

“WHEN I COMPOSE, I TRY TO FORGET ALL THEORIES...”. THOUGHTS ON PRESENTING ARNOLD SCHOENBERG’S TWELVE-TONE METHOD TO A WIDER AUDIENCE

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SUMMARY. This article describes the process of creating an exhibition and publication on Arnold Schönberg's twelve-tone method and discusses the challenges of presenting Schönberg's complex compositional techniques to a wide audience, balancing biographical information with musical analysis. The exhibition at the Arnold Schönberg Center featured a chronological narrative of the method's development, showcasing manuscripts, tools like Schönberg's twelve-tone discs, and multimedia content. The accompanying book aimed to be accessible to various readers, including a simplified introduction to the method, a historical overview, a glossary, Schönberg's lecture on the method, and a catalogue of 50 related objects. The author reflects on the difficulties of explaining complex musical concepts to diverse audiences, acknowledging the ongoing challenge of accessible music education.

Keywords: Arnold Schönberg, Twelve-tone method, Exhibition, Composition, Music history

Anniversaries are an excellent way of attracting attention to a topic. While 2024 was the year to celebrate Arnold Schönberg's 150th birthday, 2021 offered the opportunity to honor the 100th anniversary of the twelve-tone method. In July 1921, Schönberg composed a piece, in which a twelve-tone series is used for the first time as the foundation for all the tone constellations of an approximately one-minute composition. Schönberg's famous dictum that he had found something that would ensure the dominance of German music for the next 100 years dates from this period. In late 2019, the Arnold Schönberg Center, at that time under its director Angelika Möser, decided for an exhibition and a publication on the topic, to be realized by the

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author of this article. Aiming for the opening in March 2021, I had to start work on the accompanying publication immediately and began writing a kind of Schönberg biography along the lines of the twelve-tone method. Although the twelve-tone method may well be considered a focal point in Schönberg's development, this broad approach lacked a clear frame of reference. While parts of the evolution of dodecaphony can be told along a continuous storyline that shows correlations between live events, ideology and music, in later times, compositional practice and personal history become more and more independent. Writing about music in connection with biography developed more and more towards writing a biography with special attention to selected musical works. Besides questions of meaningfulness, this task was far too big to fulfil in the time available. The project might have ended in disaster.

In March 2020, the first Austrian lockdown due to the pandemic occurred, followed by two more. It was to be feared that a comprehensive publication, including the complex requirements of an exhibition, would hardly be feasible this year – even the opening of the show in 2021 seemed uncertain. At the Arnold Schönberg Center, the decision was therefore made to postpone the entire project until 2023. In addition to the considerably longer planning time, there were also substantive reasons for this date. While 2021 was celebrated in some social media posts, concerts and scholarly projects as the year of the twelve-tone method, this dating is legitimate as well problematic. From a compositional point of view, the piece created in Traunkirchen is a twelve-tone composition with a limited number of row variants. At the time, Schönberg explicitly saw it as an “attempt at a formal principle for composing with twelve tones” and emphasized its experimental nature.² It was only after an experimental period of almost two years that the twelve-tone method was finally formulated in a valid compositional way in the *Wind Quintet*, op. 26, with the use of all eleven possible transpositions of the basic form. Although the further development of the method did not come to a standstill afterwards, the foundations for a viable system for the future were laid in 1923. In this respect, the year of publication, as well as the opening date of the exhibition in 2023, was already a statement, one aspect of the message.

April saw the publication of the book *Arnold Schönberg and Composition with Twelve Tones* (Vienna 2023) as well as the opening of the exhibition *Composition with Twelve Tones. Schönberg's Reorganization of Music* (March

² Eybl, Martin: “Frühe Dokumente zur Entstehung der Zwölftonkomposition aus dem Nachlass Alban Bergs: philologische Beobachtungen.” (*Early documents on the genesis of the twelve-tone composition from Alban Berg's estate: philological observations*) In *Arbeit an Musik: Reinhard Kapp zum 70. Geburtstag* (2017) (*Working on music: Reinhard Kapp on his 70th birthday*), pp. 239–267, here p. 253 The composer was aware of the significance of his discovery but had no idea what systematic consequences it would have.

15 – December 29, 2023). The aim of both was, on the one hand, to show that the twelve-tone method was not a spontaneous invention, but a lengthy development in which numerous factors, biographical, aesthetical, ideological, as well as genuinely music-related, came together; on the other hand, to show the many possibilities that Schoenberg's twelve-tone method offers beyond the prejudice of celebrealty. And finally, not to overestimate the relevance of the method, to relegate its significance to the sidelines, true to the spirit of its inventor, who simply regarded it "as a tool of composition."³

Figure 1



**Arnold Schönberg Center, exhibition space.
Photograph © Hertha Hurnaus**

The exhibition space of the Arnold Schönberg Center is centered around a table that takes up almost the whole room and on which there are boxes of three different sizes that can be filled in different ways. The idea of the architect Jochen Koppensteiner was to create a situation comparable to visiting an archive. As with an archive table, visitors should be able to get close to the objects, and also sit if they wish, while an accompanying brochure provides detailed information. Four stations are fixed by permanently installed iPads, on which multimedia content can be shown that usually corresponds to the objects.

³ Schönberg, Arnold: "Schoenberg's Tone-Rows." In: *Style and Idea*, ed. by Leonard Stein. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1984, pp. 213–214, here p. 213.

The drawings on the wall are self-portraits that chronologically accompany the development of the twelve-tone method. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the colorful drawings in the middle were done in 1922, a rather challenging period in the development of the method.

Figure 2



**Selfportraits CR28, 29, 27. Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien.
Photograph © Hertha Hurnaus (excerpt)**

The table situation with two opposite sides suggests a division of the exhibition into two parts. Taking this into account, the first part unfolded as a linear narrative of the genesis of Schönberg's twelve-tone method up to 1923, while the second part presented selected twelve-tone works chronologically, but in a selection that was more in the manner of an anthology. The narrative of the first part is based on Schönberg's own idea of the emergence of the twelve-tone method in the sense of an organic development from the gradual expansion of major/minor tonality via free atonality to the search for a new order of the chromatic scale. In parallel, Schönberg's idea of the supremacy of German music was the common thread running through the selection of objects and their presentation. In support of both approaches, the very first object, however, departed from the chronological narrative: Schönberg's copy of Johann Sebastian Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, opened at the last fugue from Part 1 with entries by Schönberg dating back to 1950.

Figure 3



Johann Sebastian Bach: The Well-Tempered Clavier Book 1. Fugue No. 24 in B minor, BWV 869. Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien (Book B21)

"Is this the first composition with 12 tones?" is written in green crayon at the top left. At first, the answer is a simple "no"; the major/minor tonal structure of the piece clearly identifies the chromaticism as harmonic tension, which adds more or less by chance to the twelve-tone total. What is much more interesting is why Schönberg poses this question to a work by Johann Sebastian Bach of all composers. Because after all, twelve-tone constellations can easily be found in Mozart, Liszt, Richard Strauss and probably also Gesualdo. Besides purely musical aspects, the reason lies probably in Bach being considered since his early biographer Johann Nikolaus Forkel in 1802 as "the very first of all German and foreign composers",⁴ being such substantial for a forthcoming idea of dominance of German music. While walking along the right-hand side of the table, visitors repeatedly encountered fragments of an explanation: newspaper clippings and notes from wartime that reveal Schönberg's cultural German nationalism;⁵ a letter to Alma Mahler from July 1921 that contains the famous quote about dominance of German music, but also reflects on his situation as a Jew, threatened by aggressive anti-Semitism;⁶ finally, the Suite for Piano op. 25, which makes references to Bach's piano works with movement titles such as Gavotte, Musette or Gigue, and realizes their structural properties by means of the new compositional method; and the Wind Quintet op. 26, which implicitly transfers Ludwig van Beethoven's compositional practice, an archetype of the German musical tradition in the 19th century, into the modern age.

⁴ Forkel, Johann Nikolaus. *Ueber Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke*, Hoffmeister & Kühnel, Leipzig 1802, p. vii.

⁵ Schönberg, Arnold. *Meine Kriegspsychose und die der anderen* (1914) (ASSV 5.3.5.1.)

⁶ Arnold Schönberg to Alma Mahler, 26 July 1921 (<https://repo.schoenberg.at/urn:nbn:at:at-asc-B060799>).

Figure 4**Twelve-Tonde Discs (Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien [MS26])**

For this piece, in addition to an early manuscript, a small tool was shown which is both appealing to look at and instructive in understanding how dodecaphony works. It is a set of discs, handmade by Schönberg, labelled with the notes of the chromatic scale and numbers indicating the position of the respective note within the twelve-tone row. By turning the middle disc, the order numbers are shifted in relation to the pitches: A transposition is made in this way. In the quintet, these different transpositions ultimately serve to replace the formal function of the key change, i.e. the tonic/dominant tension that characterizes the sonata movement.

In the course of this story, quite demanding musical concepts are discussed. The Arnold Schönberg Center has a wide range of visitors, most of whom are culturally educated but lack more in-depth musical knowledge. Efforts have been undertaken to make aspects of composition visually comprehensible through animated scores. Two rather simple videos, for example, were related to the prehistory of the twelve-tone method, namely Liszt's *Faust Symphony* and Schoenberg's *Chamber Symphony*, op. 9. In the opening theme of the *Faust Symphony*, all twelve tones of the chromatic scale come together in a very small space, as they do in the Bach example. The example from the *Chamber Symphony* op. 9 refers to the famous chords of fourths, which characterize

the work. It’s a common fact that the layering of fourths automatically touches on all twelve tones of the chromatic scale.⁷

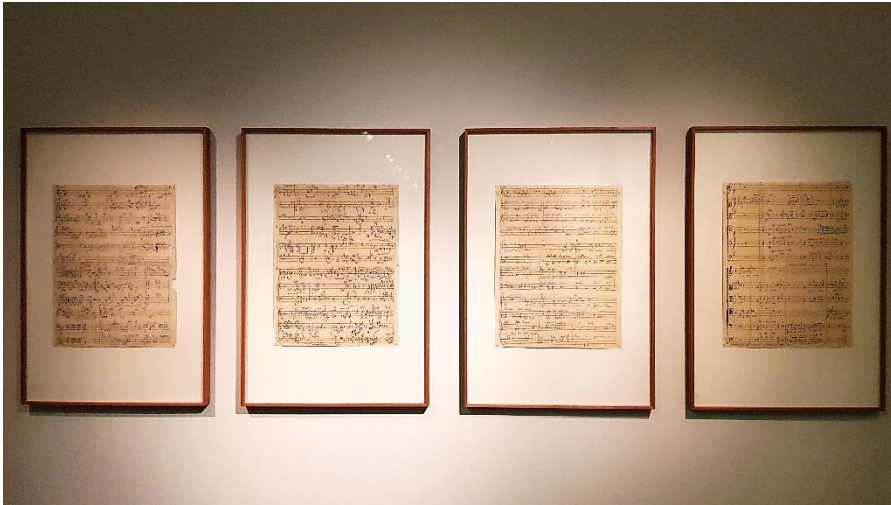
The aim here was not to assert early precursors to the twelve-tone method in these works, but to show that twelve-tone constellations already existed in music for various reasons – in other words that the idea of full chromaticism was already present. Such phenomena probably played little role in the development of the method. More important for Schönberg in particular was the exploration of contrapuntal compositional techniques, canons and the intellectual examination of these aspects at the time the twelve-tone method was created – and, of course, the study of Johann Sebastian Bach’s œuvre. How the formal characteristics of a stylized Baroque dance can be rethought with a contemporary compositional technique beyond tonality is shown particularly clearly in the *Musette* from the *English Suite* No. 6. The uninterrupted repetition of the tonic, which is characteristic of this dance form, cannot be realized in the twelve-tone method due to the lack of a tonic reference. Schönberg therefore decides to use the 3rd note of the original form of the row *g* as the root note and let it wander through the voices like an unsteady organ point.⁸

The second part of the exhibition was eclectic in nature and was intended to demonstrate the variety of genres with which Schönberg dealt in the context of twelve-tone composition and the consequences that the method had for the traditional forms. The visual effect was not least at the forefront of the choice of objects. The decision to show Schönberg’s self-made twelve-tone dice was ambivalent. While they are surprising and attractive as an object, they all too easily give the impression that twelve-tone rows are designed at random. However, the experimental nature of such objects becomes apparent in the context of various equally self-made booklets in which the consequences of different combinations of chromatic scales are explored. In this way, the right context may even dispel some myths. The same is true for an object that can easily mislead the educated observer in particular. It belongs to Schönberg’s late, tonal *Variations on a Recitative for Organ*, op. 40. Anyone who is a little familiar with twelve-tone method will initially identify this sheet as a kind of row table without knowing the context. In fact, it is a sketch for Variation No. 8, which shows how Schönberg’s tonal thinking changed under the premises of the twelve-tone method - namely with regard to a new system for exploring tonal possibilities.⁹

⁷ Full video: <https://youtu.be/yfeTC34IzS0?si=K7hliMYwEoi6bgQk> (accessed 10.01.2025); many examples are part of the online exhibition, which is still available on the website of the Arnold Schönberg Center (<https://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/composition-with-12tones-online>, accessed 10.01.2025).

⁸ Full video: <https://youtu.be/Ss2wcpNCEPs?si=GIWvuCqqXD9ruj5U> (accessed 10.01.2025).

⁹ Forr illustrations see Feß, Eike. *Arnold Schönberg and Composition with Twelve Tones*, edition text + kritik, Wien, 2023, pp. 172f., 190f.

Figure 5

Autograph Scores of Phantasy op. 47, String Trio op. 45, Dreimal tausend Jahre op. 50A, Psalm 130 op. 50B (Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien)

Visitors were almost magically drawn to Schönberg's late scores, not least from a visual point of view. Due to a nervous eye condition, the composer had to resort to large-format paper from around 1944 onwards, which significantly altered his writing. These sheets had to be mounted on the wall like pictures, as they did not fit into the boxes due to their format. The corresponding works, such as the String Trio or the late Psalms op. 50, could hardly be neglected within the exhibition. Due to the way they were hung, these musical notations had an unexpected effect that was more akin to graphics than musical scores.

As far as the accompanying videos for this part of the exhibition are concerned, an attempt was made to make different compositional processes in the twelve-tone method visually tangible. While the numbers from one to twelve were occasionally used in the first part, this approach now seemed pointless in view of the complex compositional constellations: Nobody actually hears the progression of the row in a twelve-tone work. What can perhaps still be perceived, however, is the alternation between row derivations, the disposition of which fulfills an essential structural function in the works. Colors were used to illustrate the distribution of the rows in the musical space and thus perhaps also demonstrate how versatile Schönberg's approach actually was. In the fourth piece from Four Pieces for Mixed Choir op. 274,

the row derivations used are first introduced in an instrumental prelude. This gives the listener an introduction to the sound world, which is exposed by the choir in the following bars. This alternation of row forms can hardly be followed in passages from *Moses and Aron*. The visualization using colors here makes it clear how flexibly Schönberg arranged different row derivations in order to achieve the desired tonal result. At the beginning of the *Dance around the Golden Calf*, this even results in a melody and accompaniment that oscillate between pentatonic and church modes.¹⁰

The book accompanying the exhibition¹¹ was conceived less as a catalogue than as a guide to the twelve-tone method for different audiences. It starts with an introduction to the basic technical characteristics of the method, condensed into three pages. It had to be accepted that the musical examples alone might put off some potential readers who are more interested in cultural history. The systematic labeling with colored numbers, which not only indicates the position of the respective notes within the row, but also visually demonstrates the principle of working with different row derivations, was intended to compensate for this. In contrast to the often-common designation of note heads with numbers, the graphically uniform distribution corresponding to different parts can at least convey an idea of the musical structure.

The historical chapter tells the story of the genesis of the twelve-tone method, analogous to the exhibition, with a focus on the following aspects: Expansion of chromaticism, the search for organizing criteria for the free atonal space and Schönberg's identification with the German musical tradition. In discussions with colleagues, there was justified criticism of the overly linear presentation, a kind of teleology in Schönberg's sense. This includes the suggestive presentation of rather random twelve-tone constellations at the beginning of the last movement of the 2nd String Quartet op. 10 or the adoption of arguments that originate from Schönberg himself or his circle, for example the three-tone motif from the *Passacaglia in Pierrot lunaire* op. 21, as an early form of composition with a basic shape, the *Grundgestalt*. Purely academic work would undoubtedly have required more differentiation and critical scrutiny here. However, it should not be forgotten that this is a kind of reader for the purpose of conveying Schönberg's music. The reason why Schönberg's pupil Erwin Stein used the *Pierrot* example in his well-known essay "New formal principles", published in 1924 in *Musikblätter des Anbruch*,¹² is of course due to the fact that it is catchy and plausible.

¹⁰ Full videos: <https://youtu.be/bIFeNe4AXp4?si=mLkwFjt3lEdXKfK> (op. 27/4);
<https://youtu.be/7hi73pnaDFk> (*Moses and Aron*) (accessed 10.01.2025).

¹¹ Feß: *Arnold Schönberg and Composition with Twelve Tones*, see fn. 8.

¹² Stein, Erwin. "Neue Formprinzipien." (*New Formal Principles*) In *Musikblätter des Anbruch* 6/7–8 (08.1924), pp. 286–303.

The idea for the glossary grew out of the author's own wishes in the early days of research on the twelve-tone method. In the English-speaking world, Ethan Haimo's *Schoenberg's Serial Odyssey*¹³ provides a valuable introduction to technical issues, even for beginners, and was an indispensable source for this book. However, in German, there are many detailed observations from a scholarly perspective, but introductions often only touch the surface of compositional procedures. An accessible explanation of basic terms such as Grundgestalt, Complementarity or the twelve-tone matrix, as well as a concise overview of basic compositional practices seemed to be a desideratum. It goes without saying that a process such as isomorphic partitioning can hardly be adequately presented to a lay audience. This chapter is therefore expressly aimed at students or scholars.

In order to give Schönberg himself a chance to speak, his first comprehensive lecture on the twelve-tone method, held in Princeton in 1934, has been reproduced in full. This is an early version of the much better-known, later text from the collection *Style and Idea*.¹⁴ In this version, Schönberg is closer to compositional practice and largely dispenses with a philosophical-aesthetic classification of his method. The text is characterized by an immediacy that the later version lacks. Schönberg, who had emigrated to the USA in 1933, initially formulated the lecture in German in view of his rudimentary knowledge of English, but switched directly to the foreign language from around the last third. While the English version was already published in 2016 by Daniel Jenkins¹⁵ in his collection "Schoenberg's Program Notes and Musical Analyses", the German text, including a translation of the English-language sections, was published here for the first time.¹⁶ The music examples are based on Schoenberg's sketches, which were photographed for the lecture and projected onto glass plates. These plates are preserved in the Center's archive and were digitized and published for the first time.

At 100 pages, the chapter "Twelve-tone method in 50 objects" is the most extensive part of the book. One could speak of a catalog section here: 50 pictures that are directly or indirectly related to the twelve-tone method are described on the opposite page. These are not only music manuscripts. The connections between illustration and twelve-tone-context can also be

¹³ Haimo, Ethan. *Schoenberg's serial odyssey: the evolution of his twelve-tone method, 1914-1928*, Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1990.

¹⁴ Schönberg, Arnold. "Composition with Twelve Tones (1) (1941)." In: *Style and Idea*, see fn. 2, pp. 214–249.

¹⁵ Schönberg, Arnold. "Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Only Related to One Another, 1935," In: *Schoenberg's program notes and musical analyses*, ed. by Daniel J. Jenkins, Oxford University Press, New York 2016, pp. 248–278 (Schoenberg in Words 5).

¹⁶ There is still an early edition by Claudio Spies, however, for unclear reasons this one only covers the handwritten part; Spies, Claudio. "Vortrag / 12 T K / Princeton." In *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 13/1 (1974), pp. 58–136.

associative, as in a photograph of Schönberg with his grandson Arnold, to whom the Wind Quintet op. 26 is dedicated; or as in a record cover for the so-called Genesis Suite, a joint composition by seven American based composers, in which Schönberg participated with his Prelude op. 44. By explaining music manuscripts, detailed analyses were avoided. Musical issues had to be derived from other aspects. Sketches for the String Quartet op. 37 on hotel stationery, for example, clearly show how Schönberg proceeded when creating a twelve-tone work: at the beginning were melodic ideas, which were spontaneously put on paper, even before the twelve-tone row was formulated.

Figure 6



String Quartet No. 4, op. 37 Thematic Table
(Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien [MS41, 1032a])

The more complex the contexts, the more difficult a description becomes, of course, which cannot go into depth analytically. Within certain limits, however, the musical notation of Schönberg's manuscripts certainly lends itself to a visual explanation.

Especially for a project that is educational in the broadest sense, the measure of success is how it is perceived by a wider audience. While guided tours of the exhibition met with a very positive response overall, it was also

a considerable learning process for me as the guide to deal with the visitors' different levels of prior knowledge. A very interested and educated group of historians, for example, were completely overwhelmed by the term "chromatic scale" and the contrast to the major/minor scale, which made at least some of my explanations incomprehensible. Apart from reviews in musicological journals, which were mostly positive, the book even received 3 stars, including a review on amazon. Reader Mike had difficulties with the music examples and technical terms. In fact, the first introductory section on the technical characteristics of the method is probably difficult to digest for a musically illiterate reader – an alternative approach could have been sought here, maybe with the support of music educators. Apart from that, of course, no author can rely on readers taking notes of the preface, where the addressing of the different chapters to different groups is made very clear. However, limiting the publication to just 50 objects, somewhat like a slim exhibition catalog, might have been less open to irritations and the feeling of inaccessibility. In any case, the last word has not yet been spoken on the problem of conveying challenging musical content in an accessible way without compromising too much substance.

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