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## The Cambridge Introduction to Serialism

Serialism, one of the most prominent innovations in music since 1900, is a key topic in the study of music. From Schoenberg to Boulez and beyond, serial composition has been attacked as mathematical and anti-expressive, defended as vital and visionary. Both responses result from an understanding of the relationship between serialism as something new and the existing, established traditions it appeared to challenge so wholeheartedly. Coming nearly a century after the first stirrings of serial thinking in music appeared, this introduction provides a basic outline of the compositional techniques that embody serial principles, and of the historical evolution of those techniques as composers responded to the wealth of social and cultural imperatives that impinged on them in the years after 1920. Following a broadly chronological path, the book demonstrates the variety and adaptability of a wide range of serial compositions, and explains the compositional techniques clearly and concisely.

ARNOLD WHITTALL is Professor Emeritus of Music Theory and Analysis at King's College London.

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## Preface

Serialism is sometimes portrayed as one of the great lost causes of twentieth-century music. An initiative that began in the 1920s with attempts to prove its relevance as a means of both refreshing and preserving traditional compositional methods, it allegedly expired in the 1950s as a result of misguided attempts to radicalise its principles and divorce its compositional manifestations from accepted conventions. After 1960, according to this scenario, it was a spent force, its products rarely performed or recorded, and serving mainly as objects of study for those keen to learn about the various dead ends in reaction to which the serious music scene today has evolved.

‘In reaction to which’ – the phrase that crept into that last sentence – suggests a key to the alternative interpretation of serialism offered in this *Introduction*. One of the most authoritative overviews of the early twenty-first century<sup>1</sup> ends with contrasting a naïvely evolutionary hypothesis – tonality as the living language of tradition from Bach to Brahms being eroded, then decisively supplanted by the freer, truly democratic techniques of ‘atonal’ serialism – with a less crudely progressivist interpretation in which (since 1900) tonality has adapted and survived, to remain today the predominant mode of musical expression, both serious and popular. Nevertheless, as argued here, tonality’s adaptation and survival are intricately bound up with serialism’s adaptation and survival. In these terms, serialism is no more a lost cause than radio in the audio-visual age, but a crucial and often invaluable aspect of that age’s culture.

The concerns and challenges confronted in offering an introduction to the phenomenon of serialism are outlined in the early stages of the main text below. Since no author could plausibly claim omniscient expertise over the entire range of the composers and compositions as well as the theories and practices relevant even to an outline introduction such as this, there is a strong documentary element in the text, where acknowledged authorities are cited, sometimes at

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length. Some of the more detailed technical aspects of these discussions can be bypassed, but the reader should note that it has not been possible to provide technical chapter and verse, with music examples, for all the composers referred to. Such materials are indicated in the Notes. Terms and associated concepts, highlighted in the text in **bold**, are explained in the glossary.

Finally, I want to offer my heartfelt thanks to those friends and colleagues who have devoted valuable time to reading all or part of my work, and for whose suggestions and, at times, complaints, I am enormously indebted. My special gratitude to Ian Bent and Jonathan Dunsby, and to Edward Campbell, Peter Dickinson, Jonathan Goldman, Peter T. Marsh, Carola Nielinger-Vakil, Philip Rupprecht, Ciro Scotto, Joseph Straus and Charles Wilson.

*The Cambridge Introduction to Serialism* is dedicated to the enduring memory of Mary Whittall, who witnessed its inception, but did not survive to see its completion.

Arnold Whittall  
London, March 2008

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