

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2022

Prof. Smey

Class 25, Wednesday May 4

In this class we tackled the Modern era in Classical music. We listened to some of the more “mainstream” Modernist composers – Debussy, Stravinsky, Bartok and Copland. Next time we’ll listen to more radical composers who make an even more decisive break with the past.

The Modern Era in Classical Music (1908-1968)

General Background

By the end of the 1800s society is starting to transform into what we know today. The 1880s are the **Age of Invention**, and we see the development of the electric light bulb, phonograph, telephone, automobile, et cetera. The 1800s also saw the **rapid growth of cities** with all the differences urban life brings.

As a result, the Romantic focus on individual, subjective experiences and intense emotions makes way for a more impersonal era, one that is obsessed with technical progress. Every artist is also expected to act as a sort of inventor, changing the very fabric of music (or art, or literature) in order to come up with a unique style.

In class we looked at the radical new movements in painting -- each artist is looking for new, interesting ways to manipulate paint. We considered Monet, Picasso, Matisse, and Kandinsky. Kandinsky in particular was the first artist to achieve total (or near-total) *abstraction*, making works that don’t seem to represent any specific, real-life thing at all, but rather are intended to explore color and shape by themselves.

We briefly considered the move towards abstraction in literature as well, citing influential early-20th-century writers such as Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein. I showed an excerpt from Stein’s “Sacred Emily” [1913] where she famously wrote “A rose is a rose is a rose.”

Finally, **World War I** (1914-1918) had a profound influence on general attitudes and philosophy, as Europe was embroiled in a massive conflict that seemed pointless and arbitrary. People were shocked by new horrors of modern warfare such as machine guns and chemical weapons. This experience burned away any remaining Romantic notions of human nature – the Romantics believed that one could find the truth through introspection, by simply looking deep inside one’s self. But now people began to question whether mankind is good at all, and the arts took on a very dark and pessimistic character.

Changes in music – everything is questioned

In the Modern era basically any dimension of music can be totally reinvented. The familiar chords such as the major and minor triads can be thrown out in favor of new, dissonant combinations of notes. Many composers look for new ways to write in a key, or even discard the idea that there should be any basic scale or home note at all (a development known as “**atonal**” music.) In part inspired by developments in Ragtime and Jazz (as well as other musics from other parts of the world, like Indonesia) composers introduce new metric patterns and new kinds of rhythmic complexity. The choice of instruments and even the very notion of a normal musical texture are all open to revision.

French “Impressionism” in the 1890s

Hopefully you can remember back to when we did a lesson on Richard Wagner, who was the dominant figure of the late romantic period. He created massively long, loud, slow-moving, and complex operas that surpassed anything that had ever been done. It was difficult for other composers to compete with this – some (like Anton Bruckner and Gustav Mahler) followed in his footsteps and created similarly massive works, but others struggled to “stand out” against such aggressive music.

In the 1880s and 90s, however, French artists and composers cultivated their own aesthetic which was known as *Impressionism*, and in many ways it was a reaction to the values of German and Austrian culture. Rather than trying to be overpowering, Impressionism pulls back. It is more restrained, gentle, detached, and somewhat abstract.

The Impressionist movement starts in painting, actually. Rather than striving for photographic realism, French painters start “playing with paint,” making images with lots of colorful brushstrokes and only a loose relation to the thing being depicted. Often there is a sense that the painter is trying to capture fleeting psychological impressions of reality. This is where many of our favorite Modern painters come from, like Monet and Cézanne.

Here’s a link to [a summary of impressionism in art](#) online.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Claude Debussy was the French composer who led the Impressionist movement in music.

He often wrote music that focuses on a single musical idea for a long period of time. This is profoundly meditative, relaxed music, a true opposite of Wagner's constant striving. Just as the Impressionist painting tends to be fuzzy and somewhat vague about what it is representing, here there is no strong sense of melody or chord progressions, just "sound."

For the quiz we will learn a short piece for piano called "Voiles" [1909]. This is from Book I of his collection of piano preludes. In this track you can hear how Debussy cultivates a single, atmospheric sound (specifically the sound of the whole-tone scale) for an extended period of time.

This is the first beginnings of a Modernist approach to music making, as Debussy experiments with new chords and new scales and puts the focus squarely on these materials.

Stravinsky and the *Ballets Russes*

Stravinsky rose to fame as the in-house composer for a ballet troupe called the *Ballets Russes*. You may remember that we talked about how Mussorgsky and his friends were strategizing on how to produce distinctly Russian art in the 1880s and 90s – the *Ballet Russes* was also in this spirit, presenting ballets drawn from Russian folklore, costumes based on native folk traditions, and Stravinsky's music, which occasionally incorporated Russian folk tunes into his distinctive style.

Their first production, *The Firebird* [1910], still shows a strong influence of the Romantic Russian composers who came before, as well as Debussy's interest in colorful scales, chords, and combinations of instruments. We played a bit of this in class, and I usually say that it is easy to imagine a particularly energized Debussy writing it.

However, *The Rite of Spring* [1913] is different. Rather than the fairy-tale plot of Firebird, this was supposed to depict a ritual sacrifice of a young virgin in Russia's distant, Pagan past. Stravinsky used this opportunity to create music that was more aggressive, dissonant, and strange than anything most Europeans had ever heard on the concert stage. This piece famously caused a riot to break out at its premier performance in Paris, as part of the audience began catcalling and heckling while others who wanted to hear the music fought them. Some people think the aspect of the performance that really offended people the most was probably the choreography, which was created by the great dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. The dancing is generally not in the balletic tradition -- rather than doing pirouettes the dancers are hopping and stomping around with some awkward and strange poses here and there. In general, the ballet production quickly faded into obscurity but the music took on a life of its own as a very popular and influential piece of concert music.

In class we listened to the first 10 minutes or so. Our video for the beginning part was a reconstruction of the original choreography, set, and costumes. This 10-minute segment is also on our playlist for the quiz.

After creating a handful of provocative and aggressive works Stravinsky actually started to mellow out, and most of his later pieces are what we call "Neo-Classical." They often

consciously engage some older kind of work (like, say, a Baroque concerto) and put a Modern twist on it. In class I played a bit of his *Dumbarton Oaks* concerto from 1938.

Béla Bartók

Bartók was born in Hungary, and, like so many other composers who were born outside of the European mainstream he drew on his native heritage to create a distinctive style of music. Bartók's approach, however, was uniquely methodical and scientific. Acting as one of the first ethnomusicologists, he traveled around Eastern Europe and made recordings of people singing folk melodies. (These were captured on "Edison cylinders," the earliest recording technology that existed and apparently the only option that was portable.)

Béla would then take these melodies and incorporate them into his music. Often they featured unusual rhythmic and metric patterns or new scales which he would then expand upon in his more elaborate and Modernist musical language.

In class I demonstrated how one field recording became a fairly straightforward duet for two violins, and I played the twisty and exciting final movement from his Fourth String Quartet [1927] which also seems to incorporate folk music.

I used to have a movement from his *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* [1936] on our quiz list – it features a unique combination of instruments and an unusual texture. This slow, "creepy" kind of piece was another specialty of Bartók's – it is often referred to as his "Night Music." This movement was also featured very prominently in the movie *The Shining* (because director Stanley Kubrick loved Modern classical music.)

Aaron Copland

We also turned to the subject of American composers in the 20th century. Classical music definitely existed in 1800s America, but it was usually just a weak copy of musical trends in Europe. There are some early American composers of note (such as Edward MacDowell), but it is not until the 20th Century that we see Americans with distinctive voices that remain relevant today.

Aaron Copland is probably the most beloved and revered American composer of all. He was born in Brooklyn and traveled to Paris to learn more about contemporary Modernist trends. In his youth he was able to write music that was energetic, spiky, and unusual, perhaps following the path of Stravinsky.

In class I played an excerpt from his Concerto for Clarinet, Strings and Harp [1949] which blends jazz with the Modernist style.

In the 30s and 40s, however, Copland responded to the Great Depression by developing a distinctly “American” style, full of big, majestic gestures and slow, sentimental “yearning” passages.

Politically, he was quite left-wing, and he belonged to a few organizations that identified as Communist. (This was more socially acceptable in the years before World War II.) Thus, his American style is an attempt to write music that expressed the spirit of the American people, and he intended it to be accessible and relevant to the average person, not just artsy types.

For the quiz we will study the final part of his ballet *Appalachian Spring* [1944]. This is a Theme and Variations on a traditional tune called “Simple Gifts” (which is a hymn from a Protestant religious sect called the Shakers.)