
Patrick Horrigan
Third-Year Student (Bachelor of Arts, Music and Hispanic Studies)
School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, CANADA

While twelve-tone music in America is still a relatively young genre in comparison to common-practice classical music, its history is richer and more diverse than journalists and scholars have led people to believe. Joseph Straus’s Twelve-Tone Music in America is a detailed analysis of the history and practice of dodecaphony in the United States that attempts to break the many misconceptions that surround the controversial musical genre. Straus calls upon 37 twelve-tone and/or serial composers to validate his thesis, and through close-readings of their pieces demonstrates that twelve-tone serial music is not monolithic, allowing the composers to stand for themselves, as opposed to a few composers representing many. Straus’s monograph is an important contribution to the scholarly world of twelve-tone music, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the history of dodecaphony in America, its origins, influences, and place in the currently developing modern music scene.

Straus divides his book into two main sections. The first, “Thirty-seven Ways to Write a Twelve-Tone Piece,” is the aforementioned analysis of 37 composers who at some point in their respective careers turned to twelve-tone methods, and the second, “American Twelve-Tone Music in Context,” abolishes apparent “myths” about twelve-tone music. In the first section, Straus divides these 37 composers into seven groups, according to when they began to compose using twelve-tone and/or serial methods. In discussing the environments within
which these groups wrote and comparing their individual styles through score analyses, Straus clearly traces each composer’s influences and relates them to the development of twelve-tone music in America.

In the second half of his book Straus makes some more general statements about the history and reception of twelve-tone music in America, presenting the reader with a number of “myths” based upon the many mischaracterizations of twelve-tone music. The deconstruction of these myths reveals the underlying diversity of twelve-tone music and disentangles any negative perceptions that the public has accrued about twelve-tone music such as its being strict, antitonal, or incoherent. Because Straus organizes his book so that the reader develops an understanding of the history of twelve-tone music and the variety of compositional techniques developed by composers first, one is already convinced of the fallacy of the myths presented by the time they arrive there. This is only effective, however, if the reader already has a basic understanding of dodecaphonic music, and even then it can at times be difficult to thoroughly understand Straus’s analyses. The argument would be clearer if Straus presented his “myths” chronologically, as they pertained to each group of composers. This method of organization, realized in Straus’s earlier article “A Revisionist History of Twelve-Tone Serialism in American Music,” would have made Twelve-Tone Music in America that much more effective in its layout.¹

The first group of composers that Straus mentions in his book are the “‘Ultramodern’ Composers:” Adolph Weiss, Wallingford Riegger, Carl Ruggles, and Ruth Crawford-Seeger. This chapter outlines the very beginnings of twelve-tone serial composition in America. When Adolph Weiss returned from studying with Schoenberg in May 1927, he brought back new ideas and methods that composers who studied with him would use as a foundation for twelve-tone music in the United States. These composers’ interpretations of Schoenberg’s method of twelve-tone composition were not, however, exactly accurate. In presenting Ruth Crawford Seeger, Straus describes her methods as a “creative misreading of Schoenberg,” a result of her interest in Schoenberg’s “method of composing using twelve tones” combined with the “[unlikely] that Crawford had any detailed or sophisticated understanding of Schoenberg’s own compositions.”² In his analysis of Ruth Crawford Seeger’s compositional method, Straus notes her adoption of twelve-tone compositional styles as

---


² Joseph N. Straus, Twelve-Tone Music in America (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18.
compatible with her leftist politics, examining her rotational/transpositional schemes as distinctively her own. In general, the music of the ultramodern composers marks not only the beginning of twelve-tone music in America, but also the point at which their miscalculations concerning Schoenberg’s methods became a part of a uniquely American portrayal of twelve-tone music.

Moreover, Europe was not the only continent to influence the development of twelve-tone music in the United States. Straus’s monograph, while explicitly stating the European influence on dodecaphony, is missing a discussion of other influential cultures. As discussed in an article by Nancy Rao, the interactions between Asia and America were also a part of the ultramodern scene:

Composers such as Henry Cowell, Colin McPhee, Dane Rudhyar, and Ruth Crawford wrote music that engaged [with] the traditions of Balinese music, Indian classical music, Hindu chanting, Chinese opera, and Japanese instrumental music. Famous instances include Cowell’s use of Asian string-playing technique (plucking, pressing, and sliding on piano strings) in *The Banshee*; McPhee’s use of the gamelan in *Tabuh-tabuhan*; Crawford’s use of Hindu chanting in *Three Chants for Women’s Chorus*; or Rudhyar’s association with what musicologist Carol J. Oja calls “a trans-Asian mix of religious philosophies and musical practices.”

This Asian influence is something that Straus did not mention in his book, and it would have be very useful in presenting the idea that Europe was not the only inspiration for developing twelve-tone composers in America. This article clearly shows that American composers drew on a number of styles and ideas that came from all over the world, while also reinforcing Straus’s idea that there is no predominant method with which one composes serial and/or twelve-tone music.

The second group of composers Straus discusses in his book are the “European Immigrants,” including Arnold Schoenberg, Ernst Krenek, Igor Stravinsky, and Stefan Wolpe. While journalists and scholars often only mention the importance of Schoenberg with regards to twelve-tone music in America, this section clearly illustrates that he was not the only influential composer who immigrated to America during the rise of Nationalist Socialism. To this end, Straus explores the variety of styles that Schoenberg composed in, referencing his lack of strict methodologies. It is perhaps for this reason that composers

---

consistently misinterpreted Schoenberg’s method. In Sabine Feisst’s book, *Schoenberg's New World: The American Years*, she examines the common misconception of Schoenberg as a purely atonal/serial composer, exploring the variety of repertoire he wrote in America. Feisst reinforces the idea that there is no “Schoenberg” method, as the man himself never wrote in any one particular style, but rather an assortment of methods.\(^4\) Schoenberg did, however, have a distinct theme throughout his music: his rhythmic motives, and they became an important aspect of serial composition in general.

Varying, non-uniform rhythm is a characteristic of twelve-tone music that Straus considers one of the defining qualities of the genre. John Roeder strengthens Straus’s point in his article “Interacting Pulse Streams in Schoenberg’s Atonal Polyphony,” by discussing the importance of rhythmic variety not only in Schoenberg’s compositions, but also as a contrasting quality to the “metrically regular, homophonic foregrounds of tonal music.”\(^5\) This frames Schoenberg as a cultivator of certain stylistic aspects of twelve-tone music rather than of the compositional method itself.

Although Straus’s list of composers seem inclusive, they are not the only ones to have played an important role in the early developmental years of twelve-tone music in America. Allen Forte elsewhere presents the influence of composer and music theorist Paul Hindemith and his book, *Unterweisung im Tonsatz (The Craft of Musical Composition)*. Hindemith’s theoretical advances and philosophies as outlined in *The Craft* were important in developing an ideology behind twelve-tone music. Hindemith published the second edition of his book in America in 1942, during which time he taught at Yale. Forte considers a number of reviews of Hindemith’s book, stating, “It is the ‘orderly’ presentation of the materials of musical composition that appealed to the contemporary composer, through a theoretical approach that did not require the renunciation of tonality and was therefore regarded as a potent alternative to the dreaded 12-tone system.”\(^6\) Forte discusses the abundance of composers that were eager to study with Hindemith and references a number of composers mentioned in Strauss’s book, for example, Donald Martino and Mel Powell, who were clearly influenced by Hindemith’s teachings. In discussing composers such as Ernst


Krenek, whose influence is acknowledged because of his prolific contributions to the academic world, *Twelve-Tone Music in America* would have profited from the addition of Paul Hindemith as an important European influence on twelve-tone music in the United States.

The third group of composers Straus mentions are the “Postwar Pioneers,” consisting of Milton Babbitt, Elliott Carter, George Perle, Aaron Copland, and Roger Sessions. During World War II, these composers began exploring new and innovative methods of composition, expanding upon their already established careers as scholars and composers. They drew from both “ultramodern” composers as well as European immigrants for inspiration, incorporating their previous practices to create a link between the tonal and the atonal idioms. Interested in extending the serial tradition, Straus illustrates how these five composers thought carefully and systematically about preexisting methods of serial composition, and approached their own compositions in highly original and individualistic ways. These composers, while clearly not the earliest American twelve-tone composers, were the main advocates of twelve-tone music during its significant popularization in postwar America.

Straus’s fourth group of composers, “An Older Generation (composers born before 1920),” consists of Ben Weber, George Rochberg, Ross Lee Finney, Barbara Pentland, and Roque Cordero. The composers presented in this section represent a generation who turned to twelve-tone composition in the 1950s, after having already developed their reputations in other creative pursuits. These composers brought a stylistic diversity that expanded upon the twelve-tone system, adding to the notion that there is no common practice for twelve-tone music. Furthermore, here Straus references Barbara Pentland, the only Canadian composer mentioned in his book, and Roque Cordero, the only composer included born south of the United States of America. In this chapter, Straus refers to Barbara Pentland as “the best known of a large and extremely diverse group of Canadian twelve-tone composers” and to Roque Cordero as “[representing] a [large] number of twelve-tone composers from Central and South America.”

While Straus does reference other Canadian and Latin American artists in his notes, by allowing Pentland and Cordero to represent a larger group of composers, he contradicts the whole idea of his book, which is the necessity for emphasizing the uniqueness of twelve-tone composers.

The next group of composers Straus discusses, “Some Serial Neoclassicists, Tonalists, Jazzers, and Minimalists,” is comprised of Arthur Berger, Irving Fine, Louise Talma, Samuel Barber, Gunther Schuller, Hale Smith, and...
and Michael Torke. These composers represent the move to serialism as a way of “reinvigorating” their earlier practices, incorporating tonal aspects into their twelve-tone methods. Here Straus negates two of the myths he later presents, including “The Myth of Anti-Tonality” and “The Myth of Un-Americanness.” This section directly relates tonality to twelve-tone composition and displays the use of atonality in more distinctly American musical genres, such as jazz. This group of composers allows Straus to reinforce his views concerning the flexibility of serial composition as a means by which to elaborate on traditional tonal practices.

The sixth group of composers, “A Middle Generation (composers born between 1920 and 1940),” further reinforces Straus’s argument that the practice of twelve-tone music does not follow any specific compositional methods. This chapter addresses the music of Charles Wuorinen, Donald Martino, Ralph Shapey, Ursula Mamlok, Peter Westergaard, Leonard Rosenman, and Mel Powell, and represents a group of composers who began their careers composing in the twelve-tone style. It is significant to note that these composers did not draw their inspiration from European traditions, but rather from the aforementioned generations of American composers, thus there is an emphasis on the beginning of a specifically “American” style. Straus writes, “[the] American style is defined by carefully crafted precompositional schemes and, in their realization, a strong, audible commitment to pitch centricity as a way of articulating the musical flow.”8 These composers shared a great interest in exploring the possibilities of twelve-tone music through the creation of complex, premeditated compositional plans, realized through a multiplicity of rows and series.

The final group mentioned by Straus, “A Younger Generation (composers born after 1940),” consists of Joseph Schwantner, Robert Morris, Peter Lieberson, Andrew Mead, and Jeff Nichols. This group represents the existence of twelve-tone music in present-day America, refuting the idea that twelve-tone serial composition has died. Having studied with composers such as Babbitt, Martino, and Wuorinen, this group of composers epitomizes current twelve-tone music in America. Straus argues that they have all aptly assessed the history of the twelve-tone practice and are now faced with the opportunity to draw upon it in diverse and exciting ways. This group of composers represents the potential for twelve-tone music in the future – their ability to continue building upon the foundation laid by so many composers before them gives hope for a prosperous future for American dodecaphony.

---

8 Strauss, Twelve-Tone Music in America, 124.
While Straus has done a commendable job in recounting the history and development of twelve-tone music in America, there is a significant gender imbalance in his work: 4 of the 37 composers mentioned are female. Fred Maus argues that this is an overall problem with modernist discourse, citing the male dominance of mainstream music theory.9 Twelve-Tone Music in America is a prime example of that to which Maus is referring, and it is interesting to note that Straus makes no mention of the male dominance in his book. Ellie Hisama’s own monograph, Gendering Musical Modernism, gives some insight into some other important women twelve-tone composers not mentioned by Straus, such as Marion Bauer and Miriam Gideon.10 Surely Straus’s work would have been stronger had he taken a deeper look into the gender politics that surrounded the development of twelve-tone music in America or even included more women composers in his text.

Twelve-tone music in America is characterized by a large number of composers that differ in age, birthplace, career path, religion, race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The context within which twelve-tone music exists, however, belongs to a much larger spectrum. While Straus attempts to contextualize twelve-tone music, Peter Schmelz, in his review of Twelve-Tone Music in America, criticizes Straus, saying, “contextualization suggests a broader sociocultural, historical overview of twelve-tone serial practices, encompassing composers, performers, listeners, patrons, institutions, venues, and technology, along with the perceived and received values and meanings attributed to serialism by historical actors.” 11 To better unmask the common oversimplifications that scholars and journalists often present in their writings, Straus could have gone beyond the theoretical and historical perspectives, considering more of twelve-tone music’s sociocultural implications.

Joseph N. Straus’s Twelve-Tone Music in America is, however, extremely successful in disproving the many misrepresentations that have accumulated around twelve-tone and serial composition over the course of its development. Straus presents his material in a clear and compelling manner, with thorough analyses and clear explanations of the importance and resourcefulness of each composer. This book is an asset to anyone interested in twelve-tone and / or serial

---


music and composition, and it is a useful resource for scholars who wish to further expand upon the history of twelve-tone music and its place in the contemporary music scene.

**For Further Reading:**


