

SCHÖNBERG AND ATONALITY

Arnold Schönberg was born in Vienna in 1874 and was almost an entirely self-taught musician. He began his career as a bank clerk but lost his job at the age of 21 and decided at that time to devote himself to music. Around 1908, Schönberg began composing works that were drastically different from anything that had been composed up to that time. These compositions were *atonal*, meaning that they lacked a key signature. These compositions used all of the 12 tones. When one heard the works of Arnold Schönberg, one could not say necessarily that this piece began in the key of C Major and ended in the key of C Major (often indicated by beginning on C and ending on C).



Arnold Schönberg

The works that Arnold Schönberg composed were met with a great deal of hostility because they went against everything that had been taught and heard and performed until that time. But Schönberg was certain that this was the new direction that music should take in the twentieth century, and he persisted. It wasn't long before his works began to be well received and people began to try to understand what he was trying to do. With this understanding came an acceptance, and the acceptance led to the musical world's embrace of this new style of composition.

Arnold Schönberg was greatly influential on two of his young theory students: Alban Berg and Anton von Webern. Both of these composers, along with Schönberg, constitute the main composers of the Expressionist period. Through their works, these composers sought to use the ideals of the Expressionist painters and writers—that of distortion and grotesque disfigurement—to express the feelings, turmoil, and tension that they felt were in each of us. The works of Arnold Schönberg forever changed the world of music.

Activities:

1. What world events were occurring near the beginning of the twentieth century that may have affected composers such as Arnold Schönberg and their compositions?
2. Individually or as a class, create your own free-form atonal compositions.
3. Listen to a recording of Schönberg's cantata *A Survivor From Warsaw*. Express verbally or in written form how this piece made you feel.