

How Equal Temperament Ruined Harmony And Why You Should Care

Have you ever wondered why some classical music sounds harmonious while some modern music feels off? The answer lies in a seemingly innocuous development in the world of music - equal temperament. This system of tuning has been widely adopted, but at what cost? In this article, we will delve into the fascinating history of equal temperament, explore its impact on music, and why understanding this topic is crucial for any true music lover.

The Birth of Equal Temperament

To understand the impact of equal temperament, we must first comprehend the musical landscape that preceded it. Before the 17th century, most music was performed using various systems of tuning called "just intonation." These systems created harmonies that were pure and rich, closely aligned with the natural harmonic series.

However, there was a problem with just intonation. To play in different keys, musicians needed to adjust the tuning of their instruments accordingly. This was a cumbersome task that limited the versatility of compositions and hindered musical exploration. Musicians and theorists began searching for a solution; one that would allow them to easily modulate between keys without compromising the harmonic beauty of their music.

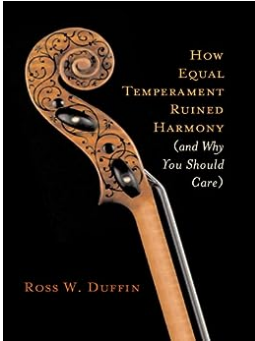
How Equal Temperament Ruined Harmony (and Why You Should Care) by Ross W. Duffin (Kindle Edition)

★★★★☆ 4.4 out of 5

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Text-to-Speech : Enabled



Screen Reader : Supported
Enhanced typesetting: Enabled
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Print length : 208 pages



The Great Compromise

Enter equal temperament. In the late 17th century, a keyboardist named Andreas Werckmeister developed a system of tuning that divided the octave into 12 equal semitones. This meant that all intervals and keys became equally out of tune, but in a way that was consistent and allowed for effortless modulation.

Equal temperament quickly gained popularity due to its convenience, soon becoming the dominant tuning system in Western music. The standardization of tuning allowed composers to freely explore new tonalities, leading to the birth of major and minor keys as we know them today. It also facilitated the emergence of instrumental music, as instruments could now easily adapt to different keys.

The Loss of Harmonic Purity

While equal temperament brought undeniable benefits, it also came at a price. The harmonies produced by this tuning system were no longer pure. Each interval, except for the octave, contained a slight dissonance called a "beat." These beats resulted from the mathematical compromise needed to divide the octave equally.

These imperfections in tunings had a profound impact on the emotional qualities of music. Composers were now limited in their ability to evoke certain moods and atmospheres. The specific character of each key was blurred, as the inherent differences between them were diminished. The unique colors and emotional resonances associated with different tonalities started to fade away.

A Modern Renaissance?

As music evolved, many composers and musicians became aware of the limitations brought upon by equal temperament. A renewed interest in just intonation and alternative tuning systems emerged, seeking to recapture the lost beauty of harmonic purity.

Some modern musicians have embraced microtonal music, which employs intervals smaller than the equal-tempered semitone to create intricate and emotionally evocative harmonies. While still considered niche, microtonal music is gaining recognition for its ability to expand the expressive range of contemporary compositions.

Why You Should Care

At this point, you might be wondering why you should care about the intricate details of music tuning systems. The answer lies in the power of music to deeply move and connect with us on an emotional level.

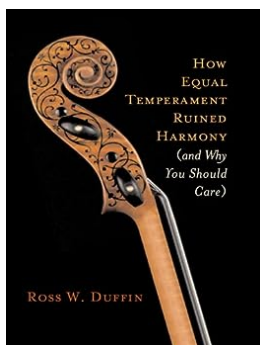
Understanding the impact of equal temperament allows us to appreciate the historical context of the music we love. It sheds light on the tangible effects this compromise has had on the compositions we hold dear. By recognizing the limitations of equal temperament, we can better grasp and explore the emotional possibilities offered by alternative tuning systems.

Furthermore, being informed about equal temperament empowers us as listeners. We can actively seek out and appreciate musicians who experiment with new tonalities and tuning systems. It allows us to engage with music in a more informed and critical way, deepening our connection with the art form.

In

Equal temperament, while revolutionary in its time, has left an indelible mark on the world of music. While it brought convenience and freedom, it sacrificed the purity and emotional resonance of harmonies found in just intonation.

Understanding this impact and exploring alternative tuning systems can significantly enrich our music experience. So next time you listen to your favorite piece, take a moment to consider the tuning system behind it and let the music transport you to a world filled with harmonic beauty.



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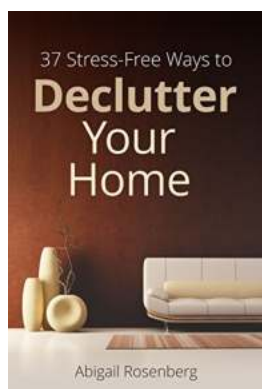
"A fascinating and genuinely accessible guide....Educating, enjoyable, and delightfully unscary."—Classical Music

What if Bach and Mozart heard richer, more dramatic chords than we hear in music today? What sonorities and moods have we lost in playing music in "equal temperament"—the equal division of the octave into twelve notes that has become our standard tuning method? Thanks to *How Equal Temperament Ruined Harmony*, "we may soon be able to hear for ourselves what Beethoven really meant when he called B minor 'black'" (Wall Street Journal). In this "comprehensive plea for more variety in tuning methods" (Kirkus Reviews), Ross W. Duffin presents "a serious and well-argued case" (Goldberg Magazine) that "should make any contemporary musician think differently about tuning" (Saturday Guardian). Some images in the ebook are not displayed owing to permissions issues.



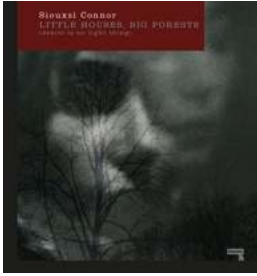
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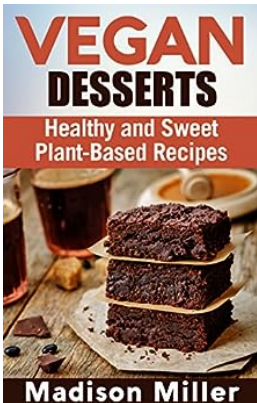
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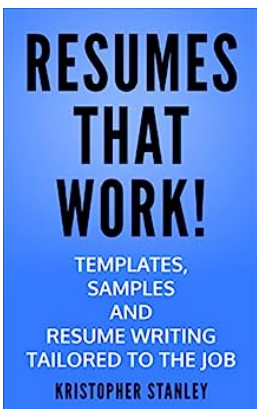
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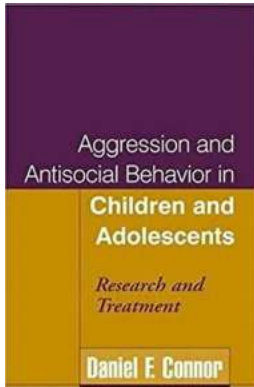
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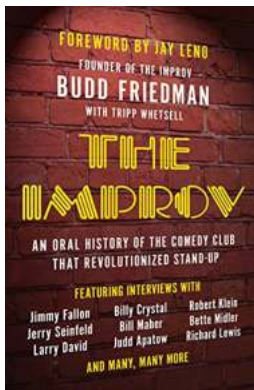
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