

CHARACTERISTICS

The avant-garde technique of atonality is radical in terms of its abandonment of traditional scales and chords—but in other ways, atonal music might still seem extremely conventional. Many early examples of atonality are crafted as recognizable, standard forms. Their treatment of meter and rhythm is completely straightforward, and the performance ensembles might be the kinds of groupings used for hundreds of years. But, there is no escaping the fact that the lack of a tonal center was (and can still be) quite destabilizing. Some theorists draw parallels between this musical style and the experimental literary writers of the early twentieth century who were abandoning linear narrative—authors such as James Joyce (1882–1941) and T. S. Eliot (1888–65). These works of literature are often difficult to read and require much concentration, and the same can be said of atonal music.

As we might expect, atonality often partners quite well with other twentieth-century musical styles, such as Expressionism. In fact, “*Nacht*” from *Pierrot lunaire* is an atonal work, but we didn’t necessarily notice that fact because Schoenberg held the song together with the persistent three-note ostinato, which he called a passacaglia. In this way, “*Nacht*” uses a structure from the past, but combines it with the Modern technique of atonality. (And, by choosing the weird, disturbing poetry, Schoenberg turned the composition into an example of Expressionism as well.) Primitivism is another twentieth-century style that can easily accommodate atonality, although not all Primitivist pieces are atonal. Stravinsky, for instance, used an octatonic scale in portions of *The Rite of Spring*. Still, it is feasible for atonality by itself to be the primary “style” of a piece, as is demonstrated by LISTENING EXAMPLE 5, the fifth piece of Webern’s *Six Bagatelles for String Quartet*.



Six Bagatelles for String Quartet, Op. 9, No. 5 “*Äußerst langsam*” (1911–1913) – Anton Webern

By assigning the label “bagatelle” to these pieces, Webern returns to the Romantic-era genre of character pieces. The definition of bagatelle is not widely known today, but a synonym is “trifle”: it is something of little value or importance, or something that is insignificant. Webern clearly is trying to convey the idea that these are not weighty, monumental works; they are simply short novelties.

Webern was always attracted to miniatures. His entire compositional output can be contained on three compact discs. However, even in the tiny Bagatelle No. 5, he incorporates quite a few twentieth-century concepts. For instance, this bagatelle is a good illustration of Schoenberg’s notion of “pantonicity,” because Webern employs all twelve notes of the chromatic scale within the first seven measures of the piece. Composers working with atonality often refer to the chromatic scale as the **aggregate**—the complete set of notes we use in Western music—and FIGURE 2-3 demonstrates how Webern carefully unfolds the aggregate through the first half of the bagatelle. He starts with C, C#, and E in the first bar, quickly adding a D# in the second violin. Those four pitches leave a gap for the pitch D, and the first violin plays that note in the second measure. As FIGURE 2-3 illustrates, Webern then gradually expands outward through the aggregate, adding higher and lower notes in each bar, until all twelve notes have been presented in the course of only seven measures.

NEW FOCUS ON TIMBRE

Anyone who goes to a concert to hear a string quartet by Mozart would expect to see two violins, a viola, and a cello on the stage, and that is exactly the instrumentation that Webern uses in this bagatelle. However, Webern also asks the instruments to use new timbres through the course of the piece. They do use normal bowing at times, but two other techniques are also employed. At times, they play “on the bridge,” as was heard in Schoenberg’s “*Nacht*,” and sometimes they pluck the string instead of bowing it; composers use the Italian verb **pizzicato** to request this tone color. Moreover, throughout the bagatelle, Webern asks all the instruments to use a **mute**—a small device that limits some of the string’s ability to vibrate,