CHAPTER22

CHAPTER 22: THE EUROPEAN MAINSTREAM IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Chapter Outline

Prelude. (CHWM 530)

In competing with past composers, living composers sought to secure a place for themselves by offering something new while continuing a tradition.

I. The First Modern Generation (CHWM 530–40, NAWM 156–58)

A number of major composers from nations across Europe combined tradition with innovation and national identity with personal style, as illustrated in this chapter and those to follow.

1. ***Claude Debussy***  
   *Claude Debussy*(1862–1918) blended influences from Wagner, the French tradition, Russian composers, medieval music, and music from Asia and elsewhere to create strikingly individual works that had an impact on almost all later composers.

**Biography: Claude Debussy**  
Debussy began studying at the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten. He was influenced by works of Russian composers and by Wagner as well as by new artistic movements in Paris. By 1908, he was France’s leading modern composer, making his living as a music critic and through publications.

* 1. Style   
     Debussy’s music is often called *impressionist*, but it is closer to symbolism.
  2. Piano music   
     *Symbolist*traits are evident in Debussy’s piano music. Each motive is associated with a particular figuration, harmony, scale, dynamic level, and range, creating a succession of distinct musical images.
  3. Harmony   
     Debussy usually maintained a tonal focus but emphasized the pleasure of sound rather than its resolution. Many of Debussy’s piano pieces have evocative titles, often suggesting a visual image.
  4. Orchestral music   
     Debussy’s orchestral works require a large ensemble, which he used to offer a variety of tone colors and textures. His best-known orchestral works are*Prélude à "L’après-midi d’un faune"*(Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun," 1891–1894), *Nocturnes*(1897–1899), and *La Mer*(The Sea, 1903–1905).
  5. *Nuages*  
     *Nuages*from *Nocturnes*exemplifies the interaction of motive with timbre, scale type, and other elements. **Music: NAWM 156**
  6. Songs and stage music   
     Debussy composed songs to texts by several major French poets, as well as music for dramatic projects, including ballets and one opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*(1893–1902).
  7. Influence   
     The changes that Debussy introduced in harmony and orchestration and his emphasis on sound itself made him one of the most influential composers in the [**history of music**](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/music/concise-history-western-music4/ch/22/outline.aspx).

1. ***Maurice Ravel***  
   The music of *Maurice Ravel*(1875–1937) encompasses a variety of influences while carrying a distinctive stamp.
   1. Distinctive traits   
      Unlike Debussy, Ravel often treated colorful harmonies as dissonances needing resolution, and he added sevenths to tonic and subdominant chords.
   2. Varied influences   
      Ravel absorbed ideas from older French music, the Classic tradition, the Viennese waltz, Gypsy music, blues, and Spanish idioms to create a diverse set of original works.
2. ***Spain: Manuel de Falla***  
   Spanish composer *Manuel de Falla*(1876–1946) combined specific national elements with the neoclassical approach popular after World War I to[**produce music**](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/music/concise-history-western-music4/ch/22/outline.aspx) that is both nationalist and more broadly modern.
3. ***England: Ralph Vaughan Williams***  
   After centuries of domination by foreign styles, English composers in the early twentieth century sought a distinctive voice for English art music, often drawing on folk songs.
   1. English style   
      *Ralph Vaughan Williams*(1872–1958) cultivated a national style and wrote both art music and utilitarian music, using elements from each tradition in the other. The natural quality of Vaughan Williams’s music comes from his [**incorporation**](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/music/concise-history-western-music4/ch/22/outline.aspx) and imitation of British folk tunes and his assimilation of the modal harmony of sixteenth-century English composers.
4. ***Czechoslovakia: Leoš Janáček***  
   Music that reflected their language and traditions allowed the peoples of Eastern Europe to assert an independent identity at home and gain recognition abroad.
   1. National style   
      *Leoš Janáček*(1854–1928), the leading twentieth-century Czech composer, created a specifically national style through a distinctive melodic idiom based on peasant speech and song and through procedures more similar to Musorgsky’s or Debussy’s than to Germanic tradition.
   2. Operas   
      Janáček’s operas dominated the Czech stage between the world wars and later became part of the international repertory.
5. ***Finland: Jean Sibelius***  
   In the 1890s, *Jean Sibelius*(1865–1957) established his reputation as Finland’s leading composer through symphonic poems on Finnish topics, then wrote seven symphonies and a violin concerto for an international audience. He created a distinctive sound marked by modal melodies, simple rhythms, repetition, pedal points, and strong contrasts.
6. ***Russia: Sergei Rachmaninov and Alexander Scriabin***  
   The works of Russian composers Rachmaninov and Scriabin illustrate the wide variety of personal styles in this period.
   1. Rachmaninov   
      *Sergei Rachmaninov*(1873–1943), a virtuoso pianist, is best known for his piano music.
   2. Prelude in G Minor   
      Rachmaninov’s Prelude in G Minor (1903) illustrates his ability to create innovative textures and individual melodies within traditional harmonies and ABA' form. **Music: NAWM 157**
   3. Style   
      Rachmaninov’s music retains elements from the Romantic tradition and combines them with a unique approach to melodies and textures.
   4. Scriabin   
      *Alexander Scriabin*(1872–1915) began by writing in the manner of Chopin and gradually evolved an innovative harmonic vocabulary in which a complex chord can serve as a kind of tonic.
   5. *Vers la flamme*  
      Scriabin’s unique harmonic process is illustrated in his tone poem for piano,*Vers la flamme*(Toward the Flame), Op. 72. **Music: NAWM 158**

II. Tonal and Post-Tonal Music (CHWM 540–52, NAWM 160–63)

Strauss, Ravel, Vaughan Williams, Rachmaninov, and other composers active in this period wrote tonal music. Others, including Debussy, Falla, Janáček, and Scriabin, wrote in*post-tonal*idioms that moved beyond common practice tonality.

1. ***Arnold Schoenberg***  
   *Arnold Schoenberg*(1874–1951) moved beyond tonality to atonality and then to the twelve-tone method.
   1. Tonal works   
      Schoenberg began by writing tonal music in a late Romantic style.

**Biography: Arnold Schoenberg**  
Schoenberg was born in Vienna, where he studied violin as a boy and received minimal instruction in theory and composition. After moving to Berlin, where he worked at a cabaret and taught composition, he returned to Vienna, where he taught Alban Berg and Anton Webern and became acquainted with expressionist painters. Schoenberg formulated the twelve-tone method in the 1920s. After the Nazis came to power, he emigrated to the United States, where he taught at UCLA. Schoenberg was one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century.

* 1. Developing variation   
     After turning toward chamber music, Schoenberg applied the principle of developing variation to his own works.
  2. Nonrepetition   
     Schoenberg asked of each work that it not simply repeat but build on the past.
  3. Atonal music   
     Schoenberg’s experimentation with novel harmonic progressions led to what he called "the emancipation of dissonance," since dissonances were freed of the need to resolve to consonance, and in 1908, he began to compose pieces that others called *atonal*.
  4. Coherence in atonal music   
     To organize atonal music, Schoenberg relied on developing variation, the integration of harmony and melody, and *chromatic saturation*, as well as gestures from tonal music.
  5. Compositional process   
     To integrate melody and harmony, Schoenberg manipulated the notes and intervals of motives to create chords and new melodies.
  6. Pitch-class sets   
     Schoenberg generated melodies and harmonies for a composition from *sets,*or *pitch-class sets*.

**In Context: Expressionism**  
In the early twentieth century, some German and Austrian painters embraced *expressionism*, which developed from the subjectivity of Romanticism. Expressionist painters aspired to convey an introspective experience. Schoenberg and Berg, two leading exponents of expressionism in music, deployed angular melodies, fragmented rhythms, and discordant harmonies to convey extreme and irrational states of mind.

* 1. Chromatic saturation   
     Atonal music can be shaped through chromatic saturation, the appearance of all twelve pitch-classes within a segment of music.
  2. Atonal works   
     Schoenberg’s one-character opera *Erwartung*(1909) exemplifies expressionism, which portrayed extreme emotions through dissonances and exaggerated gestures and pushed nonrepetition to an extreme.
  3. *Pierrot lunaire*  
     Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire*(Moonstruck Pierrot, 1912) is a song cycle for a woman’s voice and chamber ensemble.
  4. *Sprechstimme*  
     *Sprechstimme*("speaking voice") is a style of performing that approximates written pitches in the gliding tones of speech, while following the notated rhythm exactly. *Pierrot lunaire*has expressionist features (such as Sprechstimme) and uses many traditional elements. **Music: NAWM 160**

**A Closer Look: Schoenberg’s Piano Suite, Op. 25**  
Schoenberg’s Piano Suite illustrates some of his methods, such as division of the row into segments (here, three *tetrachords*,or groups of four notes) that are used as sets, analogies between row transpositions and keys, and references to tonal music. **Music: NAWM 161**

* 1. Twelve-tone method   
     Schoenberg developed the *twelve-tone method*to lend formal coherence to atonal music without text. The basis of a twelve-tone composition is a *row*or *series*that can be used in its original, or *prime,*form but also in *inversion,*in *retrograde*, and in *retrograde inversion.*
  2. Return to form   
     In his twelve-tone music, Schoenberg evoked traditional forms and the structural functions of tonality by focusing on motives, themes, and long-range repetition.
  3. Schoenberg as modernist   
     The problems Schoenberg addressed as a modernist and the way he faced them did much to shape musical practice in the twentieth century.
  4. The Second Viennese school   
     Schoenberg and his students Alban Berg and Anton Webern are known as the *Second Viennese School*.

1. ***Alban Berg***  
   *Alban Berg*(1885–1935) adopted Schoenberg’s atonal and twelve-tone methods but achieved greater popularity by infusing his music with the familiar forms, expressive gestures, and characteristic styles of tonal music.
   1. *Wozzeck*  
      *Wozzeck*(premiered in 1925) is an expressionist opera in three acts with continuous music and orchestral interludes linking acts. Berg highlights the drama and organizes the music through the use of leitmotives, or pitch-class sets identified with the main characters, and traditional forms. References to tonality and familiar types of music helped him to convey strong emotions in a language that listeners could understand. **Music: NAWM 162**
   2. Twelve-tone works   
      In his twelve-tone works, Berg often chose rows that allowed for tonal-sounding chords and chord progressions.
   3. Violin Concerto   
      Berg designed the row of the Violin Concerto (1935) with four interlocking minor and major triads, which gives this twelve-tone work a familiar sound.
2. ***Anton Webern***  
   *Anton Webern*(1883–1945) was trained as a musicologist and absorbed ideas about music history that influenced his development as a composer.
   1. View of music history   
      Webern believed that twelve-tone music was the inevitable result of music’s historical evolution.
   2. Webern’s style   
      Webern’s style passed through the stages of late Romantic chromaticism, atonality, and twelve-tone organization.
   3. Economy of means   
      Webern sought to write deeply expressive music, yet his music is extremely concentrated. His works are usually brief, spare in texture, canonic, and without tonal references.
   4. Symphony, Op. 21   
      The first movement of Webern’s Symphony, Op. 21, illustrates his use of twelve-tone procedures, canons, instrumentation, form, and*Klangfarbenmelodie*. **Music: NAWM 163**
   5. *Klangfarbenmelodie*  
      The first movement of Webern’s symphony exemplifies *Klangfarbenmelodie*(tone-color melody).
   6. Influence   
      Webern never gained wide popularity, but his reputation and his influence on other composers grew steadily after World War II.

Postlude (CHWM 553–54)

The music of the early twentieth century was remarkably diverse, and its reception has varied. While some of this music may sound late Romantic in spirit or technique, all of it is modern in its overwhelming sense of measuring itself against the past.