

The Modern/20th Century Era

(1900 - Present)

With the coming of the 20th century another evolution in the musical world emerged. While some of the early 20th century music can be seen as extensions of the late Romantic style, much of 20th century music can be seen as a rebellion. Composers did not look to build on what was standard but again created music freely and used sounds that went against the current grain. Twentieth century music can be described as being more refined, vague in form, delicate, and having a mysterious atmosphere.

Twentieth century music is an era that is hard to define in terms of musical style. The only easy way to define 20th century music is that it does not fit into the Romantic era's requirements. And because of its own expression and orchestral technique it does not fit into any other category but its own.

This time period spawned many new terms for musical styles because of the diversity of music that was being written. Some common examples are atonality, expressionism (seen in Schoenberg's early music), [*neo-Romanticism*](#) , and [*neo-Classicism*](#) .

As was true in the Romantic era, [*nationalism*](#) was still an important musical device used during the first half of the 20th century. Composers utilized folk songs to enriched their music. Examples can be seen in the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams (England), Bela Bartok (Hungary), Heitor Villa Lobos (Brazil) and Aaron Copland (USA). Jazz and popular musical styles influenced composers from both the United States and Europe.

In 20th century musical styles traditional forms and structures were broken up and recreated or composed using non-Western musical techniques and abstract ideas. Technology also became an extremely important factor in the music making during this time period. Composers have been known to use recording tape as a compositional tool. Electronically created sounds are used in combination with other electronic sounds or played together with traditional music instruments. Most recently, the use of computer technology has affected the world of music making. Some ways in which computers currently alter the face of the music world are by manipulating the performance of instruments in real time.

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Trends

Throughout the twentieth century, many trends developed. These trends permeated all the different areas of music and did not specifically happen at a given point in time or take on a strict form. Some of these trends were incorporated together into the same piece of music. The twentieth century broke all the musical rules of the past and let one form and style flow right into another. It is still important to note that although much change came with the turn of the century, Romantic music continued throughout this era, and remained the dominant form for quite some time.

Impressionism

Impressionism was the very first trend of significance which moved away from Romanticism and towards Modern era characteristics. Though this type of music was programmatic, it still started the movement away from the Romantic era. Impressionistic music was vague in form, delicate in nature, and had a mysterious atmosphere to it.

Expressionism

Although not as important as Impressionism, Expressionism was a prominent early twentieth century movement. Stylistically, expressionistic music was very atonal and dissonant. It was a German movement away from French Impressionism. It was emotional and had a somewhat Romantic feel to it.

Neo-Classicism

Neo-Classicism can be defined as the new classical movement. This movement started in the early 1920s and continued to be a leading musical movement throughout the century. This trend is still popular today. Neo-Classicism is a movement which incorporated the music of the Classical era, in terms of clarity of texture and objectivity. This trend not only based its music on the Classical era, but it also mixed Renaissance, Baroque, and some modern trends in with it.

Jazz

Jazz is a musical movement which dominated the 1900s. It is mainly an American form and remains popular to this day. Jazz can be defined as anything from popular music of the twentieth century to the improvised sounds of a dance band. Some prominent forms of Jazz throughout the century have been Ragtime, *Blues*, *Swing*, Dixieland Jazz, Bop, and Boogie-Woogie. Since the second half of the 1900s, new forms and techniques of Jazz have come about. These include funky hard bop regression, cool jazz, progressive jazz, and rock and roll. Generally these newer styles have a greater range in harmony, rhythm, and melody, and are less oriented to dance music. They also sometimes borrow techniques and forms from classical music, and vice versa, as modern classical music often contains Jazz elements.

Aleatory Music or Chance Music

Aleatory music is an extremely random style of music. The composer and/or the performer will randomly pick musical materials and make it into a piece of music. There are no rules to this form of music, and, thus, any kind of music can be created as a result. After the composer writes a piece in this unusual style, the performer then improvises on it, to make it stranger and more unique. Some techniques involved in aleatory music are having the audience improvise along with the performer, using electronic or computer media, or reading poetry somewhere inside of the work.

Electronic

The newest trend of the twentieth century lies in electronic music. Electronic music takes electronically generated sounds and turns it into a work of music. Like conventional music, electronic music has four general properties to it. These are amplitude, pitch, duration, and timbre. Electronic music is typically composed on either a synthesizer or a computer. The most current trends in this form of music show electronic music in combination with Jazz.

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Techniques

During the Modern era, many new musical techniques emerged. They were seen in [melody](#), [harmony](#), rhythm, meter, texture, tonality, and [sonority](#). It is important to note that during the twentieth century not all changes in music were a revolution or a return to old ideals.

Meter and Rhythm

Few changes occurred to the concepts of meter and rhythm during the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic eras. For the first time in hundreds of years, rhythm became a more important factor and took on characteristics of flexibility and variety.

New Time Signatures - Refers to odd time signatures, such as 5/8 and 7/8, are found in modern music.

Asymmetrical Grouping - This is a grouping of notes within a measure to yield new rhythmic effects.

Non-metric Music - For non-metric flexibility, composers omit the bar line, this is limited to solo media.

Polymetric Music - This is music in which two or more meters are used simultaneously.

Multimetric Music - In this type of music frequent changes of time signature occur almost every measure.

Displaced Bar Line - This is a technique to make the barline seem as if it is misplaced or shifted. To do this, accents are put in recurring patterns to counter the normal accents in the measure.

Melody

During the 1900s, new changes to melody occurred in the areas of style, scale bases, and the role of melody.

Style

Melody in music has generally remained traditional throughout the Modern era, but there have been exceptions as some extreme forms of melody have occurred.

Scale Bases

New melodic and harmonic styles appear during this era, as a result of the use of unconventional scales. Composers have borrowed scales from old church modes and have used them in a neomodal settings.

The Role of Melody

Up until the twentieth century melody was the most important element in any work of music. Now, the role of melody has greatly changed. It is still important in music with *contrapuntal* texture, but its importance is greatly diminished in music having great emphasis on harmony and rhythm, and virtually nonexistent in some forms of electronic music with nontonal sound.

Texture

Contrapuntal textures in music dominate the Modern era. While, *homophonic* textures are present, it is to a lesser degree and with less importance. Texture is especially evident in *neo-Classicism*, where contrapuntal forms from the Baroque, such as the *cannon* and *fugue*, are used.

Sonority

Sonority of the modern era takes on the characteristics of being thin, clear, and transparent. This resembles music of the Classical era, thus showing once again the importance of neo-Classicism in the twentieth century. Pointillism, a very thin sonority is also present in this modern era. It involves fragmentary lines, a combination of various tones sounding simultaneously, frequently changed timbres, and widely spaced registers.

Serialism & Twelve Tone Music

Serial music is based on a repeating series of rhythms, dynamics, tones, or timbres in a work. This form first appeared in the 1920s and relates to new concepts of formal structure in music and atonality.

Twelve tone music is a form of serialism that is based on a series of twelve different pitches called a tone row. A tone row contains all twelve tones of the octave arranged in such an order that any implication of tonic or key center is avoided. Melody, harmony, and themes are derived from the tone row, which replaces scales as the basis of composition.

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Composers

Bartok, Bela (1881-1945)

Bela Bartok was a famous Hungarian composer who transcribed Hungarian folk songs and also wrote his own orchestral, opera, ballet, and chamber music. Stylistically, he mixed his innate musical talent along with his intellectual skill to create his mastery of modern form. His most famous works are the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*, *Concerto for Orchestra*, and *Mikrokosmos*.

Britten, Benjamin (1913-1976)

Born in 1913, Benjamin Britten was an English composer. He wrote music in choral, orchestral, solo vocal, and operatic styles. He is also well known as being a significant composer of opera. He used various themes from American, Japanese, and British cultures in his works. His most famous opera is *Peter Grimes*. Britten was very opposed to war, and this can be seen in his *War Requiem*, which was a statement about his objection against militarism.

Copland, Aaron (1900-1990)

The composer Aaron Copland was born in 1900 in Brooklyn, New York. His personality often clashed with his musical compositions, as he was a quiet and soft-spoken man, while his music was loud, brilliant, and tense. As a child, he studied the piano and music theory. When he was old enough to leave home, he traveled to France to further immerse himself in the musical world. There he made his first business mistake, as he sold a short composition of his, *The Cat and The Mouse*, for twenty-five dollars. Thousands of copies were sold and he did not receive and royalties from the song.

Copland returned to New York after his education in France. While back in the United States, he composed his famous *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra*. He went on to become the director of many musical foundations such as the International Society for Contemporary Music, the League of Composers, and his own foundation.

Copland was very interested in educating people about modern music. He gave concerts with fellow friend and composer Roger Sessions. These Copland-Sessions concerts, served to educate audiences about the new and dissonant music that he and Sessions composed. He was also the director of the Berkshire School of Music in Tanglewood, Massachusetts after the great conductor Serge Koussevitzky died.

Some of his most famous works are *Lincoln Portrait*, a large orchestral piece with text from the Gettysburg address, and *Appalachian Spring*, which was a Pulitzer Prize and Critic's Circle of New York winning ballet. Additional songs for which he is known are [Hoedown](#) and [Simple Gifts](#). Copland was an extremely versatile composer and composed music for choruses, orchestras, theater, and chamber music groups. It is a special honor of his that he was one of the

first major composers asked to write a piece of music for a radio broadcast. Additionally, he wrote the scores for the films *The Heiress*, *The City*, *Our Town*, and *Of Mice and Men*. His compositions for film are emotional and have also been performed in concert halls.

Aaron Copland retired from composing music in 1965. This was due to the fact that younger composers were ignoring him, and the general public did not receive his newer works very well. Among these works that were ignored by the public was *Inscapes*, one of the great postwar American scores. From then on, Copland focused on a conducting career, specializing in his own scores.

Gershwin, George (1898-1937)

American born composer George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1898. He was a composer of both pop and concert music. As a child, Gershwin learned about music by playing the piano. At age sixteen, he received additional piano practice at a job where he played popular song hits all day long. He began to compose and play some of his original works but was largely ignored.

Eventually, Gershwin took a job as a rehearsal pianist at a Ziegfeld production. At this point in his life, he wrote his first musical comedy, *La La Lucille*, which turned out to be a hit. From then on he rapidly turned out Broadway successes. These were the famous *Oh Kay*, *Strike Up the Band*, *Girl Crazy*, *Funny Face*, *Of Thee I Sing*, *Lady Be Good*, and *George White's Scandals*. These scores contained songs that the country would grow to love, full of popular music and touches of early rock and roll.

Soon after, George Gershwin produced another one of his most famous works, [*Rhapsody in Blue*](#). This was a jazz piece written as a form of art. This whole philosophy was very new to the public, and yet they instantaneously fell in love with this piece. It was performed in concerts, broadcast on radio stations, and recorded and distributed in high volume, making it a well-known musical composition throughout the world. After *Rhapsody in Blue*, he composed two very famous compositions, [*American in Paris*](#) and the Cuban Overture.

[*Porgy and Bess*](#) was George Gershwin's last important composition. This was a grand opera folk opera written about the African American Southern culture. The all-African cast was so important that it was hailed as the first completely successful and completely American opera. It was written so emotionally and dramatically that members of the cast could not believe that the opera's composer wasn't at least partially African American. *Porgy and Bess* exemplified the skill and talent that George Gershwin possessed.

Tragically, Gershwin died at the young age of thirty-nine due to a cancerous brain tumor. His legacy continued on and Gershwin's music is still influential today, making him one of the most important composers of the twentieth century.

Ives, Charles (1874-1954)

Charles Ives was born in 1874 in Danbury, Connecticut. He learned about music from his father who was the lead member of the town band. At Yale he took a course in music, but rather than use conventional notation, he invented his own musical alphabet. Ives' unusual philosophy certainly did not make him a conservative musician.

From 1906 to 1930, when he retired, Ives was a businessman at an insurance company. From that point on he focused wholeheartedly on his music. Throughout his life, he tried not to miss a musical affair in his hometown of Danbury. He attended performances by the town band and played the organ in church. When he wrote music he incorporated the sounds he heard in town performances into it, faults and all. Some typical characteristics of his music were off-key singing, squeaky and out of tune violin playing, and the wheeze of the harmonium.

Ives wrote his music in a manner as cryptic as its sound. His score would have notes jotted all over the page with no bar separations and strange chords, rhythms, and quarter tones. One of his most famous works, written in this style, is his second [sonata](#) for the piano, entitled *Concord, Massachusetts*. This was arranged into four movements known separately as "Emerson," "Hawthorne," "The Alcotts," and "Thoreau." This piece brought out the spirit of Concord in the middle of the century, and was hailed for its power and display of emotion. Another popular piece of Charles Ives' was his *Symphony for Orchestra and Piano*.

Charles Ives was certainly one of the most influential, original, and unique composers of the 20th century. He died at eighty years of age, leaving eleven volumes of chamber music and six volumes of orchestral scores, most never performed. He was only semi appreciated in his lifetime, but the world today now appreciates his importance to the world of music. He was innovative, well ahead of his time, and risky and bold in his musical experimentation. Ives and his music are studied today for their freshness and daring.

Stravinsky, Igor (1882-1971)

Igor Stravinsky was born in Russia in 1882. His earlier works, such as his symphony No. 1 in E Flat, showed the old school Romantic musical style of Russia. However, Stravinsky began to turn away from this style of music and progressed towards the music of Claude Debussy, while adding a Russian flavor to it. Some of the works he completed in this new style were *The Faun and the Shepherdess*, *Fireworks*, and the major ballet [Firebird](#). In these compositions, clean orchestral textures, irregular rhythms, and emphasis on stamping were used. Two additional ballets written in this style were *Le Sacre du Printemps* and [Petrouchka](#). These works were less Romantic and had more of a barbaric feeling to them.

Eventually tiring of this style, Stravinsky decided to search for a new style of music once again. In this transitional period, he wrote the opera *Le Rossignol*, and *Symphonies for Wind Instruments*. After World War I, he moved further away from his fiery ballets by composing *Tango*, *Ragtime*, and *L'Histoire du Soldat*. These new scores were less aesthetically pleasing but used more objectification. At this time, he also reworked the old masterpieces of *Pulcinella* and *Oedipus Rex*. This style was called [neo-Classicism](#), which was a return to classical music with

modern day elements added in. Stravinsky is regarded as the most influential modern composer in both France and America. His most famous Neoclassicist works are the Concerto for Two Solo Pianofortes, the ballets Apollo and Jeu de Cartes, Symphony in Three Movements, Symphony in C, Ebony Concerto, Mass, Symphony of Psalms, and the classic full length opera, The Rake's Progress.

After Stravinsky finished *The Rake's Progress* he moved away from neo-Classicism and towards the serial music style. His most famous works in this category were *Movements for Piano and Orchestra*, *Cantata, In Memoriam Dylan Thomas*, *Three Shakespeare Songs*, *Threni*, *Introit*, *The Dove Descending Breaks the Air for chorus*, and *Requiem Canticles*. Stravinsky was a multifaceted and talented man who left an impression still burning on the musical world today.

Vaughn Williams, Ralph (1872-1958)

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in England during the year 1872. Composers influenced in the musical style of Brahms were his musical mentors. His earlier music showed the influence of Brahms, yet they also has Williams' unique and original sound to them. Throughout his life, he was fascinated by the English folk song.

Vaughan Williams had the unique talent of being able to absorb musical techniques and styles from other composers while still remaining true and original to himself. Composers who influenced him were Stravinsky, Bach, Brahms, Byrd, and Debussy. His earliest compositions were French impressionist music, such as his *In the Fen Country*, and *String Quartet No. 1*. He soon changed his musical style to incidental music. In this format, his famous works were *The Wasps*, the song cycle *On Wenlock Edge* and *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.

Vaughan Williams was a composer in almost every category of music. He wrote a few of operas, none which had success on stage, even though they were filled with artistically pleasing music. His other major musical compositions were *Hodie*, *Merciless Beauty*, *Serenade to Music*, *10 Blake Songs*, *Five Mystical Songs*, *Dona nobis pacem*, and *Sancta Civitas*. All of his symphonies show Ralph Vaughan Williams' wide range of style and form, each piece having a truly unique sound. His music was always original and unique, with much drama and emotion.