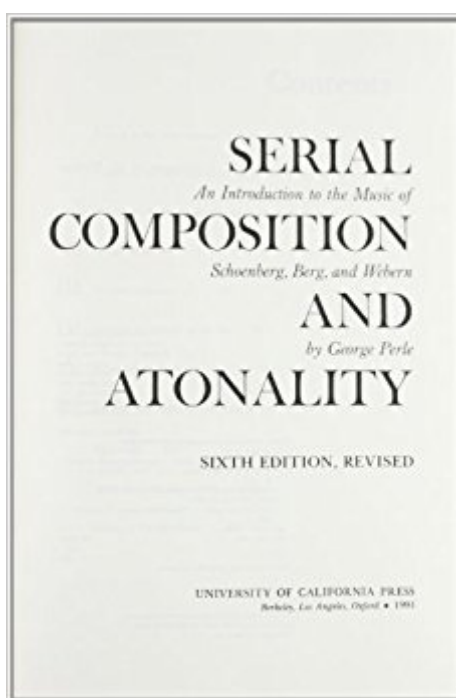


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Serial Composition And Atonality: An Introduction To The Music Of Schoenberg, Berg, And Webern



Synopsis

Widely recognized as the definitive work in its field ever since its original publication in 1962, *Serial Composition and Atonality* remains an unsurpassed introduction to the technical features of what is probably the most revolutionary body of work since the beginnings of polyphony. In the analysis of specific compositions there is first and last of all a concern with the musical surface; an attempt to trace connections and distinctions there before offering any deeper-level constructions, and to offer none where their effects are not obvious on more immediate levels of musical experience. In this sixth edition of the book, George Perle employs the new and more consistent terminology for the identification of transpositional levels of twelve-tone sets that he first proposed in *Twelve-Tone Tonality* (1977).

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Customer Reviews

"The best description in any language of twelve-tone techniques as developed by their originators."--"Notes

George Perle, one of this country's most respected composers, theorists, and critics, is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize in music and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. His writings on twentieth-century music include *The Listening Composer* (1990), *The Operas of Alban Berg* (1980, 1984), and *Twelve-Tone Tonality* (1977), all available from the University of California Press.

Definitely a worthy tome, but not for a casual reader looking for history and/or a "popular" presentation of serial procedures in music. Perle is especially good in his analyses, and the chapters on free atonality and non-dodecaphonic serial works are excellent.

This book, in all its revisions, has been in print for more than thirty-five years. It has been found very useful by students and general readers who are already well versed in tonal music systems and want a primer on the basic ideas behind the serial composition methods that grew up and matured during the 20th Century. The book says that it is an introduction to the music of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. While most of the musical examples are drawn from their music, examples from other composers such as Bartok, Babbitt, Stravinsky, and others are also included. Perle lays out some of the basic issues of organization that grew out of atonality and how the idea of sets or rows was used to provide order. He shows various kinds of serial organization including sets fewer than twelve tones, hexachords, and the full twelve tone set. He also does a great job in demonstrating the different ways composers implemented this organization principle. It is important to realize that the information here is really just what it says: an introduction. Composers have come up with many other kinds of implementations of the idea of serialization and sets. It is vital to keep in mind that there is no ordained way of composing with twelve tones. There are some basic postulates in the Schoenberg method, but no composer has to be bound by them other than by choosing to compose music that way. Perle also shows the reader how composers use these rows and combine them in ways that create effects that are not a part of any of the rows including constructions that look like major and minor triads. Yes, your ear will pick them up quite readily, but the way the "move" is not tonal. However, they provide interesting color and a way for the composer to draw the ear to certain aspects of the composition. There are also many other technical matters of the "standard" method of serialization that are not included here. But who would expect an introduction to be comprehensive?

As far as I can tell, George Perle's books are the only ones that really come to grips with atonality. Others are either 1) simplistic glosses, 2) pieces of propaganda, or 3) attempts to impress or intimidate the reader (so as to entrench their authors in academia). Having heard one of George Perle's piano sonatas on the radio the other day and once a string quartet of his in concert, I can testify that he is himself a first-rate composer, and isn't it better to read the works of one who has an artistic stake in his subject? However, for a contrasting point of view, I also recommend--with reservations--"Milton Babbitt: Words about Music", edited by Stephen Dembski. Like George Perle, Milton Babbitt is a prominent serialist composer. As it happens, I'm not a particular fan of his music,

and I think his analyses tend miss the substance of the music he analyzes, but he is an influential, articulate, and intelligent exponent worth hearing out.

Perle's book is considered a classic in the theory world, and well so. It gives a thorough analysis of representative works of not only Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, but also of Stravinsky, Bartok, and Babbitt. I was able to learn from it many of the tools of serial music and their application in specific pieces. The world of serial composition is actually much broader than I had hitherto realized. As a composer, I found this book helpful, but I would recommend Charles Wuorinen's SIMPLE COMPOSITION in addition. My main problem with this book is Perle's consistent use of the word "atonal." This furthers the myth that there is such thing as "atonal music." First of all, serialist work is more accurately "pantonal;" it encompasses all tonalities, and implies all tonalities. Furthermore, it is a misleading term, as there is no music that uses no tones (all sounds have some frequency, and therefore some tone). This edition is an improvement over an older one. The older edition, which I read, contained a section in the chapter on simultaneity which I thought was absolutely ridiculous. This edition omits the section.

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