

# What is Serialism?

Throughout musical history, harmony has become more and more complex. This is because as time goes by, more and more ‘rules’ get broken. This applies to probably all other areas of life and art – look at social changes since the Victorian times, when holding hands in public was considered risqué. Or how visual art went from realistic portraits in stately homes, to elephant dung paintings in the Tate Modern gallery.

Schoenberg started his composing career in a **Late-Romantic** style (like Wagner and Mahler). These composers’ music was already much more **chromatic** than that of, say, Mozart and Beethoven. Instead of continuing to compose in this lush, romantic style, Schoenberg noticed this gradual **breakdown of conventional harmony** and took it to its logical conclusion. **Atonal** music was born.

**Atonal** music literally means “opposite of tonal”. There are **no keys**. There are **no cadences**. There are **no scales**. Each note or chord was played for its own sound, and was not harmonically linked to the previous or next note.

## 90 (BIII) *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op.21 No. 7: *Der kranke Mond* (1912)

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Sehr langsame  $\text{♩} = 96-100$

FLÖTE

REZITATION

Du näch - tig to - deskran - ker Mond\_ dort auf des Him - mels schwarz - em

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Most harmony which you are used to hearing uses major or minor scales, which create a **hierarchy** of notes – the dominant (chord V) to the tonic (chord I) being the most obvious.

Atonal music can be very expressive, but the lack of tonality makes it hard to have coherent structure. Schoenberg experimented to try and find a way around this. In the end he came up with **serialism** or, as it is sometimes called, **dodecaphony**.

**Serialism** is based on using all 12 semitones in an octave, which are first used in a certain order. This is called the **prime order** or **tone row**.

**Below is an example I have made.** If I were a modernist composer like Schoenberg or Webern I’d probably call it something rather dull and academic like **Tonal Metastasis IIb!**

Notice how **every** note has an accidental sign next to it. This is to make it easier for the performer.

The **prime order** forms the basis for a composition. The notes **have to be used in order**. Each note therefore is no more or no less important than the next. There is **absolutely no hierarchy**.

## How can you make a tone row into a piece?

Just playing a tone row does not make a serial piece! Here are some techniques that can be employed to make music out of the science.

### Altering the prime order

The prime order (**P<sub>0</sub>**) can be adapted in these ways:

**Inverted order (I<sub>0</sub>)**– each interval is flipped the other way round. E.g. instead of the next note in the row moving up 4 semitones, it moves down 4 semitones.

**Retrograde order (R<sub>0</sub>)**. The prime order played **backwards**

**Retrograde Inverted order. Flipped AND played backwards**

Any of the orders can be **transposed** up a number of semitones (**P<sub>1</sub>**) (**R<sub>2</sub>**) (**RI<sub>10</sub>**). The number in the bracket is how many semitones to move each note **up**.

### Orchestration

Modernist composers started to move away from the standard symphony orchestra of the time. By the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the symphony orchestra was reaching epic proportions. Instead they chose to write more for smaller **chamber ensembles**. Two popular pieces by Webern are his String trio and Concerto for nine instruments. Instead of having rich orchestration with many parts, the **texture** is often **sparse** – **monophonic** or **pointillistic** (like pointillist paintings- made up out of ‘dots’).

### Chords

You can play several consecutive notes of the row together, as a chord. The fancy name for this is **verticalisation**.

**And finally...** if you think Serialism is soulless and academic, check out **Total Serialism** employed by Pierre Boulez amongst others. In this music, **every element** of the music was **predefined**, including tone rows, length of notes, dynamics and even articulation!