

And for piano solos, give these a listen:

- ✓ Prelude in C-sharp minor, opus 3, no. 2
- ✓ Prelude in D major, opus 23, no. 4
- ✓ Piano Sonata no. 2 in B-flat minor, opus 36

Listening to Music of the 20th Century and Beyond

After attending a few concerts of modern music, you too may develop a nervous eye tic on merely hearing the *words* “20th-century music.” Much of the music composed in the past century was written by composers who aimed to break the traditional rules. Unfortunately, some of the rules they broke included “Music should sound good,” “Music should have melody and rhythm,” and “Music should not send the audience bolting for the parking lot.”

First, you may actually *like* some modern classical music — even the more strange-sounding stuff. Second, some of the composers of this century had brilliant musical ideas, resulting in fresh, interesting music that, after you’re used to it, can actually get you fired up. Finally, just because it’s modern doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s dissonant; many recent composers have as much a gift for melody and beauty as their predecessors. These sections take a closer look at modern composers.

Debussy and Ravel

If one composer started 20th-century music, it was probably the French composer Claude Debussy (1862–1918 — see Figure 2-22). Then again, he had a head start: He began writing 20th-century music in 1894.

Debussy (pronounced “de-bu-SEE,” or “WC” if you say it really fast) was one of a group of composers known as *Impressionists*. He tried to portray in music the *impressions* created by sights, sounds, fragrances, and tastes, much the way that such painters as Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir depicted blurry fields of dappled light, Paris in the rain, and so on.

To create such impressionistic sounds, Debussy needed a new musical language. The tried-and-true harmonies and chord structures weren’t enough anymore. He needed different chords — and different progressions of chords — to produce his special effects.

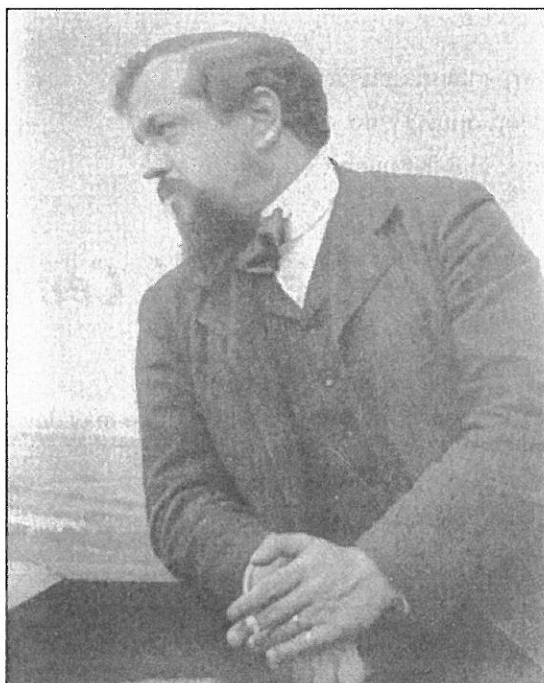


Figure 2-22:
Claude
Debussy
was one of
the brightest
lights on the
Impression-
ism scene.

Source: Creative Commons

Debussy flunked composition at the Paris Conservatory, where unorthodox harmonic progressions were frowned upon. In fact, several years later, another conservatory student was expelled just for having a Debussy score in his possession!

As you can imagine, the audiences in Paris took a long time to get used to these new sounds in music. Today's audiences find Debussy's music lush and sensual, but what his audiences heard was utter chaos.



One of Debussy's most interesting innovations was his use of the *whole-tone scale*. In Chapter 11, you can find out how to play a normal scale on the piano: You move up the keyboard, playing *adjacent* keys or every *other* key in a specific sequence. But in a whole-tone scale, you play every other key from start to finish. The result is a magical, dreamy, harplike sound that's not in any one key. (Any time a TV or movie character goes into a trance, starts having a daydream, or thinks back to an earlier time — or parodies such a flashback — the harp plays a whole-tone scale up and down to create a dreamy Debussy ripoff.)

Debussy's first important piece was *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, based on a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. The music fits the mood of the poem,

which concerns the afternoon adventures of a faun (half man, half goat). It's dreamy, sensuous, and vague; the story is your basic Goat-Meets-Nymph, Goat-Chases-Nymph, Goat-Loses-Nymph, Goat-Eats-Grapes.



The musical examples available at www.dummies.com/go/classicalmusic include the third movement of Debussy's greatest orchestral composition, *La Mer (The Sea)*. In this piece, the water rises and falls, little waves play with one another, and the wind whips the ocean into a frenzy of excitement. If you don't get the feeling of the endless, heaving sea while listening to this piece, your earbuds need adjustment.

Debussy on your MP3 player

If you're going to listen to Debussy, you must hear *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* (also known as *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*) and *La Mer*.

Then listen to the evocative, highly sensual pieces *Nocturnes* and *Images*, and the popular little piano piece *Clair de lune*.

Unraveling Ravel

Claude Debussy was a hero to Maurice Ravel (1875–1937), another Frenchman. Ravel ("rah-VELL") was also a Paris Conservatory-trained Impressionist composer, but his style isn't as hazy and gauzy sounding as Debussy's. Ravel's music was also influenced by American jazz, which he experienced during a brief visit to the United States in 1928.

Ravel might not have become very well known if not for one particular composition: *Boléro*. This piece, based on one particular Spanish rhythm (a *bolero*, of course), consists of a simple melody repeated over and over, louder and louder, played by successively more and more instruments, for 15 minutes, until it reaches a shattering climax that just wipes you out. Depending on how you look at it, this long, slow music buildup is either totally maddening or astoundingly exciting. Because its building intensity is so overtly sexual, Hollywood loves this piece; you hear it in critical lovemaking scenes in movies, such as *Bolero* and *10*.

Another of Ravel's best compositions does for the waltz what *Boléro* does for the bolero. It's called — what else? — *La Valse (The Waltz)*, and it was written shortly after the end of World War I. At the very beginning, the orchestra, heard through an ominous mist, plays a simple, lovely waltz tune, which represents the elegant, graceful society of the past (before the war). But as the piece progresses, the waltz becomes stranger and more distorted, depicting European society's decline. Again, Ravel builds the music to a shattering finish, in an extremely violent crash of the full orchestra.

Our favorite Ravel piece, however, is the ballet *Daphnis and Chloé*. He wrote it for the Ballets Russes (the same dance group for which Igor Stravinsky

wrote his three famous ballets). Like Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun*, it's about nymphs, but don't prejudge — hey, some of our best friends are nymphs.

Recordings of Ravel

You must, absolutely must, hear *Daphnis and Chloé* Ballet Suite no. 2. Then listen to these other terrific Ravel pieces:

- ✓ *Boléro*
- ✓ *La Valse*
- ✓ *Rhapsodie espagnole* (a lovely and exciting evocation of Spain)

Igor Stravinsky

To many (including us), the Russian Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971; refer to Figure 2-23) was the most important composer of the 20th century. After Stravinsky (“stra-VIN-skee”), nobody could write music without thinking about Stravinsky’s ideas and then either accepting or rejecting them.



Figure 2-23:
Igor Stravinsky, the most important composer of the 20th century.

Source: Creative Commons

Stravinsky's youth followed the standard Classical Music Composer Formula: he was born into a successful family, got packed off to law school, and felt tugged enough by the lures of music to bag law and become a composer. Keep reading for more about Stravinsky.

The Firebird jump-starts his career

Stravinsky first made his mark by writing ballet music. A famous Russian producer named Sergei Diaghilev, who founded the Ballets Russes in Paris, was looking for a composer to write music for a ballet based on the legend of the Firebird. He originally hired a guy named Anatol Liadov to write it. But as the rehearsal period approached, he asked Liadov how the composition was going. Liadov's response: "Great! I just bought the music paper!" Diaghilev panicked and gave the commission to his second choice: Stravinsky.

Igor's music for *The Firebird* was a milestone. At its premiere in Paris, nobody had ever heard such complex rhythms and strange, shocking dissonances. Still, the audience was impressed by the excitement of the piece and the new sounds that Stravinsky (a student of the great orchestrator Rimsky-Korsakov) had created. The ballet was a hit. Stravinsky became Diaghilev's favorite composer, and his career in Paris was assured.

The Petrushka Chord

Next on the list was *Petrushka*, a ballet based on the antics of — get this — a sex-starved puppet. This ballet has even more dissonance; for example, Stravinsky deliberately wrote two simultaneous harmonies that clashed horribly with each other. If you've got a piano handy, here it is: the now-famous *Petrushka Chord* (which, much as it may resemble the title of an airport bookstore paperback, is actually a perfectly good cocktail party term):



This clash, however, has a purpose: It represents a musical nose-thumbing on the part of the puppet. The audience understood the effect, and this dance, too, was a success.

The most famous premiere in music history

But then, in 1913, the 31-year-old Igor wrote the bombshell: *The Rite of Spring*. The subtitle of this ballet, "Scenes of Pagan Russia," tells all. As Stravinsky wrote: "I saw in my imagination a solemn pagan rite; sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring." Not exactly a day at the beach (unless you live in certain parts of Southern California).



His music for this scenario offers the sonic impact of a baseball bat in the gut: exceedingly harsh, with short, repetitive melodic fragments; sudden, jarring dissonances; instruments screaming at the edges of their ranges; and hideous, pounding, brutal rhythms. In short, it's *great*. At the opening-night performance — the most famous premiere in music history — the audience responded by trashing the theater.

Not everyone hated the performance; the audience included some of the leading artists in Paris (including Claude Debussy, the famous French composer), who shouted out their energetic approval for the music. Unfortunately, this enthusiasm only fanned the riot's flames, making the music's detractors even more vocal. Fistfights broke out; people scrambled over each other to get out of the theater; at least one person challenged another to a duel. Stravinsky himself ducked out through a window in a dressing room and pretended to join the rioting crowd outside.

Only a year later, the music from the ballet was played in a concert performance, and the audience stood up and cheered. Go figure.

After the Rites



A long excerpt from *The Rite of Spring* is online at www.dummies.com/go/classicalmusic. In Chapter 5, we explain in detail what's going on as you listen. But for now, we should say that the best way to enjoy a lot of Stravinsky's early music is to let it roll over you like thunder. It's a kick.

Stravinsky was still a young man when he composed his three earth-shaking ballets. Shortly thereafter came the Russian Revolution and World War I, and Stravinsky fled Russia, first to Switzerland and then to the United States. (He actually bought a house in Hollywood.)

In his later years, Stravinsky became very cerebral and experimental, composing in a number of styles, including the *Neoclassical* (meaning, simply, "new-Classical") style. (To oversimplify a bit, Neoclassical music was a return to the balance and restraint of Classical music, but with a lot of "wrong notes.") Although he continued to write music into his old age, nothing Stravinsky wrote ever achieved the musical importance of *The Rite of Spring*. He died in New York in 1971.

Stravinsky for the record

You can guess what we're going to suggest in your Stravinsky listening list. Start with his three great ballets, in order of composition:

- ✓ *Firebird* (also known as *L'oiseau de feu*)
- ✓ *Petrushka*
- ✓ *The Rite of Spring* (also known as *Le sacre du printemps*)