

# Western art music style and techniques music essay



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Use this statement and its possible implications as a starting-point for discussion of the principal developments in style and techniques of western art music during the first years of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Your discussion should centre on an analytical comparison of two works.

As the 19th century moved into its second half, many social, political and economic changes set in motion in the post-Napoleonic period became entrenched. The dramatic increase in musical education brought a still wilder sophisticated audience, and many composers took advantage of the greater regularity of concert life, and the greater financial and technical resources available. During this period, some composers created styles and forms associated with their national folk cultures. The notion that there were “German” and “Italian” styles had long been established in writing on music, but the late 19th century saw the rise of nationalist Russian style. Some composers were expressively nationalistic in their objectives, seeking to rediscover their country’s national identity in the face of occupation or oppression such as Antonin Dvorak and Boheminas Bedrich.

At the turn of the early 20th century composers continued to work in forms and in a musical language that derived itself from that of the 19th century, however, the influence of modernism in music was becoming increasingly prominent. This period was extremely varied stylistically and there was a complete break down of tonality. Indeed as Eric Salzman stated “the tonal tradition in its most typical forms is Italo-German, and can be said to have declined in Central Europe by virtue of its own inner, contrapuntal, chromatic development. Elsewhere this tonal tradition was much weaker....”

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Composers such as Gustav Mahler and Jean Sibelius were pushing the bounds of post Romantic Symphonic writing. At the same time, the impressionist movement, spearheaded by Claude Debussy, was being developed in France. Additionally, many composers reacted to the Post Romantic and Impressionist styles and moved in quite different directions. In Vienna, Arnold Schoenberg developed atonality, out of expressionism that arose in the early part of the 20th century. He later developed the twelve tone technique which was developed further by his disciples- Alban Berg and Anton Webern (Burkholder, 2009).

The other important revolution came in after the First World War. Many composers after this war started returning to previous centuries for their inspiration and wrote works that drew elements such as form, harmony melody and structure from classical and baroque period. This type of music thus became labelled neoclassicism and Igor Stravinsky was the leading composer of neoclassical music. Indeed late 19th century and early 20th was a period of great revolution and the first part of the following essay is going to discuss the principal developments in style and techniques of Western art music during the last years of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the second part of the essay is going to focus on an analytical comparison of two works

### **Part one.**

The appearance of impressionism, expressionism, atonality, 12 note music and neoclassicism represent the major developments of late 19th century and earlier 20th century.

## **Impressionism**

Throughout history, art and music have developed in parallel with each other. The impressionist movement is not exception. Impressionism in art began in France near the end of the 19th century. Impressionist painters did not seek to show reality in the classical sense of a picture perfect image; instead, they emphasized light and colour to give an overall “impression” of their subjects. (Kamien, 2004)

Much in the same way, Impressionist music aims to create descriptive impressions, not necessarily to draw clear pictures. The music is not designed to explicitly describe anything, but rather to create a mood or atmosphere. This is done through almost every nature, often repeated in different contexts to different moods. In terms of colour, notes are often drawn from scale system other than the traditional major and minor. These include pentatonic, whole tone, or other exotic scales. The use of harmony was a major part of impressionism. Impressionists did not use chords in the traditional way. For nearly the entire history of western music, chords had been used to build and relieve tension. However, the chord used in impressionist music sometimes serves no harmonic purpose in the traditional sense; these chords set the joyful colour and mood of the piece.

Creative exploration of musical timbre via orchestra certainly predates the impressionist period, but it was this generation that opened up timbre as a first-tier parameter, to be exploited and pursued in its own right (Gasser, 1994). In orchestral works such as Debussy's *La Mer* and Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe*, unusual usage or combinations of instruments, particularly at soft dynamic levels, are a common feature and give the works a distinctly  
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“coloristic” sound that would open up new possibilities to later composers. Even in works for solo piano – such as Debussy’s Preludes – new timbres are explored via extremes of register, as well as by unique and “colourful” approaches to harmony and melody. Indeed, it is in the realm of harmony that the Impressionist “sound” is most readily identified: via such techniques as parallel triads, whole-tone scales, blurring of tonal identity, extended or chromatic chords. Above all, the impressionist musical language, techniques, and aesthetic had a direct and profound influence on the revolutionary Modern period that followed.

## **Expressionism**

Expressionism was a prominent artistic trend associated especially with Austria and Germany before, during, and immediately after World War I. This was around the time that people were feeling for fear, anger, death and isolation. In some measure a reaction against the perceived passive nature of impressionism, it emphasised an eruptive immediacy of expressive feeling. It also distorted reality for an emotional effect (Trinh, 2002).

Expressionism is the direct opposite of impressionism. Unlike impressionism, its goals were not to create passive impressions and moods, but to strongly express intense feelings and emotions. The main difference is that expressionism puts the emotional expression above everything else. While romantics (such as Robert Schumann or Johannes Brahms) also showed emotion in their music, they did so while still following traditional methods of writing music. On the other side, expressionists completely ignored tradition and focused on expressing emotions at all costs. For this reason,

expressionistic music is often dissonant, fragmented, and densely written  
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(Fanning, 2001). For comparison, an impressionist work portrays what is in the world around the composer: it creates an impression of what is being seen. An expressionist work, on the other hand, portrays what is going on inside the composer's mind: it is an expression of what is being felt.

The three central figures of musical expressionism from the second Viennese school are Arnold Schoenberg and his pupils, Anton Webern and Alban Berg. It can be said that expressionism is primarily identified with Arnold Schoenberg's "free atonal" period (1908-1921), in particular the second string quartet (1907-08) in which each of the four movements gets progressively less tonal. The third movement is arguably atonal and the introduction to the final is very chromatic, and features a soprano singing, taken from a poem by Stefan George. This may be representative of Schoenberg entering the "new world" of atonality. In 1909, Schoenberg composed one piece called monodrama *Erwartung*; this is a thirty minutes, highly expressionist work in which atonal music accompanies a musical drama centred around a nameless woman.

Webern's music was close in style to Schoenberg's expressionism for only a short while. His *Five Pieces for Orchestra* (1911-19) is an example of his expressionist output. Schoenberg's other student Berg's major contribution to this genre is the opera *Wozzeck*, composed between 1914-25. The opera is highly expressionist in subject material in that it expressed mental anguish and suffering and is not objective, presented, as it is, largely from *Wozzeck*'s point of view, but it presents this expressionism with a clearly constructed form. Expressionism is an important movement that paved a way to atonality and 12 note music.

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## **Atonality and 12 note music**

While music without tonal centre had been written previously, for example Franz Liszt's *Bagatelle sans tonalite* of 1885, it is with the 20th century that the term atonality began to be applied to pieces, particularly those written by Arnold Schoenberg and the second Viennese School. This situation had come about historically through the increasing use over the course of the 19th century of ambiguous chords, less probable harmonic inflections, and the more unusual melodic and rhythmic inflections possible within the style of tonal music. There was a concomitant loosening of the syntactical bonds through which tones and harmonies had related to one another (Beach, 1983).

The first phase, known as "free atonality", involved a conscious attempt to avoid traditional diatonic harmony. Works of this period include the opera *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg which will be talked in details in the later part of this essay. The second phase, begun after World War I, was exemplified by attempts to create a systematic means of composing without tonality, most famously the method of composing with 12 tones or the 12 tone techniques. This period includes Schoenberg's *Piano Concerto*. Indeed this 12 tone technique was devised by Arnold Schoenberg and it is a means of ensuring that all 12 notes of the chromatic scale are sounded as often as one another in a piece of music while preventing the emphasis of any through the use of tone rows, and ordering of the 12 pitches. All 12 notes are thus given more or less equal importance, and the music avoids being in a key.

## **Neoclassicism**

Neoclassicism in music was a 20th century development, particularly current in the period between the two World Wars, in which composers drew inspiration from music of the 18th century. Smaller, sparer, more orderly was conceived of as the response to the overwrought emotionalism which many felt had herded people into the trenches. Since economics also favoured smaller ensembles, the search for doing “ more with less” took on a practical imperative as well (Albright, 2004).

Neoclassicism can be seen as a reaction against the prevailing trend of 19th century Romanticism to sacrifice internal balance and order in favour of more overtly emotional writing. Neoclassicism makes a return to balanced forms and often emotional restraint, as well as 18th century compositional processes and techniques. However, in the use of modern instrumental resources such as the full orchestra, which had greatly expanded since the 18th century, and advanced harmony, neoclassical works are distinctly 20th century.

Neoclassicism had two distinct national lines of development, French which was represented by Igor Stravinsky, and German which was represented by Paul Hindemith. Igor Stravinsky's first foray into the style began in 1910-20 when he composed his ballet *Pulcinella*, using themes which he believed to be by Giovanni Pergolesi (Walsh 2001, 8). Representing the German strain of neoclassicism was Paul Hindemith, who produced chamber music, orchestral works, and operas in heavily contrapuntal, chromatically infected style. Even the atonal school, represented by Arnold Schoenberg, was not unaffected by neoclassical ideas. The forms of Arnold Schoenberg's works after 1920, have <https://assignbuster.com/western-art-music-style-and-techniques-music-essay/>



been described as “openly neoclassical”, and represent an effort to integrate the advances of 1908-1913 with the inheritance of the 18th and 19th centuries (Rosen 1975, 70-73).

## **Part two**

Claude Debussy is one of the major representatives of impressionism and his works has made a great influence in modern period. Alban Berge with his work Wozzeck laid the foundation for the creation of expressionism and atonality.

### **Claude Debussy and his works**

Claude Debussy is a French composer who founded the impressionist school of music. Debussy's music was brief, elegant, and rather cold, unlike the period before, which held sentimental music. Debussy's vision first emerged in his 1894 prelude to the afternoon a faun, an exquisitely colourful ten minuets mystical evocation of languid erotic longings on a sultry afternoon. It has often been remarked that its meandering opening flute solo breathed new life into the art of music. In retrospect, the prelude is one of turning points in the history of aesthetics. His other work, Nuages No. 1 from Nocturnes shows the interaction of timbre with motive, scale types and other elements to create a musical image. He used pattern of fifth, third to convey moving cloud and the gradual disappearing of the pattern gives the impression of dispersing cloud.

### **La Mer**

La Mer is not only the title of Debussy's orchestral masterwork, but an apt metaphor for his innovative art. La Mer was more evocative and less literal,

because Debussy wrote it in landlocked Burgundy, distilling memories of his childhood and holidays at the shore into an intense vision of the essence of the sea rather than a mere portrait (Gutmann, 2006). The work is in symphony form yet the first movement does not adhere to typical sonata allegro form and Debussy utilizes uses of motifs and imaginative orchestral writing skills to conjure various moods and impressions of the sea throughout the three movements. The three movements work also bears titles; the first movement is called " from dawn to noon on the sea". This movement develops from short thematic fragments above muted strings to a wonderful evocation of the swelling of waves, as a theme for divided cellos swells and subsides, subtle echoed by horns and timpani. Various brief melodies detach themselves from the complex texture, melodies that Debussy will later develop in the final movement. At present however, his is content to let his movement surge and ebb, ending with a final brass chorus that swells from fortissimo back to piano (Guttman, 2006).

The second movement is called " play of the waves". It offers many rapid, brilliant figured from various sections of the orchestra. Its lighter, percussive texture includes harp and xylophone, suggesting the sparkle of light on wave. The swirling motion of this movement does not resolve, but dies away, leading us to an equally restrained opening of the final movement. But where the second movement was playful, the third movement- " the dialog of the wind and the sea" is powerful and urgent. In its orchestration Debussy gives us some of his most charming and exotic colours, such as the passage for Celeste, a toy piano that sounds like bells, reminiscent of a playful breeze. And he give some of his most powerful moments, like the stuttering

trumpets whirling amidst the orchestra's sea-surge that climax to the ending (Derrickson, 2006).

## **Alban berg and his work Wozzeck**

Alban Maria Johannes Berg (1885 - 1935) was an Austrian composer. He was a member of the Second Viennese School with Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern, and produced compositions that combined Mahlerian Romanticism with a personal adaptation of Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique. His *Wozzeck* (1922) is considered by some scholars to be the greatest opera of the 20th century. It is based upon 23 unordered, unfinished fragments of a play, *Woyzeck* (1837), written by the German writer, Georg Buchner (1813-1837) (Solomon, 2004).

Berg's opera presents us with a "heightened and distorted" actuality rather than with a documentary realism. There is no attempt to portray a realistic image of the person or the environment. Neither is there any attempt to portray the external impression of the scene, as in one by an impressionist artist such as Debussy. Instead the impressionist sees a world distorted by the intense inner emotion of the scream. This world is subjective rather than objective. Subjectivity is the perspective of Berg's opera—a world transformed by the perception of its primary subject, the oppressed under class, as represented in the character of Wozzeck. One remarkable example of this inner perspective occurs at the end of the act III, scene 4, where Wozzeck drowns in a blood-red pool while searching for the murder weapon. This music expresses this scene in an unusual way. Traditionally, sinking would be cast in descending musical figures, as Wozzeck descends deeper and deep into the pool. Instead we hear ascending scales of parallel seconds, <https://assignbuster.com/western-art-music-style-and-techniques-music-essay/>

fourths and triads. This surprising reversal of perspective can only be Wozzeck's view of the water rising around him as he drowns (Solomon, 2004).

Another example of extreme subjectivity is found in the preceding scene, when Wozzeck, fleeing from his horrific act, wanders into a local tavern where people are drinking, singing, and dancing a bizarre polka. It is not a normal dance, but one highly distorted by atonal harmonies. It is reminiscent of the distorted waltz heard in Act II scene 4, when Wozzeck discovered Marie dancing lustfully with the Drum Major. Now he tried to appease his misery by drinking, singing and carousing with a bar maid. The song is a strange one about dresses too lovely for a servant, reflecting the common theme of oppression although diatonic; it is surrounded by atonal harmonies, which function to distort any resemblance of key.

The greatest example of heightened expressionism occurs in the drowning scene of Act III scene 4. Escaping from the tavern, Wozzeck is fearfully paranoid of being discovered. As he frantically searches for the knife, he begins to hallucinate, "Alles still und tot", he exclaims in Sprechstimme. Berg continually uses atonality for the expression of Wozzeck hallucinations, psychosis, and alienation. Additionally, he used atonality as a way to distort and magnify madness and abnormality, which Buchner believed was the result of the way that the rich and powerful controlled and exploited the poor. Apart from all that, Berg also used the Wagnerian principle of the leitmotif throughout the opera. These are short musical fragments that serve as musical symbols of the characters, actions, moods, and ideas that occur and recur in the drama. For example, when the Captain uses the word "<https://assignbuster.com/western-art-music-style-and-techniques-music-essay/>

angst” we hear a trembling tremolo in the cellos and timpani. The same tremolo appears with the word “ shudder” in Act I.

This work Wozzeck is truly an amazing work in which the expressionist language of the first decades of the 20th century was peculiarly well suited to deal with such extreme mental and emotional states.

## **Conclusion**

Late 19th century and early 20th century was an important period of transformation into the late 20th century. The impressionism, expressionism, atonality, 12 notes music and neoclassicism have all influenced composers in later centuries. In addition, the music of all composers discussed in this essay has found a growing and apparent permanent niche in the repertoire. All are performed and recorded more and more, and interest in their music has tended to increase with every passing decade (Burkholder, 2009).