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Twelve-Tone Music in America

Most histories of American music have ignored the presence of twelve-tone music before and during the Second World War, and virtually all have ignored its presence after 1970, even though so many major composers have continued to compose serially. This book provides the first comprehensive history of twelve-tone music in America, and compels a revised picture of American music since 1925 as a dynamic steady-state within which twelve-tone serialism has long been, and still remains, a persistent presence: a vigorous and unbroken tradition for more than eighty years. Straus outlines how, instead of a rigid orthodoxy, American twelve-tone music is actually a flexible, loosely knit cultural practice. By providing close readings of thirty-seven American twelve-tone works by composers including Copland, Babbitt, Stravinsky, and Carter, among many others, who represent a typically American diversity of background and life circumstances, the book strips away the many myths surrounding twelve-tone music in America.

JOSEPH N. STRAUS is Distinguished Professor in the Music Department at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the author of numerous books and articles on topics in twentieth-century music, including *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory* (2004), *Stravinsky's Late Music* (Cambridge, 2001), *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger* (Cambridge, 1995), and *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (1990). His most recent publications, including *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music* (co-edited with Neil Lerner, 2006), are the first to bring the insights of “disability studies” to music.

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Preface

Beginning in the late 1920s, the group of “ultramodern” composers gathered around Henry Cowell (especially Wallingford Riegger, Ruth Crawford, Adolph Weiss, and Carl Ruggles) quickly began to make use of Schoenberg’s “method of composing with twelve tones” in various individual ways.

Early ultramodern efforts received a boost in the 1930s when first Schoenberg and then a small wave of European twelve-tone composers (including Ernst Krenek, Stefan Wolpe, Hanns Eisler, and Erich Ito Kahn) arrived in America to escape Nazism and war. Their arrival not only had an impact on music in America, giving a new impetus to indigenous twelve-tone writing, but also had an effect on their own music: the European twelve-tone composers became Americanized to some extent, their twelve-tone styles modified by the change in their circumstances. Both ultramodern composers (primarily Riegger) and European émigré composers were active throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

The combined efforts of indigenous ultramodern serialists and the European émigrés laid the groundwork for an upsurge of twelve-tone compositional activity during and after the Second World War. During the 1950s and 1960s, twelve-tone music became a highly visible part of the contemporary music scene in America. A large group of older composers (including Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, and Roger Sessions) modified their compositional approach to take account of these developments. An even larger group of slightly younger composers came to maturity as twelve-tone composers (including Milton Babbitt, George Perle, and Ben Weber), or modified an earlier style (including Louise Talma, Ross Lee Finney, Arthur Berger, Irving Fine, Barbara Pentland, and Roque Cordero), followed by numerous still younger composers who grew up in the twelve-tone tradition (including Donald Martino, Ursula Mamlok, Peter Westergaard, and Charles Wuorinen).¹ All found distinctive, individual ways of composing twelve-tone serial music, and some found ways of integrating twelve-tone serial methods with tonal or popular idioms (including Samuel Barber, Gunther Schuller, Hale Smith, and Leonard Rosenman). Although there is debate about the extent to which these composers and their musical style dominated the music of this period, there is no question that the decades following World War II were a period of twelve-tone flowering in America.

Beginning in the 1970s, the spotlight of fashion turned elsewhere, but the level of actual twelve-tone composition continued without significant break and without losing much of its energy or innovative spirit. As some composers (George Rochberg and David DelTredici, for instance) turned away, others (Elliott Carter and Ralph Shapey, for instance) found new ways of writing twelve-tone music. And, although arbiters of musical fashion have long since deemed twelve-tone music passé, the longevity and continued activity of leading figures (Babbitt, Martino, Wuorinen, Mamlok, Perle, Carter, among others) and the interest of a younger generation of composers (including Joseph Schwantner, Peter Lieberson, Robert Morris, Andrew Mead, Jeff Nichols, Lou Karchin, Jonathan Dawe, Dan Welcher, Ross Bauer, and Judd Danby, among others) have ensured that twelve-tone music has remained an important part of American contemporary music into the first decade of the twenty-first century: a vigorous and unbroken tradition for more than eighty years.

Twelve-tone serial music in America, as varied as it is stylistically and expressively, generally shares two structural features: (1) the aggregate of all twelve tones as a referential harmonic unit; and (2) an ordered succession of tones as a source of motives, melodies, and harmonies. With regard to the first feature, these composers are generally concerned with dividing the aggregate into smaller collections, such as trichords, tetrachords, and hexachords – these smaller collections often related by transposition or inversion – and with combining smaller collections to create aggregates. With regard to the second feature, these composers are generally concerned with ordered successions (lines) of musical elements, usually pitch classes. The series are often transformed by interval-preserving operations (transposition, inversion, retrograde, or combinations of these). One might think of aggregate-based music as “twelve-tone music” and series-based music as “serial music.” It is perfectly possible to write twelve-tone music that is not serial, and serial music that is not twelve-tone, and this book will provide instances of each.² In general, however, twelve-tone music tends to have at least some concern with serial ordering and serial music usually involves the aggregate of all twelve tones. To some extent, then, I will use the terms interchangeably, only insisting on a distinction between them when the specific situation warrants.³

Most of the composers discussed in this book identify themselves as twelve-tone or serial composers, and their self-identification provides biographical corroboration for the distinctiveness and integrity of this repertoire. In general, when twelve-tone or serial composers describe their music, they acknowledge the centrality of the twelve-note aggregate and serial

ordering as structural features that define this repertoire and distinguish it from others.

In practice, the category of twelve-tone serial composition is a loose and permeable one. For Schoenberg, the twelve-tone method represented a confluence of two central trends in his earlier music: first, an interest in the aggregate of all twelve pitch classes as a basic, recurring harmonic unit; second, an interest in motivic unity, pervading not only all the melodic voices of the musical texture but also the chords (“coherence in music can be founded on nothing other than motives and their transformations and development”).⁴ By imposing a specific order on the twelve pitch classes, and using that row or series as the source for all of the melodic and harmonic activity, Schoenberg felt he could ensure motivic consistency in an environment in which the twelve pitch classes were in regular circulation.

After many unsuccessful attempts during a period of approximately twelve years, I laid the foundations for a new procedure in musical construction which seemed fitted to replace those structural differentiations provided formerly by tonal harmonies. I called this procedure *Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Which are Related Only with One Another*. This method consists primarily of the constant and exclusive use of a set of twelve different tones. This means, of course, that no tone is repeated within the series and that it uses all twelve tones of the chromatic scale, though in a different order ... The basic set functions in the manner of a motive. This explains why such a basic set has to be invented anew for every piece. It has to be the first creative thought ... From the basic set, three additional sets are automatically derived: (1) the inversion; (2) the retrograde; and (3) the retrograde inversion. The employment of these mirror forms corresponds to the principle of *the absolute and unitary perception of musical space*.⁵

Schoenberg’s fundamental conception of his twelve-tone method thus comprises a precomposed series of all twelve pitch classes, susceptible to repetition, inversion, retrograde, and retrograde-inversion (all of these potentially transposable). The “basic set” and its derivative forms were to be the source for all melodic and harmonic activity in a piece.

Above all: my 12-tone composition is: 1. Composition with rows (basic shape!! [*Grundgestalt*]) and 2. Composition with *one single row*... The greatest step was not to the 12 tones, but *the invention of countless means*: to create from a basic shape the themes and all remaining material (quite apart from inversions and retrogrades and transpositions)... [My method is] composition with a basic shape consisting of twelve different tones.⁶

But neither Schoenberg’s terminology nor his compositional approach have survived intact among more recent composers. Wuorinen, for example, considers himself a twelve-tone composer, but not a serial composer:

I've never accepted the word "serial" because, for me, ... [it] means the sort of automatic program music written by Europeans, mostly in the '50s and a little bit into the '60s ... The phrase "twelve-tone," on the other hand, is accurate in the sense that it assumes the use of the total chromatic (maybe segregated into collections of less every once in a while), and it is based on ordered sets (usually involving all of the twelve elements, sometimes more, and sometimes less). Whatever nasty connotations it has had slathered onto it by mean-spirited critics and insecure composers, that is a designation I'm happy to accept.⁷

Martino, in contrast, considers himself a serial composer, but one for whom the series is not necessarily a thematic presence in the music:

I hold a broad view of the twelve-tone system which permits me to use the set or sets I have formulated as a source from which to draw a network of deductions. I tend to see the set as a premise that leads me in certain directions. You may not even be able to find it after a while, but the fact that I've formulated it, that it's back there somewhere, guiding my actions, means that it is still operative in the profoundest sense. If that's what serialism is, then I suppose I am a serial composer.⁸

Morris offers a useful, somewhat formal definition in which the idea of serial ordering is subsumed within the twelve-tone system:

[The twelve-tone system is] the musical use of ordered sets of pitch-classes in the context of the twelve-pitch-class universe (or aggregate) under specified transformations that preserve intervals or other features of ordered-sets or partitions of the aggregate.⁹

In all of these descriptions, while the specific terminology may vary, we sense a consistent interest in systematic treatment of the twelve-pc aggregate and serial ordering.

But even these very general compositional commitments may be subject to individual modification, and American twelve-tone serial music has taken astonishingly varied forms. In many cases, twelve-tone music coexists with contrasting music within a single piece or movement. This is a distinguishing feature of "ultramodern" twelve-tone composition, and has remained a consistent trend since then. In many cases, twelve-tone structures are used in conjunction with, or in expression of, traditional tonality or current popular music. In many cases, the aggregate is not a surface feature of the music, but rather part of its precompositional design: the actual music is full of doublings and emphases of all kinds, with direct statements of the complete aggregate a relative rarity. In every case, composers have created idiomatic and highly individual compositional designs – each has a distinctive way of composing twelve-tonally or serially.

Instead of a rigid orthodoxy one finds in American twelve-tone serial music a flexible, loosely knit cultural practice. Composers within this

culture share certain tastes and proclivities, and these in turn establish the vague and permeable boundaries of the culture. As in matters of diet and sexuality, these tastes and proclivities have often seemed strange and unappealing to outsiders, but have proven deeply satisfying to the participants over a long period of time. One of the goals of this book is to probe both the cultural practices and the reasons they have proven so satisfying to so many for so long.

Too often historians and critics have often seemed more interested in reading the composers' prose than in attending to their music. As a result, a small number of texts (mostly by Schoenberg and Babbitt) have been allowed to stand for not only their music but, what is even worse, for a highly varied musical repertoire produced by a remarkably diverse group of composers. To rectify this omission, the first part of this book will consist of close readings of thirty-seven twelve-tone and/or serial works by thirty-seven American composers. The composers discussed here represent a typically American diversity of background and life circumstances, varying in chronology (birthdates range from 1874 to 1961), place of origin (Europe, South America, Canada, East Coast, West Coast, American heartland), career trajectory (universities, conservatories, outside academia entirely), religion, race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. American twelve-tone serial music is not monolithic, and neither are its composers. Chart 1 lists the composers in chronological order by birth, and Chart 2 lists the works discussed in chronological order of composition.

Chart 1. Chronological list of thirty-seven composers

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)
 Carl Ruggles (1876–1971)
 Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)
 Wallingford Riegger (1885–1961)
 Adolph Weiss (1891–1971)
 Roger Sessions (1896–1985)
 Ernst Krenek (1900–1991)
 Aaron Copland (1900–1990)
 Ruth Crawford (Seeger) (1901–53)
 Stefan Wolpe (1902–72)
 Ross Lee Finney (1906–97)
 Louise Talma (1906–96)
 Elliott Carter (1908–)
 Samuel Barber (1910–81)
 Barbara Pentland (1912–2000)
 Arthur Berger (1912–2003)

Irving Fine (1914–62)
 George Perle (1915–2009)
 Milton Babbitt (1916–)
 Ben Weber (1916–79)
 Roque Cordero (1917–)
 George Rochberg (1918–2005)
 Ralph Shapey (1921–2002)
 Mel Powell (1923–98)
 Gunther Schuller (1925–)
 Hale Smith (1925–)
 Ursula Mamlok (1928–)
 Leonard Rosenman (1924–2008)
 Donald Martino (1931–2005)
 Peter Westergaard (1931–)
 Charles Wuorinen (1938–)
 Robert Morris (1943–)
 Joseph Schwantner (1943–)
 Peter Lieberon (1946–)
 Andrew Mead (1952–)
 Jeff Nichols (1957–)
 Michael Torke (1961–)

Chart 2. Chronological list of thirty-seven works

Adolph Weiss, *Prelude for Piano, No. 11* (1927)
 Ruth Crawford (Seeger), *Diaphonic Suite No. 1* (1930)
 Wallingford Riegger, *Dichotomy* (1931–32)
 Ben Weber, *Bagatelle No. IV from Five Bagatelles, Op. 2* (1939)
 Carl Ruggles, *Evocations II* (1941)
 Arnold Schoenberg, *Piano Concerto, Op. 42* (1942)
 Ernst Krenek, *Lamentatio Jeremiae Prophetarum, Op. 43* (1942)
 Samuel Barber, *Piano Sonata, Op. 26* (1949)
 Leonard Rosenman, music for *The Cobweb* (1955)
 Arthur Berger, *Chamber Music for Thirteen Players* (1956)
 Irving Fine, *Fantasia for String Trio* (1957)
 Gunther Schuller, *Transformation* (1957)
 Ross Lee Finney, *Fantasy in Two Movements* (for solo violin) (1958)
 Stefan Wolpe, *Form for Piano* (1959)
 George Rochberg, *String Quartet No. 2, with soprano solo* (1961)
 Hale Smith, *Contours for Orchestra* (1961)
 Roque Cordero, *Violin Concerto* (1962)
 Peter Westergaard, *Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos* (1966)
 Igor Stravinsky, *Requiem Canticles* (1966)

- Aaron Copland, *Inscape* (1967)
 Barbara Pentland, String Quartet No. 3 (1969)
 Roger Sessions, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* (1970)
 Donald Martino, *Notturmo* (1973)
 Joseph Schwantner, *In Aeternum* (1973)
 Ursula Mamlok, *Panta Rhei* (1981)
 Mel Powell, String Quartet (1982)
 Charles Wuorinen, Piano Concerto No. 3 (1983)
 George Perle, *Six New Etudes*, "Romance" (1984)
 Peter Lieberson, Bagatelles for Solo Piano, I. "Proclamation" (1985)
 Michael Torke, *Ecstatic Orange* (1985)
 Louise Talma, *Seven Episodes* for flute, viola and piano (1986–87)
 Andrew Mead, *Scena* for Solo Oboe (1994)
 Ralph Shapey, String Quartet No. 9 (1995)
 Milton Babbitt, *Danci* (1996)
 Robert Morris, *Fourteen Little Piano Pieces* (2002)
 Elliott Carter, *Caténaires* (2006)
 Jeff Nichols, "...its darkening opposite, or Set Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (2008)

In presenting these thirty-seven analytical vignettes, I am interested in understanding the senses in which the music can be understood as twelve-tone and/or serial. Toward that end, I take account of any precompositional plans or charts to which I have access (or can reliably recreate). To a large extent, the composers under study here felt the need to create distinctive compositional spaces for their music and to reify those spaces in the form of lists, charts, or arrays. These precompositional systems presumably function in place of the kinds of repertoire-wide communal systems that underlie traditional, tonal music and represent a fascinating artistic and musical achievement in their own right. Of even greater interest is the ways in which these underlying precompositional systems are realized in the sounding music, sometimes in a very direct way, but more often operating at some structural distance from the musical surface.¹⁰ In interpreting the underlying plans and their musical realizations, I rely where possible on written accounts by the composers themselves – I am interested in how these pieces were made. I am also interested in how these pieces might be made sense of by sympathetic listeners and the sorts of expressive impact they may be said to have. In the course of these close readings, then, I hope to suggest something of the range and richness of this repertoire. The vignettes are loosely grouped by chronology, but freely so as to highlight unexpected commonalities and

contrasts. In keeping with the nature of twelve-tone serial music, I seek to create a rich network of associations rather than a rigid hierarchy.

In the second part of this book, I attempt to place this music in a larger theoretical and historical context and I will attempt to make some general statements about its composition, history, and reception, all of which have been badly mischaracterized in the journalistic and scholarly literature. Indeed, it would be hard to think of another repertoire so widely discussed (or so harshly attacked) and so little and so poorly understood. I will try to set the record straight by prying away some of the many myths – unwarranted contentions that often underpin a larger anti-modernist mythology – that have accreted around twelve-tone serial music in America.

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