



Schoenberg's Error (Studies in the Criticism and Theory of Music)

William Thomson

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Along with such Viennese contemporaries as Freud, Loos, Mach, Wittgenstein and Kokoshka, Arnold Schoenberg is one of the supremely compelling figures of history. Most commonly known as the originator of the compositional technique of ultimate chromaticism - the method of composing with 12 tones - he left an imposing body of prose in support of his conclusion that tonality is an expendable musical property, and that music's evolutionary path through Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner had unerringly and inevitably led to the "emancipation of dissonance". This text examines the composer's explanations of musical structure and finds them driven by self-serving interpretations of 19th century ideas, from Nietzsche's notion of the artist's cosmic supremacy to Darwin's explanation of biological evolution. This examination further reveals that Schoenberg's perspective was rooted in a severely limited musical repertory (essentially Germanic), virtual ignorance of crucial theoretical abstractions (such as modal theories) and an over-optimistic conception of the integrative powers of human perception.

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