is one formal way to do atonal music: the composer follows a fixed series of notes ⁵ ⁶ . These tools let musicians explore sound and emotion in new ways, creating music that can be beautiful, strange, confusing, or intense — but always interesting.

Part 2: Explaining Atonality and Serial Technique to a Deaf Five-Year-Old

Imagine music as a game on a playground. In a normal music game (tonal music), there is a special spot called home base. You run around and always come back to stand at home base. In **atonal music**, there is *no* home base. It’s like running all over the playground without ever stopping in one favorite spot.

How does atonal music feel? Think about feeling vibrations. In a usual song, when you put your hand on a big drum or speaker, you feel a steady pattern of booms (like a heartbeat or footsteps). In atonal

music, the vibrations can jump around – sometimes a deep thump, then quickly a fast buzzing, then maybe silence. It feels unpredictable.

Or imagine colors: regular songs are like drawing with a few soft, harmonious colors (like blue sky and green grass) to make a calm picture. Atonal music is like splashing every bright color all over the page. At first it might look messy, but you might start seeing new shapes and feelings in the jumble.

When you move to atonal music, it can feel like dancing with no set steps. Tonal music might feel like walking up a hill and down again. Atonal music is like walking in a field where you suddenly skip, spin, or zigzag instead of going in a circle. You never end up in one place, and that adventure can feel exciting or even a little scary.

Why play this way? Sometimes people have lots of mixed-up feelings. Atonal music is one way to show strong or confusing emotions. For example, if you're really excited or upset, you might jump and spin all around instead of waltzing gently. Sonic Youth's guitarist Kim Gordon said they liked making big noise because it let them express feelings without words ³.

Serial technique – a pattern game. Even though atonal music doesn't have a home base, **serial music has a special rule.** It's like picking 12 stepping stones and always following them in order. Imagine 12 different colored tiles on the floor, numbered 1 to 12. You make a rule: step on them in a certain fixed order. For example: 5, 1, 12, 3, 9, 2, 7, 8, 4, 6, 11, 10. That order is your rule. You step on tile 5, then 1, then 12, and so on, using each tile once, and then you can do it again in that same order. This is how a serial (twelve-tone) melody works ⁵ ⁶. It's a bit like a dance routine where each move is done in a specific sequence.

Because of this rule, the music feels patterned, but not in a familiar way. It's as if you're following a secret treasure map that uses every clue before repeating. If you're clapping or tapping to it, you'd always count 12 different beats before repeating. It might feel surprising because no one beat is more special than another.

Why can it be beautiful or scary? At first, atonal sounds can seem odd. But they can make a big adventure for your imagination. It's like looking at a crazy picture or sculpture: not realistic, but full of emotions. Some parts of atonal music might feel beautiful — imagine a shimmering swarm of sound, like fireworks you can feel. Other parts might feel eerie — like a sudden thunderclap of a chord or a squeak that makes you jump.

Try it with your body or hands:

- *Feel vibrations:* Place your hand on a balloon or speaker while someone plays atonal music. Notice the skin of the balloon vibrate. Some parts might make it wobble slowly (like low, slow notes) and some parts might make it flutter quickly (like high, fast notes). You might notice the changes more clearly than hearing the tune. - *Move around:* Dance or sway however the music makes you want to. If you feel a deep rumble (like a bass drum), you might sway or stomp. If you feel a quick buzz (like a bell), you might tap your fingers or twirl. You'll probably make unpredictable movements, just like the music sounds unpredictable. - *See colors/shapes:* Imagine each sound as a color or shape. If the music has a sharp snap, see a red lightning bolt. If it has a gentle hum, see a green wave. In atonal music, the colors keep changing and mixing. You might see a colorful abstract painting come to life in your mind.

Serial patterns with movement: Think of the 12 tiles again. You could lay out 12 mats in a circle and step on them in your chosen order. One step at a time, following the rule. Maybe you step forward, then

sideways, then jump. Because the rule is fixed, once you learn it, you'll notice the pattern. You might not go back to the first mat until you've stepped on all 12, so the pattern feels like a loop of 12 moves.

Summary: Atonal music is like playing in a world without a home base – everything moves and changes. Serial technique is like following a secret rule through that world. Both create a journey that can be beautiful, scary, confusing, or exciting, much like exploring an unknown forest or painting with all the colors at once. Even if it feels strange at first, you can enjoy it by focusing on how it *feels* and *moves* instead of expecting a familiar tune. It's a new kind of musical adventure.

Sources: Atonal music has “no tonal center” ¹, and serial technique (twelve-tone) uses all 12 notes in a fixed series ² ⁵. Sonic Youth and others embraced dissonance as emotionally powerful ³, and even The Beatles’ “*Revolution 9*” was an attempt to “paint a picture of a revolution using sound” ⁸. These examples show how atonal, serial, and experimental approaches create new musical worlds.

¹ ² ⁴ ⁵ ⁶ ⁷ Everything You Need To Know About Atonal Music
<https://www.piano-composer-teacher-london.co.uk/atonal-music-all-you-need-to-know/>

³ Sonic Youth – Daydream Nation – Classic Music Review | altrockchick
<https://altrockchick.com/2020/09/21/sonic-youth-daydream-nation-classic-music-review/>

⁸ revolution 9 | SECOND INVERSION
<https://www.secondinversion.org/tag/revolution-9/>