CHAPTER23

CHAPTER 23: MUSIC, POLITICS, AND THE PEOPLE IN THE EUROPEAN TWENTIETH CENTURY

Chapter Outline

Prelude. (CHWM 555–56)

In the nineteenth century, some writers claimed that classical music was an autonomous art that should be admired for its own sake; nevertheless, music never fully escaped politics. The period between the world wars brought new links between music and politics. Believing that music must be relevant to social needs, some composers tried to make their music more accessible to audiences and amateurs, while nationalism continued to be strong in many countries. Most governments sponsored musical activities directly. While some composers were developing new sounds within the Classic tradition, others explored new territory in the avant-garde movement.

I. The Avant-Garde (CHWM 556–57, NAWM 159)

*Avant-garde*composers challenged the very notion of classics and sought to focus on the present.

A. ***Erik Satie***

*Erik Satie*(1866–1925) used wit in his music to satirize convention. His early piano pieces challenged Romantic notions of expressivity through deliberate plainness, modal harmonies, and puzzling dynamics.

* 1. Piano works   
     Between 1900 and 1915, Satie wrote several sets of piano pieces with surreal titles, parodistic music, and satirical commentary printed in the score. **Music: NAWM 159**
  2. Larger works   
     Satie’s larger works, such as his ballet *Parade*(1916–1917), question listeners’ expectations and fix attention on the present. His antisentimental spirit influenced later composers.

B. ***Futurism***

The Italian *futurists*favored machines and noise over traditional instruments and pitches. Like Satie, they focused on the experience of listening in the present moment and rejected the music and aesthetics of the past.

II. France (CHWM 558–60, NAWM 173)

* 1. Notions of classicism   
     During and after World War I, *neoclassicism*became the prevailing trend in France and was allied with patriotism. Conservatives identified classicism with balance, order, discipline, and tradition while more progressive composers saw classicism as universal and not national.

B. ***Les Six***

*"Les Six"*(The Six) were a group of French composers who sought to escape old political dichotomies and wrote highly individual works that drew on a wide range of influences, including neoclassicism. The most successful members of this group were Honegger, Milhaud, and Poulenc.

* 1. Arthur Honegger   
     *Arthur Honegger*(1892–1955) is best known for *Pacific 231*(1923), an orchestral impression of a train, and for his oratorio *King David*(1923).
  2. Darius Milhaud   
     *Darius Milhaud*(1892–1974), prolific in every genre, blended neoclassicism with other influences from jazz to Schoenberg. **Music: NAWM 173**
  3. Francis Poulenc   
     *Francis Poulenc*(1899–1963) drew especially on the Parisian popular chanson tradition associated with cabarets and revues.

III. Igor Stravinsky (CHWM 560–69, NAWM 164–65)

*Igor Stravinsky*(1882–1971) started as a Russian nationalist and became a cosmopolitan, and through his compositions, elements of Russian music became part of a common international modernist practice.

**Biography: Igor Stravinsky**

Stravinsky was raised in St. Petersburg and studied composition privately with Rimsky-Korsakov. In the early 1910s, *Sergei Diaghilev* commissioned him to write ballets for the *Ballets Russes*(Russian Ballet) in Paris; these ballets made Stravinsky famous. After the outbreak of World War II, he moved to the United States, settling in Hollywood. Most of his late works are serial and many are religious.

A. ***Russian Period***

Stravinsky’s most popular works are three ballets from early in his career, composed for the Ballets Russes.

* 1. *The Firebird*  
     *The Firebird*(1910) stems from Russian nationalism and from Rimsky-Korsakov’s exoticism.
  2. *Petrushka*  
     Some of Stravinsky’s distinctive stylistic traits emerge in *Petrushka*(1910– 1911), including repetitive melodies and rhythms over static harmony, blocks of sound that interrupt and alternate with one another without transitions, and sharp dissonances that are often *octatonic*or derived from superimposed triads. Stravinsky evokes a carnival atmosphere by borrowing and elaborating Russian folk tunes and Viennese waltzes.
  3. *The Rite of Spring*The typical characteristics of Stravinsky’s mature idiom can be heard in *The Rite of Spring.*One characteristic is the reduction of meter to mere pulsation through unpredictable accents or silences and rapidly changing meters. **Music: NAWM 164**
  4. Ostinatos and juxtaposed blocks

Stravinsky used ostinatos to create static blocks of sound, which he juxtaposed with one another.

* 1. Layering   
     Stravinsky frequently layered two or more independent strands of music on top of one another.
  2. Timbre and orchestration   
     Stravinsky often identified a musical idea with a particular timbre or used changes of timbre to provide variety.
  3. Small-ensemble works   
     During World War I, Stravinsky turned toward small combinations of instruments to accompany stage works.

B. ***Neoclassical Period***

In his ballet *Pulcinella*(1919), Stravinsky applied the methods distilled in *The Rite of Spring*to arrangements of eighteenth-century pieces by Pergolesi and others.

* 1. Neoclassicism revisited   
     With *Pulcinella*, Stravinsky turned to neoclassicism, a broad movement from the 1910s to the 1950s in which composers revived, imitated, or evoked the styles, genres, and forms of pre-Romantic music.

**A Closer Look: Stravinsky’s Notorious Ballet**

The premiere of Stravinsky’s ballet *The Rite of Spring*defied the audience’s expectations. The music’s explosive rhythms and unpredictable harmonies were accompanied by the bold and unorthodox choreography by *Vaslav Nijinsky* (1888–1950), as well as exotic sets and loose-fitting primitive costumes designed by *Nicholas Roerich*.

* 1. Uses of neoclassicism   
     Neoclassicism allowed Stravinsky to use the tools he had developed in his Russian period while claiming a place in the classical tradition of the West. Stravinsky’s neoclassical music adopts an anti-Romantic tone, reflecting a preference for balance, objectivity, and absolute music.
  2. *Symphony of Psalms*  
     Stravinsky’s neoclassicism and its continuity with his earlier style are both evident in his *Symphony of Psalms*(1930). **Music: NAWM 165**
  3. Neotonality   
     *Symphony of Psalms*is *neotonal*: it uses reiteration and other means to establish a tonal center, rather than traditional functional harmony.
  4. Schoenberg and Stravinsky   
     Both Schoenberg and Stravinsky sought to revitalize traditional forms in an entirely new musical language.

C. ***Serial Period***

From about 1953, Stravinsky adapted techniques from *serial music*(an extension of twelve-tone methods) to his characteristic idiom. His particular genius lay in assimilating new ideas into his own personal sound.

* 1. Influence   
     Through Stravinsky, elements that had been nurtured in Russian music and traits that he had introduced became commonplace in modern music, making him one of the most influential composers of the century.

IV. Béla Bartók (CHWM 569–75, NAWM 166–67)

Modernists other than Stravinsky found elements in their own national music that allowed them to create a distinctive voice while continuing the classical tradition.*Béla Bartók*(1881–1945) created an individual modernist idiom by synthesizing elements of Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, and Bulgarian peasant music with elements of the classical tradition.

**Biography: Béla Bartók**

Bartók took music lessons from a young age and studied piano and composition in Budapest. A virtuoso pianist, he performed all over Europe and edited keyboard music by Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and others. As an ethnomusicologist, he collected, edited and published, and wrote about folk music. He arranged peasant tunes, created original works based on them, and also blended characteristics of them with those of Classical and modern music. He composed his most famous pieces shortly before World War II. In 1940, Bartók immigrated to the United States, settling in New York.

* 1. Classical and modern influences   
     Bartók drew on the Classical tradition from Bach to Brahms for his early compositions, then absorbed influences from Strauss, Debussy, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky.
  2. Peasant music   
     Bartók’s search for an innately Hungarian music led him to collect and study peasant music, often with fellow composer Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967).
  3. Stylistic evolution   
     Bartók first achieved a distinctive personal style around 1908, and his later works are his best known. His *Mikrokosmos*(1926–1937) is a series of graded piano pieces that summarizes his style. **Music: NAWM 166**
  4. Bartók’s synthesis   
     Bartók synthesized peasant music with classical music by emphasizing what the traditions have in common—a pitch center, diatonic scales, and motives that are repeated and varied—and what is most distinctive about each—the classical tradition’s forms and counterpoint, and the irregular meters, modal scales, melody types, ornamentation, and other traits of specific peasant traditions.
  5. *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*  
     *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*(1936) exemplifies Bartók’s synthesis and his personal style. His approach to neotonality is novel, yet alludes both to the chordal motions and the tonic-dominant polarity of classical music and to the ways peasant melodies establish a tonal center. **Music: NAWM 167**
  6. Melodic structure   
     Bartók’s melodies reflect the procedures of varying small motives that are typical both in classical music and in the peasant music of Hungary and Bulgaria, and sometimes mix modes, as do some Hungarian songs.
  7. Form and counterpoint   
     The forms and contrapuntal procedures used by Bartók, such as fugue, sonata, rondo, canon, inversion, and cyclic form, come from the classical tradition.
  8. Peasant elements   
     Bartók also used elements from traditional peasant styles, including Bulgarian dance meters, the ornamental style of Serbo-Croatian song (which he described as *parlando-rubato*), and melodies over drones.
  9. Bartók as modernist   
     Through a synthesis of classical and peasant traditions, Bartók created new works with a strong personal identity and rich connections to past music.

V. Germany (CHWM 575–79, NAWM 174)

Music and politics were linked closely in Germany under the Weimar Republic (1919–33), and the Nazis (1933–45) attacked modern music and banned leftists and Jews from public life.

A. ***New Objectivity***

The Neue Sachlichkeit (*New Objectivity*) of the 1920s opposed complexity and favored music that was widely accessible, objective in expression, and connected to current concerns.

* 1. Ernst Krenek   
     *Jonny spielt auf*(1927) by Ernst Krenek (1900–1991) embodied the ideals of New Objectivity and was attacked by the Nazis for its use of jazz.

B. ***Kurt Weill***

*Kurt Weill*(1900–1950), a supporter of New Objectivity, sought to entertain everyday people rather than intellectual elites.

* 1. *Mahagonny*  
     Weill and playwright *Bertolt Brecht* collaborated on *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*(1930), an allegorical opera about failures of capitalism.
  2. *The Threepenny Opera*  
     Weill and Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*(1928), adapted from *The Beggar’s Opera*(see Chapter 14), parodied American hit songs and was a great success before being banned as decadent by the Nazis in 1933.
  3. Career on Broadway   
     After emigrating to the United States, Weill wrote successful Broadway musicals in the spirit of New Objectivity.

C. ***Hindemith***

*Paul Hindemith*(1895–1963) was among the most prolific composers of the twentieth century and was also important as a teacher and performer.

* 1. Interwar period   
     Between the wars, Hindemith moved from expressionism to writing neotonal music that avoided Romantic expressivity and focused on purely musical procedures.
  2. *Gebrauchsmusik*  
     By the late 1920s, Hindemith began composing *Gebrauchsmusik*(music for use), music for young or amateur performers that was modern and challenging yet rewarding to perform.
  3. *Mathis der Maler*  
     Hindemith’s opera *Mathis der Maler*(Matthias the Painter, 1934–35), written after the Nazis came to power, examines the role of the artist in relation to politics.
  4. Harmonic fluctuation   
     From the 1930s, Hindemith wrote in a new, neo-Romantic style and developed a new harmonic method that he called "harmonic fluctuation," in which phrases start with relative consonance, move toward greater dissonance, and return to consonance. **Music: NAWM 174**
  5. Later works   
     Hindemith emigrated to Switzerland in 1938, then to the United States in 1940, before returning to Europe in 1953. His notable later works include*Ludus tonalis*(Tonal Play, 1942), *Symphonic Metamorphosis*(1943), and a Symphony in B-flat for band (1951).

D. ***Music under the Nazis***

The Nazis established a Reich Music Chamber to which all musicians had to belong.

* 1. "Degenerate" music   
     The Nazis attacked most modern music, but there was no coherent Nazi style of new music: the government focused more on performance than on composition, exploiting the great nineteenth-century German composers as symbols of alleged German superiority.
  2. Carl Orff   
     Carl Orff (1895–1982) is best known for *Carmina burana*(1936) and his contributions to music education.

VI. The Soviet Union (CHWM 579–84, NAWM 175–76)

The Soviet government controlled every realm of life, including the arts.

* 1. Composers’ organizations   
     During the early 1920s, the Association for Contemporary Music promoted modernism and contacts with the West, and the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians supported simple tonal music with wide appeal. Both were replaced in 1933 by Stalin’s Union of Soviet Composers.
  2. Socialist realism versus formalism   
     Beginning in 1934, Soviet authorities promulgated *socialist realism,*which called for accessible, melodic, folklike music on patriotic or inspirational topics, and condemned what they called *formalism.*

B. ***Sergey Prokofiev***

*Sergey Prokofiev*(1891–1953) made his initial reputation as a radical modernist. After touring outside Russia, he accepted commissions from the Soviet regime for works in a more popular style (including *Alexander Nevsky*), and he returned permanently in 1936. During World War II, he turned to absolute genres, and his music was labeled "formalist" by the authorities in 1948. **Music: NAWM 175**

C. ***Dmitri Shostakovich***

*Dmitri Shostakovich*(1906–1975) spent his entire career within the Soviet system, reaching international fame at a young age.

* 1. *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*  
     Shostakovich achieved great success with *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*(1934), but he and his opera were attacked in the official press in 1936.
  2. Fifth Symphony   
     Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony, modeled on Mahler and Tchaikovsky, outwardly conformed to socialist realism, but could be heard as conveying emotions experienced in a totalitarian regime. **Music: NAWM 176**
  3. Seventh Symphony   
     The Seventh Symphony (1941) is a programmatic work about the heroic defense of Leningrad that some hear as a complaint against Stalin’s repression.
  4. Later works   
     In 1948, Shostakovich was denounced, and he wrote music for the regime as well as himself. The apparent double meanings in Shostakovich’s music reflect the fact that he could never say precisely what he felt under Soviet rule.

**Postlude (CHWM 584)**

Although art music of the interwar period includes some of the most widely performed classical works of the twentieth century, many listeners and musicians have largely forgotten the political circumstances in which most of it was created. Today, many musicians and historians are challenging the notion that classical music is an autonomous art and seek to understand the circumstances surrounding its creation. What seems most important about classical music of this period is its great variety.