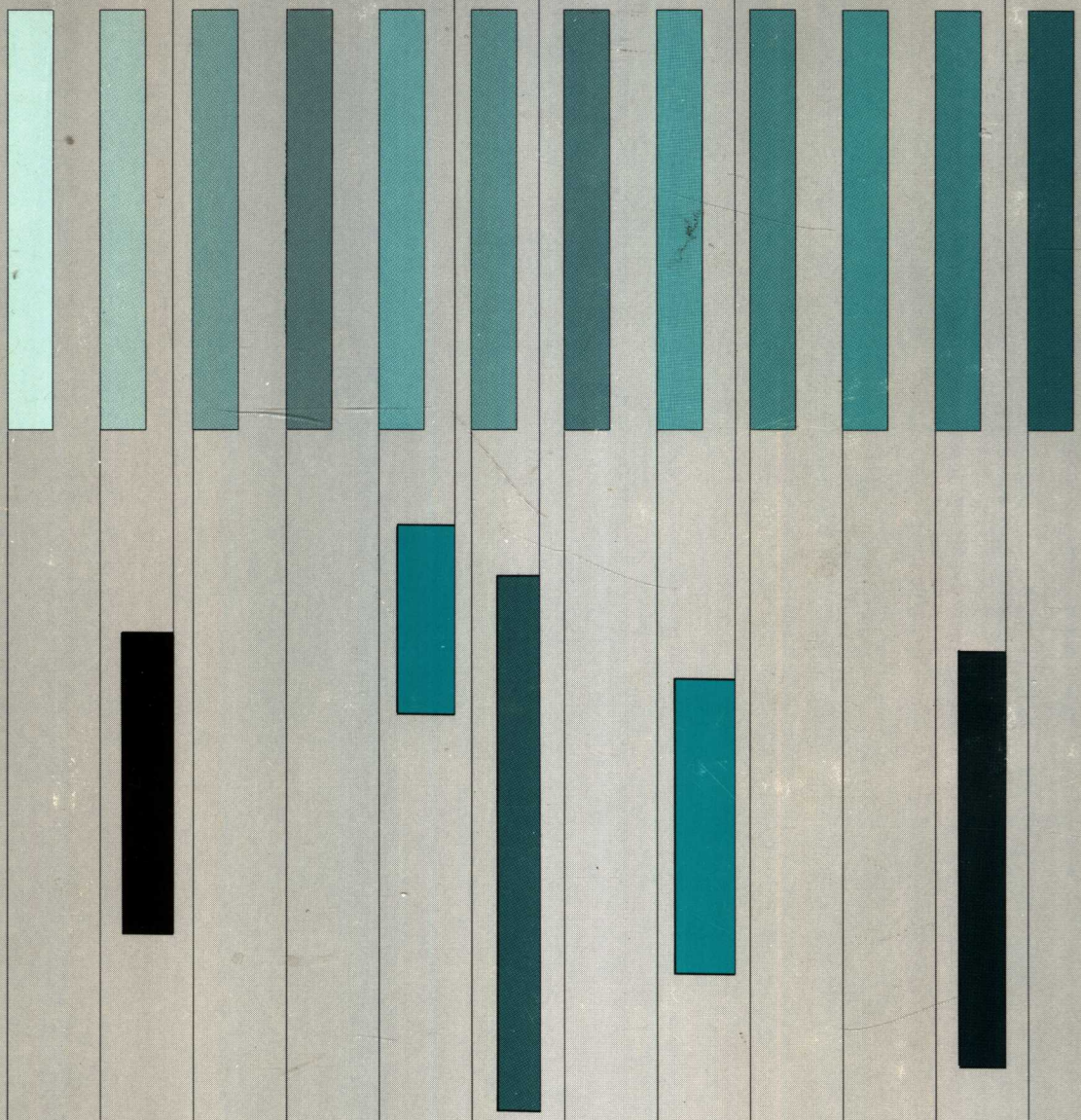
Schoenberg's Error



William Thomson

STUDIES IN THE CRITICISM
AND THEORY OF MUSIC

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William Thomson

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William Thomson. *Schoenberg's Error.* 1991

To Walter Robert:
Impeccable Musician and Model Scholar,
my First and Best Theory Teacher

PREFACE

Toward the end of 1924 one of the world's great music publishers, Universal of Vienna, released Arnold Schoenberg's *Suite für Klavier* Op. 25. By usual standards this was not an auspicious event, even in the sedate circles of classical music publishing. In fact, few persons in addition to Schoenberg himself—some close friends from his circle of present and past students like Erwin Stein and Alban Berg—were even aware that this collection of short piano pieces had been committed to print, much less that it could, in time, come to signify something far greater than just the music it contained.

Even Stravinsky's notorious *Sacre,* older by some dozen years, could not match this slight composition's eventual symbolic power. In some ways its release was the public revelation of what would become one of the dominant forces in twentieth-century music. Inauspicious at birth, perhaps, its compelling role in history was nonetheless confirmed by developments during the next fifty years.

Even today, most serious music lovers do not find Schoenberg's suite of little pieces especially delightful. In fact, the composition's principal claim to fame was not its substance but Schoenberg's use of his "method of composing with twelve notes" as a controlling agent throughout all six movements. He had composed music earlier that made use of the same method, but not to the degree incorporated in the *Suite*. This latest piece signaled an epochal point in the composer's creative life, one of those deliberate turns in a personal road that ultimately changes the direction of many others as well. From that time in 1924 to now, professionals and non-professionals alike have argued the musical validity, the artistic propriety, the historical justification of Schoenberg's contribution to how we think about music. Ironically, like the *Suite,* Schoenberg himself seems destined to endure mainly as a mythic symbol of musical revolution. Posterity seems intent upon neglecting both.

Schoenberg's quick and brilliant mind sought ultimate answers; but he now seems more an extension of intellectual beliefs of nineteenth-century Romanticism than an oracle for an ineluctable evolution. Early in his maturity, he was consumed by the intoxicating ideas of his troubled times, some of which he did not fully compre-

hend (like Darwin's version of evolution), and others which even in their original formulations were of doubtful credibility (like Nietzsche's idea of the artist as cosmic prophet). Historian Donald Grout could have had Schoenberg rather than Berlioz in mind when, in defining the essential Romantic stance, he speaks of "this conception of the composer as prophet, a lone heroic figure struggling against a hostile environment."

Only Schoenberg's theories of music and of history, not his compositions, occupy us in this study. One of the most articulate composers of history, he left a record that enables us to trace and assess his reasons for choosing the particular trail that he blazed. Those reasons are likely to be more valuable to cultural history than the conclusions he reached or the music he created. This study argues that those reasons are especially important to us and to the history of ideas because they represent a noble attempt to plant a revolutionary artistic movement in what turns out to have been shallow soil. As this chronicle confirms, errors left unchallenged by one generation tend to fertilize the minds of the next; and while they are catalytic for the boldest minds, they often lead to ever more tenuous concepts and procedures.

My focus is on Schoenberg as the principal author and apologist for many of the theoretical positions that have dominated our century, as well as the chief architect of rigorous atonality and a systematic means for achieving it. This focus is appropriate, because he fits the role better than any other twentieth-century musician. But our chronicle can also be understood in broader terms, as the tracings of roots of issues that extend beyond one man's wrestlings with artistic change. Schoenberg-as-figurehead is a revealing symptom of more widespread conflict within the twentieth century's arts and their explications as structure. In music it is a conflict that began to change the art's complex creation-production-marketing-consumption apparatus when Beethoven, early in the nineteenth century, helped music develop into a vehicle of ego expression, when the artist's unique creative stamp first began to be a dominating motive for creation rather than a welcome by-product. It was then that *style* and its differentiating facets began developing into the central issue it has become today, when an obsessive self-consciousness for one's stylistic uniqueness began to show that it could stunt the creative impulse, much as the centipede's concern for the succession of feet could destroy its locomotion. For music theory it was a time to emulate—or at least try to emulate—the impressive successes of the natural sciences.

As theorist and as composer, Schoenberg indirectly posed for us the biggest question of all: whether it is even fruitful to think of music as evolving. Are those surface stylistic differences that distinguish one culture or era or individual from another the products of an unswerving linear progression from "there" to "here," each stage marked by substantive changes, each later stage demonstrable as the necessary outgrowth of its precedent? Or do they instead represent only this or that audacious way of mixing an unchanging reservoir of ingredients, in which historical progression is a zig-zagging from one boundary of the same spectrum to another? Schoenberg's path to his own forceful answers to those questions reveals several object lessons in speculative thinking about any art and its basis in human action.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As for a child, a book's conception is best a private matter, yet its full flowering can be achieved only through the generous sharing by many others.

A number of persons contributed to this book in unique ways at various stages in its development. Faced with my near-despair one critical weekend, Betsy Snyder generously loaned me her Selectric so the labor could continue unchecked. Arthur Darack, Maryellen McDonald, and Larry Livingston gave broad insight and guidance for an early version of the manuscript, and J. B. Floyd helped refine my conclusions about Scriabin's music that are discussed in Chapter 12. Especially hard readings and pithy comment came from Diana Deutsch, James Hopkins, Bryan Simms, and Fred Lerdahl, who took to task my next-to-last manuscript version and helped to put many matters in better shape than I had left them. And finally, Leonard B. Meyer made enormous contributions to the final manuscript, from being the original source of several conceptual elegancies that have fed my thinking to gently curbing my penchant for overripe metaphor, both straight and mixed.

WILLIAM THOMSON

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PART I

The Context and its Predilections

CHAPTER I

Music, Change, and a Dawning Century

Every era has its unique preoccupations, its favorite obsessions, its special solutions for special problems. In the arts these recurrent testings of goals and means are often little more than local stirrings of limited import. Whether ancient Sparta's flurry over Terpander's added lyre string or modern New York's debates over Andy Warhol's affinity for soup can labels, skirmishes over tools and boundaries often generate more heady talk than lasting substance: subtle realignments rather than jarring revolutions mark their places in history.

Yet other polemics in the arts may cut to deeper tissue and leave uglier scars. They raise fundamental questions that penetrate to the marrow, so they become serious business for those who take a particular art seriously. Either category may sometimes consume more time and arouse stronger feelings than seems reasonable to humanity at large, but this is to be expected: it is true of the art experience itself.

The central issue of music during the first half of the twentieth century was of the latter kind. Although it generated considerable heat at times, it managed to persist, waxing and waning through the decades, well into the century's second half. It suffered little competition as the reigning musical issue during its seven-decade life. In the minds of thoughtful people of the world's music capitals, these were years dominated by a question raised by many imposing figures but argued most forcefully by one of history's most formidable musicians, Arnold Schoenberg. The question had to do with the role of tonality in music and whether, as Schoenberg claimed, its necessary and inevitable demise and replacement should not mark a departure and next step in music evolution. This was the twentieth-century issue destined to affect music's future most dramatically, to fuel more discussions than any other. Musicians are familiar with the basic story, but in a larger context Schoenberg's forceful role in the polemic ensured his place in the intellectual history of our time. Like the names of Einstein, Freud, Wright, and Picasso, his has endured—for the non-professional as well as the professional—as an icon of what was considered revolutionary about the revolutions of the early twentieth century.

By mid-century, tonality had become a notorious word in the lexicons of music's intellectual circles. Tempers flared over its definition, over its alleged presence or absence, its clarity or ambiguity. Like most issues of the art world, its economic and sociological and political power, as a rallying point outside music, was not impressive. But within the art, tonality was the supreme issue, the anvil on which a significant portion of modern music was shaped.

Eliminating tonality from music was a more wrenching matter for musicians than eliminating linear perspective seems to have been for painters, or abandoning the concept of cosmic ether was for physicists. Indeed, tonality had been around far longer than either of those concepts had been freight for their respective disciplines.

Tonality in Music

What is tonality? It is a perceptual condition which everyone experiences, yet few seem to agree fully about its nature and causes. As a word it is bandied about in a multitude of different contexts. Our discussion can be made easier if we assign a bedrock meaning to it, a meaning unbedeviled by some of the accumulated connotations that often weigh it down. We will use the word to refer to how musical pitch is organized to yield structure from tones, to make collections of them add up to more than random sounds. It is a condition achieved by the way tones are related to one another, and it provides an elemental coherence not unlike the way linear perspective works in vision.

Lewis Rowell has found as many as five metaphorical descriptions of tonality from over the ages. As he notes with some humor, they have included "*focus,* as in optics; *homing,* as in pigeons; *attraction,* as in magnets; *vectoring,* as in airport approaches; and *vanishing point,* as in perspective." He then adds that recent times have brought us more abstract labels like *centricity, priority,* and *referentiality.*[1]

As any of these terms makes clear, the most important distinction within the setup of tonality is what we shall call *pitch focus* (or better, *pitch-class focus*), the way one pitch enacts the role of focal point, with all other pitches related to it in varying degrees of simplicity or complexity, directness or indirectness. Tonality is a set of pitches operating as a resolutional hierarchy. It is the pitch nucleus, the drawing together of the members of a pitch collection as aural vectors toward a tonic—the *keynote* or *Do* of musical pitch—that is the primal feature. Beyond this fundamental state tonality cannot be reduced. Everything else about it falls into place as a consequence of this inequitable relating of many pitches to one. We shall consider its other manifestations and causes as they become pertinent to our principal topic (especially in Chapter 8).

The causes of tonality as an experiential concept were not explored significantly until early in this century,[2] perhaps because tonality had been so central to music that it was taken for granted as much by composers and music theorists as by listeners. It was such an implicit part of the musical experience that it was largely ignored, except

in terms of its direct musical consequences. In fact, the musicians most responsible for the word's adoption were the Frenchman Françoise-Henri-Joseph Blaze (1784–1857) and the Belgian François-Joseph Fétis (1784–1871). They recognized the concept, just before the mid-nineteenth century, only as it had meaning in the narrow major-minor key sense of the music of their time.[3] Tonality was too fundamental to be an object of direct concern. It persisted in the kind of basic yet concealed status Ludwig Wittgenstein had in mind when he once observed that the aspects of things which are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity, that the core of our wonderment rarely strikes us because it is too commonplace, too "understood," to be noticed. And such was the case with tonality.

Though bedrock to the musical experience, it is a fragile condition. The perspective of a prevailing focal pitch can be changed instantly or made tenuous by the intrusion of a single pitch or chord, or by a rhythmic emphasis that topples previous alignments, the accumulated strength of a particular tonal hierarchy reduced within milliseconds to the disquiet of ambiguity. On the other hand, the condition itself can be emphatically suggested rather than explicitly established, a tonic response evoked without its carrier even being sounded.

Nineteenth-Century Tonal Flexing

During the waning years of the nineteenth century, several of the most perceptive musicians seemed to agree that perhaps familiarity had bred stylistic saturation. The hierarchy of tonal relatedness had actually provided the backbone for music of every description since one knew not when; yet it was during this era of music's ascendency (perhaps the very brightest of music's golden ages) that this largely implicit ground rule of tonal ordering came to be questioned, especially by Schoenberg. The questioning was stimulated by two circumstances of the times. One was a consequence of music's development, especially since Beethoven, toward greater chromaticism. The other was the emerging prominence and intellectual influence of the theory of biological evolution.

There are several plausible ways to explain the main changes of musical style between Beethoven's late works (let us say from around 1815) and the year 1900. Certainly one of the more evident of these changes, and one that most music historians accept as a given, was a product of extensive tonal exploration in the music of some of that period's most influential composers. It involved the flexing of tonality, the occasional attenuation of the long-spanned sense of pitch focus that could be heard in earlier music. This came about especially through the packing together of all or most of the twelve pitch classes into ever shorter musical spans, whether through continuous modulations (as in Reger) or through the extensive use of non-diatonic chords (as in Scriabin). This well-chronicled ferment of tonal exploration was centered in Germany, but the dominance of that country's composers ensured that the idea spilled far beyond its borders.

It is important to observe, however, that not all composers between 1815 and 1901 were lurching headlong toward tonal oblivion. Indeed, the most famous factional dispute in music of the times, the Brahms-Wagner "War," testifies to the absence of uniformity in matters of compositional persuasion. A more symptomatic clash of Classical-Romantic, Apollonian-Dionysian, Conservative-Radical could not be found in music's history, as its issues were a good deal broader than egoistic spats between camp followers of the two great composers. Its issues pitted opposing aesthetic ideals against one another as much as they paraded the prejudices of two musical perspectives. Those issues brought into stark relief the "thing in itself," the music as non-representational sound views of Eduard Hanslick, who passionately and unequivocally supported Brahms's side against the revolutionary music-dramatic ideas of Wagner.

Well after the fact (1926), Schoenberg described these stirrings for liberated tonal expression (symptoms more of Wagner than of Brahms), noting that they were motivated by the wish to treat music less as mere sonic delight and more as a message of concentrated expression. He recognized the effect of this outcome in the music of his immediate predecessors.

> It is clear that all these tendencies which exert an eccentric pull, worked against the desire to fix, make sensorily perceptible, and keep effective an harmonic central point, and that the composers who succeeded Wagner were soon obliged to make fast their forms in a different way from that practised until then.[4]

It would be an error to forget that composers before Wagner occasionally composed passages of high chromatic content, music in which tonal equilibrium was thrown, momentarily at least, to the winds. For instance, Mozart's development sections often include patches of tonal ambivalence, tonal orientations steered decidedly in the direction of harmonic flux. Brief but striking instances of similar flights of tonal fancy occur in the music of J. S. Bach as well, and the claim has been made (perhaps a bit exaggerated) that Bach's most illustrious German predecessor, Heinrich Schütz, composed music that at times was veritably *twelve-tone*. Let us not forget as well that some of the brooding creations of late Renaissance masters, Marenzio, Monteverdi, Gesualdo, Rore, and Banchieri—the musical expressionists of their day—bear unmistakable signs of radical tonal ambiguity recruited in the service of greater emotional expression.[5] Of these we shall have more to say later, especially in Chapter 12.

But none of these excursions into chromaticism seems to have made as strong an impression on Schoenberg as did those of his most illustrious German forebears. And with Schoenberg, historians have generally recognized surer signs of an evolving tonal syntax in works such as Liszt's *Faust Symphony* (1857), in which the first movement's main theme emphatically and systematically employs the full comple-