

Anton Webern: The Path to New Music

Now I should like to cast a quick glance at the extension of the tonal field. Why do I talk so much about it? Because for the last quarter of a century major and minor have no longer existed! Only, most people still do not know. It was so attractive to fly ever further into the remotest tonal regions, and then to slip back again into the warm nest, the original key! And suddenly one did not come back—such a loose chord is so ambiguous! It was a fine feeling to draw in one's wings; but in the end one found it was no longer so necessary to return to the keynote. Until Beethoven and Brahms, one didn't really get any further—but then a composer appeared who blew the whole thing apart: Wagner. And then Bruckner and Hugo Wolf; and Richard Strauss also came and had his turn—very ingenious!—and many others; and that was the end of major and minor.

Summing up, I would say: just as the church modes disappeared and gave way to only two modes, so these two have also disappeared and made way for a single series: the chromatic scale. Relation to a keynote—tonality—has been lost. The relationship to a keynote had given older structures an essential foundation. It helped to build their form, in a certain sense it produced unity. This relation to a keynote was the essence of tonality. As a result of all the events mentioned, this relationship first became less necessary and then disappeared altogether. Harmonic complexes arose, of a kind that made the relationship to a keynote superfluous. All this happened between Wagner and Schoenberg, whose first works were still tonal. Relationship to a keynote became ever looser. This produced a state in which one could finally dispense with the keynote. The possibility of rapid modulation has nothing to do with this development; in fact just because all this happened in order to safeguard the keynote—to extend tonality—precisely because we took steps to preserve tonality—we broke its neck!

I go out into the hall to knock in a nail. On my way there, I decide I would rather go out. I obey the impulse, get into a train, come to a railway station, go on travelling and finally end up—in America! That is modulation!

In this musical material new laws have come into force, which have made it impossible for a piece to be described as being in one key or another. It was so ambiguous. Things have asserted themselves, which made this "key" simply impossible. We have sensed that the frequent repetition of a note, either directly or in the course of the piece, in some way "got its own back," that this note "came through." It had to be given its due—that was still possible at this stage; but it proved disturbing, for example, if one note occurred a number of times during some run of all twelve. The movement of the individual parts in a polyphonic texture happened chromatically, and no longer in the sense of major or minor. Schoenberg said, "The most important thing in composing is an eraser!" It was a matter of constant testing: "Are these chord progressions the right ones? Am I putting down what I mean? Is the right form emerging?"

What has happened? I can only relate something from my own experience: About 1911 I wrote the *Bagatelles for String Quartet* (op. 9), all very short pieces; perhaps the shortest music so far. I had the feeling here that when all twelve notes had gone by, the piece was over. Much later I discovered that all this was part of a necessary development. In my sketch-book I wrote out the chromatic scale and crossed off individual notes. Why? Because I had convinced myself: this note has been there already. It sounds grotesque, incomprehensible, and it was unbelievably difficult. The inner ear decided quite rightly that the man who wrote out the chromatic scale and crossed off individual notes was no fool. In short: a law emerged; until all twelve notes have occurred, none may be repeated. The most important thing is that the single rotation of the twelve notes marked a division within the piece, idea or theme.

All the works created between the disappearance of tonality and the formulation of the new twelve-tone law were short, strikingly short. The longer works written at that time were linked to a text which carried them (Schoenberg's *Erwartung* and *Die Gluckliche Hand*, Berg's *Wozzeck*), i.e., really with something extramusical. With the abandonment of tonality the most important means of building up longer pieces was lost. For tonality was supremely important in producing self-contained forms. It seemed as if the light had been put out! (At least, this is how it strikes us today.) At that time everything was in a state of flux—uncertain, dark; very stimulating and exciting, so that there was no time to notice the loss. Only when Schoenberg gave expression to the law were larger forms again possible.

Adherence to the law is strict, often burdensome—but it is *salvation!* The dissolution of tonality wasn't our fault—and we did not create the new law ourselves; it forced itself overwhelmingly upon us. The commitment is so powerful that one must consider very carefully before finally entering into it... almost as if one took the decision to marry; a difficult moment! Trust your inspiration! There is no alternative.

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Note: This passage was not exactly written by Anton Webern. It's extracted and translated from shorthand notes taken by Rudolf Ploderer at a lecture that Webern gave in 1932 or 33.