

Douglas E. Woolley
Professor Herb Johnson
FA 112 Music Appreciation
11 May 2004

Development of Twentieth-Century Musical Composition

Music, by definition, is “an art of sound in time that expresses ideas and emotions in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, and dynamics” (*Music*). Although “music is probably as old as the history of the human race itself” (Kamien 87), the earliest reference to music is found in the Old Testament. Stradling and Kitchen state, “According to tradition Jubal, the son of Lamech, who ‘was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe’ (Gn. 4:21), was the inventor of music” (800). Although “Hebrew music was primarily vocal” (Unger 893), at least sixteen distinct musical instruments were utilized in the Bible (Foxvog and Kilmer 438). Music played an important role in Israel, Greece, and Rome, but notated music has only survived since the Middle Ages (Kamien 87). Beginning with Medieval period, western art music has been classified into stylistic periods: Middle Ages 500-1450, Renaissance 1450-1600, Baroque 1600-1750, Classical period 1750-1820, Romantic period 1820-1910, Twentieth century 1910-2000 (Ferris 63). Twentieth-century musical composition developed from a springboard of previous musical eras and in conjunction with contemporary western culture that can be exemplified by the musical philosophies and works of various modern composers.

Twentieth-century composition is the culmination of musical styles that preceded it. According to Ferris, a period’s style is the way in which the majority of outstanding artists of that time expressed their music, using variations of dynamics, form, texture, and degrees of dissonance (63). Music that is “restrained, objective, and emphasizing form and balance” is termed “classical in style” whereas music that is “emotional, dramatic, and more concerned with expression than with balance or formal design” is termed as “romantic” (Ferris 71). Pogue and Speck describe the changing styles of music as “an overreaction to the style of music before it” and as a pendulum, swinging from the “cool spiritualism of medieval and Renaissance music” to an “emotionally freer” Baroque style to the Classical period that “put a bridle on emotion” to the Romantic period that “burst violently out of that bridle” (35). Ferris believes these styles have “evolved in a logical way.” “Each age has taken what it could use from previous artistic styles and techniques and added characteristics that appealed to contemporary tastes” (73). “Naturally, since music reflects the social, economic, and religious climate in which it is conceived as well as the personal inclinations and artistic ideals of its creators, the music characteristic of one historical period differs in important respects from the music of another time” (Ferris 63). Summing up, Ferris states, “Classicism and romanticism alternately dominated artistic expression in Western culture until the twentieth century, which produced significant works in both styles” (71).

Neoclassicism was predominant between World War I and II, from 1920 to the 1940s, while romanticism was “evident in many works composed before, during and since that period” even though the Romantic style died out at the beginning of the twentieth century (Ferris 351). Due to the “political, social, and economic problem of the 1920s”, composers moved “away from the excesses of Romanticism” and embraced Neoclassicism, marked by emotional restraint, balance and clarity (Ferris 342). Stravinsky’s philosophy was “to build a new music on eighteenth-century classicism” (Kamien 467-68) and thus composed the ballet *Pulcinella*. He is also famous for his ballet *The Rite of Spring*, exemplifying primitivism. Prokofiev was restricted in Russia from expressing religious

fervor, feelings for sad Russian peasants, and experimentalism, so he decided to write a “symphony as Haydn would have written it in the twentieth century”, thus he composed *Symphony no. 1* (Ferris 343-44). Paul Hindemith’s compositional philosophy was that art music “would exist not only for its own sake but also to serve some need or desire of society” (Ferris 346). He believed music was meant for practical use, termed by the German word “Gebrauchsmusik.” He also believed in the “ancient Greek philosophy of ‘the doctrine of ethos’” (Verble 124). Hindemith composed *Little Chamber Music*. Since America is not restricted by governmental constraints concerning music, a full gamut of emotionally expressive music has been composed with a twentieth-century style, called Neoromanticism. Gian-Carlo Menotti’s music, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, “is exemplary of warm, emotional expression” (Verble 124). Samuel Barber wrote the expressive composition *Adagio for Strings*. According to Ferris, “Barber represents a long line of Americans who continued to write in the Neoromantic style” (351). Ferris believes that “there has been a significant return to classicism” in music (308), though he and Verble believe that “composers have not observed this return with any amount of uniformity” (94).

The beginning of the stylistic period called “Twentieth century” was arbitrarily set at 1910 by Ferris (304) and set at 1900 by Kamien (438). Unlike previous stylistic periods, “it is not possible . . . to apply one label to the music” of the twentieth century (Ferris 275). Danziger says that composers at this time felt the need to have their “own unique style” which also changed with each new piece (*Revelation* 173). “By ‘twentieth century music’ we refer to the multiplicity of styles coexisting over the last ninety years or so” (Ferris 304). Kamien states that the enormous variety of music in the twentieth century is reflective of the “diversity of life” that resulted from the increase in freedom that people had to make choices of “where to live, how to earn a living, and how to spend their time” (441). Cultural inventions such as, “the automobile, airplane, telephone, phonograph, movies, and radio all made the world more accessible and expanded the range of experiences” (441). Also, “Social and political events vitally affected the arts throughout the twentieth century” (Ferris 275). Musical composition was often influenced by the culture surrounding the life of a composer. Some of the cultural developments that influenced composers include: analysis of folk and popular music, exposure to non-Western music, more acceptance of women and African American composers, development of jazz, technological developments, and development of the twelve-tone technique.

“Elements of folk and popular music were often incorporated within personal styles. . . . Folk music was studied more systematically than before, partly because scholars could now record the actual sounds of peasant songs” (Kamien 441). “As a young man [Bela] Bartok became fascinated with the folk and peasant music of his native land and embarked on a major project to collect and preserve what he felt were imminently disappearing examples of indigenous Hungarian music” (Danziger *Revelation* 183). According to Danziger, Bartok succeeded in producing music that sounded Hungarian but did not use “actual folk material,” in accordance with his composition philosophy: “assimilate the idiom of peasant music so completely that he is able to forget all about it and use it as his mother tongue” (*Revelation* 183). Some of his works include *Allegro barbaro*, *Mikrokosmos*, and *Piano Concerto no. 3*. Bartok’s efforts also “helped to carry the interest of nationalism from the Romantic era right into the 20th century” (Verble 122). For a lifetime, Englishman Ralph Williams collected “English folk music from the rural countryside” and “this contact with British folk song seemed to inspire his own creative powers” (Kavanaugh 171). His first masterpiece, the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, exemplifies his “love for his country’s musical past” (171). “Other composers stimulated by folklore were Stravinsky, who drew on the folk songs of his native Russia; and Charles Ives, who used American revival hymns, ragtime, and

patriotic songs” (Kamien 441). Kavanaugh documents, “Ives frequented the outdoor revivals of his time, and their rugged, homespun music affected him deeply” (182). An example of incorporating this cultural aspect into his composition is his art song, “At the River.” Integrating the arts was Ives’s philosophy for composition. “His *Concord Sonata* for piano is one such work in which each movement is dedicated to a different American, transcendentalist writer” (Verble 112).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, “cultural and commercial exchanges increased between Europe and other continents, bringing with them unusual-sounding instruments that composers began to work into their compositions” (Plotkin 399). For example, starting with the 1889 World Exposition in Paris, musicians came together from many parts of the world, uniting Western and non-Western composers. Also, in the early twentieth century many composers from Russia and Eastern Europe “left their countries for political asylum in Western Europe” (Verble 100). Plotkin states, “The period between the two wars saw many composers and musicians seek refuge in the United States (25). Western composers were influenced by the sounds they heard when they traveled abroad and by the sounds they heard by immigrants to their own country. “Debussy was strongly influenced by sounds brought to Paris from the Far East. Strange, oriental sounding scales and an exotic, Asian feeling found their way into much of what he wrote” (Danziger *Revelation* 194). One of his famous masterworks is *Prelude to “The Afternoon of a Faun.”* Henry Cowell, born in California, “loved the Chinese music he heard in the homes of his Chinese neighbors” (Ferris 317). “Recognizing the wide range of timbres offered by instruments of China, Japan, India, and other non-Western cultures, he became one of the first Western musicians to advocate merging Eastern with Western sounds” (317-18). “Cowell’s most unique contribution to piano performance was to expand the range of timbres that could be produced by a grand piano” (Verble 112). Using string-playing techniques described in Chinese manuals, Cowell would stroke, pluck, strike, or strum the “strings with the hands, the fingernails or various implements to produce an enormous variety of sounds” (Ferris 317). One such piece of his is entitled, “The Banshee.”

During the twentieth century, there has been increased acceptance among society for the public involvement of women and African Americans in musical composition. According to Verble, “Women are today filling musical roles such as performer, entertainer, conductor, and composer which were once exclusive to men” (123). Kamien lists some famous examples of twentieth-century female composers, including Amy Beach, Ruth Crawford-Seeger, Miriam Gideon, Vivian Fine, and Pauline Oliveros (451). “American composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich (b. 1939) won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Music for her *Symphony No. 1*” (Kamien 560). William Grant Still “became the first black American to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra and the first to have an opera produced by a major American company” (Ferris 341). In 1931, his work *Afro-American Symphony* included definite African American effects, such as a banjo. The first movement of this work exemplified Still’s philosophy “to demonstrate that the blues, so often considered a lowly expression, could be elevated to the highest musical level” (Kamien 529). Having composed and played “Maple Leaf Rag,” Scott Joplin was the king of ragtime who also composed the opera *Treemonisha*, according to his philosophy “that African Americans must pursue education as a path toward prosperity and independence” (Ferris 360). Rags coupled with improvisations led to jazz within the African American community.

“Jazz . . . originated in America and is considered representative of the American personality or soul. Its roots lie in African cultures, but black Americans created the important pre-jazz styles—ragtime and the blues—and developed jazz itself in the early years of the twentieth century.” George Gershwin was responsible for making jazz a legitimate form of composition after completing his most famous work, *Rhapsody in Blue*. Later, he also wrote the opera *Porgy and Bess*, portraying the

“lives of poor black people in Charleston, South Carolina” (Kamien 523). Several European composers incorporated jazz into some of their own compositions including Darius Milhaud, Igor Stravinsky, Bela Bartok, and Maurice Ravel (Ferris 378). “The introduction of long-playing records [LPs] in 1948 inspired more extended jazz compositions and improvisations” that lasted five to fifteen minutes, since composers were no longer limited to the three minute limit of 78-rpm records (Kamien 592). The LP’s permitted thirty or more minutes of music on one side, and later around 1980, a CD was used to store about seventy-five minutes of music, thanks to advancing technology (Plotkin 36-37).

With the technological developments in the 1950s and 1960s of electronic sound synthesizers, tape studios, magnetic recording tapes, and computers, potentially unlimited new sounds could be produced and used in composition (Kamien 542). Edgard Varese had a philosophy that advocated the “liberation of sound . . . the right to make music with any and all sounds” (Kamien 544) that only became a reality with these advances in technology (Ferris 319). *Ionisation* is Varese’s most famous composition. Milton Babbitt contributed toward the development of the first American synthesizer and accomplished his idea “to invent, produce, and record exactly the sounds he desired” (Verble 113). In Babbitt’s *Ensemble for Synthesizer*, finished in 1964, “all the sounds in this music were created and controlled by the synthesizer” (Verble 113).

Possibly the most influential development of the twentieth century was Arnold Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique that abandoned the traditional tonal system. Schoenberg decided to abandon tonality and communicate his principles of Expressionism, an emotional “artistic movement influenced by the growing despair of Europe leading up to World War I” (Verble 91). Schoenberg’s philosophy was that “music had to continually evolve” and all the notes of the chromatic scale should be used to accomplish this (Verble 92) and dissonances should be “emancipated” from having to be resolved to consonances (Kamien 485). Schoenberg invented his twelve-tone technique that replaced “tonal relationships with an even more highly structured system of organization” where the twelve pitches are played with “equal importance” and “no tone is repeated . . . until the other eleven have been used in proper order, so that no tone is emphasized or made to sound like a tonic” (Ferris 310). A great example of atonal music is his song cycle *Peirrot Lunaire*. Alban Berg and Anton Webern learned from Schoenberg and utilized his system. Many composers throughout the world, especially after World War II, have incorporated Schoenberg’s culturally significant twelve-tone system into their own revolutionary compositions (Kamien 484).

The twentieth century has produced a wide variety of musical composition that has had a close relationship with the development of contemporary western culture, such as drawing fresh from the pinnacle of previous classical and romantic styles, analysis of folk and popular music, exposure to non-Western music, more acceptances of women and African American composers, development of jazz, technological developments, and development of the twelve-tone technique. “Musical style”, Kamien states, “is shaped by political, economic, social, and intellectual developments” (87). Most twentieth-century music “falls within the realm of tonality” and “appeals to the vast, general, listening public,” yet other recent music has been composed by revolutionaries that have abandoned traditional compositional methods of the past to explore new methods such as atonality (Verble 91). Plotkin points out that in the 1960s, and even today, a number of people have viewed some of the new music as “unsavory or weird” (532). Randy Verble says that music from revolutionary composers, or experimentalists, may “challenge” a person’s “very concept of music” (116). Gaining a greater understanding of the cultural background and ideas that influenced a composer’s music helps one to appreciate challenging music and all other music. In Danziger’s novel, *The Musical Ascent of Herman Being*, he shares his secret to appreciating art music that

applies also to the many varieties of twentieth-century compositions: “Repeated listening” to the same music without “forming a judgment on the first hearing” (50-52).

Works Cited

- Danziger, Robert. *The Musical Ascent of Herman Being: A How-To Novel*. Newly rev. ed. Modesto, CA: Jordon Press, 1995.
- . *The Revelation of Music: Learning to Love the Classics*. New Haven: Jordon Press, 1991.
- Ferris, Jean. *Music: The Art of Listening*. 6th. ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003.
- Foxvog D. A., and A. D. Kilmer. "Music." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Ed. G. W. Bromiley. Fully Revised. Vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986. 4 vols.
- Kamien, Roger. *Music: An Appreciation*. 7th. ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
- Kavanaugh, Patrick. *Spiritual Lives of the Great Composers*. Rev. and Expanded. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.
- "Music." *Random House Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. New York: Random House, 1991.
- Plotkin, Fred. *Classical Music 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Classical Music*. New York: Hyperion, 2002.
- Pogue, David, and Scott Speck. *Classical Music for Dummies*. Foster City, CA: IDG Books Worldwide, 1997.
- Stradling, D. G., and K. A. Kitchen. "Music and Musical Instruments." *New Bible Dictionary*. Ed. J. D. Douglas. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982.
- Unger, Merrill F. "Music." *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Ed. R. K. Harrison. Chicago: Moody Press, 1988.
- Verble, Randy. *Music Appreciation Study Guide*. Minneapolis: North Central Bible College, 1992.