

The Twentieth Century

Breaking with tradition

Since the Baroque period, when the major/minor key system evolved out of Medieval and Renaissance modality, composers had used the relationship between keys – most notably the tonic and dominant keys – as the foundations for their musical structures. The major forms of the Baroque and Classical periods – the binary forms of the dance suite, ritornello, rondo and, most importantly of all, sonata form – were built on this tonic/dominant relationship.

Form and tonality

In the Romantic period, the sonata form and its related structures were still important and were used copiously by every major composer. However, other developments in Romantic music and artistic matters in general began to undermine the importance of tonality as a means of musical structure and expression. The Industrial Revolution had led to the development of wind and brass instruments that were capable of playing completely chromatic lines. The development of programme music and the preference of Romantic composers to write personal, expressive music meant that they used increasingly chromatic music with a wide range of dynamics and colourful instrumentation in their compositions. The operas of Wagner brought this Romantic movement to a height, and Wagner's work was a catalyst for many of the musical developments that were to take place in the early twentieth century. Wagner's musical language was continued and developed in different ways by the Austrian composers Hugo Wolf and Gustav Mahler, and the German composer Richard Strauss. Mahler and Strauss composed large, expansive orchestral works and took different but equally innovative approaches to orchestration. Mahler, in particular, is noted for his sparing and selective use of instrumental timbres and his work paved the way for the *Klangfarbenmelodie* style of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern that we will explore later.

A time of change

At a time when, following the rise of chromaticism in the late nineteenth century, composers were beginning to question the role of tonal structures in music, European society in general was also undergoing a period of immense unrest when old orders were being questioned and challenged. Movements that led to the outbreak of the World War I, the rise of Communism in Russia, and the overthrow of the monarchy and/or the aristocracy in a number of European countries meant that, in the early years of the century, Europe was a volatile region. In many ways, this was an ideal environment for the development of new, exciting ideas in the arts and it is not surprising that so many innovative movements in music, dance, drama, and the visual arts emerged at this time. Added to this was the development of recording technology which, as we shall also see with the development of popular musical styles, did much to spread and cross-fertilise these new ideas.

New methods of organisation

As tonality, as a means of musical structure, disintegrated, composers searched for a new way of building compositions. Some composers developed new scales and/or tonal relationships. Others moved the emphasis to other elements of music, such as rhythm. Some composers went back to the past to before the chromatic excesses of Romanticism and re-examined Classical structures, the use of modes, or folk music.

The study of twentieth century music should rightly start with three composers who studied and grew up with the Wagnerian chromatic style, but whose geographical roots – and consequential exposure to two traditions in the arts – led them to develop very different but equally influential schools of composition. Those composers are Debussy, Schoenberg and Stravinsky.

Impressionism

During the second half of the nineteenth century, a group of French artists – including Monet, Manet and Pissarro – developed a distinctive style of painting which became known as impressionist. In their work, the artists created images that set out to capture the mood and ambience of their subject or scene, rather than creating a hard, graphic illustration. Their painting techniques included using broad brush strokes, with washes of colours which merged together rather than abutted each other. For these artists, colour and light became more important than the defined form and shape of their subjects. Their aim was to depict the mood or 'impression' rather than giving a graphic illustration of what they saw.

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

The French composer Claude Debussy was well versed in all the arts, including painting and literature, and he knew the works of the impressionist painters well. Studying in Paris and Rome in the 1870s and 1880s, he was well aware of the expressive, chromatic Wagnerian style. As his own personal compositional style developed, Debussy took this chromaticism and applied it to an approach to orchestral writing that has also been called 'impressionist' (although Debussy himself did not like that label for his music!).

The first, and best known of Debussy's orchestral works in the impressionist style is *Prelude à L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* which, rather than giving a graphic account of a series of events, paints an atmospheric picture of a warm, hazy, sleepy afternoon in a forest. In a similar vein are Debussy's orchestral works *La Mer* and the three *Nocturnes* (including one movement called *Nuages*). Debussy was also a prolific composer of piano music, including the *Images*.

Features of Debussy's style

In order to achieve his Impressionist musical style, Debussy used a number of compositional

devices. These include:

- chromatic melodies, often moving by step, to give melodic lines a blurred image
- similarly, chromatic chords used to give a blurred or colourful effect
- added chords (9ths, 11ths, 13ths), often written in parallel movement
- subtle syncopations and use of complex rhythms and cross rhythms to blur the metrical line of the music
- sensitive exploitation of instrument timbres – either by selection of register (high/low strings, high/low woodwind, etc), by choice of playing techniques (tremolo strings, muted horns, etc.), or by use of exotic and/or delicate instrumental sounds (harp, celeste, antique (Chinese) cymbals). In some of his later work, Debussy explored exotic scales and timbres from other cultures, such as the Indonesian Gamelan
- use of non-diatonic scales to blur the sense of the tonic/dominant, and thus further obscure form and line in the music. Debussy also employed modes in place of major/minor scales in some of his compositions, and he sometimes used the textures of Medieval/Renaissance vocal music – that is, organum and polyphony. Debussy also used the whole-tone scale shown below.



Note that the 'tonic' and the middle notes of the scale are a tritone apart, which is one reason why the whole-tone scale detracts from the sense of tonic/dominant in a piece of music.

Debussy's approach to composition was influential in the development of much twentieth century music and, as we shall see, a variety of composers took on elements of his style.

Atonality and serialism – Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)

The Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg was born in 1874 and, although he did not study music on a formal, full-time basis, grew up at a

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time and in a place where Wagner's music would have been a great influence. Schoenberg's early work, such as the string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* (1899) and the orchestral tone-poem *Pelléas und Mélisande* (1903) is clearly rooted in the late Romantic programmatic, chromatic tradition. During the first decade of the new century, Schoenberg's works became increasingly chromatic to the point that the short (30 minute) music-drama piece *Erwartung* (1909) was completely atonal – that is, it had no sense of key whatsoever and, as such, was also completely unstructured. That the music-drama is written for a female singer who spends the entire half-hour on a guilt and angst-laden journey of anger through a forest searching for her missing lover, only to find his dead body at the very end of her journey, gives an indication of the musical torment and instability that is within Schoenberg's score.

Expressionism

This period of Schoenberg's compositional career is often referred to as his 'expressionist' period where, for the composer, the expression of emotion and state of mind was of complete importance over any form or structure in the music. 'Expressionist' was a term that was also applied to the visual arts, to the work of painters such as Kandinsky, Klee and Munch (whose painting *The Scream* is possibly the most well-known expressionist painting, with an obvious link to Schoenberg's *Erwartung*). Like Debussy, Schoenberg was extremely interested in the visual arts, and was himself an able painter.

The early work of Stravinsky (1882–1971)

At around the same time that Schoenberg was composing his expressionist works in Vienna, and Debussy his late-impressionist works in Paris, Igor Stravinsky was working in St Petersburg on the three great ballet scores of *The Firebird*, *Petrouchka* and *The Rite of Spring*. As Schoenberg's style was influenced by Wagner and expressionism, and Debussy's style grew from Wagner and impressionism,

Stravinsky's early style owed much to the great Russian composers that preceded him, especially Rimsky-Korsakov, and to Russian folk culture. His orchestral writing is, in many ways, an extension of Rimsky-Korsakov's work with large and colourful selections of instruments in all sections. It is also worth noting that in this early work, Stravinsky does not only write full-blooded orchestrations (we know that he admired Debussy's work), there are also moments of selective and delicate orchestration to be found. Like Debussy, he explored new combinations of instruments and unusual performance techniques.



Igor Stravinsky

Polyrhythm and polytonality

Like Schoenberg and Debussy, Stravinsky worked at a time when the long held dominance of the tonic/dominant structures in music was coming to an end. Stravinsky's response was to create an equally individual solution through a number of compositional techniques which, at face value, might seem rather primitive but which, in total, create some incredibly complex musical textures.

Rhythmically, Stravinsky took an extremely flexible approach to both metre and accent. Often,

in his contrapuntal textures, a number of different metres and/or accented rhythms are playing at once – what is referred to as a 'polyrhythm'. Another favourite Stravinskian rhythmic (and melodic) device is the *ostinato*. Similarly, Stravinsky sometimes has two simultaneous keys playing – giving a jarring bitonal effect which is often added to through use of extremely dissonant harmonies. Add these to his off-beat, off-metre rhythms and the effect is electric.

Stravinsky (1882–1971)

The Rite of Spring

Listen to the two extracts from *The Rite of Spring* that can be found on CD1, tracks 45 and 46. The first, Extract A, comes from the very start of the work. The second, Extract B, is from the very end.

Texture and rhythm

- Clearly, the two extracts are at opposite extremes in terms of texture – the first is constructed from a number of individual lines, the second is homophonic. However, both are extremely flexible in their approach to rhythm. In the first extract, the note durations are extremely varied and precise, with the same melodic motif being presented in an ever-varying rhythm form.
- Look at the opening six-note bassoon phrase and then see how it is repeated with rhythmic variation in the next two bars. The metre of these opening bars changes constantly, and the phrase structure of the melodic line goes across the bar lines.
- In each instrumental line the rhythm

patterns and phrasing is different, giving a truly polyrhythmic effect to the whole orchestral sound.

- There are metre changes in the second extract, too, although here the changes are not so extensive. What makes the tempo jump about so much here is, again, the cross-bar phrasing and the fact that, whilst the texture is homophonic, there are a number of groups of instruments playing different blocks of rhythm against each other with parallel harmonies.
- Stravinsky places dynamic accents sometimes on, sometimes off 'the beat' to give the overall rhythm an extra kick. Stravinsky's use of silence should not be overlooked – in both extracts, the careful placing of general silences are very effective in terms of the overall rhythm and sound of the music.

Orchestration

- Together, the two extracts give a good representation of Stravinsky's approach to orchestration. The first extract shows his careful and subtle combination of instrumental timbres for colour – for example, the high, reedy bassoon solo, the dark cor anglais, and the piercing clarinet in D. The second extract shows Stravinsky using the full orchestra, together with his punchy rhythms, in a show of brute force.
- Note how both extracts are built around *ostinato* figures and how, when individual lines are taken unharmonised, how simple many of Stravinsky's melodic figures are. It is only when all of the elements are combined that the distinctive Stravinsky sound is heard.