

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2022

Prof. Smey

Class 26, Monday May 9

In the previous session we talked about some fairly "mainstream" Modern composers, people who invented new things but did it in a way that still seems related to what came before. In this online unit we'll look at musicians who made a more radical break with the past. Such music is often referred to as being *avant-garde*, a French military metaphor that means that it is "ahead of its time."

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Schoenberg was an Austrian composer, based in Vienna. He single-handedly invented the concept of *atonal* music, which intentionally avoids many of the elements that are present in most other music. He avoids scales, using all 12 chromatic tones with equal weight, and he avoids any sense of a stable, referential tonic or home note. He also works hard to avoid the familiar chords that make up most compositions, experimenting with more unusual and dissonant combinations of notes.

I argue that Schoenberg arrived at this decision in a fairly organic way. In his early years he wrote music in the Late Romantic German style, similar to Wagner, and he was pretty good at it. You may remember that I said that Wagner's Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde* was a masterpiece of chromatic writing, focusing almost relentlessly of the sense of wandering or "flux."

In 1908 Schoenberg was writing his Second String Quartet. He had decided that he was going to use a singer in one of the movements, and that she would sing a symbolist poem by Stefan George that speaks of "feeling the air of other planets." Schoenberg decided that this movement would be 100% flux, with absolutely no moments of stability. Thus, the first atonal music was created.

On our quiz we are going to study the first movement of *Pierrot lunaire* [1912]. This is Schoenberg's best-known piece, a 40-minute work for soprano and small orchestra. The text is surrealist poetry in which the character of Pierrot (who we met in the previous unit) seems to be having a sort of existential crisis.

One more vocab concept that goes with this piece has to do with the manner of singing. This is another Schoenberg invention, called *Sprechstimme* (or "speech-song.") The notation for *Sprechstimme* puts little slashes through each note, which indicates that these pitches are more of a "target" or "suggestion." You are supposed to scoop up and down in a series of gestures that move through these notes rather than sticking to them faithfully.

Schoenberg's 12-Tone Method (aka "Serial" Music)

Schoenberg actually invented two influential new methods of composing – the second one is what is frequently called “twelve-tone music.” (This is somewhat misleading, since atonal music also uses all twelve possible tones, but this is the label that stuck. Academics also like to call this "serial" music.)

Basically, Schoenberg’s pure atonal period was intense but also pretty brief. He was mostly writing pieces like *Pierrot lunaire*, with a singer and a text. That was helpful because the text provided a framework for the piece that would help him figure out what to write.

Without that framework, however, Schoenberg felt somewhat frustrated. The lack of any underlying rules to what he was doing meant that he had difficulty creating works of real length and complexity.

Schoenberg made up a new kind of musical technique that would create some structure and depth for his atonal universe. He began his compositions by putting all twelve notes in a specific order. This would be like his scale for the piece – as the work proceeds the notes would have to flow out strictly in that order. This is called the 12-tone row.

As our example we are going to look at a piece by Schoenberg's pupil, Anton Webern (1883-1945). The row for his Piano Variations looks like this:



Now, despite this rule there is actually still a lot of freedom here for the composer. For example, he or she can make the notes higher or lower in different octaves, and the rhythm is not specified at all. Thus, the composer can rearrange these notes in all sorts of different ways, making them combine together in chords or flow out like a melody.

The composer is also allowed to make various transformations of the row and combine different versions of it simultaneously.

The influence of serial music in the 20th century

It would probably surprise you to know how widespread this technique was. From the 1950s through the 70s the most prestigious composers in the world tended to be working with extensions of the 12-tone method. Even Stravinsky and Aaron Copland tried it! Composers liked it because it felt "rigorous" or "scientific" - the American composer Milton Babbitt somewhat famously argued that his work was a form of research and that he didn't expect the general public to understand or like it.

The generation that followed Webern produced 12-tone works that are incredibly complex. In class we listened to a brief clip from Pierre Boulez's *Sur Incises*, composed in 1998.

I actually think that *Sur Incises* is a fairly pleasant and pretty piece, but it is just so packed with information that it seems like it would be impossible to ever really absorb.

John Cage (1912-1993) and Randomness

Cage is an American composer who had a very conceptual or even philosophical approach to music. One aspect he was particularly interested in was chance or randomness.

Cage started out as a Schoenberg-like composer, but he eventually became frustrated with choosing the sounds that would be in his compositions - he felt that he was limited by his own habits or personality. Around 1950 he discovered the *I Ching*, a Chinese text from the Zhou Dynasty that offers a method for answering questions through the generation of random numbers, and this opened a world that he would explore for the rest of his career.

Cage's first experiment with randomness was to derive musical chords and rhythms from a series of coin tosses. To Cage, these chords sounded fresh, new, and free from the polluting influence of human psychology.

Each piece of Cage's has a different method of making random choices, and people often seem to find the discussion of the concept behind the piece to be as interesting as the act of listening to it.

In class we looked at a few Cage pieces that generate sound in random ways. *Atlas Eclipticalis* is based on an astronomy book that Cage found in the library at Wesleyan university. He took the diagrams of stars and mapped them onto musical notation, and the musicians execute their star-notes at randomly determined moments in time. The result is a vaguely pleasant smattering of sound.

In *Radio Music* the entire piece is just a set of instructions for turning radios on and off and twisting the dials. Whatever comes out of the radios becomes part of the piece!

The most famous piece of Cage's is called *4'33"* (or "Four Minutes and Thirty Three Seconds.") In its original version, a pianist came out on stage, sat down at the piano, and did nothing, for four minutes and thirty three seconds. (Well, not quite nothing - he did close and then open the lid over the piano keyboard at predetermined times.)

What Cage is saying when he does something like this is that "anything can be music." The fact that he is presenting it to you transforms it from a random event and makes it music!

György Ligeti and Noise

As the century continued some composers start working with carefully constructed masses of pure noise, big blocks of sound in which you often cannot hear individual musical notes.

Hungarian composer György Ligeti was one of the most well-known practitioners of this sort of thing. His *Atmospheres* [1961] takes a whole orchestra and gives each musician careful instructions on what sounds to make. The many different sound sources merge together into a giant and overpowering mass of noise that nevertheless seems to be very carefully controlled and sculpted.

Philip Glass and Minimalism

In a way Minimalism is a reaction to all of this complexity and chaos, choosing to explore extreme simplicity and repetition instead.

As our first example we looked at *Music in Similar Motion* [1973].

This style emerged in the 60s and 70s. It has a counterpart in the art world, as artists started making sculptures, drawings and paintings that were as simple as possible.

Philip Glass was part of a truly "alternative" music scene that flourished in downtown New York City. We watched a documentary clip from *Philip Glass: A Portrait in 12 Parts* which showed what these events were like. (In one particularly memorable bit an associate of Philip's says that "of course everybody was high – the audience was high, the musicians were high. Philip didn't do drugs but everybody else did.")

Einstein on the Beach [1976]

Minimalism had its big breakthrough in 1976 with an opera called *Einstein on the Beach*. This was a collaboration between Philip Glass and a theater director named Robert Wilson.

In Robert Wilson's world, everything is very carefully designed to look cool, and people move and act as if in a dream. Wilson compiled a text from several different sources, including an autistic 16-year-old boy named Christopher Knowles. Knowles wrote repetitive, chopped-up poetry that made some pop-culture references, like so:

If you see any of those baggy pants it was huge

Mr Bojangles

If you see any of those baggy pants it was huge chuck the hills

If you know it was a violin to be answer the telephone and if

any one asks you please it was trees it it it is like that

Mr Bojangles, Mr Bojangles, I reach you

So this is about the things on the table so this one could be counting up.

The scarf of where in Black and White

Mr Bojangles If you see any of those baggy pants chuck the hills

It was huge If you know it was a violin to be answer the

telephone and if anyone asks you please it was trees it it is like that.

Actors in *Einstein* speak these lines and do various dance and mime-like motions. A group of singers, on the other hand, are only allowed to sing numbers and the solfège syllables (like *do re mi* etc.) The entire event is about four hours long!

Einstein on the Beach was commissioned by a big arts festival in Europe, and after its premier Wilson and Glass somehow managed to raise enough money to rent the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City and present it here. It was a major event - all of the artsy types in the city went to see it, and the initial reaction was pretty severely split between enthusiasts and haters. Some people thought it was amazing, and others thought it was the stupidest thing they had ever seen.

But, after *Einstein* Glass rapidly became the most famous living composer in the U.S., and he remains one of the most prolific and successful today.

Post-Minimalism

There are, of course, many different trends right now in the contemporary classical music scene. Some people (like [Ashley Fure](#)) are still following Ligeti's path and working with abstract blocks of sound. Some (like [James Dillon](#)) are still making works of thorny complexity.

Perhaps the most common style in the United States takes the language of the minimalists and just puts a little more information back into the music, to make it a little less *severely* minimal. We call this Post-Minimalism.

So our last example in this unit was from the hip young post-minimalist Missy Mazzoli (born 1980). We listened to *Still Life With Avalanche* [2008].