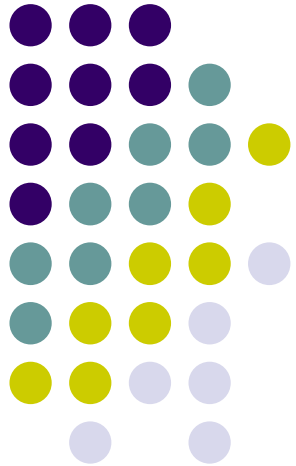
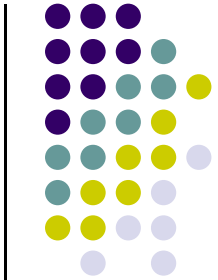
Twentieth Century Classical

Atonality



From Tonal to Atonal



- Classical music is tonal. The key it's in gives it character.
- In the Romantic period composers started using a lot of chromatic notes to the point where the music started to lose the character of the main key.
- Famous Romantic composers include
  - Schumann
  - Chopin
  - Verdi
  - Puccini

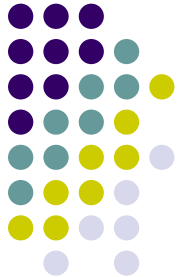
Atonality

- In the 20th Century, many composers stopped writing tonal music.
- Music became atonal.
- Composers stopped using binary, ternary and Rondo form and tried different ways of structuring their music.

Claude Debussy

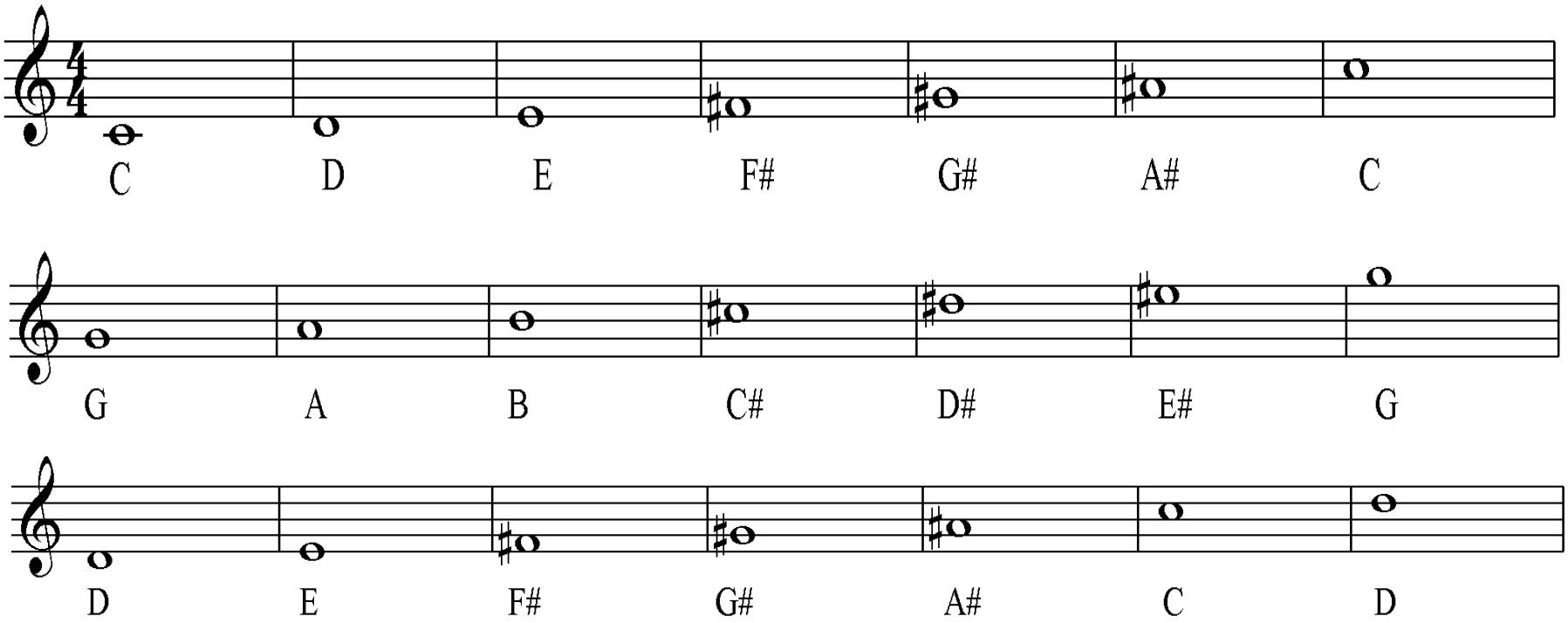
- Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
- Started writing music in the Romantic period until his death.
- Debussy composed a lot of music using the whole tone scale.
- His music is sometimes describes as impressionist (out of focus/blurred) like the work of painters such as Monet and Manet.

The Whole Tone Scale



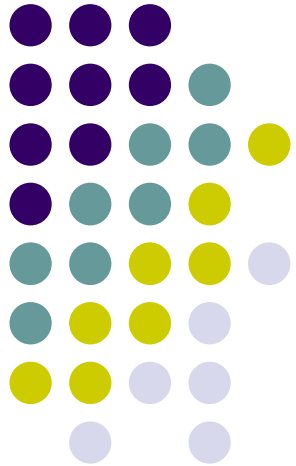
- All the notes are a tone apart.
- Melodies sound hazy and dreamy.
- Debussy added to the impressionist effect with colourful chords (added 9ths and 13ths).
- He also picked instruments with the right timbre to play different melodies.

Whole tone scales

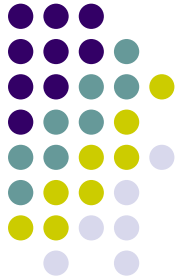


Twentieth Century Classical

Serialism

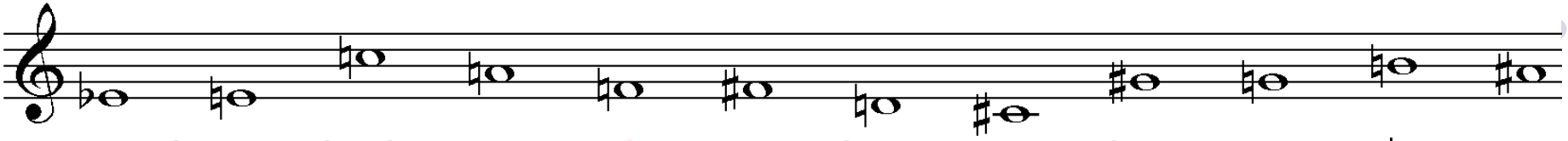


Serialism – the 12 note system

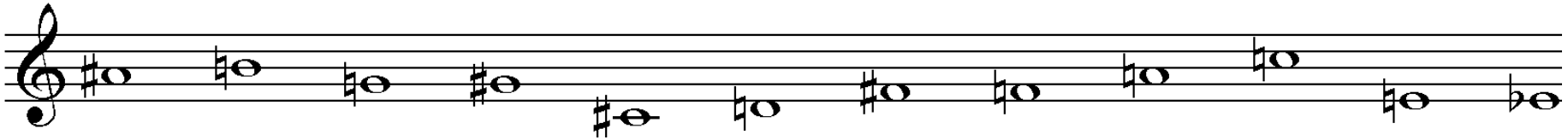


- The Austrian composer Schoenberg invented Serialism in the 1920s.
- Serialism was a completely new way of structuring atonal music. Each note of the chromatic scale must be played before any tone can appear again.
- To compose a serialist piece, Schoenberg would start by arranging the 12 chromatic notes of an octave in a set order. This starting point was called the Prime Order.

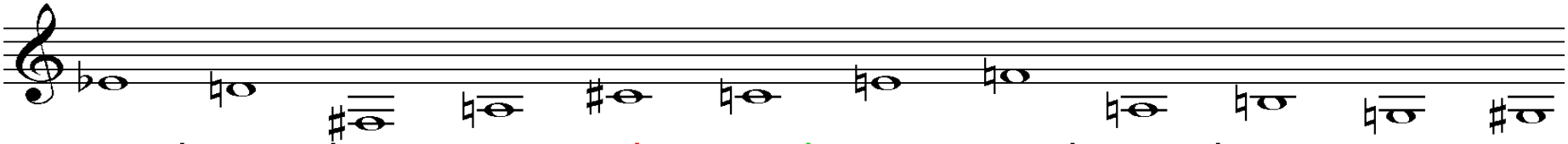
- Prime Order



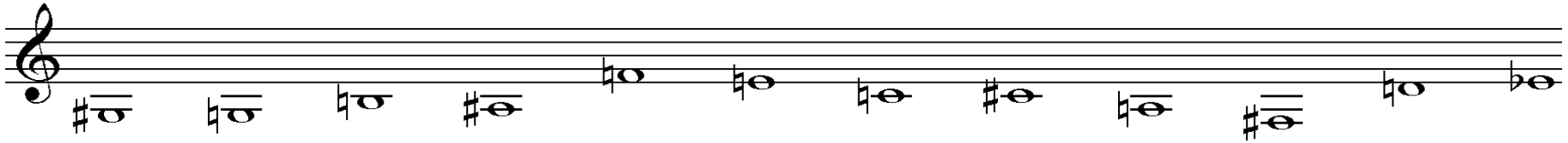
- Prime Order in Retrograde – Notes in reverse order



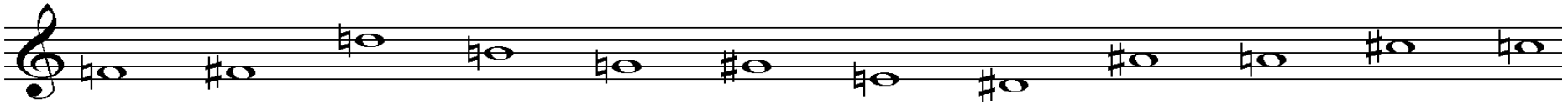
- Prime Order Inverted – Intervals turned upside down



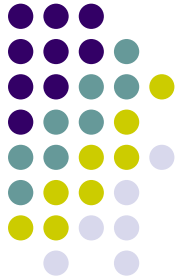
- Prime Order In Retrograde Inversion – Inverted notes in reverse



- Prime Order Transposed – Notes shifted up or down



Turning Tone Rows into Music



- The Prime Order and rearrangements of the Prime Order are called Tone Rows.
- The tone rows could be played in the bass line or melody, and in any octave.
- Groups of notes from the prime order & variations could be piled up to make chords.
- Notes next door to each other in the original rows would be played all at once by different instruments. This is called Verticalisation.
- The prime order could also be designed to create cluster chords with notes really close together.

Microtonal Music

- Microtonal music uses quarter tones as well as semitones.
- So instead of 12 notes in an octave, you could have 24 notes.
- Alternatively, the composer could split the octave notes up unevenly, or arrange notes which are very close together.
- Microtonal music is often played on synthesisers as synths are very adaptable, allowing the microtones to be programmed.