Chapter 21

Beyond Tonality
Atonality

- absence of a tonal center
- Schoenberg advanced what he called “the emancipation of the dissonance”
- distinctions between dissonance and consonance had become almost meaningless
Atonality

• atonality suited to aesthetics of Expressionism (artistic movement that sought to give voice to unconscious and manifest humanity’s deepest and often darkest emotions)

• Expressionism in literature, painting, cinema and music rejects conventional techniques of representation, instead favoring devices that exaggerate and distort
Atonality

• Schoenberg was deeply sympathetic to expressionist art and drawn to surreal, violent, eerie imagery of *Pierrot lunaire*

• *Sprechstimme*, style of singing
  
  - “Speech-voice” is neither speech nor song but means of declamation between the two
  
  - in Schoenberg’s 1912 setting of *Pierrot lunaire*, *Sprechstimme* reinforces surreal quality of text and music
Atonality

- Schoenberg *Pierrot lunaire* (1912)
  - Symbolist poetic work set in Expressionist style with atonal music
  - from Albert Giraud’s poem based on characters from commedia dell’arte
  - in the poem, we get to see underneath Pierrot’s mask; his true, underlying feelings
  - the atonal music really matches the disturbing nature of the poem
commedia dell’arte characters
Paul Cézane painting of Pierrot and Harlequin (1888)
Atonality

- **Schoenberg *Pierrot lunaire***
  - No. 7 “The Sick Moon”
    - uses atonal music to make the moon seem even more sick than tonal music could
  - No. 14 “The Cross”
    - Schoenberg projects the violence of this poem by having the voice leap large, non-triadic intervals
  - No. 21 “O Ancient Scent”
    - the clown longs for the age of tonality (the past) but there is no going back
  - The text provides the large-scale structural scaffold for this piece; without tonality, it is difficult to build large-scale musical structure
Atonality

• Composers writing atonal works without text found other means to structure them

• Anton Webern’s *Five Pieces for String Quartet* uses a limited number of building blocks usually consisting of four or five notes
  - these four or five note collections are often analyzed as pitch-class sets

• Alban Berg’s opera *Wozzeck* used series of traditional instrumental forms for structure (fugue, inventions, suites, sonata form, variations, passacaglias)
Atonality

- Webern *Five Pieces for String Quartet, Op. 5, No. 4*
  - series of miniatures for string quartet
  - uses 4 or 5 note pitch-class sets to organize the pitch materials
  - triads avoided (melodically and harmonically)
Atonality

- **Alban Berg Wozzeck** (1922, premiered 1925)
  - most successful atonal work of the early 20th century
  - Opera base on a play about a soldier who is exploited by many around him; his underlying psychology is explored
  - Berg uses traditional music forms (e.g., Suite, sonata-form, variations, passicaglia, etc.)
  - Act I, Sc. 1 is based on the Dance Suite
    - Prelude (m. 1), Pavane (m. 30), Gigue (m. 65), Gavotte (m. 115), Double (m. 127), Air (m. 136), Prelude reprise (m. 154)
    - Berg did not expect or want the audience to be aware of these forms
Serial Composition

• Schoenberg, Webern, Berg and others struggled to find means of creating large-scale atonal structures

• in response, Schoenberg developed serial composition in early 1920s

• serial composition based on unit of music - most often a row or series of 12 different pitches - can be varied repeatedly to provide structural basis for an entire work
Serial Composition

- Schoenberg identified three principal functions of the 12-tone row:
  1. to avoid creating impression of principal note (avoid a pitch center)
  2. to unify the composition through motive(s)
  3. to eradicate any distinction between consonance and dissonance
Serial Composition

• four basic forms of any given row - each can be transposed to start on any of the 12 chromatic pitches in diatonic scale
  1. Prime (P) is the basic form of the row
  2. Inversion (I) is the row played upside down (inverted)
  3. Retrograde (R) is the row played backward
  4. Retrograde Inversion (RI) is the inverted form played backward
Serial Composition

- pitch-class set designates any set of notes regardless of register

- *organicist* analysis demonstrates many different elements immediately audible on musical surface - theme, timbre, harmony, rhythm - manifest a deeper coherence
Serial Composition

- Schoenberg, Webern, Berg each developed own personal ways of applying technique of serial composition
- three know collectively as “Second Viennese School”
Serial Composition

• Schoenberg *Piano Suite*, Op. 25 (1923)
  - see Bonds p. 556 for matrix
  - Bonds does not use the same row designation system we learn in Th-3
  - early 12-tone piece
  - based on the traditional Dance Suite
Serial Composition

- Alban Berg *Lyric Suite*
  - for string quartet
  - uses 12-tone technique but Berg’s usage is very different from Schoenberg and Webern’s
  - Berg uses multiple, different but related rows within this piece
  - all movements are not serial
  - see Bonds p. 560 for the rows
  - note the hexachordal division of the rows and the tonal implications within each hexachord