

Introduction

“[...] forget the theories, the twelve tone method, the dissonances etc. [...] That I write in this or that style or method is my private affair and is no concern to any listener [...]”¹

¹ Arnold Schönberg to Roger Sessions, 3 December 1944 (ASCC 4115); quoted from *Schoenberg's Correspondence with American Composers*. Edited by Sabine Feisst (New York 2018), 462 (Schoenberg in Words 9).

² Wilhelm Sinkovicz: Wer komponiert mit? Schreiben Sie Ihr Zwölftonstück! Kleine Bastelanleitung für Neugierige. Ein Notenblatt, ein Bleistift und Grundkenntnisse in Notenschrift genügen, in *Die Presse am Sonntag* (27 February 2022); the cabaret artist Bodo Wartke addressed his audience in a similar way hoping to get some cheap laughs: https://youtu.be/mleptek_Ab8 (Accessed 20 October 2022).

³ Felix Greissle: Arnold Schönberg – Versuch eines Porträts, 357 (Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien [Felix Greissle Collection]); for more on the twelve-tone method and the “hegemony of German music” see History, 45 and passim.

⁴ Schönberg's respect for different compositional positions is exemplified by his relations with George Gershwin and John Cage. Although he himself did not operate in the field of popular music, he accorded Gershwin the highest respect. And although he could hardly identify with the aesthetics of Cage around 1940, he nevertheless had high regard for his hard work and idealism, and he taught the young composer free of charge.

Arnold Schönberg was one of the most influential artistic figures of the 20th century. His work has secured its place in the concert hall and on the stage through compositions that cover a range of styles – from classical forms, to virtuosic arrangements, to simpler genres. The great complexity of the history and culture of the first half of the 20th century is reflected in his thinking and character, as well as in his biography as a Jew born in Vienna. But immediate associations with the name Arnold Schönberg are, nevertheless, usually connected to one specific compositional idea: the twelve-tone technique, twelve-tone music, or, as Schönberg preferred to say, the “*method of composing with twelve tones which are related only with one another*”. Whether in a school lesson, a concert guide, or a university seminar, the twelve-tone method remains the point of reference for discussions about the composer. This often leads to a dilemma: while the compositional practice of the twelve-tone method is extremely complex and nearly impossible to understand schematically, its main features can be explained quickly. A renowned Austrian music critic and author of a Schönberg biography once encouraged his readers, by means of an “*instruction manual for the curious*”, to compose their own first twelve-tone piece. “*If the result sounds nice*” he quipped, “*then you probably did something wrong*”.² In truth, such approaches to illustrate the method, which reduce it to merely mechanical aspects, are about as beneficial to an understanding of Schönberg's music as is the knowledge of some key signatures in a study of Beethoven's String Quartets: it does not hurt, but it barely scratches the surface of the musical experience.

Arnold Schönberg's work with twelve-tone rows was, above all, a kind of liberation for the composer. Once music was opened to sounds beyond those of major/minor tonal harmony, the twelve-tone method offered a secure foundation upon which his compositional thinking could develop anew. His widely circulated statement, in which the composer claimed, “*I found something [...] that will determine the development of music for the next hundred years*”,³ has proved to be true – although admittedly in a different way than Schönberg assumed. In conventional teaching and concert life, professional composers can hardly avoid the twelve-tone method – whether they engage with it directly, develop it further independently, or distance themselves from it. The postwar generation had a decisive influence in this respect. They declared a compositional tabula rasa in the 1950s based on some core principles of the twelve-tone method, and an unprecedented avant-garde movement followed. However, it was primarily the technical aspects of working with rows that were established internationally under the banner of postwar serial music. And Schönberg himself, who understood his work to be connected to the Viennese classical tradition and its artistic norms, would hardly have taken part in postwar developments. But given his lifelong willingness to respect any serious and independent artistic choice, he likely would have accepted the attitude of a younger generation.⁴ Nevertheless, it might have pained him that the twelve-tone method has retained to this day its clichéd characterization as mathematically cerebral, inflexible, and abstract, for almost nothing could be more distant from Schönberg's compositional reality.

Schönberg saw the significance of the twelve-tone method primarily in relation to practical compositional concerns; with respect to aesthetics, artistic quality and, above all, the understanding of music, he accorded it only

⁵ Schönberg's statement in a letter to Rudolf Kolisch, 27 August 1932 (ASSC 2259), has become widely known: "my works are twelve-note compositions, not twelve-note compositions." English translation published in *Arnold Schoenberg, Letters*. Edited by Erwin Stein (New York 1965), 164.

⁶ Public lectures, which after 1927 increasingly treat the establishment of the twelve-tone method as an effective substitute for tonality, are addressed to the broader public and serve to legitimize the method both aesthetically and historically. See, for example, Arnold Schönberg: *Problems of Harmony* (1934) (ASSV 3.1.1.25.), as well as chapter 5 in this book.

⁷ Paris 1949. Leibowitz published a substantial account of the twelve-tone method prior to this in *Schoenberg et son école: l'étape contemporaine du langage musical* (Paris 1947).

⁸ Leibowitz wrote his book evidently without knowledge of the autograph sources. His assumption that the opus numbers 23 through 25 reflect the creative sequence of the works they represent may offer a picture of the genesis Schönberg intended for these works, but it corresponds in no way with the actual historical development of the twelve-tone method (see *History*, 52–60).

⁹ Berlin 1952; English translation published as *Composition with twelve notes related only to one another* (London 1954).

¹⁰ For more on this, see the correspondence between Schönberg, Leibowitz, and Rufer, excerpts of which appear in Philine Lautenschläger: "...vermutlich die einzige als authentisch zu betrachtende Interpretation von Schönbergs eigenen Gedankengängen". Josef Rufers Bemühungen um die Rückkehr von Werken und Ideen Schönbergs nach 1945,

marginal importance.⁵ Through to his later years, and against the wishes of his students, he refused to teach twelve-tone compositional technique, let alone codify it in the form of a textbook.⁶ But the need for instruction increased with the gradual spread of the twelve-tone method beyond the circle of the Viennese School. The first comprehensive introduction, René Leibowitz's *Introduction à la musique de douze sons*, appeared during Schönberg's lifetime.⁷ Basing his study on extensive analyses, Leibowitz traced the historical development of twelve-tone composition and provided insight into the creation of a large-scale compositional design using the example of the *Variations for Orchestra*, op. 31. Notwithstanding a few historical inaccuracies⁸, this book remains one of the most useful accounts of the method. Josef Rufer's *Die Komposition mit zwölf Tönen* [Composition with Twelve Tones]⁹ can be regarded as an alternative to Leibowitz's book.¹⁰ Rufer, a student of Schönberg in Vienna and later assistant at the Berlin Academy of Arts, considered himself as a kind of trustee for the composer in Europe, and he tried to explain the derivation of the twelve-tone method exegetically from the Classical-Romantic musical tradition, without including a systematic account of compositional techniques. Hanns Jelinek, a participant in Schönberg's seminar for composition at the Schwarzwald school and a private student of Alban Berg, largely avoided writing a historical narrative in his four-volume publication *Anleitung zur Zwölftonkomposition* [A Guide to Twelve-tone Composition].¹¹ His is the first instruction book in twelve-tone composition that attempts to give a clearly structured and easily understandable system of rules for the method, but it could hardly do justice to the creative thinking of Schönberg and his coterie.¹²

Decades of subsequent academic research have generated an abundance of studies on the historical development and practice of twelve-tone composition.¹³ The writings of Ethan Haimo in particular, which focus on Arnold Schönberg, provide a systematic introduction to his compositional technique and its historical development.¹⁴ There are no other publications that are comparable with Haimo's succinct presentation of the fundamentals of Schönberg's twelve-tone practice. But in view of the great interest that the twelve-tone method attracts, both among professional musicians and academics and beyond them, an introduction that would enable non-experts to approach Schönberg's compositional thinking seems lacking. The present book thus hopes to make the twelve-tone method approachable on several levels: as a compositional tool, in the context of historical events and aesthetic concepts, and, not least, as a genuine musical experience.

A chapter on **Basic Principles** provides a brief overview of elementary ideas and conventions of the twelve-tone method. A **History** chapter examines Schönberg's efforts to fashion a method of composition that, independent of traditional harmony, could match the heritage of musical traditions formed in the German-speaking cultural sphere. This "History" concludes with an account of the *Wind Quintet*, op. 26 – the piece through which Schönberg worked out the basic elements of twelve-tone composition. A **Glossary** then provides an overview of terminological, technical, and theoretical aspects of the twelve-tone method. Although not exhaustive, the lexical entries in the "Glossary" can be read together as a concise introduction to the analytical discussion around Schönberg's twelve-tone works. The transcription of

in *Journal of the Arnold Schönberg Center* 12/2015. Edited by Eike Feß and Therese Muxeneder (Wien 2015), 235–249.

¹¹ Published by Schönberg's former publisher: Universal-Edition (Wien 1952–1958).

¹² From this time period could be added also Herbert Eimert: *Lehrbuch der Zwölftontechnik* (Wiesbaden 1952), which is a brief introduction that really only touches the margins of Schönberg's idea of the twelve-tone method. Diverse other practically oriented twelve-tone instruction books appeared after Hanns Jelinek's book, but none of these had a lasting impact. One could name, for example, Reginald Smith Brindle: *Serial Composition* (Oxford 1966) as an attempt to provide practical instruction on various serial techniques as well as their compositional and expressive possibilities; also Larry Fotine: *Theory and Technique of Twelve Tone Composition* (Sepulveda 1967), which is an introduction to the twelve-tone method oriented decidedly toward jazz composers.

¹³ The most extensive accounts of the many different manifestations of serial composition include, Arnold Whittall: *Serialism* (Cambridge 2008), and the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Serialism* edited by Martin Iddon (Cambridge 2023).

¹⁴ The most significant references for the present book were Ethan Haimo: *Schoenberg's Serial Odyssey. The Evolution of his Twelve-tone Method, 1914–1928* (London 1990) and Haimo's contributions to *The Arnold Schoenberg Companion*, edited by Walter Boyce Bailey (Westport/Conn., London 1998).

¹⁵ Arnold Schönberg: *Hauers Theorien* (1923) (ASSV 5.3.1.36.)

Schönberg's **Lecture** that follows, which was delivered originally in March 1934 at universities in Princeton and Chicago, is linked indirectly with the foregoing chapters, for it presents the formation and application of the twelve-tone method now from the perspective of the composer. A final chapter, on the **Twelve-Tone Method in 50 Objects**, offers a collection of manuscripts, documents, and photographs that lie at the center and around the peripheries of serial composition. Taken together, they form a visual narrative from the beginnings of the twelve-tone method to the late phase of Schönberg's creative work.

This book is intended for a wide readership. Musical examples are simplified with respect to dynamics, articulation, and tempo indications so that space is left free for information about pitch sequences, which are illustrated with colored numbers. This should facilitate the comprehension of musical connections without requiring in-depth analysis of the score excerpts. Cross references to supplementary materials or alternative accounts of similar issues in other chapters are included throughout the text.

With his idea of the twelve-tone method, Schönberg did not find "the only possible way", but, rather, a "key to many possibilities"¹⁵ for opening 20th-century music to new paths. Arnold Schönberg's work and contributions have thereby served as the foundation for diverse compositional developments in the 20th century. It is hoped that this book will provide not only basic knowledge about this topic, but also, and most importantly, provide a stimulus to explore Arnold Schönberg's music, that of his students, and that of the following generations.

Eike Feß, Vienna, March 2022