

MUS 735

Discussion - Hitchcock, Chapter 10

Jim Novak

3.21.21

Milton Babbitt famously said he didn't care if people understood or liked his music. Do you think the average listener understands tonal music in a different way than serial? Does serial music elicit an emotional response the way tonal music often does? Why or why not? Post at least two examples to support your thoughts from composers in the text.

Milton Babbitt was a trained mathematician, as was his father, and having read the chapter on serialism, I can understand its appeal to him. He saw the system and organization of tone rows, and the mathematician in me could understand the security and order in a system like this. Math tends to be pretty black and white. An answer is typically either correct or incorrect. A tone row contains the proper series of pitches or it doesn't. For the methodical mind, this all makes sense, in theory.

Once put into practice, though, I feel like serial music doesn't make as much sense. I understand that this movement was at least partially a reaction to the Romantic Era, in which music was heavily chromaticized, to the point of completely obscuring the key or tonal center. That said, I feel like serial music removes all emotion and feeling from music entirely. Using *Three Compositions for Piano* by Babbitt (Hitchcock, page 272), we can see that he begins movement one with the prime form of the set in the left hand, and the right hand has a row transposed by a tritone in the first two measures. In measures three and four, the left hand has a retrograde inversion form of the row transposed up by a half-step, while the right hand has a retrograde version of the row.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z87gifJNqoE>

To me, this seems like exercises of the genius for the genius, rather than a piece of music. I can't imagine the average listener would understand serial music as much as they would tonal music. I think the average listener today would have no idea what is happening in the Babbitt piece linked above, but would guess it was just being improvised, whereas the organization of tonal music would be immediately more accessible. It is difficult to guess the emotional response that others might have to serial music, but I can say that it generally makes me feel confused and uncomfortable, as I find myself naturally trying to find moments of resolution, and they just aren't there.

As an example that is entirely different in instrumentation, I found a piece entitled *All Set for Jazz Ensemble* by Milton Babbitt. Even with more familiar instrumentation, I feel the same as I did for *Three Compositions for Piano*. Again, to me this seems like an exercise in genius rather than a piece of music. I thoroughly look forward to hearing the thoughts of those who enjoy this, as maybe I'll gain some insight.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNSr6sPceBI>