

What is atonal?

A dialogue with Alban Berg on Vienna Radio from 23 April 1930.



Alban Berg (1885–1935)

So, my dear Meister Berg, let's begin.

Alban Berg: You start, Professor, I'm happy to have the last word!

You're that sure of the matter?

Alban Berg: As sure as a person can be about an issue in whose development and growth he has participated for a quarter century, with a certainty that comes not only from reason and experience but, even more, from belief.

Good. It would probably be simplest if I first pose the title question of our dialogue: "What is atonal?"

Alban Berg: It is not easy to answer this by a formula that could also serve as a definition. Where this expression was first used – apparently in a newspaper critique – it probably was, as the compound form of the term [a-tonal] clearly implies, a designation for music whose harmony did not comport with the traditional laws of tonality.

So you mean in the beginning was the word, or, better, a word that compensates for the helplessness we feel when confronted with something new.

Alban Berg: You might say that. But it is certain that this term "atonal" was used with a pejorative intention, just as terms like "arrhythmic", "amelodic", "asymmetric" were also used at this time. But while these borrowed terms were sometimes suitable as designations for specific phenomena, the word "atonal", unfortunately I must say, served as a collective term for music that was assumed not only to lack relevance to a harmonic centre (to use tonality in Rameau's sense), but also to have none of the other prerequisites of music, such as melody, rhythmic, formal divisibility into large and small. So the term "atonal" today really means as much as something that is not music, non-music, in fact something that is quite the opposite of what has always been understood as music.

Even if a few harmonic resources are lost along with major and minor, all of the other prerequisites of "serious" music are preserved.

Aha, a term of reproach! And I see it as a valid one. So you're saying, Mr Berg, that there is no such contradiction and the lack of reference to a definite tonic does not actually shake the whole edifice of music?

Alban Berg: Before I answer that question, Professor, let me put this forward: if this so-called atonal music cannot be related in harmonic terms to a major or minor scale – and after all there was music before the existence of this harmonic system...

and what beautiful, artful, and imaginative music...

Alban Berg: It doesn't follow that in the "atonal" artworks of the last quarter century, at least as regards the chromatic scale and the new chords derived from it, there cannot be found a harmonic centre, although this, of course, is not identical to the concept of the old tonic. Even if this has not yet been brought into the form of a systematic theory.

Oh, I find this reservation to be unjustified.

Alban Berg: All the better!

But you still haven't answered my earlier question: whether there is not in fact a contradiction between traditional music and the music of today and whether the renunciation of relation to a tonic does not in fact make the entire edifice of music totter.

Alban Berg: I can answer your questions more easily by starting where we have found agreement – that the rejection of major and minor tonality in no way produces harmonic anarchy. Even if a few harmonic resources are lost along with major and minor, all of the other prerequisites of "serious" music are preserved.

Today people know that atonal music in and of itself can be engaging and in certain cases will be so. In cases that are truly artistic! It is only a matter of showing whether atonal music can really be called music in that same sense as with earlier works. That is, whether, as you say, only the harmonic basis of new music has been changed, with all other elements of traditional music still present.

Alban Berg: And I do hold this and can prove it in every measure of a modern score. Prove it above all – to start with the most serious objection – by showing that this new music, as with traditional music, rests on motive,

theme, main voice, and, in a word, melody, and that it progresses in just the same way as does all other good music.

Well, is melody in the normal sense really possible in this atonal music?

Alban Berg: Of course it is! Even, as is most often disputed, cantabile and songful melody.

Now as concerns song, Mr Berg, atonal music travels on new paths. Here there are certainly things not heard before, I would almost say things that seem at present to be outlandish.

Alban Berg: But only in harmonic rudiments – there we are in agreement. But it is quite false, as regards the other characteristics of melodic line, to see a new path or something unheard of or outlandish. Not even in a voice part, even when it contains (as has been thrown at me) “instrumentally chromatic, distorted, jagged, wide-leaping intervals”. Just as little does it “contradict the lyric necessities of the human voice”.

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