

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.