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**Tonal Meaning in the Eclectic and Atonal Context of my Composing**

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## *Abstract*

Whether used as an undercurrent, or as gestures or style quotations on the surface, tonality is a characteristic device in many of my compositions. Before revealing reasons for my interest in this device, I will define tonal meaning in the context of my atonal and/or eclectic style. Subsequently, eclecticism, in itself, will be compared to uniform style. The best solution for evaluating the benefits of tonal references is to do the opposite -—explore my works where tonality is absent (*Marble Sparks* (2004) and *Most Beautiful Bird of Paradise* (2003)). Finally, in examples of my pieces where tonality IS present, its meaning varies according to both its own unique characteristics and its context (*The Stillpoint* (1995), *The Overwhelming Blankness of the Ultimate Meaninglessness of Tragedy* (1996), both string quartets (1997/8 and 2002), *...And he Wept Bitterly* (2001) and *Kwart/Four* (2006)). It is the contrast between its identity and its context that produces interesting music.

## **Tonal Meaning in the Eclectic and Atonal Context of my Composing**

### *Eclecticism*

The term eclecticism is used to describe the combination in a single work of elements from different historical styles.<sup>1</sup> To that I would like to add: elements of non-western musical styles.

Every musical composition in history draws on tradition, on what happened before. Very broadly, this includes notes, harmony, gestures, instrumentation and other elements. The adoption of foreign styles, forms and techniques, is nothing new. Also, themes or motives such as the Dies Irae, the B-A-C-H motif, or the Tristan chord, have been in common use since long.

However, over the course of the centuries since the Renaissance, the idea of musical development, or any development in western culture, has been of a linear nature: each generation building upon achievements of the most previous one. For example, composers of the classic and *Sturm und Drang* era drew on Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, rather than on the two generations older J.S. Bach. This is different today. It is my view that a composer nowadays, in a time of a widely expanded musical consciousness made available through travels and recordings, is placed in the centre of music history, rather than at its tail's end. Based on Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Kugelgestalt der Zeit* philosophy – the spheric appearance of time, I believe that music exists in our experience, rather than in a linear time frame. The simultaneity of time, both musically and music historically, exists in our memory, our perception, and our expectation. This is an important motivation for me to include references to music from the past in my own work. In response to Zimmermann I would like to add the *Kugelgestalt der Welt* to my own musical philosophy: music of other cultures has gained equal rights today to music from

western history.

Composers I have been influenced by regarding the concept of style reference or borrowing are George Crumb, Louis Andriessen, Alban Berg, Bernd Alois Zimmermann, and Wolfgang Rihm. Peter Burkholder says in the Grove Music Online: "Borrowing has often provided a way to reintroduce tonality without renouncing newer procedures."<sup>2</sup> To avoid confusion: tonality is referred to as part of music history, opposed to non-tonal music of today. When borrowed in the context of an eclectic work, it is regarded generically as a style. Sometimes certain styles *within* tonality are referred to, such as classicism or the German Lied, but also pop or world music, which are often, to a certain extent, considered tonal.

*Defining tonal meaning in the context of my atonal and/or eclectic style.*

To me, there are two types of music: music that goes somewhere, and music that doesn't. It is this simplification of the dynamic versus the static I need to constantly be aware of in order not to divert attention during the process of composition. When both are represented in a composition, it is the contrast and the conflict between these two polar opposites that makes music interesting to me.

Even though static planes are reached in a work, they are not experienced as a constant, unchanging state of mind. They rather often are the result, or the mirror image of direction. This results in the work on the whole to have a constant undercurrent of building expectation, even in the static sections: the music constantly tends to go somewhere. Contrast and conflict come into play.

Often, contrast and conflict are realised through references to different styles. When a specific language for a work is established, gestures in a foreign

musical language, or style quotations can be used. Establishing a fixed identity through consistency of material is not the goal. When asked whether a musical composition can be schizophrenic as a result, the answer is: yes, it can. I asked composer George Benjamin's opinion, who stressed that this will only be possible as long as a composition is schizophrenic from the start. In other words, despite of their conflict, there should be a logic to the way the different musical identities interact.

The quotations I use are often stylistic references and sometimes literal. The decision for me to quote other music can have two reasons. On one hand it serves an aesthetic purpose, i.e. the general language I use can provide ideas and associations with other music during the compositional process, which I then consciously incorporate in the piece.

Play Example 1: *The Stillpoint* (1995), second movement *As the World Turns*. 1'51

In this piece, several literal melodic quotations are effortlessly integrated into the modal language. Direction is mainly achieved through an increase of tempo and density.

On the other hand, quoting other music serves the purpose of expression: what I want to say musically needs to be emphasised by another, existing, musical style. The meaning that history, tradition, and culture have music provided with, can help a composer in bringing his ideas across in a very direct way, provided that the audience is cultured and possesses the necessary historical and cultural awareness. Perhaps I need the confirmation of music history that I am expressing the right thing. Of course, this very much depends on the context. Quoting the style of Renaissance counterpoint in a certain passage of the composition, can

have a total different meaning in another.

Example 2: *The Overwhelming Blankness of the Ultimate Meaninglessness of Tragedy* final section

Again, in this example, modality is the context- language, at least in this section. As mentioned earlier, static planes in my work are the mirror images of direction, of something dynamic. The section here comments on what happened previously. Within it, tonality is used to blow up the idea of, perhaps, blankness. The idea comes from the *Death and Disaster* silkscreen series of pop- artist Andy Warhol. These images consist of two equal panels. One depicts the horrors of, for example, a traffic accident in monochromes, whereas the other comments on it with just the blank background colour. It is the contrast between these two opposites that makes the work interesting.

Show example of Warhol's *Red Disaster*

In the *First String Quartet*, the use of tonality emphasises a musical idea in a non- tonal context. Tonality here is a concrete reference. The work is based on the horrors of hell, as depicted by Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch in his *Last Judgement* paintings. The minor space heaven occupies in these altar pieces is echoed in the string quartet through tonality.

Show painting of Bosch' *Last Judgement*

Example 3: *String Quartet #1* from 3' to 4'04

In the examples shown so far, tonality seems to have a kind of healing purpose. Also, especially in example 3, it gains meaning by being used individually, placed after, or rather in between, conflicting sections of music. More recently, similar to *The Stillpoint* (ex.1) I am focussing more on the expression within the musical language itself, instead of using a quote whenever it is needed in a narrative way. In the work *Kwart/Four* (2006), reference to tonality is shaped by a recurring major third of C-E, placed against a chromatic kind of music, reminiscent of post war purism. The juxtaposition of these two musical identities creates the work's character.

Example 4: *Kwart* first 1'30

*In depth look at one particular work*

I will now have a closer look at ... *And He Wept Bitterly* for piano trio. As the title suggests, this work borrows from J.S. Bach's *St. John's Passion*. The melodic line of the evangelist set to the text of *und weinete bitterlich* is very free, chromatic and almost atonal. It is referred to in the third movement of my piano trio, and enriched through a technique borrowed from melodic writing in Chinese opera. This technique consists of several instruments playing a melody in unison, but in a rich ornamental way ending up not entirely synchronised.

Example 5a: *Eight Fairies Celebrating a Birthday* Beijing opera (Suzhou opera, town north of Shanghai) (2'55 – 3'25)

Example 5b: *St. John's Passion* #12C Bach

Example 5c: ...*And He Wept Bitterly* third movement (first 50")

*Works where tonality is absent*

To evaluate the benefits of tonal references is to do the opposite. *Marble Sparks* for orchestra (2004) and *Most Beautiful Bird of Paradise* (2003), are both works where tonal reference is absent. The latter was written for the Schoenberg ensemble, so I wanted to write a Schoenbergian, or at least quasi serial, work. The work is a rigid elaboration of three layers, each consisting of the same rhythmic and intervallic material, but moving in different tempi. Structurally it is probably one of more successful works I wrote, but I was not entirely content with its expression as a work of music. Of course, on the whole it is one large reference to a certain style, in this case early serialism with its consistency of material. During an informal workshop in the nineties, Luciano Berio had told me that I needed to work on my counterpoint. I took his advice on board with this work, and it is my most contrapuntal piece so far. If music becomes too contrapuntal however, if too many voices are going somewhere constantly, the composition ends up going nowhere, both musically and aesthetically. This, I found was the case with *Most Beautiful Bird of Paradise*.

Example 6: play fragment of *Most Beautiful Bird of Paradise*.

With this separation between 'musically' and 'aesthetically', the two legs a composition stands on, is meant, on one hand the material meaning of music - its notes, instrumentation, etc., and on the other hand that which is not in the notes;

that which is expressed. As Dutch composer Peter- Jan Wagemans taught me: Composing is the process of growing in between technique and inspiration. Not every composition in a composer's oeuvre is a perfect balance between these two, some works stand on one leg, so in that sense *Most Beautiful Bird of Paradise* is crucial in my development. Through this work I came to conclude that a perfectly worked out system of composing was not delivering the result I found satisfying enough. It proved to be a confirmation that my earlier quest for eclectic form, with its constant interrupting of processes through multiple tonal or non- tonal references *within* it, had more value to me.

The next step will be to create an eclectic work that has the contrast of differences, but without sacrificing formal coherence. This is the biggest remaining issue, keeping the form of an eclectic work coherent, and I am afraid it shall remain so as long as I compose. Maybe I purposely leave a form open. I prefer to think that musical composition is a process to be completed in the listener's mind.

Edward Top

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3. id.

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