In his recent monograph *Schoenberg’s Transformation of Musical Language*, Ethan Haimo traces Arnold Schoenberg’s compositional development from the early songs, Op. 2 (1899) to the *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11 and the *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, Op. 16 (1909). Central to Haimo’s approach is the principle of ‘incremental innovation’:

‘From the beginning of his career Schoenberg subjected his pitch language to a relentless process of change. Step by step, Schoenberg continually modified or transformed many of the techniques that had characterized his music at the beginning of his career. From approximately 1899 to July 1909, one must understand the pitch language of Schoenberg’s works as comprising an ongoing extension and transformation of prior techniques, not a renunciation of them.’ (p. 7)

In accordance with this central thesis, Haimo consistently avoids the word ‘atonal’ in his study. This does not mean that he denies the presence of a radical ‘rupture’ or ‘break’ in Schoenberg’s development. Haimo identifies this rupture with the composition of the last of the piano pieces, Op. 11 (No. 3) and the last of the orchestral pieces, Op. 16 (No. 5), music in which he observes the complete abandonment of motivic return and of traditional compositional devices. The earlier pieces from Op. 11 and Op. 16, by contrast, Haimo considers as part of a gradual and unbroken transformation of Schoenberg’s pitch language (a process begun in 1899).

The major strength of Haimo’s approach is that it allows him to describe Schoenberg’s evolution in the decade 1899-1909 as an essentially positive development, with the emphasis on the ‘extension’ and ‘enrichment’ of compositional techniques and material, instead of their ‘destruction’ or ‘negation’. In Schoenberg literature, the popular image of an ‘atonal revolution’ has sometimes led to describe Schoenberg’s ‘tonal’ period in a rather one-sided and mainly negative way: the notion that in compositions such as the First String Quartet, Op. 7 and the Chamber Symphony, Op. 9 the cohesive tonal forces are put under such strain that, eventually and inevitably, they had to ‘break’ in order to make possible a completely new way of organizing musical material. This popular notion is contradicted by the rich and multifaceted reality of Schoenberg’s ‘tonal’ period, or in Haimo’s words: ‘[Schoenberg] felt he was an agent of forward moving development, not a catalyst for disintegration and thus viewed what he was doing in positive, not negative terms’ (p. 228). In exemplary fashion, Haimo demonstrates that the evolution of Schoenberg’s pitch language from the early songs, Op. 2 (1899) to the mature songs, Op. 6 (1903-5) is at least as profound and thoroughgoing as the evolution from Op. 6 to the first so-called ‘atonal’ songs, Op. 15 (1908-9).

Haimo’s central thesis is nevertheless not without its own dangers or pitfalls, two of which I will briefly discuss here. Firstly, the principle of ‘incremental innovation’ could lead to the conviction that every new composition has to fulfil its own essential role in a relentless and uninterrupted forward movement. Haimo manages to avoid such a dogmatic (‘teleologic’) approach by acknowledging periods of relative rest and stabilisation (e.g. the six songs, Op. 3) or even moments of uncertainty and crisis (*Friede auf Erden*, Op. 13 and the two Ballades, Op. 12). All the same, most of the other compositions from the period under discussion fully corroborate Haimo’s thesis of ‘incremental innovation’ as far as the evolution of Schoenberg’s pitch language is concerned. With respect to the evolution of his compositional aesthetics, however, it could be questioned whether the image of a ‘gradual transformation’ is the most appropriate way of describing the compositional reality. The interpretation of the aesthetic position of the First String Quartet, Op. 7 is a case in point.

According to Haimo, this work constitutes a crucial and essential link in Schoenberg’s ‘gradual’ transition from the aesthetics of programmatic music to the aesthetics of absolute music. In his view, the discovery of the ‘secret, hidden...
program’ of Op. 7 offers the necessary evidence that in this seemingly abstract composition, Schoenberg could not completely renounce his earlier aesthetic beliefs (the principles of programmatic music, as embraced by Opp. 4 and 5). Although Haimo acknowledges the importance of abstract formal principles in Op. 7, his interpretation tends to overemphasize the programmatic content of this work, at the expense of its formal dimension (he repeatedly calls the Chamber Symphony, Op. 9 the first non-programmatic composition since 1897). But would the listener really lose anything essential if this program had remained undiscovered? In the case of Opp. 4 and 5, the answer to this question would be an undoubted ‘yes’; in the case of Op. 7, an unqualified ‘yes’ is rather doubtful. A second possible danger lurks in the definition of ‘tonality’ versus ‘atonality’. Although Haimo’s arguments against the use of the word ‘atonality’ are persuasive, much of course depends on how this abstract notion is defined in relation to its counterpart ‘tonality’. Haimo seems to define tonality on the basis of the presence of a referential triad (tonic) and/or clear diatonic pitch content. He finds a confirmation of this interpretation in Schoenberg’s own definition of tonality in *Harmonielehre*, quoted on p. 147:

‘Tonality is a formal possibility that emerges from the nature of the tonal material, a possibility of attaining a certain completeness or closure (Geschlossenheit) by means of a certain uniformity. To realize this possibility it is necessary to use in the course of a piece only those sounds (Klänge) and successions of sounds, and these only in a suitable arrangement, whose relations to the fundamental tone of the key, to the tonic of the piece, can be grasped without difficulty.’

This rather ‘static’ description, however, is not the only, and even not the most representative of the many definitions of tonality in Schoenberg’s writings. Although the tonic does play an important role in Schoenberg’s concept of tonality, even more crucial is the image of ‘conflict’ between this tonic and other regions, as can be deduced from several other passages in *Harmonielehre*:

‘Every chord that is set beside the principal tone has at least as much tendency to lead away from it as to return to it. And if life, if a work of art is to emerge, then we must engage in this movement-generating conflict. The tonality must be placed in danger of losing its sovereignty (...). Thus, the departure from the fundamental tone is explained as a need of the fundamental itself (...). Even the apparently complete departure from the tonality turns out to be a means for making the victory of the fundamental so much the more dazzling.’

According to this definition (and several others, e.g. in the article *Problems of Harmony*), tonality is not so much the point of departure, but the end point, the result of an intensely dynamic process. The fact that the Chamber Symphony, Op. 9 seems to begin in the region of F major does not necessarily mean that the E major tonality of this work is weakened, as Haimo suggests; on the contrary, the tonality of E receives its strength from the struggle with several opposing and competing forces. In this sense, the Chamber Symphony is not about ‘E major’, but about the ‘conflict’ between E, F and other regions or other ways of pitch organization (see in this respect the almost exemplary way in which the harmony of fourths, the Neapolitan region and the whole tone harmony are presented at the beginning of this composition). This tonal conflict results in what Schoenberg has called ‘schwebende Tonalität’, a very helpful concept for the understanding of his music in the period 1903-1906. Although Schoenberg’s own definition of ‘schwebende Tonalität’ in *Harmonielehre* remains rather vague, this concept was later elaborated by several other theorists, such as Robert Bailey and Christopher Lewis.2

Haimo frequently acknowledges the importance of ‘schwebende Tonalität’ in Schoenberg’s works from this period, especially in the context of his analysis of the song ‘Geübtes Herz’ Op. 3, No. 5. A similar approach could demonstrate that in works such as the First String Quartet and the Chamber Symphony, tonality has a stronger cohesive capacity than Haimo seems to suggest.3 In the works written shortly

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thereafter, however, tonality has lost much of its structural potential. A telling example is the problematic nature of the final triad of the ‘tonal’ song ‘Ich darf nicht dankend’ (Op. 14, No. 1). As Haimo rightly asserts, this final triad sounds foreign to the remainder of the composition: ‘By using a clear, unadorned, strongly emphasized, root position triad as the final chord of the composition, Schoenberg seems to be contradicting the harmonic norms of the rest of the song’ (p. 236).

Notwithstanding these critical remarks about the division programmatic/absolute music and the function of tonality in Schoenberg’s compositions, Haimo’s study offers many interesting and perceptive observations about the development of Schoenberg’s pitch language. One important agent in this development is the principle of ‘localized consonance’, by which a new sonority is constructed in such a way that more traditional sonorities (triads or seventh chords) are still recognizable as distinct segments within this new sonority. Haimo demonstrates how this principle occurs very early on in Schoenberg’s music and how it remains valid even beyond the renunciation of the triad as final sonority of the composition. In his analysis, Haimo draws mainly on Schoenberg’s own writings, although he discusses several other analytical approaches. Particularly noteworthy is Haimo’s sceptical attitude towards pitch-class set analysis, a methodology that by its very nature and terminology is designed ‘to efface the connection with prior repertoires: a ‘triad’ is not a triad, but a 037 trichord; a ‘whole tone step’ is not a whole tone step, but interval class 2’ (p. 358). Because of their stronger attachment to tradition, Schoenberg’s own theories are much more in line with Haimo’s central thesis. Also admirable is the author’s ability to relate his analytical findings to specific historical events and vice versa. In this respect, chapter 14 offers a very healthy ‘demythologisation’ of the genesis of the last two movements of Schoenberg’s Second String Quartet, Op. 10.

Schoenberg’s music is a complex reality. We have to free ourselves from the tendency to see this music exclusively in terms of ‘either … or …’ (either ‘evolution’ or ‘revolution’, either ‘tonal’ or ‘atonal’). In its rejection of any simplifying slogan, Haimo’s study is a valuable contribution and a fruitful approach to this complex reality.

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3 Arnold Schoenberg, ‘Tonality and Form’ (1923): ‘Tonality does not only serve; on the contrary, it demands to be served. And that is not so simple as the decreeing committee thinks. I am probably the last of the modern composers who has occupied himself with tonal harmony in the sense of the oldest masters. That this circumstance is not heeded nor understood is not my fault. Those who examine in my First String Quartet or in my Kammersymphonie the relation of the keys to each other and to the incident harmony, will get from them some conception of the demands that are made, in the modern sense, on the tonal development of a harmonic idea.’ (Schoenberg, Style and idea, ed. Erwin Stein, trans. Leo Black, Berkeley etc.: University of California Press 1984, pp. 256-257.)