

Web Feature 1.1

Observations of tonal relationships and the evolution of musical style

To a great extent, a composer's tonal design reflects the stylistic constraints of the period in which it was written. Prior to the beginning of the eighteenth century, instruments were tuned according to ratios derived from the harmonic series, a system referred to as **just intonation**. While this system yielded very pure intervals, it was not flexible enough to work in all keys, especially on instruments with fixed pitch such as keyboard instruments. In other words, a keyboard that was tuned to the key of a composition would be acceptably in tune only on keys that were closely related to its "tonic." As a result, the tonal outline of most Baroque music stays comfortably within the closely related keys of the tonic; "visits" to distant keys are rare.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, just intonation had largely been superseded by **equal temperament**, the system derived from artificially dividing the octave into twelve equal steps. While this meant that most of the intervals were no longer acoustically "pure," the minute adjustments to each interval meant that all "major thirds," for example, would be exactly the same. As a result, any key could theoretically now be accessed from the tonic.

The music of the nineteenth century, then, is to a great extent the story of how paths to increasingly remote keys were blazed. Sometimes the paths taken were direct and their goals predictable; other times, the paths wandered in a more circuitous fashion, with surprising twists along the way. In the music of certain composers, the path traced from key to key was imbued with a kind of dramatic, narrative flair; new forms, such as the Classic and early Romantic sonata form (to be covered in chapter 21), arose to provide a structural framework for this dramatic impulse. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the tonal system had seemingly been exhausted, the newfound freedom of traveling to increasingly distant keys with increasing frequency resulting in a state where the tonic no longer seemed to enjoy its privileged "home" status.