

## MUSICAL FEELINGS AND ATONAL MUSIC

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### INTRODUCTION

Several recent studies in many different fields have focused on the question of how music can be expressive of such emotions that only sentient beings can feel. In philosophy of music the adherents of cognitivist theories of expressivity (e.g. Davies 2003, Kivy 2002) try to solve this problem by explaining that we hear music as expressive of emotions, because we hear the events and contours of music as resembling the typical ways in which human beings express their emotions in behaviour and utterance. In cognitivist theories listeners are not supposed to have any reactionary feelings to the expressed emotions, whereas ‘arousalists’ (e.g. Matravers 1998) emphasize that a listener’s experience of expression involves an aroused feeling that is related to the expressed emotion; this aroused feeling makes it the case that we describe music as melancholic, for instance. The third type of philosophical theory of expressivity is the symbolist account (Addis 1999, Langer 1951) whose defenders regard music as isomorphic with our feelings and states of consciousness; in particular, special stress is laid on the idea that music is capable of presenting these ineffable states.

Music psychologists and musicologists are also interested in the topic of how music is expressive; however, such ideas as musical feelings of *tension* and *relaxation* (e.g. Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983) and emotional response to music as felt feelings of *anticipation* and *fulfilment* (Meyer 2000) are not directly concerned with ordinary human emotions. An interesting issue is how these theories relate to those accounts mentioned above where

expressivity is explained in terms of human emotions; I will not address this question, but musical feelings of tension and relaxation will be important in this essay.

For the time being, the focus of expressivity theories has mostly been on the traditional classic tonal music.<sup>1</sup> However, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such modernist phenomena as, for instance, atonal music and twelve-tone music, serialism, aleatoric music, electronic music and minimalism have extended the concept of music tremendously. These kinds of music are a challenge to theories of expressivity in music, because it is not self-evident that the concepts and theories in terms of which we explain the expressivity of more traditional music are also applicable to essentially different styles of music.

In this paper I will argue that Diana Raffman's argument for her claim is not convincing due to inapplicability of a central notion. She suggests that:

[t]his is the defect in twelve-tone music — a structure that makes it at once purport to afford, and fail to afford, a certain type of pitch-related feeling experience. Twelve-tone music purports to mean something it cannot mean. (2003: 86)

Raffman's claim is that twelve-tone music is artistically defective, because it does not communicate pitch-related meaning, that is, pitch-related musical feelings. According to Raffman (*ibid.*: 86), twelve-tone music is therefore emotionally incomprehensible, and “art to a lesser degree than the music of, say, Bach or Brahms.”

Raffman discusses twelve-tone music, but the object of her criticism is clearly *atonal* twelve-tone music: for instance, Raffman (*ibid.*: 69) says that the same questions can be raised about atonality in general. Accordingly, I have chosen the term *atonal music* for the title of my article because twelve-tone music may also have tonal features; nevertheless, because the principles of twelve-tone music elucidate the difference between tonality and atonality, the first part of my essay is a brief introduction of those principles.

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<sup>1</sup> By traditional *tonal music* I mean music that is composed in *a tonal system*: music having a pitch collection, one member of which is the major point of stability, tonic, and there is also a measure of relative stability of pitches as well as harmonic consonances and dissonances.

## 1. WHAT IS TWELVE-TONE MUSIC?

That the musical content of twelve-tone music, i.e. of *dodecaphony*, is difficult to understand is an opinion shared by many music enthusiasts: for instance, Peter Kivy (2001: 61) states that the music of the Second Vienna School, that is, the music composed by Arnold Schoenberg and his pupils Alban Berg and Anton von Webern, either lacks an expressive code, or possesses one that ordinary listeners cannot read. What then is so distinctive about dodecaphonic music that makes philosophers of music pay attention to it; in particular, what is the basis of the claims that the expressivity of this music is obscure or that it is not expressive at all?

This method of composing with twelve different tones of a chromatic scale was created by Schoenberg in the 1920s. In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the traditional tonality had given way to extended tonality and gradually the modernist trends led to the emancipation of dissonance and finally led to free atonality. Schoenberg (1941: 103) deems that his new method grew out of necessity. The harmony of atonal music had turned out to be colourful, but, something was, nevertheless, lost: tonal harmonies had functioned *syntactically* in distinguishing forms of music so that, for instance, only consonances had been suitable for endings (*ibid.*: 105).

The function of the basic item in a dodecaphonic composition, *the row*, is therefore partially constructive. The row of a composition consists of twelve different, *ordered* tones; it may be transposed and it may be used in its mirror forms as well, but the point is that no tone may be repeated before the other tones of the row have occurred. The reason for this restriction is that each tone of a row is meant to be of *equal importance*, and repeating certain tones more often than others is emphasizing them. This principle of equal importance implies that in strictly dodecaphonic music — unlike in tonal music — there are no tonal centres and no relative stability of tone pitches. Furthermore, because the character of harmony is dependent on these relations of stability, there are no such functional tensions and releases between harmonies as in tonal music.

Nevertheless, as suggested in the introduction, it is quite possible to compose music that in broad outline is dodecaphonic but that still has tonal features: a well-known example is Alban Berg's *Violin Concerto* whose set comprises both major and minor triads.

## 2. RAFFMAN'S ARGUMENT

For Raffman, music is a form of communication that should result in grasping the meaning of music; this meaning is syntactic and comprises the structure of music (Raffman 2003: 78). Furthermore, this understanding results in *musical feelings*, which are also a precondition for music to be emotionally comprehensible. These feelings differ from ordinary emotions such as anger and fear. Raffman describes musical feelings in the following way:

For present purposes, though, I think no serious trouble will arise if we take as understood the existence and nature of feelings *of a kind* with the feelings of musical tension, stability, resolution, rhythmic stress, and so forth, to which Lerdahl and Jackendoff refer. For convenience I will call these feelings, simply, "musical feelings". (*ibid.*: 80)

I now turn to Raffman's argument that is concerned with musical feelings and twelve-tone music. I formulate it so that there are five premises and the conclusion:

- (1) Musical understanding, that is, the grasp of musical meaning consists in experiencing certain musical feelings (*ibid.*: 80).
- (2) We understand musical meaning by understanding the musical structure (*ibid.*). By *musical structure* Raffman means local pitch, rhythmic structure and such architectural structures as motives, endings, transition etc. Instead of a mere string of undifferentiated sounds we hear these structures in music, and this is possible due to the unconscious use of musical grammar (*ibid.*: 79).
- (3) It is difficult for listeners to hear the local structures of twelve-tone music, that is, the pitch structure and harmonies of this music. It is for instance harder to learn atonal pitch sequences than tonal ones. Raffman acknowledges that more empirical studies on this subject are needed, but she still assumes the perceptual unreality of twelve-tone structure (*ibid.*: 76-77).
- (4) If the local structure of dodecaphonic music remains obscure and if listeners still experience musical feelings engendered by this music, these feelings must be aroused by

such *large-scale structures* as phrases, sections, and movements, and by such *nonstructural, secondary features* as dynamics and tempo (*ibid.*: 83).

- (5) In traditional tonal music we are not interested in the large-scale structures of music as its expressively relevant features, and expressively relevant nonstructural features are *meaningless* without the structural features. It is unlikely that these points are different in twelve-tone music (*ibid.*: 83-84).
- (6) Consequently, twelve-tone music fails to provide pitch-related musical feelings (*ibid.*: 86).

The conclusion follows from the premises, but we may still call in question at least premises (4) and (5): Raffman seems to disparage the role of secondary features in how we hear music that is not tonal. For instance, Jackendoff and Lerdahl (1983: 297) remark that when there is no tonal centre, important musical events are chosen on the basis of rhythm and that our intuitions of tensing and relaxation are then more dependent on rhythmic, dynamic and timbral features than on tonal pitch. Also Meyer (1973: 89) emphasizes how for instance timbre is *structurally significant* in Webern's music, but it plays a minor role in Bach's music. In short, the secondary features of dynamics, sonority, tempo, etc., which in tonal music assist listeners to hear such structural events as climaxes and endings, now obtain a more independent structural role: in twelve-tone music these secondary features *form* structures. As stated in the second premise, understanding these structures promotes understanding of the meaning of this music, and according to the first premise, understanding manifests itself to us as an experience of certain musical feelings.

Indeed, Raffman considers that rhythmic and durational features of twelve-tone music may engender musical feelings:

For example, I have been speaking only about pitch, but perhaps the rhythmic and durational aspects of a twelve-tone work are perceptually real and give rise to musical feelings of the relevant sort. (2003: 85)

However, *pitch-related* musical feelings are still important for Raffman:

That said, even if there *are* other features of twelve-tone music whose perception engenders musical

feelings, the perceptual unreality of twelve-tone pitch structure constitutes a critical defect.... Because of its rich (and designed) pitch structure, twelve-tone music purports to afford pitch-related musical feelings. However, given the perceptual unreality of that structure, the result is that twelve-tone music purports to engender feelings that it cannot engender. (*ibid.*)

The problem thus is that because twelve-tone music—unlike for instance rap music—has a pitch structure, we still expect to experience feelings due to the pitches. However, what kind of musical feelings could they be? Raffman argues the following:

Obviously we cannot assume that the musical feelings (“emotions”) at issue are just the sort caused by perception of *tonal* music....For example, we assume that there is no tonal centre, and perhaps no feeling of stability, in the perception of a twelve-tone work; *but feelings of tension and resolution may abound* (*ibid.*: 82; the latter italics added).

Nevertheless, my point is that even if Raffman does not expect the feeling of stability from dodecaphonic music, by expecting *the feelings of pitch-related tension and release* Raffman still conveys tonal ideas to considerations of this kind of music. It is difficult to understand the notions of pitch-related tension and release without assuming some kind of relative stability among pitches and centres to which music leads, but avoiding such stabilities and tonal centres is the defining principle of dodecaphony. Thus, given this interpretation of the term *pitch-related feeling*, the statement that dodecaphonic music does not communicate pitch-related feelings is simply a tautology.

### 3. DISCUSSION

We certainly cannot criticize dodecaphonic music for not exemplifying such properties that its creators aim to avoid. Furthermore, we cannot draw the conclusion that dodecaphonic music is not expressive of any emotions if it does not give rise to such feelings as tonal music often does. Schoenberg (1947: 179) himself emphasized that everything valuable in art must show heart as well as brain; further, the change of character and mood of a composition were mirrored for instance in the dynamics, tempo, figuration, accentuation and instrumentation of a composition (Schoenberg 1941: 106). It thus seems that expressivity of music was important to Schoenberg, and by listening to dodecaphonic music, for instance Schoenberg’s *Violin Concerto* op. 36, we

are assured that it may sometimes be deeply emotional.

Expression in music is obviously not an intentional matter in the sense that a precondition for music to be expressive is the composer's aspiration for this result; neither does expressivity preconceive that there is a causal connection to the composer's life and experiences (Levinson 1996: 99). Rather, the emotional characteristics of music are properties that emerge on the structural features of music, that is, on the composed pitch structure, rhythms, harmonies, etc. What then is the relation between the structural features of music and its aesthetic properties, including its expressive character? No detailed answer may ever be available even if, for instance, stressing the tones that are important in major mode, e.g. major third, has been shown to contribute to conceiving happy emotions (Lindström 2004: 40). Generalizations of this kind about twelve-tone music are not likely to be found, since compositions of this style do not share scales or tonalities: each composition is based on its own row, its own sound material.

Dodecaphonic music along with other modernist methods and styles may thus have obscured the relation between the structural properties of music and its emergent aesthetic properties further. Nonetheless, it does not follow from this that dodecaphonic music is defective with respect to its expressive and other aesthetic properties. Indeed, this different language of music may be expressive of new and different emotions from those of earlier music – perhaps expressive of genuine emotions of the unconscious that have immediate presence and reality within the work (Adorno 1948: 38-39).

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