Towards a definition of tonality

FRANCIS ROUTH

BY ANY STANDARDS this is an important book*. It deals with that issue which is central to twentieth century music, namely tonality, and deals with it in a fresh and original way. Moreover it is not yet another academic history; nor is it yet another collection of criticism of the 'this is what I think' variety — for which relief much thanks.

Samson's approach is a bold one, as he sets out on his voyage of aesthetic discovery; and boldness, as it turns out, is exactly what is called for in this century of conflict and contradiction. But the book's argument is also in places extremely tough and close-knit, though always logical. He seems to be temperamentally sympathetic to those all-too-few musician-writers of our age who have adopted an equally radical approach to twentieth century music; Ernö Lendvai is one, whose study of Bartók's style, particularly as far as tonality is concerned, is as stimulating and exciting a piece of original research as any that has appeared on this most complex, and least understood, of recent composers. Samson finds Lendvai's work 'fascinating and provocative', and proceeds to prove his point by putting it to positive use in an analysis of certain aspects of Bartók's second Violin Sonata.

Of course, as anyone must find who sets out to investigate our century's music, the question of the definition of tonality must be faced sooner or later. Indeed it is perhaps more important to give a definition, even an unsatisfactory one, than to leave the reader uncertain. Samson gives his first definition early in the book (page 2):

> The tonal principle may be expressed as the requirement that all the events in a musical group (usually a complete work) should be coordinated by, and expressed in relation to, a central point of reference. The language of classical tonality, a specific expression of the principle . . .

As any definition is bound to be, this is both suggestive and hotly debatable. Tonality, according to Samson, appears to be a principle; it appears to be open to more than one expression. So we are prepared for what is to come. Later a chapter is devoted to the discussion of other terms, such as atonality, extended tonality, indirect tonality. The pace becomes hotter, the ice thinner. Samson recognises that the term 'tonality' is used in two senses. Indeed it is; and in more than two. One of the interesting features, I think, of music in this century is that, whereas in previous periods the theorising, the verbal defining of music's nature, was left to specialists in this field, such as Fétis, Helmholz, Riemann, and others (listed by Samson), in our day the original thought has been done by the composers themselves — Debussy, Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky; Samson would add Scriabin, Busoni and Szymanowski, and I shall not gainsay him.

Quite plainly, there was no need for the composers of the classical or romantic periods to devote their attention to the consideration of theoretical matters, since the diatonic system was universally acceptable. They had more important things to do; theory could be left to the theorists. It was only when the ground shifted and the universal acceptance of music's language was questioned, that the situation altered markedly, and theorising about music's nature became very much the composer's concern.

Now it is immediately noticeable that of these seven composers just mentioned, only one springs from the Austro-German tradition. It is also a remarkable fact that Schoenberg's view of tonality — which was to equate it with the major/minor keys of the diatonic system — was also the least flexible, the most

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tradition-bound. The other six composers all saw the major/minor key system as simply one instance of the working of tonality, which is, in its full concept, something altogether bigger and more comprehensive than anyone then (1900–1920) realised. Just how much bigger was glimpsed by Busoni in his *Sketch of a new Aesthetic of Music*, which proved prophetic.

In a key passage early in the book, Samson refers to the 'widening tonal spectrum'. This, too, is a particularly useful and productive phrase, containing within it the seed of what was to come about in the music of Bartók and Stravinsky—particularly in the latter's serial phase; also, to some extent, of Schoenberg. The problem of showing how the concept of tonality evolved in the crucial years 1900–1920 hinges on the fact that each of the composers mentioned had a different view of it, according to the tradition from which he sprang. Of course the word provides a happy hunting-ground for the pedant, the academic, the professional hair-splitter who likes to see ideas neatly parcelled and labelled; but in this case, as with other fundamental concepts which are part technical, part physical, and part abstract, a satisfactory verbal, dialectical definition invariably eludes those who attempt it; including Samson, one must admit. The point at issue here is the evolution and growth of a living art-language. Tonality is that dimension which lies at the root of most twentieth century developments; it is moreover the only musical element common to both time and space.

Clearly the greatest precision in the use of the term is essential if we are to be guided through the tangled web of tonal developments and experiments, part genuine and part phoney, that mark this century's music. If a total definition cannot be achieved, at least we must be reasonably clear of the way in which the word is being used for a particular chapter, or argument. Occasionally it seems, quite understandably, that Samson is not entirely clear which alternative meaning he implies. For instance: 'Yet even in the most harmonically intractable of Szymanowski's middle-period works . . . tonal thinking exerts its influence . . .'. Are we to understand by this that Szymanowski uses keys, however abstrusely; if so, why not say so? Or are we to interpret 'tonal' in a wider sense; if so, again why not say so? A little later we read: 'The new resources made available by the loss of tonality . . .'. At first sight this seems unbelievable and illogical; what has happened to the 'widening tonal spectrum' that we heard about earlier? Has it all been lost? Then we realise that at this point Samson is referring to Schoenberg, so the word in this context can be taken to mean simply 'keys'. In the case of some composers, other than Schoenberg and the Viennese School, to refer to 'the loss of the major/minor key system' is correct; to refer to 'the loss of tonality' is a travesty of the truth. Hence the need for great exactness in the use of terms.

On occasions, it seems, Samson confuses even himself. For instance, straying well outside his limit of 1920, he applies the term 'tonal', apparently in its traditional meaning, to part of Stockhausen's *Kontrapunkte*, with marvellously inappropriate results. But such examples are exceptional, and the book in its broad structure has a compelling logic about it. First we are shown the work of those composers whose music represents an extension of the classical nineteenth century diatonic system; then we are shown something of the nature of these extensions; finally we are given the end-product: atonality.

Two points must be made here. The first is that in an all-inclusive study such as this, which covers composers other than the Viennese School, (and that is the book's greatest strength), it should be specified beyond ambiguity in what sense the term 'atonality' is being used. The denial of tonality is merely the obverse of its affirmation; one does not deny something which is not there. Now it is probably impossible, at this late stage, to do away with a word which everyone seems to agree needs to be done away with. It has been used for so long to describe specifically the pre-twelve note music of Schoenberg and the Viennese, that we are stuck with it. It is therefore doubly important that it should be clearly stated that, when applied to this School, the term means doing away with keys, and all reference to keys; that is all. It does not mean doing away with tonality, which was, and is, a wider concept than the Viennese realised.

The second point is that the goal towards which the book's argument leads, namely the 'achievement' (if that is putting it correctly) of atonality, is somewhat belied by the history of music itself. Atonality was not so much a goal to be aimed at, as a phase through which some (by no means all) composers passed, largely as a result of random, fortuitous experiment. Samson aptly calls his book *Music in Transition* and the essential quality of atonality was its transitoriness. One says 'was' and not 'is', since very few works of this phase have retained any interest, and then usually for some other reason than their atonality. *Pierrot Lunaire* is the chief exception, and in that case one can notice a number of other features in it, notably its structure, and the introduction of *sprechstimme*. Atonality was a phase which could not last. Its solution, and resolution, was the twelve note technique, which was the means invented by Schoenberg to enable the composer to construct large forms, and to solve those structural problems inbuilt in atonal music.

It was by no means necessarily the case that music which looked beyond the confines of the diatonic system was atonal — whatever that word means. In Schoenberg's case, we ascribe to him 'atonality'; but in the light of other discoveries about tonality (whose implication needs to be carefully clarified) by such composers as Bartók and Stravinsky, we can say that their style, far from representing an abandonment or a loss of tonality, was in fact an enlargement and an enrichment of its use. Stravinsky was a milliion miles away from 'atonality', which for him represented chaos. His fullest exploration of the tonal spectrum did not come until his last, serial, phase, and therefore lies well outside the limit of this book; but Samson gives a misleading impression when he says: '. . . he seemed to be drawing close to atonality in *Le Roi des Etoiles* and *The Rite of Spring*'.

One or two other small errors of fact mar this section on Stravinsky. It is not the case that 'he turned away from an overtly nationalist style shortly after his voluntary exile from Russia following the revolution'. He wrote *Mavra* in 1921/22, which is about as 'overtly nationalist' (whatever that means) as he could make it. Nor am I sure that his exile was 'voluntary'. It was caused by the outbreak of war, and happened in 1914, not after the revolution. Moreover the *Serenade in A* was not written in 1923; but in 1925, following an American tour.

But such small errors of fact can be put right, whereas the underlying theme of the book is much more deep-rooted; and it is this which gives Samson's work its excellence and far-reaching importance.