

Prof. Smey

Class Notes – Session 26, Tues Dec 4

Modernism in Classical Music II: The Avant-Garde

In the previous session we looked at some of the more mainstream Modern classical composers – people who were doing new things but also retained some connection to the past.

In this class we look at the more radical side of music in the 20th century – people who go even further in the quest to invent something new. A lot of this stuff seems “difficult,” “experimental,” or just plain “crazy.” However, to a certain kind of person this can also be the most exciting stuff.

Arnold Schoenberg (1874 –1951)

Our textbook also discusses Schoenberg on pp. 343-348 in the seventh edition and pp. 362-368 in the eighth.

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.

So, in a sense, Schoenberg is trying to completely avoid anything that has been done in the past - he wants to do the opposite. To some people this seems like a dumb or superficial idea, made up by someone who was perhaps trying too hard to be original. However, Schoenberg actually arrived at this technique in a fairly organic way. His early compositions are in a Late Romantic style that is very similar to Wagner – they are free-flowing, dramatic pieces that feature the kind of tonal “flux” (or sense of wandering) that Wagner presents in the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*.

Schoenberg made the jump from a Wagnerian style to atonal music in his Second String Quartet [1908]. As he was planning the work, he decided to add a singer and create music for a poem by Stefan George which includes the words “I am feeling the air of other planets.” He made this part of the piece 100% flux. This was a new development! Wagner features long passages that seem to wander, but there are also definite moments that seem to “touch down” and imply a

home note. The Second String Quartet simply avoids these gestures completely. Thus, “atonal” music was born, and Schoenberg decided that this was the new way to compose.

We will look at *Pierrot lunaire* [1912], a piece for singer and a small group of instrumentalists. This is written in the atonal style, and it features 21 dark and surreal poems by Albert Giraud. We’ve already met Pierrot the “sad clown” in the context of Schumann’s *Carnaval*. In this work he seems to be having a sort of existential crisis, and the texts reflect his fragmented impressions of the world.

The style of singing in this work reflects yet another invention of Schoenberg’s, called *Sprechstimme* (speech-singing). Rather than hitting each pitch cleanly and sticking to it, *Sprechstimme* instructs the singer to scoop up and down. The idea is that this reflects the contour of everyday speech, but the usual effect is some sort of trance-like delivery that sounds even stranger than normal operatic singing. (In class I sometimes joke that it sounds “spoooooky, like a ghooooost!”)

For the quiz we will learn the first movement from *Pierrot lunaire*, “Moondrunk.”

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

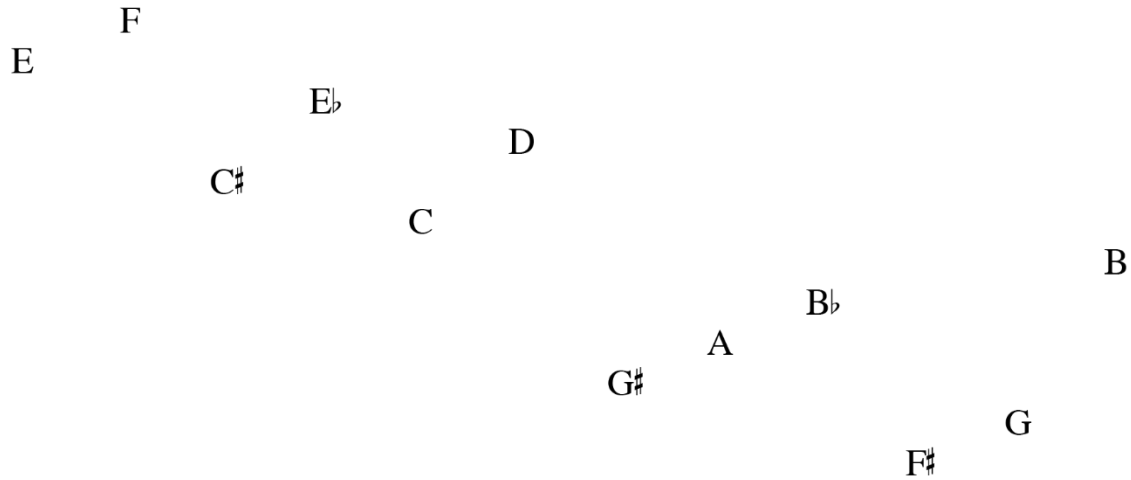
Schoenberg actually invented *two* influential new methods of composing – the other is what is frequently called “**twelve-tone music**.” (This is somewhat misleading, since atonal music also uses all twelve possible tones, but the world was slow to catch up with what Schoenberg was doing and this is the label that stuck.)

Basically, Schoenberg’s pure atonal period was intense but it was 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 possible 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. There is still an element of freedom, here – the composer can make the notes higher or lower in different octaves, he can decide whether they will clump together into chords or follow each other in a melody, and there are 48 possible transformations of the pattern that can be generated and combined in various ways. The presence of this “rule” gives the composer something new to think about that can inspire larger-scale planning.

(So the term “**serial**” music is a more accurate description of what is going on. The notes have been put into an ordered “series.”)

In class we actually used a composition by one of Schoenberg’s pupils, Anton Webern, as our example for 12-tone music. The 12-tone row for his *Piano Variations* looks like this:



You can go through the music and track exactly where you are in the series with each note. These are the red numbers 1-12 in the example below. Here Webern is using the normal or “prime” version of the row that I drew above plus the “retrograde” (or backwards) version that begins on the opposite end. Combining these two variants of the row creates a brief musical palindrome.

Sehr mäßig $\text{♩.} = \text{ca } 40$ Anton Webern, Op. 27

The musical score illustrates the 12-tone row in two directions:

- Prime Row (P0):** 1 F, 2 E, 3 E \flat , 4 C \sharp , 5 C, 6 D, 7 G \sharp , 8 A, 9 B \flat , 10 B, 11 F \sharp , 12 G.
- Retrograde Row (R0):** 1 G, 2 F \sharp , 3 B, 4 B \flat , 5 A, 6 G \sharp , 7 D, 8 C, 9 C \sharp , 10 E \flat , 11 E, 12 F.

Red numbers 1-12 are placed above and below notes in the score to track the series. The score is in 3/16 time and includes dynamics like *pp* and *p*.

The overall effect of this piece is that we have some musical object that we are carefully manipulating, turning it around every which way in order to observe its properties.

Schoenberg's Legacy

It may be surprising from our current vantage point to learn that atonal and 12-tone music was hugely influential in the 20th century. After World War II many prestigious composers were writing in this style. This kind of approach was perhaps appealing because it felt “scientific” and “rigorous” – the American composer Milton Babbitt somewhat famously argued that his music was a form of research and he didn't expect the public to understand or like it. The serial method of composing eventually became so pervasive that even Stravinsky and Aaron Copland tried it!

Now many people (like myself) have begun to argue that the use of triads and a “home note” engage fundamental psychological processes that make music more enjoyable, and that it is in the very least very difficult to write successful music without them.

John Cage (1912-1993) and Randomness

The book briefly discusses Cage on pp. 388-390 in the eighth edition and 374-5 in the seventh edition.

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 wasn't being truly creative, because he was limited by his own habits and 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, I show a bit of Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis*, which converts a map of stars into musical notes, and his *Radio Music* which is just a bunch of instructions for turning radios on and off and twisting the dials – whatever comes out of the radios is part of the piece!

Then, we look at Cage's most famous composition, *4'33"* (or "Four minutes and thirty-three seconds") – in the original performance a pianist came out on stage and simply sat there for that exact length of time, doing nothing! (Well, almost nothing – he opened and closed the lid to the piano at certain times.) This is obviously a piece that people find very provocative and love to argue about. One of the popular interpretations of the work is that everything happening in the environment becomes part of it - the shifting and coughing of the audience, the traffic noises coming in from outside, and so on. Also, I think Cage really did sincerely want to capture the experience of silence, of sitting there doing nothing. He put shorter lengths of nothingness in some of his other pieces as well.

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 magically transforms it from a random event and makes it music!

This wasn't quite a new idea – it actually has some roots in the art world with the work of Marcel Duchamp. He started to question the very nature of art by taking already-made objects and putting them into art galleries. In class we look at his 1913 sculpture *Bicycle Wheel* (which is just part of a bicycle mounted on top of a stool) and his most famous provocation *Fountain* [1917] which is a real urinal from a bathroom. Just as Cage would later suggest that "everything we do is music," Duchamp was arguing that anything can be turned into art.

György Ligeti and Noise

As the 20th century continued some composers started 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

The book discusses Minimalism on pp. 390-392 in the eighth edition and pp. 376-378 in the seventh.

In a way Minimalism is a reaction to all of this complexity and chaos, choosing to explore extreme simplicity and repetition instead. A minimalist composer usually creates short, simple ideas and loops them for a long time, combining a meditative vibe with an active rhythmic pulse.

This is a style of composition that first emerged in the 1960s and grew in popularity and acceptance in the decades that followed. It has several well-known practitioners such as Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and John Adams, but we'll focus on New York composer Philip Glass.

We listen to Glass's *Music in Similar Motion* [1973] to get the basic feel for this music, and we watch a brief excerpt from the documentary *Glass: A Portrait in 12 Parts* to learn more about the downtown New York arts scene where these ideas were being developed.

Finally, we turn to the opera *Einstein on the Beach* [1976] which was a huge breakthrough event for Glass and the whole idea of minimalism. This was a collaboration with a theater director named Robert Wilson. In 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 it is like that.

Actors in *Einstein* speak these texts 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!

We watched video of a few scenes which lead up to the climactic event which is supposed to take place in the interior of a spaceship. At this point the audience is somewhat exhausted and the music and lights just get louder and brighter – it's a somewhat cult-like experience!

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.

We end class by listening to one last example from the hip young post-minimalist Missy Mazzoli (born 1980), called *Still Life With Avalanche* [2008].