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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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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
Chapter 1 Introducing the <i>Introduction</i>	1
Some initial questions	1
History and hindsight: an overview	6
A Webern analysis	6
Collection, mode, series, set	8
Notes and numbers	9
Back to Webern	10
Forms of post-tonal composition	12
Terms, techniques	13
Serialism in critical perspective	14
A personal perspective	15
Chapter 2 Schoenberg’s path to the twelve-tone method	17
Interpreting transition	17
Tonal or post-tonal?	18
Twelve-tone technique in embryo	19
Ideals and practicalities	21
Post-war problems	22
Parallels and pitfalls: Hauer	24
Eye witness: Gerhard	27
Chapter 3 Serialism in close-up	31
From Bach to Schoenberg	31
Schoenberg as music	32
Serialism as music	35

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-86341-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Serialism
 Arnold Whittall
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
	Fixed and free	36
	Op. 25: further details	37
	A twelve-tone canon	40
	Coda	43
	Chapter 4 Schoenberg in the 1920s	45
	1920–3	45
	Making, meaning: Op. 23 No. 5	47
	1923–4	50
	Schoenberg on Schoenberg: the Wind Quintet	51
	More on the Wind Quintet	53
	The Wind Quintet's finale	54
	1925–9	56
	Op. 29 and after	58
	Meaning, making	61
	Chapter 5 Alban Berg: reverence and resistance	65
	<i>Wozzeck</i> and transition	65
	Personal space	66
	Berg–Klein–Berg	68
	Berg's Chamber Concerto	70
	A first step	71
	Series, cycles	72
	<i>Lyric Suite</i>	75
	<i>Lyric Suite</i> : finale	76
	The final dialogues	79
	Serialism in <i>Lulu</i> and the Violin Concerto	80
	Chapter 6 Anton Webern: discipline and licence	85
	Purity, anxiety	85
	Beginnings	86
	The route to independence	90
	String Trio, Op. 20	92
	The method perfected	93
	Form and feeling	94
	Symmetry and balance	96
	Twelve-tone canons	98

Chapter 7 The later Schoenberg	101
Laying down the law	101
Religion, politics and serialism	102
Exile and readjustment	104
‘Good old tradition!’? The Fourth String Quartet	107
Models for form and style	109
Suspended tonality?	110
Grammar or gibberish?	111
Matters of quality	112
Ambiguous endings	113
 Chapter 8 American counterpoints: I	 117
From method to system	117
Varèse	118
More pioneers	119
Krenek	119
Sessions, Copland, Perle	120
Babbitt: words	122
Babbitt: music	125
Babbitt: music, words and politics	131
Consequences and contingencies	133
 Chapter 9 American counterpoints: II	 135
Stravinsky: a balance of tensions	135
Stravinsky: series and centres	137
Cage and Nancarrow	141
The Minimalists	142
The serial inheritance	144
Carter	145
Carter’s practice	146
<i>Gra</i> : playing with sets	148
 Chapter 10 European repercussions: I	 151
Facing both ways	151
Britten and the British	152
Shostakovich and the Soviets	155
Lutosławski and the Poles	157

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-86341-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Serialism
 Arnold Whittall
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
	Cold War and style wars: Dallapiccola	160
	Nono: commitment to progress	163
	Nono: <i>Il canto sospeso</i>	166
	Chapter 11 European repercussions: II	171
	From Messiaen to Boulez	171
	Testing extremes	174
	<i>Structures</i>	175
	Hearing techniques	176
	Behind <i>Le Marteau sans maître</i>	177
	Serialism in <i>Le Marteau sans maître</i>	178
	Stockhausen: Cologne, Paris, Darmstadt	181
	Stockhausen and the piano	182
	<i>Gruppen</i>	184
	Chapter 12 European repercussions: III	187
	Xenakis	187
	Ligeti	189
	Ligeti's techniques	191
	Berio	193
	Berio's transformations	197
	Kagel	198
	Chapter 13 European repercussions: IV	203
	The later Boulez	203
	Boulez as lecturer	204
	Style and idea in <i>Incises</i>	205
	The later Stockhausen	209
	Serialism <i>in excelsis</i>	213
	Kurtág	216
	Chapter 14 European repercussions: V	219
	The contemporary scene	219
	Scandinavia: Nørgård	220
	British serialism after 1950	221
	Maxwell Davies: before 1970	223
	Magic squares and serial structures	225

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-86341-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Serialism
Arnold Whittall
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents ix

Maxwell Davies since the 1970s	227
From Manchester to Cambridge	228
Birtwistle	231
Ferneyhough	232
Knussen	235
An ending	236
<i>Notes</i>	239
<i>Bibliography</i>	259
<i>Glossary</i>	271
<i>Index</i>	279

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 century¹ 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

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-86341-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Serialism
Arnold Whittall
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xii *Preface*

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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