KS5

OCR AoS6: Innovations of the 20th Century, part 2

by Jane Werry

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PICKING UP OUR JOURNEY THROUGH THE 20TH CENTURY

Having covered late-Romantic symphonic styles, Impressionism, Expressionism, atonality and serialism in Part 1 of this resource (*Music Teacher*, December 2016), we resume our exploration of this vast topic by taking a look at the following styles:

- Neo-classicism
- National styles
- Post-1945 avant-garde, including electronic and post-modern music
- Minimalism
- Contemporary approaches to composition

For each style, we'll examine two works here. Although it's only strictly necessary to be able to write about one piece in detail for each style in the exam, students will gain a much deeper understanding of a style if they have two pieces to contrast. After all, composers rarely pigeonhole their own music neatly into a particular style, and stylistic distinctions are, at best, something of a generalisation. Added to which, there are so many amazing pieces from the 20th century that it seems a shame to be stingy with its riches.

Quite a few of the pieces mentioned here are too modern to be out of copyright. Where scores are not available online from the Petrucci Music Library (IMSLP), I have chosen pieces that are covered by Volume 3 of the *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, the best-value collection of relevant scores that I could find.

CONSOLIDATING BASIC KNOWLEDGE

For students to write coherently about this area of study in their essays, the very least they need is to remember which pieces fit with which styles, and what the basic features of those styles are. This information needs to be revisited regularly throughout the course, and one of the best ways to do this is through frequent low-stakes testing.

The use of a knowledge organiser is covered in detail in Part 1 of this resource, and is recommended for presenting to students at the beginning of the topic in order to give them the bigger picture about what they're studying. A playlist, compiled on Spotify, or presented on your school's VLE, gives students access to all your recommended recordings straight away, so that they can begin to become familiar with the aural landscape of the topic before you study each piece in more depth.

These are the pieces that will be covered in this resource, and the key features of the styles that they represent:

AoS6: Innovations of the 20th Century			
Style	**Main focus piece**	**Subsidiary piece(s)**	**Features**
Neo-classicism	Stravinsky: *Oedipus rex* (1927)	Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No. 3 (1921)	A revisiting of earlier styles and structures, with modern twists: an essentially tonal style.
National styles	Copland: *Appalachian Spring* (1944)	Bartók: *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1936); Vaughan Williams: *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* (1910)	Quotations from folk music, or elements of folk style, modality, characteristic rhythms.
Post-1945 avant-garde, electronic, post-modern	Boulez: *Le marteau sans maître* (1955)	Stockhausen: *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1956)	Unusual ensembles, extended techniques, atonality, electronic music, experimentation, knowing reference to other styles or works.
Minimalism	Reich: *Electric Counterpoint*, third movement – fast (1987)	Adams: *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (1986)	Mostly tonal, built on gradually evolving repetitions.
Contemporary approaches	Ligeti: Études, book 2 (1988-94)	Bright Sheng: *Seven Tunes Heard in China* (1995)	Hard to define: extremely diverse!

As you work through the pieces, ask students frequently to list the works, composers, and dates for each style. It is only through being required to recall this information regularly that it will become permanently fixed in their long-term memories without their having to 'cram' it before the exam. Throw in listening quizzes too – if they cannot identify a piece they have already studied from a short extract, then they have not listened to it enough. Only once this basic knowledge is in place will they be in a position to work on essay technique.

For each style, a suggestion is made for a 'micro-composition' task, where students take elements of the style being studied, and apply them in a composition exercise. As well as familiarising students further with each of the styles, these may prove useful when it comes to completing larger-scale compositions for unit 03 or 04.

NEO-CLASSICISM

At a time when many composers were experimenting with atonality or the often harsh sounds of Expressionism, there were also those who looked to the past for inspiration. Neo-classicism (literally 'new classicism') is a looser term than either Impressionism or Expressionism, and has come to encompass much of the 20th-century music that is essentially tonal.

It is important for students to understand that it was not just music of the Classical period that influenced composers to write in this style, and that neo-classical works may draw on ideas from the Baroque and Renaissance periods too. These are some of the features that might point to a piece of music falling into the neo-classical style:

- An emphasis on clarity and balance, usually found together with a certain restraint of emotion. This is something most definitely borrowed from the ideals of the Classical period, and can be seen as a reaction to the excesses of the 19th century. It is exemplified in the use of Classical structures such as sonata form, and generally shorter pieces.
- Smaller ensembles, with more transparent textures allowing solo instruments (especially woodwind) to shine through.
- An interest in contrapuntal textures and rhythm, drawn from Baroque music.
- A generally tonal (and sometimes modal) approach to harmony, but with distinct 'twists' that prevent the

music from sounding exactly like something from the Classical or Baroque period. These may include 'wrong-note' dissonance and bitonality.

- Wit and quirky humour are often to be found in neo-classical works.

Although *Oedipus rex* is not available via the Petrucci Music Library, there are PDF files of the score available from a range of online sources, including Scribd.

Stravinsky: *Oedipus rex*

Stravinsky's 'opera-oratorio' is not in any sense a small-scale piece, and in some ways is not a typical example of neo-classical music. However, it very ably demonstrates from the outset that neo-classicism manifests itself in many forms, and it does have many features that define it as coming under the umbrella of the term. It is also important to include some examples of vocal music among the pieces studied. There is also an excellent production from 1992, featuring Jessye Norman and Philip Langridge, available complete on YouTube which amply conveys the breathtaking dramatic power of this work.

Undoubtedly inspired by oratorios of the Baroque period, which are large-scale works telling mostly Biblical stories, Stravinsky chose Sophocles's play with its themes of fate and tragic flaws. The plot centres around Oedipus, the King of Thebes, who, having been brought up by adoptive parents, discovers that an old man he once killed at a crossroads was his father, and that his wife, Jocasta, is his biological mother. In the final scenes of the play, Jocasta hangs herself, and Oedipus plucks out his eyes.

Watch the final scene (from 48:00 on the video, figure 170 in the score). Stravinsky specified that the spoken narration should be in the language of the audience, and this is a Japanese production. The sung text, though, is in Latin. Stravinsky chose Latin specifically not because it is a dead language, but one 'carved in stone', which suited the monumental and ritualistic style of the piece. In this scene, the chorus fulfils the same role as that of a chorus in a Greek drama – that is, they provide a commentary on the action. The use of a chorus as the final scene could be seen as a similarity with Baroque oratorios, which nearly always end with a closing chorus (unlike operas, which generally do not).

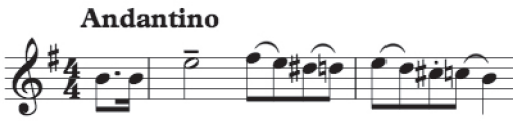
The messenger tells of Jocasta's death, and we hear the chorus's reaction while we see the stylised staging of her hanging. The use of masks is something that Stravinsky and his librettist Jean Cocteau conceived in their original ideas about the piece, and in their introduction to the score they state that the actors should give the impression of being 'living statues'. The messenger's music uses the **octatonic scale** (alternating tones and semitones), which Stravinsky often employs in his religious music, lending the messenger a priest-like air. The chorus's music is strikingly rhythmic, and predominantly minor key with dissonant notes.

At the moment that Oedipus blinds himself, the music returns to the opening idea of the piece, with a surprising change to G major, before settling back into G minor with an oscillating minor 3rd ostinato as the disgraced king is sent away.

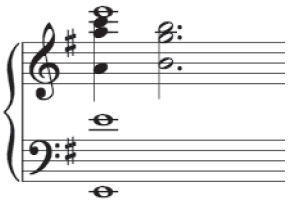
Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No. 3 – second movement

This piece is the perfect foil to *Oedipus rex*, as it demonstrates very different neo-classical characteristics. Prokofiev's orchestra is closer in scale to a Mozartian ensemble than to a Romantic one, with woodwind solos used often. There is a delicacy to the textures in this movement, which has a theme and variations structure, popular throughout the Baroque and Classical periods. Mischievous wit, a common characteristic of neo-classical music, is also never far away.

The movement is built around this distinctive theme:



Its initial upwards motif is particularly distinctive, and easy to spot when it appears in different guises, for instance when the interval is changed, or the theme appears in rhythmic augmentation. Another feature to look out for is this cadential idea, often used at the end of a variation:



One of the ways in which Prokofiev achieves a modern twist on tonal harmony is to avoid conventional dominant-tonic relationships, and this figure is a good example. It is almost a double suspension on an E minor chord, with the A being a suspended 4th and the C a suspended 6th. However, typically of a 20th-century composer, Prokofiev does not feel obliged either to prepare the suspensions (by prolonging those pitches from the preceding chord) or resolving them in the conventional way (downwards, by step).

The feeling of tonality is never lost, but the approach to using chords is distinctly modern. There are examples of chords made up of 4ths and 5ths (quartal and quintal harmony), and also chords with added 9ths and major 7ths.

Look at the end of the movement for a good example of Prokofiev's wry humour in his treatment of this motif. The woodwind play the two chords in the basic format we have heard many times. Then the piano plays its own, intensely chromatic, version, still ending on an E minor chord. Then the strings further elaborate, ending on an E major chord. The piano feels it necessary, however, to have the final word, playing a low E minor chord in a kind of anti-tierce de Picardie.

MICRO-COMPOSITION

Create a melody out of a scale – major or minor, but use one accidental to change a note of your choice. Now create some non-functional harmony, by finding chords for each note, but thinking of all the possibilities including major and minor, and with added major 7ths or minor 9ths. Include one chord built entirely of 5ths (perfect, or a combination of perfect and diminished). Cast aside any preconceptions you may have acquired from previous thorough teaching, about avoiding consecutive octaves and 5ths, or mixing sharps and flats. Even if all students in the group have the same scale as their starting point, the results should end up quite different, and you can discuss the contrasting effects of each.

NATIONAL STYLES

Three pieces are considered here: this is mainly to provide at least a smattering of coverage of the explosion of music with a national 'flavour' from the 20th century. It seems a pity to miss out the French and the Scandinavian, and you may want to glance at some other countries in your teaching, perhaps even asking students to take a country each, and present their findings to each other.

Interest in folk music became extremely popular in the 19th century, due at least in part to a changing political landscape in which national identity became a very important idea in Europe. As early as Chopin's mazurkas and polonaises, composers were using rhythms and melodic ideas from folk music in their pieces. In the early 20th century, in the face of further political turmoil, a significant number of composers became collectors of folk songs in their own countries, travelling around notating the music that they heard, in an effort to preserve a national heritage.

The three pieces discussed here demonstrate not only three different national identities represented through music, but also three very different approaches to absorbing elements of national style into the compositional process.

Copland: *Appalachian Spring* ballet suite – second half, including variations on ''Tis the Gift to Be Simple'

Until the 1930s, Aaron Copland had composed in a modernist idiom, but decided to try to gain a wider audience by composing in a more accessible style. *Appalachian Spring* is a ballet, commissioned by American choreographer Martha Graham. The plot centres around a couple getting married in a 19th-century farming community in Pennsylvania. The music includes many ideas derived from American landscapes and folk culture:

- The use of a Shaker hymn (composed by Elder Joseph Brackett in the 19th century, but possibly known to students through Sydney Carter's popular hymn 'Lord of the Dance') in a series of variations.
- Country fiddle-playing is evoked by the violin melody at figure 37.
- Syncopation and driving rhythms suggest country dancing, as at figure 43.
- The sparse texture and widely spaced intervals at figure 51 could represent the wide open spaces of rural America – certainly, this passage has inspired countless composers of music for films and documentaries who wish to create an image of America, its heritage and its nobility, for example Elmer Bernstein in his soundtracks for *Wild Wild West* and *The Magnificent Seven*, and Ennio Morricone in *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* (try the opening of the tremendous track 'The Ecstasy of Gold').

Approaches to tonality are a very likely topic for essay questions, and as soon as students have covered a few styles, they will be ready to start practising this type of answer, ensuring that they make clear points that are backed up with specific reference to the music.

However, there are distinctly modern aspects to Copland's music in *Appalachian Spring*. The passage beginning at figure 43 demonstrates this. The abrupt changes of metre and unpredictable accents show the influence of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. There are instances, for example at figure 53, where Copland superimposes tonic and dominant chords. This free approach to the notes of a diatonic scale is known as **pandiatonicism.**

Bartók: *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* – third movement

This piece provides an ideal contrast to *Appalachian Spring*, because at first listening it seems so much more dissonant and 'modern', and it is easy to wonder how any idea of a national style could fit in. However, although Bartók's approach here is highly individual, there are strong elements of Hungarian folk music, and this combination of old and new ideas is a potent one for students to understand.

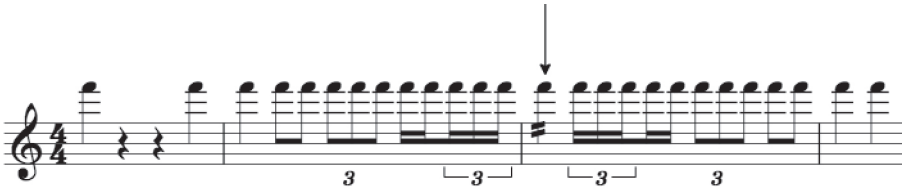
Bartók's forces are unusual, and it is interesting to note that this is the first instance of symmetry in this work. He specifies in the score that there are two separate groups of strings (each comprising first and second violins, violas, cellos and basses), and that these should be positioned on either side of the platform, with the celesta, piano and percussion in the middle. The piece as a whole has four movements, but the third movement is an example both of Bartók's 'night music' and of **arch form.**

This is the overall structure of the movement:

Section	A	FT1	B	FT2	C	FT3	B'	FT4	A'
Bar	1	19	20	34	35	60	63	74	75

FT denotes the fugue theme, initially heard in the first movement, and used as a recurring idea in each movement to provide a sense of unity. The tonal scheme of the four movements follows a symmetrical pattern: the outer movements have a tonal centre of A, with the second and third movements centred on notes a minor 3rd above (C) and below (F sharp) respectively. The approach to harmony is **neo-tonal,** that is, not based around triadic relationships. In each movement of *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, the important relationship (similar to that of tonic and dominant) is between the home pitch and one a tritone away.

There is symmetry on a smaller scale, too. Look at the xylophone rhythm at the opening:



This rhythm is a palindrome, centred around the note shown by the arrow.

So, where are the features of the Hungarian national style? They might not be immediately obvious, but they're there! The 'backwards' dotted rhythms in the strings from bar 6 are a distinctive characteristic of Hungarian folk music. Indeed, this rhythm is sometimes called a **Magyar rhythm** (it is also known as a Scotch snap or Lombardic rhythm, but it would not really be appropriate to call it by either of these names in relation to this piece). The quick chromatic embellishments in bars 7-8 are reminiscent of eastern European folk songs, and the 5/4 metre from bar 45, with its 2+3 grouping, is from a Bulgarian folk dance, the paidushko.

Vaughan Williams: *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*

Vaughan Williams was one of a number of composers who set about collecting traditional folk tunes in the early part of the 20th century. Many of these folk tunes have found enduring life in Vaughan Williams's choral and orchestral music, and in the hymn tunes that he provided for the *English Hymnal*.

A fantasia, or fantasy, is a form originating in the Elizabethan age, when a simple melody would be used as the basis for a freely evolving piece, much less rigid in structure than a theme and set of variations. Vaughan Williams uses a psalm melody written by Tallis in 1567, in the Phrygian mode. The Phrygian mode can be played on the white notes of the piano from E to E, and has a minor sound but with distinctive flat supertonic and 7th. It is this modality that provides the piece with its Englishness, and its feeling of being rooted in something ancient – there is nothing else characteristically English about the piece.

Vaughan Williams writes for an expanded string orchestra: a large first orchestra, a smaller second orchestra (to be situated at a distance from the first, to provide spatial separation), and a solo string quartet. With these multiple parts, he creates textures that can be luminous and almost transparent, such as at the opening, or a lushly thick texture spanning many octaves, such as at the climax of the piece around letter R. Three whole statements of Tallis's melody punctuate the work, with much free development of motifs from it, and countermelodies added to it.

A good essay question to set at this point would be to contrast the three different approaches of Copland, Bartók and Vaughan Williams to composing in a national style.

MICRO-COMPOSITION

Modality is well worth exploring as a compositional tool, as it can give a composition a sense of style and character that it might otherwise lack if it used 'plain' major or minor scales. Phrygian and Lydian modes are particularly useful.

Ask students to select a simple melody of their choice, one that uses notes of a major or minor scale. After identifying its key, they should modify the necessary notes to convert it into either the Lydian or Phrygian mode. Harmony can then be added, using chords I and II (in each case, II will be a major chord, which will emphasise the character of the mode: chord II in the Phrygian mode has the flat supertonic as its root).

POST-1945 AVANT-GARDE, ELECTRONIC, POST-MODERN

By the end of the Second World War, things in the world of music were significantly different from the way they had been in the 1930s. Many European composers had sought refuge in America. Concert halls and opera houses in Europe had been destroyed in the war and had to be rebuilt. Technology and communications had moved on during the war, and radio and tape recorders were now widely used. Shortly after the war, the long-playing record was introduced. It was now easier than it had ever been to hear new music and be influenced by musical thinking that may be geographically inaccessible. Added to this, it seemed as though the composers whose ideas had seemed so revolutionary in the 1920s and 1930s were running out of steam – and that those ideas had run their course.

The conditions were ripe for fresh, experimental ideas to develop and flourish. And that is exactly what happened – although, just as with the pre-war 'revolutions' in music, nothing was really revolutionary. The new ideas were very much born from the older ones, and although the evolution was rapid, it was evolution (rather than revolution) nonetheless.

Here, we will explore two pieces that fall into the avant-garde and electronic categories. We will return to post-modernism later.

Boulez: *Le marteau sans maître* – sixth movement, 'Bourreaux de solitude' ('Hangmen of Solitude')

Le marteau sans maître ('The Hammer without a Master') is a setting of surrealist poems by René Char for contralto, alto flute, viola, guitar, xylorimba (a xylophone with extended range), unpitched percussion and vibraphone. Boulez employs serial techniques that can be linked directly back to the composers of the Second

Viennese School such as Alban Berg, but his approach encompasses much more than merely the pitches of the notes used. Boulez's serialism covers many other musical parameters such as duration, dynamics, and articulation as well as pitch. The way that he applies several different techniques to altering a row simultaneously, together with his tendency to swap things around occasionally in what he called 'local indiscipline', makes the music so complex as to defy any meaningful detailed analysis.

Instead, a 'broad brush' approach can be applied to give students a sense of how Boulez went about writing this music that seems so intensely and constantly diverse. Each pitch is assigned to a note length, starting with D semiquavers and getting progressively longer through the chromatic scale until dotted crotchet C sharps. This principle is called **pitch-duration association** or PDA. Dynamics and articulation are then assigned in a variety of different patterns using pairs of notes, symmetry and palindrome. However, the idea of 'local indiscipline' allows Boulez to defy his own logic quite regularly: one analysis of the piece found that serialist principles hold for roughly 80% of the work.

The resulting music is difficult for listener and performers alike, particularly the singer, who has to cope with extremely awkward intervals. Boulez stated that the listener should not attempt to infer any interpretation of the poems through the music. Even if students do not particularly enjoy listening to this piece, it is a very good example of its style, and of the ways in which music can be extremely tightly organised.

It is not necessary to refer to a score to study this piece meaningfully, and there are plenty of recordings on YouTube. A useful brief introduction to Stockhausen and his music can be found here.

Stockhausen: *Gesang der Jünglinge*

It will be useful for students to have an example of electronic music to write about in exam answers, and *Gesang der Jünglinge* fulfils that purpose excellently – it is sometimes called the first masterpiece of electronic music. This piece was written at almost the same time as Boulez's *Le marteau sans maître*, and Stockhausen's approaches to organising his music are along the same meticulous lines as Boulez's.

In post-war Europe, wide access to recording technology, including easily edited magnetic tape, proved fertile ground for musical experimentation, particularly in France and Germany. In France, the principle of using manipulated recordings of real acoustic sounds (produced by instruments or voices) was known as **musique concrète,** while in Germany the emphasis tended to be on generating the sounds electronically from the outset, and the resulting music was known as **elektronische Musik.** In *Gesang der Jünglinge*, Stockhausen actually combines ideas from both schools of thought, using a recording of a treble singing text from the Biblical book of Daniel, together with electronically generated sine tones, clicks and filtered white noise.

The electronically generated sounds are carefully manipulated to match the sounds of the boy treble's voice, the recording of which has itself been heavily edited. All the sounds are organised in a way that bears striking similarities to Boulez's, with serialism applied to every possible aspect of the music: Stockhausen referred to this as **total serialism**.

MICRO-COMPOSITION

Ask students to create a tone-row with all 12 pitches of the chromatic scale: this in itself could follow a pattern (a certain number of semitones up or down between notes, for example). They should select some different timbres to use, and could even use sequencing software to open the range of available sounds right up, in order to create a final piece that has an *elektronische Musik* feel. Brainstorm all possible aspects of the music that could be serialised, and think about ways that these could be applied, perhaps using symmetry. Using the key editor of a sequencing program such as Logic or Cubase can help with creating musical patterns by making the whole process visual.

It is the process of serialising as many parameters of the music as possible here that is the important part for students: the icing on the cake would be to think about how to manage the series for maximum musical impact.

MINIMALISM

Steve Reich: *Electric Counterpoint*, third movement – fast

The main feature of minimalism as a whole is the idea of hypnotic repetition, which gradually evolves. The style is essentially tonal, and minimalist music is generally much easier on the ear than much of the avant-garde music from previous decades. However, the music is still tightly organised.

An excellent introduction to minimalist techniques as used by Steve Reich is to have a look at his *Clapping Music* from 1972. A score is freely available online here. It is minimalist first in its resources – simply two performers clapping. But is also minimalist in its economy of ideas: Clap 1's rhythm is unaltered throughout, while Clap 2's rhythm is displaced by a quaver each bar, until it comes all the way round to match up with Clap 1's rhythm at the end. This technique is known as **phase shifting.**

The same technique can be seen in *Electric Counterpoint*, together with others that are typical of the minimalist style. The use of technology – in this case pre-recorded guitar and bass guitar tracks, to be played on stage as a backing for the solo live guitarist – is another of Reich's signature techniques, which can be traced back to the *musique concrète* and *elektronische Musik* of the 1950s.

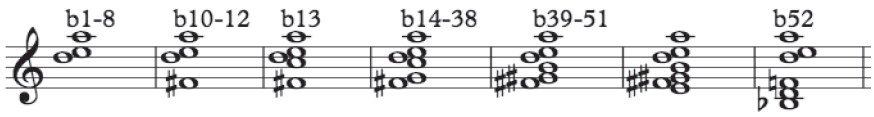
Guitar 1 (one of the pre-recorded tracks) plays the same ostinato throughout. Guitars 2, 3 and 4 play the same ostinato, with rhythmic displacement, exactly as in *Clapping Music*. The other main minimalist technique demonstrated is the use of **additive patterns**, which is shown as new parts come in with just three notes of the ostinato, gradually built up over successive repetitions to complete the pattern. The texture is varied by the chords played by guitars 5, 6 and 7, and by the various layers fading in and out.

More variety is provided by tonal shifts between E minor and C minor, and by the frisson of juxtaposing 3/2 and 12/8 time signatures: each has the same number of quavers in a bar, but by contrasting the different groupings of quavers, the 'counterpoint' of the title is achieved.

John Adams: *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*

It is a good idea to compare a piece of 'pure' minimalism such as *Electric Counterpoint* with a piece of post-minimalism – that is, music that uses some minimalist techniques, but often in a more dramatic way. John Adams's music fits right into this category, and this piece displays that style's defining characteristics: rhythmic drive, very broadly tonal harmony, and ostinatos.

The piece is unified and given forward momentum by a constant woodblock pulse. Against this, other rhythmic ostinatos collide in what can be called **rhythmic dissonance.** Harmonically, the piece is organised around collections of pitches, which evolve by the addition of new notes. Here is the harmonic framework of the opening section:



The addition of notes to the initial collection of D, E and A allows the music to develop harmonically over time without using any functional devices (ie tonic-dominant relationships). At bar 52, the music passes through what Adams calls a 'gate' into a new tonal area that leans towards B flat.

MICRO-COMPOSITION

Students can explore minimalist techniques relatively easily, especially if they use pitches from a pentatonic scale: the absence of semitones means that no harsh dissonance is possible, leaving them free to focus on textures and rhythms. More able students may be able to build in John Adams's technique of adding notes to the pitch set, and subtly change the tonal area by stealth.

Phase shifting can be achieved by copying Reich's technique of applying rhythmic displacement to one part

It is difficult to get hold of scores for Steve Reich's music. Because this piece was a set work for Edexcel's 'old' GCSE syllabus, it appears in the related anthology, which can now be bought second-hand for pennies. Alternatively, there is a YouTube video with score here.

while keeping another constant. The essential thing here is to have an initial rhythm that is interesting enough in itself: some syncopation is required, otherwise the rhythmic displacement will lose its impact. An easier way to create phase shifting is to create three ostinatos of different lengths, say 3, 4 and 5 beats long. These will go in and out of phase with each other purely by virtue of their length.

Once the ostinatos are created, additive and subtractive processes can be applied to vary the texture, bringing in layers gradually and making them fade away.

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

Composers in the last two or three decades have had unprecedented access to music from across time and locations, and technology that opens up all manner of new ways of composing. They are more likely than ever before to include a wide range of influences in their work, and for it therefore to be less possible to assign a particular stylistic label to it. Contemporary approaches are marked by their eclecticism: perhaps, in 50 years' time, the benefit of hindsight may enable a label to be ascribed to music of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, but we're not able to see this yet.

The works here have been selected as being representative of two contrasting approaches – and because the scores to both are included in Volume 3 of the *Norton Anthology of Western Music*.

POST-MODERNISM

Post-modernism is a difficult concept to pin down. The essential thing is that it is something that follows, and is a reaction to, modernism. In music, this includes an avoidance of the perceived elitism, or 'difficult' qualities, of modernist music, and can be seen as being embodied in minimalism: music that is easier to listen to, essentially tonal, and therefore more accessible.

Post-modern music is likely to be eclectic, possibly referencing other pieces of music, films, stories or ideas, and having a knowing sense of irony and scepticism. It may include a sense of iconoclasm, or deliberately breaking rules that were previously thought to be important.

So, is it a style of music? No. It is more a philosophy, a way of thinking, an approach. It characterises much of the music and culture of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The best way to understand it is to look at some examples.

Ligeti: Études, Book 2, No. 9 – 'Vertige'

Ligeti's early music is based on **micropolyphony** – this is similar to 'normal' polyphony, with independent musical lines, except that it is extremely dense, and the individual layers get lost in the overall sound, giving it a sense of gradual overall movement.

This piece demonstrates micropolyphony. It consists of repeating, rapidly descending chromatic scales, designed to melt together to create a continuous feeling of falling. This illusion, of everlasting falling (or rising) is known as the Shepard effect and is usually used in electronic music. Here Ligeti achieves the same effect on a piano, and as a result, the piece is phenomenally difficult to play.

Bright Sheng: *Seven Tunes Heard in China*

This piece combines ideas found in the Bach solo cello suites, a melody from the Qinghai province of China, and more general characteristics of traditional Chinese music. This combination of influences could be used as an example of post-modernism.

Features from Bach solo cello suites	Features of Chinese music
Dance-like rhythms **Double-stopping** **Motivic repetition** **Sequences** **Almost polyphonic texture**	Ornamentation Glissandos Free approach to metre Long notes that crescendo with intense vibrato Cello imitates the sound of Chinese instruments: the bowed erhu and plucked qin

MICRO-COMPOSITION

Students could exercise a post-modern approach to a small composition by deliberately combining features of two very contrasting styles, as Bright Sheng does in *Seven Tunes Heard in China*. To do this, they will need to be very clear about the features of each, perhaps by making a 'shopping list' of things to include, as shown in the table above.