

АКТУАЛЬНІ ПИТАННЯ МЕТОДИКИ ВИКЛАДАННЯ ФОНЕТИКИ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ МОВИ

MUSIC IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: A CASE OF ATONALITY

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Abstract. *The present paper aims to draw attention to the phenomenon of musical atonality and its possible use for teaching phonetics in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. A brief history of atonal music as part of world culture is followed by discussing Nina Simone's artistic heritage in light of atonality. We suggest employing teaching methodology similar to the one used by Carolyn Graham. Our positive classroom experience with Nina Simone's highly emotional musical pieces is supported by current neuroscience research proving the unique aesthetic experience and possible cognitive benefits of atonal music.*

Key words: *English as a Foreign Language (EFL), phonetics, atonal music, emotion, Nina Simone*

Music – in all shapes and forms – has always been, and, hopefully, will always be an important part of language curricula. Music serves as a powerful tool that helps us better capture the culture, the soul and wit, the ups and downs of human experience. Although music-related theoretical issues and practical methodologies for language acquisition have long been part of research agenda (see, for example, Degrave, 2019, McIntire, 2020), some pertinent aspects have not been the focus of scholarly scrutiny. The objective of this short paper is to draw attention to atonality as musical phenomenon, and, more specifically, to address the feasibility of involving Nina Simone's atonal pieces into teaching pronunciation in EFL.

First of all, let us briefly outline the phenomenon of atonality. Generally speaking, atonal music (as opposed to tonal) is about lack of functional harmony. Simple examples: humming and whistling. Or Native Australian music played on the didgeridoo. On the other hand, atonal musical pieces have profound emotional intensity, in the first place. The phenomenon of atonality was brought to life by Second Viennese School: its founder Arnold Schoenberg, and his principal students Anton von Webern and Alban Berg. In 1908, a pianist Arnold Schoenberg created a purely atonal composition "You rest against a silver willow." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fcvV4Cuhyk>. He was the first to define "free atonality" that a bit later transformed into a 12-tone (a.k.a. dodecaphonic) system of

composition that was meant to replace traditional tonality. Schoenberg believed that in a musical composition no tone should be more important than another. Interestingly, the composers mentioned above actually preferred the term “pantonality.”

By the look of things, such music reflects the innovative and revolutionary avant-garde art of the 20th century, with all its contradictions and harsh realities. As German philosopher, sociologist, psychologist, musicologist, and composer Theodor Adorno (1949) aptly put it, “modern music...has taken upon itself all the darkness and guilt of the world. Its fortune lies in the perception of misfortune; all of its beauty is in denying itself the illusion of beauty.”

Though atonal music has never received a really wide acclaim, it can proudly name several prominent followers and performers, like US and French singer, composer, and civil rights activist Nina Simone, a Polish composer and pianist Karol Szymanowski, Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, modern Ukrainian composer Valentyn Silvestrov, US composer, pianist, and music educator Thomas Little (a.k.a. Classic Nerd) who writes “music that toes the line between algorithm and intuition by using analysis as a tool to generate emergent narratives, lush textures, and distinct emotional affects” (lentovivace.com). Also worth mentioning is The London Sinfonietta – an English contemporary chamber orchestra <https://londonsinfonietta.org.uk/>

Yet, Nina Simone’s oeuvre deserves special praise. Trained as classical piano player, she not only wrote almost all of her lyrics and music. Nina is probably best known for her poignant combination of song and speech – or *Sprechstimme*. This phenomenon most definitely reflects what is called “speech-musical text - a complex system created via synergistic interaction of speech and music” (Kalyta, Klymenyuk, 2022: 504). Of course, such “musical texts” can undoubtedly facilitate a multimodal learning experience” (McIntire, 2020). For that matter, such units of both music and speech do need more careful scientific scrutiny and analysis.

Called “high priestess of soul”, Simone’s performances express raw emotion to the fullest, using the rich vocabulary of atonality. For example, her album “Nina Simone and Piano” is almost one hundred percent atonal. Let us name several such pieces: “Sinnerman”, “I put a spell on you”, “I’ll look around”, “Who am I”, “Don’t explain”, “If you knew”, “I Want A Little Sugar In My Bowl”, and, of course “Memphis in June”. The latter piece is even written in such a way as to convey a certain degree of atonality:

Memphis in June

A shady veranda under Sunday blue sky

Memphis in June
And my cousin Miranda
She's making a blueberry pie
I can see the clock outside a-ticking and a-tocking
Everything so peaceful and dandy
I can see my grandmama 'cross the street still a rocking
Watching all the neighbours go by, oh my
Memphis in June
Sweet oleander blowing perfume in the air everywhere
Up jumps the moon to make it so much grander
It's paradise, honey
Take my advice, honey
'Cause there's nothing like old Memphis in June
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNhPIJX7N9k>

Introducing such pieces of music is useful for practicing pronunciation, and especially the rhythm (strong and weak beats) and intonation, which brings to mind classroom activities in the vein of Carolyn Graham (2003) *Jazz Chants*: explaining cultural context, vocabulary, and pronunciation subtleties (e.g. “schwa” in auxiliary verbs like “do”) etc., focusing on stress and rhythm, for instance, recognizing primary/major stress(es). Since English is a stress-timed language, the beat is set by the number of stresses, (not syllables), with stress impacting meaning at both phrase and sentence levels (American English, 2018).

Our own classroom experience proves that raw emotion, the possibility to relax and just have fun, unexpectedness and novelty of atonal pieces stimulate attention and boost students’ activity. Last but not least, such music could reduce anxiety – a critical factor in language acquisition (and reducing anxiety, in turn, boosts cognitive skills, such as fluency).

Perhaps the irresistibility of atonal musical pieces could best be explained in terms of neuroscience, specifically, neuroaesthetics. It is argued (Mencke, et al., 2019) that the attractiveness of such music is due to several factors: the potential to evoke strong and intense experiences in listeners, when listening becomes a unique aesthetic experience, the transformative power of art, and a drive for novelty, among other things.

In conclusion, let us stress that the phenomenon of atonality, a paradox that could be oxymoronically described the harmony of chaos, never ceases to amaze both eminent scholars (see Boss, 2021; Sachs, 2023) and novice researchers

(Mizusaki, 2023). Highly unusual, unexpected, bizarre, filled to the brim with emotional weight, this artistic niche is a unique acoustic phenomenon worth exploring and worth implementing in teaching practice.

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