

## A Catholic Counterargument to Atonality

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 7 April 2019

In the early twentieth century, the argument was made that musicians were becoming too constrained by the traditional tonal system and needed to expand their possibilities. For Arnold Schönberg, a composer of the Second Viennese School, the solution was atonality, a system in which a composer would allegedly be freed from the restrictions of traditional tonality and possess a newfound liberty to expand his creativity. Unfortunately, this so-called “liberty” simply leads to totalitarianism and the destruction of true creativity, just as the so-called “liberty” proposed by liberalism eventually culminated in totalitarian communism. Atonality is essentially an artistic representation of modern-day nihilism, and it must be rejected due to its denial of the authority of God and the hierarchical order He established.

Traditional tonal music has a tonal center, and the chords which are diatonic to that key are each built upon a different scale degree and serve various functions. Using C major as an example, the C major and A minor chords (I and vi, respectively), serve a tonic function. The G major chord, often found with an added 7th (V or V<sup>7</sup>) and the B-diminished triad (vii<sup>o</sup>) serve a dominant function, whose goal is to resolve to a tonic chord. D minor (ii) and F major (IV) constitute predominant harmony, which prepare for the dominant function that will eventually resolve to the tonic. With regard to their indispensable contribution to a musical work, there is a certain *equality*, as all harmonic functions are necessary; yet there is also a certain *inequality* with respect to the specific place occupied by each tone or chord. Each must occupy its own place and remain in that place, never seeking to usurp another’s; thus a natural hierarchy within harmony is created.<sup>1</sup>

The social order is constructed in a similar way, and the organization of chord functions within music is a representation of this order. All men are equal because all are created in the image of God, who is the beginning and final end of all. However, all men are *not* equal with regard to their attributes—for example, some are more intelligent, while others are stronger—and thus it is necessary that they occupy different places and perform different functions within society. Social *inequality*, in this sense, is not only good and natural, but necessary: “Human society, as God established it, is composed of unequal elements, just as the members of the human body are unequal. To make them all equal would be impossible, and would result in the destruction of society itself.”<sup>2</sup> Truly beautiful music, then, must give testament to this natural order, which was established by God so that everything may be directed to its proper end.

The traditional social order was undermined by the so-called “Enlightenment,” with its false views on liberty and equality. As Christendom disintegrated, so did authentic Catholic

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1 The use of the tonal system developed primarily in the Baroque era of Western classical music throughout this article in no way must be seen to devalue the modal system, which is highly esteemed by the Church and used by her in her various chants, or the other systems that many traditional cultures throughout history have developed, which also reflect the hierarchical nature of harmony and the created order. However, for the sake of brevity and clarity, especially for readers less-acquainted with the fundamentals of music theory, examples will be kept as simple as possible.

2 Pius X, *Fin dalla prima*; cf. Leo XIII, *Quod apostolici muneris*.

culture, including the arts, which were subverted from their original purpose (to give glory to God and enrich human culture) to become a mere mode of subjective and individualistic expression. Liberalism, which seeks the destruction of the order created by God, rejects all notions of hierarchy, because it is fundamentally humanistic. Taken to the extreme, it results in communism, a system under which every person is supposedly made completely equal to each other, and of which atonality is a representation. By making all twelve tones completely equal to each other with no center, the system of functional harmony cannot exist, signifying an anti-Christian rejection of hierarchical order.

Music becomes insipid and uninteresting: without harmony progressing from stability to instability, culminating in the dominant resolving back to tonic, music loses all sense of direction and order. This is unacceptable, because the manner in which a well-crafted musical composition is written is a representation of man's journey toward his last end, namely, God Himself. A tonal piece usually begins with an extension of the tonic function, the most stable, signifying the original harmony of creation prior to the Fall. Chaos and disorder followed the sin of Adam, and the consequences of original sin are seen in a disruption of harmony. Man rebels against God, experiences conflict within society, and abuses his God-given dominion over the other creatures. These tensions in this fallen world are represented by the increasing tensions in harmony; the composition eventually reaches the dominant, which signifies the Last Judgment prior to the restoration (the tonic).

Atonality does not allow for this illustration of supernatural truths, because it is based upon a philosophy that posits man as his own end, and thus there is no progress toward eternal fulfillment. Atonal "music," which contains no harmonic direction, is stagnant. Just as its repudiation of hierarchical order is a representation of communism, its lack of motion and direction is the musical equivalent of nihilism, in which there is no last end to strive for. "God is dead," said Nietzsche, pointing out the fact that the so-called "Enlightenment" brought about the collapse of Christendom and true Catholic culture. Atonality sends the same message: God is dead and there is no need to strive for Him as man's last end, so there is nothing left to do than to abuse human liberty and overthrow all order.

Ironically, the liberal's constant striving to exalt so-called "liberty" over the authority of his Creator ultimately deprives man of his dignity—of which liberty is a consequence—altogether. It is necessary to keep in mind, first and foremost, why human dignity exists to begin with: man is created in the image of God and possesses intellect and will. By deliberately limiting his artistic creativity in musical composition to creating tone rows, man implicitly rejects his own freedom, consigning himself to following a totalitarian system. By removing the possibility of choice, the element of surprise, and the development of variety, man follows an artificial order built upon humanism, rather than the order established by God.

Music parallelizes virtue and the moral life, as demonstrated in 1 Samuel 16:14-23 with David's harmonious music and virtues casting evil out of the unmusical and morally discordant Saul. This concept has been forgotten in the modern era, in which music has been deprived of its meaning, as the Nietzschean mentality has infected every aspect of modern society, including the arts. Atonal "music" is not really music at all, but rather simply noise, because it has been deprived of the essential elements which help arrange pitches logically to create beauty, according to the ordinance of Providence.