

The history of tonality before Rameau: questions of methodology

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Despite its alluring clarity, periodisation prejudices our understanding of history. Periodisation is concerned with the division of the continuum of time into segments which are clearly distinguished from one another; the emphasis is on distinction rather than similarity of features. The division between the Renaissance (with a capital 'R') and the Baroque (with a capital 'B') is typical. Conventionally, the Baroque is characterised by monody, opera, thoroughbass and concertato style¹ in contrast to the complex polyphony, *formes fixes*, tenor-superius framework and imitative style of the Renaissance. While these may be fair enough generalisations of abstract styles, they do not tell the whole story. In choosing our list of period characteristics, we focus on those elements which differentiate one period from the next, rather than those that are held in common. Thus the *Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music* includes monody - but not imitative polyphony - in its list of baroque characteristics; monody is a characteristic that distinguishes the Baroque from the complex polyphony of the Renaissance, whereas imitative polyphony is not. The danger is to radicalise the differences between periods and suppress those features which overlap period divisions. The composers of the Baroque - or of any period - do not throw out all past techniques; rather, they build on and respond to these techniques.

Our understanding of the history of tonality is one of the casualties of periodisation. Many writers since Rameau have linked the beginnings of tonality with the advent of the baroque era. They argue that tonality begins with the functional harmony that is characteristic of the Baroque. By implication, the music of the Renaissance - because of its *linear* orientation - is not tonal.

The situation is exacerbated by those writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who have sought to explain the origins of tonality through the eternal laws of nature. Baroque triadic tonality, according to these writers, has a rational basis in nature's overtone

series; renaissance modes, however, do not. Because of the allegedly imperfect tonal system in the Renaissance, the division between the Baroque and the Renaissance is not only a pragmatic one but a qualitative one: baroque music is not only different from renaissance music, it is also superior to it.

The trend is reflected in the history of the definition of tonality. From the time of its coinage by French writers such as Choron (1810) and Castil-Blaze (1821), tonality was divided into *tonalité ancienne* which was based on the modes and *tonalité moderne* which was based on the major and minor scales.² While this terminology still acknowledges the existence of a pre-baroque tonality and even implies a link between the two types of tonality, the distinction between an older type of tonal system and a more modern type is already evident. By the beginning of this century tonality had come to refer only to the major/minor key system, thus severing the link with the types of tonal organisation that existed before the baroque era. Bukofzer is typical when he describes tonality as a 'gradated system of chordal relations between a tonal center (the tonic triad in major or minor) and the other triads (or seventh chords) of the diatonic scale,' which he later specifies as functional harmony. Tonality, according to Bukofzer 'emerges' in the Neapolitan opera and Bolognan instrumental music of the seventeenth century.³ Because renaissance music predates the emergence of Neapolitan functional harmony, it must - by definition - lack tonality.

In a welcome response, several musicologists from the 1950's on have sought to widen the definition of tonality, thus allowing for a more sympathetic comparison between baroque tonality and earlier models of tonal organisation. Edward Lowinsky in 1961, for example, broadens the definition of tonal music to include all music that has a 'tonally centered organization' (which he contrasts against the 'the tonally acentric organization' of atonality);⁴ Novack in 1977 defines tonality as the principle of establishing a

specific tone as *the* tone of the highest structural order to which all other tones are related;⁵ and, Norton in 1984 defines tonality as a 'decision made against the chaos of pitch', thus embracing all Western music in his definition of tonality.⁶ This response has not met with universal acceptance, however. Norman Cazden already in the 1950's observes this attitude, and argues strongly against it:

There seems no good purpose in stretching the term tonality to cover any and all methods of organizing tones in music, in hope of proving it a universal and eternal principle of the art. For if the definition of tonality be made so abstract and inclusive, it ceases to be a useful term, and some other name would still be needed for *the* tonal system.⁷

By altering a few words, however, Cazden's formula can be argued in reverse:

There seems no good purpose in *limiting* the term tonality to cover only the era of functional harmony, in hope of proving a particular principle of the art. For if the definition of tonality be made so narrow and *exclusive*, it ceases to be a useful term, and some other name would still be needed for all other forms of tonal organisation.

This second formula is more persuasive; for it is more serious to be exclusive than to be inclusive. If we choose to be inclusive, we can always resort to some further distinctions such as 'harmonic tonality' and 'polyphonic tonality'. If we choose to be exclusive, as Cazden would have us do, we ignore and rule out the forms of tonal order that do not follow the precise dictates of *the* tonal system.

Much work since 1960 has been put into bridging the gap between renaissance music and baroque music. The work has sparked off a further debate about the history of tonality - a debate in which the legacy of traditional periodisation persists. The new debate about tonality, which raged between 1961 and 1977 and then again in 1983-84, is the subject of the remainder of this paper.

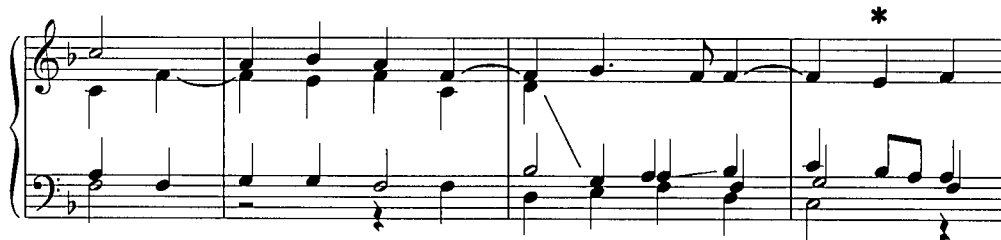
Lowinsky's *Tonality and Atonality in the Sixteenth Century*, written in 1961 provides the most complete statement of the new approach to the history of music. In order to trace the development of tonality from its embryonic beginnings through to the end of the sixteenth

century, Lowinsky scours renaissance music for elements that anticipate common-practice tonality. These elements include: perfect cadences, pedal basses, sequences, seventh-chords, repetition of chords, repetition of chord progressions, suspensions, tonal answers in fugues and so on. He concludes that 'horizontal tonality', as he describes it, can be traced back to the music of Dunstable and Dufay in the first half of the fifteenth century and 'vertical tonality' can be traced back to the secular music of the sixteenth century.⁸

The main argument against Lowinsky's approach is that the whole exercise is anachronistic: it is trying to find eighteenth-century characteristics in music that self-evidently was composed before there was any conscious knowledge of eighteenth-century techniques.⁹ Tonality - in the eighteenth-century sense - is not described in either theoretical or discant treatises, and very little in these treatises suggests that 'modern' tonality was a concept known and understood by sixteenth-century composers. It distorts history to search for and find modern (baroque) features in music of another era. Leeman Perkins asks 'whether any discussion of the music of the Renaissance that proceeds from the tenets and terminology of tonal [eighteenth-century] harmony does not inevitably run the risk of achieving its analytical goals only at the expense of distorting or obfuscating to some extent the patterns of history.'¹⁰

Even where passages in sixteenth-century music resemble modern tonal music, their context, and thus their function, are likely to be different. Thus, for example, it is anachronistic to identify dominant sevenths and 'five-six chords' in sixteenth-century music - as Lowinsky does - in order to demonstrate incipient tonality: in sixteenth-century theory vertical sonorities are not thought of in terms of eighteenth-century functional harmony. Renaissance theorists describe vertical sonorities in terms of intervallic combinations rather than functional chords.

Lowinsky provides several examples of dominant sevenths in Josquin's music, of which Example 1 is typical. Lowinsky describes the asterisked chord as a 'dominant seventh'.¹¹ The seventh, however, is more simply explained as a passing 'discord' between the bassus and altus;¹² this discord is no different from the many other



Example 1: Josquin des Prez, 'Benedicite omnia opera Domini' (text omitted).

types of passing discord in Josquin's music.¹³ According to Crocker and Perkins, it is inappropriate to find modern techniques in early music because of the vastly different contexts in which those techniques are employed.

The validity of the argument may be tested by drawing an analogy with Schoenberg's dodecaphony. If we were to write a history of dodecaphony in the same vein as Lowinsky's book, we would try to identify elements of serial writing in earlier music. One of these elements might be the tone row - the use of the twelve semitones without repetition. It would be possible, arguing *ad absurdum*, to find primitive dodecaphony in any piece that uses twelve semitones in succession, including pieces which use the humble chromatic scale. So, for instance, the Chopin Etude (Op.10 No 2) in Example 2 could be considered a brilliant example of 'incipient' dodecaphony, because - nearly a century before dodecaphony is codified by theory - not only does Chopin use a complete row, but

he derives from it the thematic material for the whole composition.

Interesting as it would be to rewrite the history books and have Chopin at the vanguard of serialism, the example is obviously absurd. It is absurd not because it falls outside the technical definition of a tone row, but because it can be more simply explained by tonal theory and practice contemporaneous to Chopin's etude. The chromatic scale reinforces the alternation of tonic and subdominant chords. A - the first note of the chromatic scale - is also the tonic. It is consistently repeated on the beat. Where a non-harmonic note occurs on the beat, it either serves as an accented passing note which is resolved (for example, bar 4, fourth beat) or as part of a melodic progression (for example, bar 1, where the broken slurs indicate the ascending progression). The chromaticism in this work serves to intensify the direction towards a tone rather than weaken it. Unlike twentieth-century dodecaphony, where the function of the tone row



Example 2: Chopin, Etude Op.10 No 2, bars 1-4.

is to avoid a tonal centre, the chromatic scale in the Chopin serves the opposite function: it establishes and reinforces a tonal centre.

In the spirit of this analogy, Example 3 provides another excellent example of dodecaphony in its infant stages. The fugue subject clearly aspires towards serialism, but is inhibited somewhat by tonal inflections - the tonic and dominant are repeated. But we get the 'pure' form of the row in the answer allowing for one brief interpolation between notes 7 and 8 and a register displacement on note 2. Its place in the history of dodecaphony could help us make decisions about performance. For instance, the alternative version marked 'ossia' in the Schirmer edition should be preferred to the original, because the row is more complete with the correction.

It is this sort of tone that some music historians have used when speaking about incipient tonality. Even making corrections to the music is not so far-fetched; *musica ficta* is an area that can all too easily be affected by tonal considerations.

Just as my accounts of the Chopin and Bach examples in serial terms are questionable to the point of absurdity, it is equally questionable to locate eighteenth-century chord progressions and cadences in sixteenth-century music and explain them in terms of the history of eighteenth-century tonality. Just as contemporaneous tonal theory provides a better explanation for Bach's and Chopin's chromaticism than twelve-tone theory, so, by analogy, sixteenth-century theory would provide a better explanation for cadences in Josquin's music than eighteenth-century tonal

theory. Crocker and Perkins have drawn attention to the need to analyse sixteenth-century music in sixteenth-century terms before indulging in speculative and potentially distorted analysis of the music in eighteenth-century terms.

Crocker accuses Lowinsky, and Perkins accuses the neo-Schenkerians of this sort of anachronistic approach. Peter Bergquist is the main apologist for the use of modern techniques and concepts in preference to those derived from renaissance theory.¹⁴ He initially acknowledges that it would be desirable to build a system of analysis based on sixteenth-century concepts but concludes that sixteenth-century theory only provides concepts with which to *categorise* the music, not the concepts with which to *analyse* the music. Bergquist therefore suggests that the best analytical system available should be used to analyse the music - in his case, Schenkerian voice-leading analysis.¹⁵ Bergquist, in the first instance, is correct: it is true that sixteenth-century theory provides few tools for analysis of harmony and harmonic progressions, and certainly there is a need for some sort of analysis that incorporates voice-leading, harmony and counterpoint. But at another level, Bergquist's argument is faulty. It does not follow that because a body of theory does not provide adequate tools for analysis, it is then justifiable to turn to systems that are based on anachronistic concepts. Conventional Schenkerian analysis, for example, is riddled with concepts that are anachronistic when applied to renaissance music: bass arpeggiation, fundamental line and linear

Example 3: J.S. Bach, *Wohltemperiertes Klavier*, Book 1, Fugue XXIV, bars 1-6 (Schirmer edition, New York, 1924).

progressions are all concepts which are rooted in 'common-practice' tonality in Schenker's *Der Freie Satz*. Bergquist ignores the possibility of systems of analysis that may be built on sixteenth-century theory and secondly, does not demonstrate how Schenkerian analysis ties in with sixteenth-century theory. The problem does not lie with voice-leading analysis, *per se*, but rather with its uncompromising application to early music.

Don Randel offers a middle path: although he acknowledges the dangers of anachronism, Randel argues that the scope of historical inquiry may be restricted through an over-zealous use of the anachronism argument.¹⁶ If a cadence in the sixteenth century is identical to a cadence in the eighteenth century, then that, according to Randel, is a fact that should not be ignored, even if that cadence happens to have been composed successively rather than simultaneously, or if that cadence has been composed with the tenor as the structural voice rather than the bass.¹⁷ Randel calls a spade a spade. There may be problems with the name given to a cadence, but this is a question of language rather than identity. The two cadences are identical and should be recognised as such. Randel acknowledges the differences of meaning from one cadence to the next, but maintains the link between the two.

To illustrate the value of Randel's point, I return to the analogy from dodecaphony (refer to Examples 2 and 3 above). If what Randel says is true, there should still be something to be gained in drawing a link between a row in the twentieth century and the chromatic melodies of the Bach and Chopin examples, even if the function of the chromaticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is different from that of the twentieth century. An argument for the link could be stated as follows: the Bach and Chopin examples represent an earlier stage of chromaticism that precedes the systematic dodecaphony of Schoenberg. At the simplest level, the opening of the harmonic space to allow the use of all twelve semitones in a variety of circumstances during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is a *precondition* for the development of serialism in the twentieth century. Naturally, the degree to which Bach's fugue and Chopin's etude are pivotal in or indicative of the expansion of harmonic space could only be judged after an

extensive study of the chromaticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But by drawing the link between similar figures of different times, the historian may receive valuable insights into the preconditions - rather than 'prophetic' anticipations - of a historical event or idea.

Neither side of the debate has followed Randel's lead. Rather, the issue of anachronism has proved to be the stumbling block in the debate. Crocker, Perkins and Norton seem reluctant to consider this middle path presumably because it still means, in practice, that renaissance music is being scoured for the concepts that are important in the classical and romantic periods, rather than *vice versa*. It is still being treated as a fore-runner, rather than on its own terms. Those terms, for Crocker, Perkins and Norton, are found in sixteenth-century theory. On the other side, Novack has been more sensitive to historicity, but still explains the meaning of medieval and renaissance music in the same way as he explains the meaning of classical music.¹⁸ Indeed, he sees this as one of the virtues of Schenkerian analysis: the one system can be used to explain and compare music from all periods.¹⁹ Dogmatism is evident on both sides: Crocker's followers vigorously attack anything that even sniffs of modernism and the neo-Schenkerians, to various extents, have been uncompromising in their application and interpretation of voice-leading techniques.

Even though there are few contemporary musicologists who would still explicitly label music before 1600 as 'primitive' and deny its quality, the legacy of the split between baroque (modern) and renaissance (old) music still persists. The post-1960 debate about tonality, in particular, suffers from the traditional division between renaissance and baroque. Both sides have been affected. The intent of Lowinsky and later the neo-Schenkerians has been to break down the divide between baroque and renaissance: they attempt to find 'modern' characteristics in music before 1600. But they have only been successful in shifting the divide between new and old. Lowinsky shifts the divide to the fifteenth century and Salzer to the twelfth century. The divide may be more subtle, but is still as damning for the music on the wrong side

of the divide. Lowinsky, for example, despite pushing the origins of tonality back to the fifteenth century, still describes pre-tonal cadential patterns as 'rather monotonous' and 'primitive'.²⁰ This approach, as Treitler has shown, perpetuates the myth that 'last' is 'best'.²¹

The other side of the debate is more discriminating in its approach to history, but still suffers the legacy of periodisation. The legacy expresses itself in this side's over-reaction to traditional views. In their concern to avoid the trappings of traditional views, these writers restrict their own range of observation. Their caution - often justified - regarding the search for modern-day concepts in early music limits the range of observations that can be made about the development and continuity of concepts. The result is that they may miss the connection between a progression of the eighteenth century and the same progression (described differently) in the fifteenth century. The function of both progressions may be different, but this does not mean that they are not related to each other.

In their revisionist zeal to demonstrate the fruitlessness of searching for prophetic anticipations, Crocker, Perkins, Treitler and Norton have stressed the differences in ideology and function between one period and another. One of the effects has been to compound the differences, distinctions and divisions between periods, suppressing yet further the connections between them.

Both sides in the end are embroiled in the convenient divisions they have inherited. Both sides emphasise discontinuity at the expense of continuity. By continuing to embrace periodisation, they - and we - risk losing history's thread.



¹ These are the characteristics listed under 'Baroque,' in the *Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music*, 1978 ed.

² Bryan Simms, 'Choron, Fétis, and the Theory of Tonality,' *Journal of Music Theory*, 19 (1975), 119.

³ Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era: From Monteverdi to Bach* (New York: Norton, 1947), pp. 219-20.

⁴ Edward E. Lowinsky, *Tonality and Atonality in Sixteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), p. xii.

⁵ Saul A. Novack, 'The Significance of the Phrygian Mode in the History of Tonality,' *Miscellanea Musicologica*, 9 (1977), 82.

⁶ Richard Norton, *Tonality in Western Culture: A Critical and Historical Perspective* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984), p.4.

⁷ Norman Cazden, 'Tonal Function and Sonority in the Study of Harmony,' *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 2 (1954), 21.

⁸ Lowinsky, pp. 75-76.

⁹ Richard L. Crocker, rev. of *Tonality and Atonality in Sixteenth-Century Music*, by Edward E. Lowinsky, *Journal of Music Theory*, 6 (1962), 142-53; and Leeman L. Perkins, 'Mode and Structure in the Masses of Josquin,' *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 26 (1973), 189-239.

¹⁰ Perkins, p. 192.

¹¹ Lowinsky, p. 21.

¹² The seventh is called a 'discord' or dissonance throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. See, for example, Johannes Tinctoris, *The Art of Counterpoint (Liber de Arte Contrapuncti)*, trans. and ed. Albert Seay, *Musicological Studies and Documents*, No. 5 (n.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1961), p. 89.

¹³ Crocker, pp. 148-49. Crocker lists nine 'chords' from Lowinsky's own examples which we would have no hesitation in calling passing dissonances. Crocker's point is that the sevenths should be interpreted no differently.

¹⁴ Peter Bergquist, 'Mode and Polyphony around 1500,' in *The Music Forum*, ed. William J. Mitchell and Felix Salzer, I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 99-161.

¹⁵ Bergquist, pp. 122, 124 and 159. Salzer makes the same point in 'Tonality in Early Medieval Polyphony: Towards a History of Tonality,' in *The Music Forum*, ed. William J. Mitchell and Felix Salzer, I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 35-36.

¹⁶ Don M. Randel, 'Emerging Triadic Tonality in the Fifteenth Century,' *The Musical Quarterly*, 57 (1971), 73-86.

¹⁷ Randel, pp. 80-81.

¹⁸ See, for example, Saul Novack, 'The Analysis of Pre-Baroque Music,' in *Aspects of Schenkerian Theory*, ed. David Beach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 113-33.

¹⁹ Novack, 'Analysis,' p. 133.

²⁰ Lowinsky, pp. 4-5 and p. 93, fn. 10.

²¹ Leo Treitler, 'On Historical Criticism,' *The Musical Quarterly*, 53 (1967), 205.