

Music in the 20th century



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The 20th century is described as the period from 1900-1999, however, there is an inconsistency with the dates allocated to this period of music (20th century music). Most people believe the dates to be 1900-1940. This is because when people refer to 20th century music, they are referring to 20th century “classical” music (as opposed to jazz, rock, pop etc.). This period (1900-1940) is when the main works of the era were composed. There were many countries involved in the development of this era. Countries such as Germany and Russia (influenced neoclassicism) and France (influenced impressionism). Other areas, such as Argentina, Brazil and Latin America produced some important composers. Prominent composers in this era include; Igor Stravinsky, Claude Debussy, George Gershwin, Bela Bartok and Arnold Schoenberg.

Although music from the 20th century is vastly different from previous eras, the composers were still influenced by elements of the past. They used a combination these elements and the other elements introduced in this era to create their own sound. There are five basic categories to describe the musical elements of 20th century music. These are melody, rhythm, harmony, texture and timbre/instrumentation. The melodies were wide-ranging, contained wide-leaps (much less vocal-centric), and were unbalanced and unpredictable. There was much less emphasis put on the melody and this meant the rhythms became more important. This is different from the previous eras except for the fact that the Baroque and Romantic eras also had hard-to-remember melodies. The rhythms in 20th century music became more complex. There were frequent tempo changes and the music used polyrhythms and other exciting and different rhythmic

techniques. These polyrhythms can be seen in Charles Ives' music. As mentioned before, there was more emphasis on rhythm in this era compared to the previous eras. The rhythms were also quite unpredictable. Other than that, these elements are quite similar to the romantic era and quite different to the classical era (steady tempo etc.). There were a few new harmonic techniques introduced in this era. These include the fourth chord (notes a fourth apart), the polychord (two chords played at the same time) and tone clusters. With regards to key, there was an increase in atonal (no home key) and polytonal (more than one home key) music and also the introduction of the 12-tone technique. There was an uncontrolled emphasis on dissonance and dissonant chords, similar to the romantic era, except dissonance in the 20th century was used way more frequently. This created a constant clashing sound/feel in the music that was almost unheard of in the classical and Baroque eras. The texture of this era was polyphonic and contrapuntal as opposed to homophonic. There was more of an emphasis on increasing tonal range and on percussion and wind instruments as opposed to string instruments as seen in the previous eras. Their role was changed to that of a more percussive one, as seen in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Electronic instruments were also sometimes used.

This era was a time of revolt and change. Like any other period it is a change as a reaction to the previous ideas of the previous eras. At first these styles were not received well (causing riots at concerts), but eventually, people got used to the unconventional style of this era. It is quite different to the periods before it. The developments in this era include: more electronic instruments being used and developments in compositional techniques that

completely disregarded previous rules or systems (while sometimes using elements for the previous eras). This can be seen in the development of the harmonic techniques. It was basically a time where each composer could experiment and create their own style and sound (e. g use of whole-tone and pentatonic scales). This was because they did not have to follow existing rules set out for them, like in the baroque and classical periods.

Impressionism, as the name suggests, focuses on the impression of an idea that a piece of music evokes rather than having a clear description. This creates a soft, subtle, almost dream-like effect. The music has a colourful texture and uses unusual scales such as the whole-tone scale. It was influenced by the impressionist movement in France, which was an artistic movement. Many of the composers were influenced by the nature of the paintings themselves. Some say this movement was a reaction to late romanticism. Composers within the genre preferred to use short genres and forms such as preludes, nocturnes and arabesques. A prominent composer in this style is French composer, Claude Debussy. You can clearly see elements of impressionism in his composition, *Clair De Lune* from *Suite Bergamasque* . The piece has an overall dream-like effect and Debussy experiments with non-functional harmony. Even though it opens and closes with the tonic chord of D flat major, the root key throughout the piece is unclear. There is a presence of dissonance and the rhythms are relatively complex. As mentioned before there is a use of unconventional harmony.

Expressionism is extremely emotionally driven. It acts as reaction to the composer's subconscious mind." It was influenced/started by Van Gogh's paintings. The music is not meant to be " pretty" or " pleasing to the ear .

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This is why some say it is a reaction to this positive characteristic of Impressionism. The music is very expressive, similar to the romantic period, so there are contrasts in dynamics and tempo. The melodies are also unbalanced with wide-leaps and complex rhythms. There is still a presence of dissonance and tonality has also basically been terminated. Some genres within this style include orchestral pieces and dramas such as operas, melodramas and one-act dramas. This was probably a popular genre because dramas are sure to evoke the strong emotion the music suggests. A prominent composer in this genre is Austrian composer, Arnold Schoenberg. He influenced the development of atonality and 12-tone technique. Many elements of expressionism can be seen in his composition, *Erwartung Op. 17* (1909). This composition is a score for his one-act drama, *Erwartung*. The music of the orchestra perfectly reflects the strong emotions of the main character (when she finds her dead lover) and the depressing story line, which supposedly has elements of dirty realism. This composition has no overall musical, rhythmic, melodic and harmonic structure (it is through-composed). It is atonal, as most expressionist music is, and it is still quite expressive.

Neoclassicism is more “structural” than impressionism and expressionism. It is more balanced and places more emphasis on emotional restriction. This was influenced by the elements of the classical period and that is why it is called Neoclassicism. It was a reaction to the emotionally driven romanticism and expressionism periods. Germany and France were involved with the development of this style because of the composers it produced. Even though there was more structure, there were still elements of 20th music,

such as complex/exciting rhythmic aspects. Similar to the classical period, genres within this style include symphonies, operas, chamber music, concerto grosso, fugue etc. A prominent composer within this style is Igor Stravinsky. He is a Russian composer who converted to this style after the 1920s. It is said that his opera, *The Rake's Progress*, was the composition that concluded his Neoclassicism. This opera was set in the 18th century; therefore it gave way for classical elements in the music to be displayed. It is a 3-act opera that is based on the legend of Faust. Stravinsky uses counterpoint in this opera which indicates a contrapuntal texture. As with most of Stravinsky's works, the rhythms relatively energetic and there is a melodic and harmonic diversity.

The 20th century was a time of change and experimentation and 20th century music reflects that. The many styles and techniques that have developed from this one era and the non-existent limits that were put into place for composers reflects just how less structured the music was compared to the previous eras of music.

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