What is Atonality?

Alban Berg

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Interlocutor: Well, my dear Herr Berg, let's begin!

Alban Berg: You begin, then. I'd rather have the last word.

Int.: Are you so sure of your ground?

Berg: As sure as anyone can be who for a quarter-century has taken part in the development of a new art — sure, that is, not only through understanding and experience, but — what is more — through faith.

Int.: Fine! It will be simplest, then, to start at once with the title of our dialogue: What is atonality?

Berg: It is not so easy to answer that question with a formula that would also serve as a definition. When this expression was used for the first time — probably in some newspaper criticism — it could naturally only have been, as the word plainly says, to describe a kind of music the harmonic course of which did not correspond to the laws of tonality previously recognized.

Int.: Which means: In the beginning was the Word, or rather, a word, which should compensate for the helplessness with which people faced a new phenomenon.

Berg: Yes, that, but more too: This designation of "atonal" was doubtless intended to disparage, as were words like arhythmic, amelodic, asymmetric, which came up at the same time. But while these words were merely convenient designations for specific cases, the word "atonal" — I must add, unfortunately — came to stand collectively for music of which it was assumed not only that it had no harmonic center (to use tonality in Rameau's sense), but was also devoid of all other musical attributes such as melos, rhythm, form in part and whole; so that today the designation as good as signifies a music that is no music, and is used to imply the exact opposite of what has heretofore been considered music.

Int.: Aha, a reproach! And a fair one, I confess. But now tell me yourself, Herr Berg, does not such a distinction indeed exist, and does not the negation of relationship to a given tonic lead in fact to the collapse of the whole edifice of music?

Berg: Before I answer that, I would like to say this: Even if this so-called atonal music cannot, harmonically speaking, be brought into relation with a major/minor harmonic system — still, surely, there was music even before that system in its turn came into existence…

Int.: … and what a beautiful and imaginative music!

Berg: … so it doesn't follow that there may not (at least considering the chromatic scale and the new chord-forms arising out of it) be discovered in the "atonal" compositions of the last quarter-century a harmonic center which would naturally not be identical with the old tonic … We already have today in the "composition in twelve tones related only to each other" which Schoenberg has been the first to practice, a system that yields nothing in organization and control of material to the old harmonic order.

Int.: You mean the so-called twelve-tone rows? Won't you tell us something more about them in this connection?

Berg: Not now; it would lead too far afield. Let us confine ourselves to this notion of "atonality."

Int.: Agreed. But you have not yet answered my question whether there does not indeed exist a distinction such as that implied in the word between earlier music and that of today, and so whether the giving up of relationship to a keynote, a tonic, has not indeed unsettled the whole structure of music?

Berg: Now that we have agreed that the negation of major and minor tonality does not necessarily bring about harmonic anarchy, I can answer that question much more easily. Even if certain harmonic possibilities are lost through abandonment of major and minor, all the other qualities we demand of a true and genuine music still remain.

Int.: Which, for instance?

Berg: They are not to be so quickly listed, and I would like to go into that more closely — indeed, I must do so, because the point in question is to show that this idea of atonality, which originally related quite exclusively to the harmonic aspect, has now become, as aforesaid, a collective expression for music that is no music.

Int.: No music? I find that expression too strong; nor have I heard it before. I believe that what the opponents of atonal music are most concerned with is to emphasize the implied antithesis to so-called "beautiful" music.

Berg: That view you take from me. Anyhow, this collective term "atonality" is intended to repudiate everything that has heretofore made up the content of music. I have already mentioned such words as arhythmic, amelodic, asymmetric, and could name a dozen more expressions derogatory of modern music: like cacophony and manufactured music, which are already half-forgotten, or the more recent ones like linear music, constructivism, the new factuality, polytonality, machine music, etc. These terms, which may perhaps properly apply in individual special instances, have all been brought under one hat to give today the illusory concept of an "atonal" music, to which those who admit no justification for this music cling with great persistence, purposing in this single word to deny to the new music everything that, as we said, has heretofore constituted music, and hence its right to exist at all.

Int.: You take too black a view, Herr Berg! You might have been entirely justified in that statement of the case of a while ago. But today people know that atonal music for its own sake can be fascinating, inevitably in some cases where there is true art! Our problem is only to show whether atonal music may really be called musical in the same sense as all earlier music. That is, to show, as you have said, whether if only the harmonic foundation has changed, all the other elements of former music are still present in the new.

Berg: That I declare they are, and I could prove it to you in every measure of a modern score. Prove above all — to begin with the most important — that in this music, as in any other, the melody, the principal voice, the theme, is fundamental, that the course of the music is in a sense determined by it.

Int.: But is melody in the traditional sense at all possible in atonal music?

Berg: Yes, of course, even vocal melody.

Int.: Well, so far as song is concerned, Herr Berg, atonal music surely does follow a new path. There is certainly something in it that has never been heard before, I would almost like to say, something temporarily shocking.

Berg: Only as concerns harmony: on that we agree. But it is quite wrong to regard this new melodic line as taking a path entirely new, as you declare, in comparison with the usual characteristics of melodic procedure, or even as never before hearto and shocking. Nor is this true of a vocal line, even if it is marked with what someone recently described as intervals of an instrumental chromaticism, distorted, jagged, wide-spaced; nor that it thereby totally disregards the requirements of the human voice.

Int.: I never said that, but I cannot help feeling that vocal melody and melody in general does seem never to have been treated like that before.

Berg: That is just what I am objecting to. I maintain on the contrary that vocal melody, even as described, yes, caricatured, in these terms, has always existed, especially in German music; and I further maintain that this so-called atonal music, at least in so far as it has emanated from Vienna, has also in this respect naturally adhered to the masterworks of German music and not — with all due respect — to Italian *bel-canto* opera. Melody that is linked with harmony rich in progressions, which is almost the same thing as being bold, may naturally, so long as one doesn't understand the harmonic implications, seem "distorted" — which is no less the case with a thoroughly chromatic style of writing, and for which there are hundreds of examples in Wagner. But take rather a melody of Schubert, from the famous song *Letzte Hoffnung*. Is that distorted enough for you?

[*Berg here gives further examples from Schubert:* Wasserflut*, bars 11–12,* Der stürmische Morgen*, bars 4–8, 15–18 (all three from* Winterreise*); and from Mozart,*

Don Juan *in particular to show that even in the classics vocal melody may be constantly on the move, expressive in all registers, "animated and yet capable of declamation — indeed, an ideal instrument."*]

But you will also see by these examples from the classics that it has nothing to do with atonality if a melody, even in opera-music, departs from the voluptuous tenderness of Italian *cantilena* — an element you will furthermore seek in vain in Bach, whose melodic potency nobody will deny.

Int.: Granted. But there seems to be another point in which the melody of this so-called atonal music differs from that of earlier music. I mean the asymmetrical structure of melodic periods.

Berg: You probably miss in our music the two- and four-bar periodicity as we know it in the Viennese classicists and all the romantics, including Wagner. Your observation is correct, but you perhaps overlook the fact that such metrical symmetry is peculiar to this epoch, whereas in Bach, for example, it is only to be found in his more homophonic works and the suites that derive from dance-music. But even in the Viennese classics, and especially in Mozart and Schubert, we observe again and again — and quite particularly in their most masterly works — efforts to break away from the restraints of this square symmetry.

[*Here Berg cites examples from* Figaro.]

This art of asymmetric melodic construction developed still further in the course of the nineteenth century (just think of Brahms *Vergebliches Standchen*, *Am Sonntagmorgen*, or *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*), and while the four-bar period preponderates in Wagner and his followers (they clung to this earlier style-factor in favor of other innovations, notably in the harmonic field), even at this time there is a very clear tendency to give up the two- and four-bar form. A direct line runs here from Mozart through Schubert and Brahms to Reger and Schoenberg. And it is perhaps not without interest to point out that both Reger and Schoenberg, when they discussed the asymmetry of their melodic periods, pointed out that these follow the prose of the spoken word, while strictly square-rhythmed melody follows, rather, metrical speech, verse-form. Yet, as with prose itself, unsymmetrical melodies may be no less logically constructed than symmetrical melodies. They too have their half and full cadences, rest and high points, caesuras and bridges, introductory and concluding moments which, because of their directional character, may be compared with modulations and cadences. To recognize all this is to feel in them melody in the truest sense of the word.

Int.: . . . and perhaps even find them beautiful.

Berg: Quite right! But let us go on: This freedom of melodic construction is naturally accompanied by freedom of rhythmic organization. Because the rhythm of this music has undergone a loosening process — let us say through contraction, extension, overlapping of note-values, shifting of strong beats, as we see it quite particularly in Brahms — does not mean that the laws of rhythm are dispensed with; and the term "arhythmic" for this treatment, which after all represents just another refinement of the artist's means, is just as silly as "amelodic." This rhythmic treatment is particularly conditioned too by the multilinearity of the new music; we seem, indeed, to be finding ourselves in a time which very much resembles Bach's. For as that period, through Bach himself, wrought a change from pure polyphony and the imitative style (and the concept of the church modes), to a style of writing built on major-minor harmony, so now we are passing out of the harmonic era, which really dominated the whole Viennese classic period and the nineteenth century, slowly but incessantly into an era of preponderantly polyphonic character. This tendency to polyphony in so-called atonal music is a further mark of all true music and is not to be dismissed just because it has been nicknamed "linear structure."

Int.: Now I think we have arrived at a most important point.

Berg: Yes, at counterpoint!

Int.: Right! The essence of polyphony of course consists in the interordination and subordination of voices, voices, that is, which have a life of their own. Here again we are dealing with the harmonic aspect; I mean, the individual lives of all the voices give rise to a second, a new life, that of the collective sound . . .

Berg: . . . which is of course not accidental, but consciously built and heard.

Int.: Now that is just what surprises me. Then is that elemental interplay of atonal voices, which seem to me to lack any such essential contrast as would give rise to a strong internal life, also achieved by

conscious construction, or is it the play of some admittedly highly inspired chance?

Berg: That question — to be brief and not too theoretical — I can answer with a truth won from experience, an experience that springs not only from my own creative work but from that of other artists to whom their art is as sacred as it is to me (so anachronistic are we of the "atonal" Viennese school). Not a measure in this music of ours — no matter how complicated its harmonic, rhythmic, and contrapuntal texture — but has been subjected to the sharpest control of the outer and the inner ear, and for the meaning of which, in itself and in its place in the whole, we do not take the artistic responsibility quite as much as in the case of some very simple form — as a simple motive or a simple harmonic progression — the logic of which is at once clear to the layman.

Int.: That explanation seems to me to make sense. But if so, it almost seems as though the word "atonal" must be a misnomer for this whole tendency in music.

Berg: Why, that's what I've been saying the whole time, trying to make it clear to you.

Int.: But then you, that is, your music, must somehow have some relation to the formal elements of earlier music too? If my guess is correct, this very music — the word "atonal" doesn't sound right after what we've said — strives to keep in close touch with older forms?

Berg: With form itself; and is it any wonder then that we should turn back to the older forms as well? Is this not a further proof of how conscious contemporary practice is of the entire wealth of music's resources? We have just seen that this is the case in all serious music. And since this wealth of resources is apparent in every branch of our music simultaneously — I mean, in its harmonic development, in its free melodic construction, in its rhythmic variety, in its preference for polyphony and the contrapuntal style, and finally in its use of all the formal possibilities established through centuries of musical development — no one can reproach us with our art and tag it as "atonal," a name that has become almost a byword of abuse.

Int.: Now you have made an important declaration, Herr Berg. I am somewhat relieved, for even I thought that the word "atonal," wheneesoever it came, had given rise to a passing theory foreign to the natural course of musical development.

Berg: That would suit the opponents of this new music of ours, for then they would be right about the implications which really lie in the word "atonal," which is equivalent to anti-musical, ugly, uninspired, ill-sounding and destructive; and they would furthermore be justified in bemoaning such anarchy in tones, such ruination of music's heritage, our helpless state of deracination.[1] I tell you, this whole hue and cry for tonality comes not so much from a yearning for a keynote relationship as from a yearning for familiar concords — let us say it frankly, for the common triads. And I believe it is fair to state that no music, provided only it contains enough of these triads, will ever arouse opposition even if it breaks all the holy commandments of tonality.

Int.: So it is still sacred to you, after all, good old tonality?

Berg: Were it not, how could such as we — despite the skepticism of our generation — maintain faith in a new art for which [the] Antichrist himself could not have thought up a more diabolical appellation than that word "atonal"!

(*Translated from the German by M. D. Herter Norton*)

[1] *deracination*: tear (something) up by the roots.