



Music in the Twentieth Century

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Music in the Twentieth Century

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Preamble: Naive and Sentimental Music

“On or about December 1910, human character changed.”¹

Anyone foolhardy enough to write a history of twentieth-century music must confront the fact that the twentieth century had started writing its own history before the era even began. In Western music, as in literature and the visual arts, the extraordinary historical self-consciousness that pervaded the first half of the century is, perhaps, its defining feature, a shared habit of mind uniting artists otherwise separated by gulfs of time, style, and ideology. If the century as a whole has any sort of musical unity, then at least part of its unity consists in the extraordinary persistence and audacity with which its protagonists sought to define themselves by reflecting on their relation to the past, positioning themselves and their work within larger narratives of progress, decline, or rupture.

For the arts, at least, this great age of historical self-consciousness might also be called the great age of self-consciousness as such. In terms of the poet Friedrich Schiller’s famous distinction between “naive” and “sentimental” artists²—between those who create spontaneously from the resources of their talents and training, and those who feel driven to reflect unceasingly on the meaning and nature of their work, pondering its language, metaphysical purpose, or social function—it is a striking fact that virtually every major artist since the beginning of the twentieth century has been of the latter type. From this perspective, all modern art is “sentimental” art.

This characterization may seem to be too sweeping and confident to do justice to the nuances and complexities of a century’s worth of music, and indeed it will need to be considerably qualified and complicated in what follows if it is to stand. But it is not intended as a confident conclusion. Instead, it is a working hypothesis, a lens to bring into focus some of the unifying passions and concerns underlying a musical repertoire whose main feature seems at first glance to be its sheer bewildering diversity.

What, then, is the best way to interpret and narrate the history of an era that has already expended so much brilliance and cunning on the task of interpreting and narrating itself? How, particularly, when that era is not even past? Musicians of the twenty-first century are still as deeply enmeshed in the musical and ideological struggles of the twentieth century as the twentieth century was engaged in those of the nineteenth. Some of the participants in those struggles are still alive, their debates not yet settled, their stakes not yet clear. As this survey progresses and the recent past blurs into the present, it becomes ever harder to define the space that separates the lucid interpretive tools of the scholar from the ideological weapons of the partisan.

This is not to say that the truth of the matter is unrecoverable, but only to recognize that musicians of the present stand in much the same relation to the competing artistic factions of the

¹ Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” in *Collected Essays, I* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), 320.

² Friedrich Schiller, “On Naive and Sentimental Poetry,” in *Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993), 179 and *passim*.

twentieth century as the children of a complex and acrimonious divorce might to their parents, suspended between irreconcilable stories each of which has compelling intellectual, emotional, and moral claims on them. Only in this case there are not two stories but many. In such a situation, the first step to understanding the twentieth century's musical parents is to explore, sympathetically but not uncritically, how they understood themselves. This is so even—perhaps especially—when their self-understandings appear plainly mythical. As Herodotus understood, myths are as important a part of history as dynasties, wars, and famines, because they continue to shape a culture long after they have ceased to be believed. Even in defeat, the gods remain mighty.

Historical Overview: The Short Twentieth Century

The historian Eric Hobsbawm writes of a “long nineteenth century” lasting from 1789, the year of the French Revolution, to 1914, the outbreak of World War I, and a “short twentieth century” extending from 1914 to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This periodization of the twentieth century may, with slight modifications, work for musical purposes as well—as, significantly, may the subtitle of Hobsbawm's history of the short twentieth century, “The Age of Extremes.”³ The musical twentieth century, if not quite so short as the political one, tracks it in important ways. It might be grouped into four periods, characterized loosely as (1) early modernist (ca. 1905–1914); (2) neoclassical (ca. 1918–1945); (3) avant-garde (1945–ca.1975); and (4) postmodern (ca. 1968 onward). Those divisions correspond to both the political cataclysms of the era and to the waxings, wanings, and ultimate fading of the cultural movement called modernism.

The precise beginning of the first period is arbitrary, though it would probably be wrong to date it much later than 1905, the year of Richard Strauss's (1864–1949) *Salome*. Musically, this was a period of precipitous change, during which composers vied with each other both in the extravagance of the claims they made for art and the extremity of the effects they sought to produce. Many were Wagner's heirs, both in the totalizing power they sought to capture in their art—many an early-twentieth-century artwork, musical or otherwise, was conceived as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—and in the transforming, redemptive role they hoped it to have. In most of Europe, the rule of the day was expansion: not just expansion of the orchestra, or of the length of a symphonic movement, but expansion of the means of expression, which were stretched in both directions, toward nearly inaudible *pianissimi* and crushing *fortissimi*, toward vast stretches of harmonic stasis and terrifying paroxysms of chromatic dissonance. Everywhere that composers encountered boundaries, they sought to cross or dissolve them, and even those who rejected the whole post-Wagnerian esthetic shared its suspicion of rules and borders, like Claude Debussy, who proclaimed that in music only “pleasure is the law.”⁴ This was the decade when modernism was at its most confident and messianic, a decade of restless discontent, of eschatological yearnings, and also, paradoxically, of a fevered optimism.

While the beginning of this period may have been ambiguous, its end was brutally precise: 28 July 1914, the beginning of World War I. Following the war, and to an extent even before it was over, a decidedly different set of esthetic values took hold. The same composers

³ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).

⁴Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, 2 vols., 1: 1862–1902: (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 208.

who had valorized instinct and intoxication in the prewar years now spoke of classicism, balance, and objectivity. Order, rather than freedom, was the watchword. Musically, this quest for order was reflected in myriad ways: in the devising of new systems of composition, in a preference for irony and esthetic distance, and in a re-appropriation, both formal and stylistic, of the Classical and Baroque past. This impulse found expression in the other arts as well, with painting and architecture becoming more geometrical and poetry more formalized. It also found expression, more profoundly, in social and political life: it is striking to note the number of modernists who committed themselves in the years after World War I to various forms of systematic communal and intellectual order, whether old (royalism, nationalism, various flavors of religious orthodoxy) or new (Soviet communism and fascism). It is tempting to see this period as the abrupt about-face of a culture scarred by World War I, as either a correction or a betrayal of the preceding decade. There is some truth to this. Yet at the same time many of the ideas and values that shaped the period grew directly out of the central concerns of the prewar years, and what seems like a rejection of prewar modernist ambition exhibits a strange continuity with it.

The question of continuity raises itself again, in a precisely contrary way, in the musical period that followed World War II. Here the relation to the previous period is one in which the appearance of continuity masks a deeper discontinuity. The harmonic practices and constructive techniques were directly descended from those of the prewar and interwar years: both the “atonal” harmonic idiom of Arnold Schoenberg, which had arisen from the fever-dream of prewar German and Austrian expressionism, and Schoenberg’s later technique of twelve-tone (dodecaphonic) composition, originating between the wars and classicist in its inspiration, became the basis for the postwar practice of much of the European and American avant-garde. Yet the spirit in which these innovations were pushed to their logical (or illogical) conclusions was in Europe one of near-total cultural devastation, and in the United States one of scientific optimism. To both mindsets, the visions that had animated much prewar and interwar art were deeply foreign. The occultism and irrationalism of early modernism were worlds removed from the positivism and scientific rationalism of the postwar academy, in which so much American composition took place. In Europe, where an entire cultural heritage seemed implicated in the inhumanity of the Nazi era, interwar music’s attachment to tradition and the classical heritage was seen as a damning liability, a betrayal of modernism’s own early radicalism. The years after World War II may, in a sense, be seen as another period of expansion and furious innovation, like that which preceded World War I. But if so, this was an expansion of an almost opposite character, undertaken in the shadow of cultural catastrophe; in it, the whole relation of the present to the European cultural past had become radically problematic in a way that could not have been imagined thirty years previously, often issuing in music from which all audible trace of the past seemed to have been scrubbed.

Without another global catastrophe to serve as a convenient point of demarcation, this third period fades unevenly over the course of the 1960s, into a fourth, often referred to as the “postmodern.” Even during the years of its postwar hegemony, high modernism was challenged by other, profoundly disparate voices—not only the composers who stubbornly clung to those aspects of the European musical tradition that modernism had discarded, but those who, like John Cage (1912–1992), forsook that tradition far more radically than high modernism itself could have ever imagined doing. Cage’s conviction that anything, from silence to the products of chance, could be music when properly situated, proved inspirational (if only negatively) to a

counterculture deeply suspicious of received authority and tradition. Musical alternatives to the prevailing high modernist idiom proliferated wildly, a proliferation measured both in the violation of modernist taboos—ranging from the reappearance of common-practice harmony and regular rhythmic pulse to the wholesale appropriation, whether ironic or sincere, of historical and popular styles—and in the growing array of musical practices, like performance art and early minimalism, that sought to place themselves outside the Western musical tradition entirely.

How to Be Modern ca. 1905–1914

The twentieth century in music is sometimes said to begin in 1912 or 1913, the years of the respective premieres of Arnold Schoenberg's (1874–1951) song cycle *Pierrot lunaire* and Igor Stravinsky's (1882–1971) ballet *The Rite of Spring*, two of the summits of the early modernist repertoire. Claude Debussy's (1862–1918) ballet *Jeux*, also premiered in 1913, was overshadowed at the time by *The Rite of Spring*, but has since been accorded almost equal significance, as has Béla Bartók's (1881–1945) opera *Bluebeard's Castle*, which was completed in 1912 (premiered in 1918).⁵

None of these works sprang into being from nowhere: each was the product of a particular, more or less gradual period of musical development, and each composer was working alongside many others. The unresolved dissonances, angular, acrobatic melodies, and disorienting harmonic flux that shocked *Pierrot*'s first audiences were already evident in Schoenberg's Second String Quartet of 1908, and, to a lesser degree, Strauss's *Salome* (1905). *The Rite* was preceded by two ballets, the *Firebird* (1910) and *Petrushka* (1911), each more harmonically audacious, rhythmically propulsive, and orchestrally brilliant than the last. Bartók's rhythmic drive and harmonic austerity, as well as his absorption in Hungarian folk music, were already apparent in the *14 Bagatelles* (1908), while Debussy anticipated his mature, sensuous, gravity-defying harmonic idiom already in his 1893 String Quartet.

It would perhaps be more useful to place the beginnings of truly twentieth-century music around 1905, or rather to say that it came gradually into being over the course of the decade between 1905 and 1914. But even then it is clear that something extraordinary had happened: a musical idiom that had remained relatively stable since the death of Richard Wagner in 1883 was now transformed, over the course of a decade, into a style—or rather, a variety of distinct styles—that audiences of the late nineteenth century would scarcely recognize.

Dating the musical twentieth century from this decade has two advantages. First, it emphasizes how closely the rise of musical modernism corresponded with the rise of modernism in the other arts: the premiere of the *Rite* came two years before James Joyce began writing *Ulysses*, three years before the publication of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," six years after Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and three years after the 1910 exhibition of post-impressionist painting in London that inspired Virginia Woolf to think human character forever changed.

⁵ On the music and the cultural *milieux* of this period see especially Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973; reprint ed., 1999); Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through Mavra* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994; reprint ed., 2016); and Judit Frigyesi, *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

Second, defining the musical twentieth century in this manner tracks neatly with Hobsbawm's political and social definition. It could be said that, just as the twentieth century "truly" began with the cataclysm of World War I, which swept away the melioristic illusions of the nineteenth century and ushered in an era of instability, chaos, and fragmentation, so did the cataclysmic masterpieces of early modernism shatter the language of common-practice tonality and the lush esthetics of Romanticism, paving the way for a music that was leaner and often more savage; in which the relationship of dissonance to consonance had changed dramatically; in which the techniques of thematic repetition and development that governed so much of Classical and Romantic music had become increasingly subtle and elusive; in which rhythm had assumed a new autonomy and, at times, a terrifying propulsive power; and in which the darkest recesses of both social and interior life were laid bare with pitiless clarity.

Yet this is only part of the story of music in the opening years of the twentieth century, and to leave it at this is to prioritize the composers who were most self-consciously "modernistic" over those whose styles do not fit so easily with the rhetoric of revolution and crisis. Debussy's music does not on first hearing strike listeners as representing the chaos of the age, nor does that of Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924), though both composers were as intrinsic a part of the twentieth century as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Bartók. A case may be made for other composers, like Aaron Copland (1900–1990), whose eclectic style incorporated atonal and twelve-tone elements into various works, many of which appealed to the public from the start.

Perhaps more importantly, to put it this way is to accept uncritically one of the most potent of modernist myths—the myth of decisive rupture, of absolute beginnings, captured so eloquently (if not without a touch of self-mockery) by Virginia Woolf. Looked at from another angle, the years 1912–1913 represent not a beginning but an end—not only the end of the period of feverish development that had led Schoenberg and Stravinsky from the late-Romantic idioms of *Gurrelieder* (1900–1911) and *Feu d'artifice* (1908) to the audacious modernism with which they are indelibly associated, but also, and more significantly, the end of an entire line of artistic and intellectual development with its roots deep in the nineteenth century. To understand *what* was coming to an end, it is necessary to delve into the meaning and history of a word that has already been used indiscriminately throughout this article, but has not yet been defined: modernism. By doing so, it is possible to arrive at a way of understanding the twentieth century musically that will be adequate not only for those composers who were proudly and self-consciously modern but also for those who were simply of their time, and—consequently—modern whether they wished it or not.

Modernism and Modernity

What, then, is "modern art?" The phrase has a number of meanings that are significant for music. At its most general, it simply means art that is being made now, or at a time not that different from now, as when we speak of "modern life" or "modernity." But it can also mean art that is not only "modern," but "modernist": art that sprang from, or was influenced by, a more or less coherent intellectual and cultural movement, modernism; or, derivatively, art of the stylistic

period between (roughly) 1910 and 1970, when modernism was the dominant force in Western artistic life.⁶

These senses of the word are clearly distinct, which is why historians generally restrict themselves to the more precise “modernist” when speaking of the second sense. But even if distinct, the connotations are not independent. It may now be the case that we are living in a “postmodernist” era, in which case most art that is modern in the first sense (contemporary) is not modern in the second (modernist). Before about 1970, however, the two senses of the word were mutually reinforcing. First, most music that was modern in the sense of being contemporary was either modernist itself, influenced by modernism, or a reaction against modernism. The movement’s prestige and influence were such that artists could reject it but seldom be indifferent to it. To be modern was thus to have an attitude, whether enthusiastic, ambivalent, or hostile, toward modernism. Conversely, fundamental to the modernist worldview was a heightened awareness of what it meant to be an artist living at the present time, of one’s relationship to history and society, and of the unique and exalted duties imposed upon artists by the present age. One could embrace this age or rebel against it, but one could not escape one’s responsibilities toward it. To be modernist was thus to have an attitude, whether enthusiastic, ambivalent, or hostile, toward modernity. It is by understanding what the modernists conceived modernity to be that we can best understand their reactions to, for, and against it, and, in turn, the musical course of the century they dominated.

The concept of modernity in this broader sense, as Karol Berger has noted, is not widely used among historians of Western music.⁷ Among intellectual and social historians, however, it is used to denote both a time period—most broadly, an era distinguished from Antiquity and the Middle Ages, beginning anywhere between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries—and the condition of being alive in that time period. It might be termed “the way we live now.” How both the time period and the condition are defined is itself the subject of wide disagreement, and its roots have been located variously in the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Enlightenment. Yet sufficient agreement exists about its fundamental features to construct a minimal definition that will help us to understand how modernity—or rather the idea of modernity—shaped the cultural landscape from which modernist art emerged.

For this minimal definition, modernity is characterized by a weakening of various forms of authority, whether of community, tradition, or religious revelation, and conversely by the growing autonomy of the individual and of “scientific” rationality.⁸ But, as is suggested by the sociologist Max Weber’s famous term for these changes—“disenchantment”—modernity was

⁶While neither a universally agreed-upon, value-neutral account of artistic modernism exists, nor is it easy to imagine what one would look like if it did, two stimulating popular attempts to address this matter—though often at odds both with each other and with this survey—may be found in Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (New York: Knopf, 1980; reprint ed., 1991 as *The Shock of the New*) and Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy: From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

⁷ Karol Berger, *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow: An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 5.

⁸ One of the best treatments of the idea of modernity, one sensitive to its cultural resonances and ambiguities, is the title essay in Leszek Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990; reprint ed., 1997).

conceived from the beginning not just as a time but as a condition.⁹ This condition could be experienced as one of loss (as it was for many anti-Enlightenment thinkers) or of opportunity (as it was for the most influential philosopher of the nineteenth century, G. W. F. Hegel), but most characteristically it was both at once: for figures as unlike as Marx and Nietzsche, the modern world, though despoiled and degraded, stood at the same time on the cusp of a glorious transformation.

Whatever the true nature of modernity may be, then, the *idea* of modernity is at least in part a mythic and religious one: it looks back to an imagined state of prelapsarian innocence, forward to an apocalyptic future, or both. In this form—that of quasi-religious myth—the idea of modernity was central to the vision of those modernists who came of age before World War I: *The Rite of Spring* and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* looked for their inspiration to a premodern, tribal world in which the individual is subsumed by (or, as in *The Rite of Spring*, sacrificed for) the community, while the first of Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces*—significantly entitled *Vorgefühle* (“Premonitions”)—musically prefigures the looming apocalyptic maelstrom that W. B. Yeats would also anticipate after World War I, in his poem “The Second Coming.” But this violent ambivalence toward modernity itself, and toward everything that was thought to characterize it, long outlasted the pioneering years of early modernism. For much of the twentieth century the arts would oscillate between extremes of rationalism and irrationalism, individualism and collectivism, only rarely alighting in the middle.

Art as Utopia and Prophecy

If the narrative of modernity was a kind of religion, then it needed its prophets and priests, which by the turn of the twentieth century it had found in an unexpected group—artists. This development was the product, first, of the Romantic cult of the artist, whose ideal image had changed dramatically in the course of a century from a humble artisan, engaged in the everyday realities of commerce and social life, to an alienated genius, both estranged from society and ineffably above it, a prophet without honor in his own country. Second, it was the product of the frustrated revolutionary hopes of the nineteenth century, where half a century of revolutionary fervor and agitation had ended in 1848 with the triumph of autocracy. After the suppression of the 1848 uprisings, the fevered energy that had animated revolutionary politics from 1789 to 1848 was both curdled and turned inward, assuming a darker and more pessimistic hue at the same time as, robbed of concrete objects, it found an outlet in a newly valorized field of activity, that of art.

These are the necessary preconditions for the beginning of artistic modernism, and in their light both its astonishing transformations and its seeming contradictions begin to make more sense. After 1848 the most optimistic narratives about modernity—those that saw it as marked by the beneficent progress of the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and brotherhood—came to seem increasingly hollow, and the evils of industry and city life it brought in its train—William Blake's “dark Satanic mills,” or the hollow world of bourgeois prosperity pilloried by Flaubert and Tolstoy—ever more unbearable. As the perceived ills of modernity grew, ever more

⁹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1920; reprint ed., 1999), *passim*. An important recent treatment of the idea of disenchantment can be found in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), *passim* and especially “The Malaises of Modernity,” 299–321.

radical cures were contemplated. Yet these cures were increasingly sought not in the world of practical politics, where they had repeatedly failed, but in art, which came by many—not least the artists themselves—to be seen as the truly significant, and indeed revolutionary, field of human activity. Both transformations, the deepening pessimism and radicalism as well as the sublimation into art of formerly political energies, are embodied with particular vividness in the career of Richard Wagner (1813–1883), who in a short span of time went from agitating for political revolution on the streets of Dresden in 1848 to embarking on the colossal, cosmogonic myth of the *Ring Cycle*, which begins in utopian political allegory and ends in a vision of universal destruction.¹⁰

The cult of art that emerged from these changes is sometimes referred to as estheticism, a term that unfortunately obscures the fact that it could take two seemingly contrary forms, one asocial and the other anything but. The asocial approach—what people normally have in mind when they talk of “estheticism”—was to construct in art a kind of refuge, a utopia of freedom and beauty where the ugliness of contemporary social life has no place. In this artistic utopia, as in all utopias, means-ends relationships were banished: just as in the perfect society none could exploit or allow themselves to be exploited, so in the artistic utopia beauty itself was the highest end, serving no purpose other than itself, a belief captured in the slogan *l’art pour l’art*, and in Oscar Wilde’s dictum that “all art is quite useless.”¹¹ The title of Claude Debussy’s last large-scale masterpiece, *Jeux*, means “games,” and both the ballet’s plot and its music depict an eroticism drained of suffering, transfigured into pure play.

More typical, however, was another approach toward the relation between art and reality, for which we have no easy name, but which might be called messianic estheticism. This was to follow Wagner’s example in treating art not as an alternative to reality, but as a corrective to it, the force by which the world could in some sense be mended or redeemed when political methods had failed. This attitude lies at the heart of artistic modernism, for two reasons. First, it motivates the totalizing ambition of artists to remake and to revolutionize. The artwork conceived in this way dissolves esthetic distance, seeking to encompass and transform both the listener and its environment. Gustav Mahler epitomized this attitude with his claim to Jean Sibelius that “the Symphony must be like the world; it must embrace *everything*,”¹² a dictum Mahler’s symphonies obey in their size, emotional extremity, and appropriation of the “world’s” own musical materials, ranging from the parody of *Frère Jacques* in the First Symphony to the cowbells of the Sixth. In the United States, Charles Ives paralleled Mahler both in universalizing ambition in his sketches for a work literally entitled the “Universe Symphony,” and in the eclectic range of his extroversive references, setting detuned marching-band music against Protestant hymns in a dizzying collage. At its most literal, the impulse for art to contain the world was embodied in Alexander Scriabin’s *Mysterium*, a work that, in Scriabin’s original conception, had no audience, the whole of humanity as its participants, and the apocalypse as its ending.

¹⁰ See also Richard Wagner, “Art and Revolution,” in *The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 21–68. Originally published as volume 1 of Richard Wagner’s prose works (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895).

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹² Quoted in Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler*, 3 vols. 2: *The Wunderhorn Years: Chronicles and Commentaries* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 286.

Just as significantly— especially for the future of music after 1914—messianic estheticism translated both the revolutionary impulse and the general myth of modernity into the terms of art itself: it was in terms of the artistic medium that the lost past, the malaise of the present, and the eschatological future were primarily conceived. Thus Arnold Schoenberg, in *Harmonielehre* (1911),¹³ a treatise that was ostensibly a harmony textbook, constructed a grand myth in which the development of German harmonic practice toward ever freer use of dissonance was in fact the development, in music, of freedom itself, culminating in an epochal transformation Schoenberg later called “the emancipation of the dissonance.”¹⁴

In the masterpieces of prewar modernism, the social transformation that was sought or imagined was inseparable from the transformation already embodied in the musical language of those works themselves. In Schoenberg’s second string quartet, at the very moment at which dissonance is emancipated—at which the accumulated chromatic tensions of Schoenberg’s post-Wagnerian idiom lose any impulse to resolve, and the music breaks through to what would later be called atonality—a soprano voice enters singing these words: “I feel the breath of other planets.” Both here and in Schoenberg’s monodrama *Erwartung* this total chromaticism—like the chromaticism of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, its most important precursor—depicts a psychological landscape of pure interiority, from which society has been stripped, leaving only the unmediated encounter between a solitary individual and the inhuman inscrutability of Nature. In a precisely contrary way, the archaic modal melodies and “primitive” rhythms of Stravinsky’s early ballets, or the Hungarian peasant songs that obsessed Béla Bartók and transformed his music, were seen as bridges to a purer, more communal past, their modal purity the means by which its strength and vitality could be regained for a lonely, socially atomized present.¹⁵

Art thus became not just the vehicle by which the present was criticized, but the embodiment of all possible alternatives to it. Empowered by society’s esteem and radicalized by alienation from it, the artist became (in Jacques Barzun’s phrase) modernity’s “prophet and jester.”¹⁶ Thus the seeming contraries toward which modernist art tended—toward the archaic and the ultramodern, the abstract and the visceral, the rationalist and the irrationalist, the individualist and the collectivist—were united by their shared aversion to the moribund center. The spirit of rebellion that would choose even damnation over bourgeois mediocrity was immaculately conveyed by T. S. Eliot, writing from the vantage point of his own later religious conservatism to praise the “decadent” poetry of Charles Baudelaire:

In the middle nineteenth century, the age which (at its best) Goethe had prefigured, an age of bustle, programmes, platforms, scientific progress, humanitarianism and revolutions which improved nothing, an age of progressive degradation, Baudelaire perceived that what really matters is Sin and Redemption... the recognition of the reality of Sin is a New Life; and the possibility of damnation is so immense a relief in a world of

¹³ Arnold Schoenberg *Theory of Harmony*, trans. Roy E. Carter, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2010). This is a translation of the 3rd (1922) edition of *Harmonielehre*.

¹⁴ Arnold Schoenberg, “Opinion or Insight?” in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975; reprint ed, 2010), 258–312. This is an expansion of the 1950 collection of articles with the same title.

¹⁵ See Richard Taruskin, “Stravinsky and the Subhuman” in *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 360–467 and Frigyesi (op. cit.)

¹⁶ Jacques Barzun, “The Artist as Prophet and Jester,” *The American Scholar* 69:1 (Winter 2000):15–33.

electoral reform, plebiscites, sex reform and dress reform, that damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation – of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living.¹⁷

This galvanizing centrifugal energy, this eager fleeing toward extremes, was the principal animating force that linked the great modernist masterpieces of the years leading up to World War I. But it also had another, longer-lasting legacy. Modernism had, almost by definition, to be perpetually self-reinventing, and reinvent it did, at a furious pace: in terms of harmony, rhythm, theme, and form, there is a wider gap between the 1952 *Klavierstücke* of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Schoenberg's 1899 sextet *Transfigured Night* than there is between *Transfigured Night* and Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. This drive toward perpetual reinvention continued to animate musical life even after the modernist movement that gave it birth was spent, and in the process gave rise to the enormous heterogeneity of the current musical landscape. Thus the very factor that makes it impossible to ascribe stylistic unity to the music of the twentieth century is a testament to its intellectual unity. Notwithstanding various perspectives on postmodernism and postmodernity, the twenty-first century remains the era that modernism made.

The Search for Order ca. 1918–1945

In his study of British literature after World War I, the literary critic Paul Fussell describes the vast disparity between the sanitized visions of military heroism with which the British entered into the war—visions entertained by politicians and writers for whom, after half a century of relative peace, war was a lofty abstraction—and the theater of meaningless technological slaughter they encountered there. Fussell argues that the absurdity of the war, the chasm between its imagined meaning and its experienced meaninglessness, was fundamental to the modern literary consciousness: “I am saying that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War.”¹⁸

Nothing like the innocence of Fussell's prewar England can be ascribed to the European intellectual milieu from which most modernist music sprang. Prewar European modernism had long been haunted by premonitions of catastrophe and exhaustion, from the nightmare bureaucracies of Kafka to the blood-soaked hallucination of Richard Strauss's *Elektra*. Yet Fussell's fundamental insight still applies. If the modernists had anticipated catastrophe, they had often enough done so eagerly, seeking in it the remedy to senselessness, the “ennui of modern life” deplored by T. S. Eliot. Yet once the expected catastrophe arrived, it proved an experience of supreme senselessness: A war undertaken for uncertain and muddled purposes, sparked by a half-bungled assassination in an obscure part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and fought with a mismatched combination of antiquated battlefield tactics and cutting-edge military technology that destroyed millions of lives for little concrete political or strategic gain.

¹⁷ T.S. Eliot, “Baudelaire” in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 235.

¹⁸ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, reprint ed., 2013), 35.

The ideals that had led artists to flirt so determinedly with catastrophe were now appraised with a new and jaundiced eye. Perhaps inevitably, the reappraisal did not stop at the modernist apocalyptic itself, but followed the trail of responsibility back to the Romantic death-drunkness from which it was descended. At the close of *The Magic Mountain*, his 1924 *Bildungsroman*, Thomas Mann sends his music-loving antihero Hans Castorp to his likely end in World War I singing Schubert's song "Der Lindenbaum," in which a weary longing for death is portrayed in music of shimmering beauty and folklike intimacy.¹⁹ Not everyone went as far as Mann in suggesting, however gently, that musical Romanticism prefigured, or helped to bring about, the cataclysm of the war. Even for those who did not, however, Romantic music's erotic power, as well as its affinity with death and the irrational, became deeply suspect. This skepticism found expression in a number of related musical responses. One such response was a new (if relative) modesty, dictated by the material constraints of an impoverished postwar society as well as by artists' newfound suspicion of their own previous messianic ambitions.

As Fussell might have predicted, another response was irony. Prewar works like Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* (1912) had already placed Romantic yearnings within a grotesquely ironic frame, but the practice became vastly more common after the war, in works like the grotesque paintings of Otto Dix or the opera *Wozzeck* (1922) by Schoenberg's pupil Alban Berg (1885–1935). *Wozzeck*, begun on the eve of the war and completed in 1922, renders the story of a tormented and oppressed soldier as a series of vignettes, each set to a particular classical form. The function of these forms is, in one respect, to hold the distorting passions of the opera's characters at a distance, placing them within a frame of irony and contempt, as when one of the villains of the opera, a grotesque character known only as the Doctor, rhapsodizes about free will to the strains of a mechanistic, implacably unfolding passacaglia, the very symbol of musical predetermination. Yet these forms also seem designed, both individually and in their succession, to grant a sense of meaning and coherence to the essentially meaningless narrative of *Wozzeck*'s exploitation and death—and thus, perhaps, to the senseless ends of innumerable other such soldiers in the battlefields of Austerlitz and the Somme.

As the formal layout of *Wozzeck* suggests, however, the most pervasive and important response to the war was a quest for order, expressed socially through a turn toward established religious or political orthodoxies and artistically through various forms of classicism and formal control. Central to both changes was a renewed sense of the value of tradition—but a tradition that artists continued, characteristically, to appropriate on their own terms. Igor Stravinsky, like T. S. Eliot, followed a flirtation with fascism by a return to Christian orthodoxy, at about the same time that he entered the period of his musical output that is called neoclassical. In the *Poetics of Music* (1947) Stravinsky praised the "classical" virtues of objectivity, constraint, and craftsmanship against the Romantic excesses of self-expression, and in his 1935 autobiography he declared hyperbolically that "music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all."²⁰ In Stravinsky's music from the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920) to *The Rake's Progress* (1951), past forms ranging from Orthodox liturgy through *bel canto* opera are

¹⁹ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods, (New York: A. Knopf, 1995), 853–54.

²⁰ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942; reprint ed., 2003) passim, and Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1936; reprint ed., 1998), 53. Both works are largely ghostwritten, but see Joseph N. Straus, *Stravinsky's Late Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 183 fn.

refracted through the composer's mind into a unified oeuvre of fearsome precision, often called "neoclassical" both for its debt to Mozart and Classical form and for its fealty to "classicist" ideals of order and symmetry. Yet Stravinsky's classicism is utterly unlike that of a nineteenth-century composer like Johannes Brahms; its plangent dissonances, dry, precise timbres, and trenchant rhythms wipe the past clean of any trace of Romantic yearning.

Other composers followed, in their own ways, the same path toward the "classical." Debussy, before his death near the end of the war, had renounced the grandiose title of composer, styling himself only a *musicien français*, and penned three late sonatas inspired by the spirit of the French Baroque. In Germany during the 1920s, the movement called the *neue Sachlichkeit* ("new objectivity") found issue in Dix's mordant paintings and the dry, deliberately "utilitarian" chamber works of Paul Hindemith (1895–1963.)

Perhaps the most consequential attempt to reclaim musical order was made by Arnold Schoenberg. A fire-breathing apostle of instinct before the war—he had written that "one must express *oneself!* Express oneself *directly!* Not one's taste, or one's upbringing, or one's intelligence, knowledge or skill"²¹—Schoenberg now reinvented himself as an advocate of tradition and order, "a conservative who was forced to become a revolutionary" (as one oft-repeated but probably apocryphal quotation has it). In one of the most influential innovations of twentieth-century music, Schoenberg codified the freely "atonal" harmonic language of his prewar years into a "method of composing with twelve tones related only to each other," informally known as "twelve-tone composition." In this new method of composing, the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale were ordered into "rows" in which each pitch occurs only once. The row, with its various transpositions and transformations—turned backward (retrograde), upside-down (inversion), or both (retrograde inversion)—served as a kind of precompositional "quarry" from which thematic and harmonic materials could be mined.

The techniques behind twelve-tone composition would be put to vastly different uses by the generation that came of age after World War II, but the intricately worked symmetries and classical forms of Schoenberg's earlier twelve-tone music make clear that its initial purpose was not far different from that of Stravinsky's neoclassicism: not only the restoration of formal control to a musical style whose freedom had come to seem anarchic, but the restoration of order and meaning to a world that had come unmoored. In his opera *Moses und Aron*, Schoenberg would tacitly equate the twelve-tone "row," his own source of musical coherence, with the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Sinai, the traditional wellspring of social and moral order.

Even the Soviet Union, insulated as it was from cultural developments in western Europe, followed a similar path, though at a different pace and for seemingly different reasons. The heady period of experimentation and brash confidence that had followed the Bolshevik revolution, finding issue in the plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Dmitri Shostakovich's (1906–1975) first four symphonies, came to an end in 1936 with the official condemnation of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1934). Hereafter Soviet music would be increasingly forced into its own form of order, that of "socialist realism," which in practice implied a very different kind of classicism from that of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, a return to

²¹ Arnold Schoenberg to Wassily Kandinsky in Jelena Hahl-Koch, *Arnold Schoenberg, Wassily Kandinsky: Letters, Pictures, and Documents* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 23.

the heroic model of Beethoven's symphonies coupled with a compulsion to express the truth as the Soviet state saw it.²²

Only the United States, which had escaped the worst ravages of the war—and in which, with the notable and obscure exception of Charles Ives, full-fledged modernist messianism had never really taken root—experienced no widespread attempt to reassert order musically. In any case, if it was the goal of artists to cast the experience of the war into some sort of meaningful order, they were soon overtaken by events. In Germany, by the time of *Wozzeck*'s premiere, a very different meaning was already being ascribed to World War I. And by 1940, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Bartók were living in the United States, watching in exile as a new and altogether more sinister order was imposed on much of Europe.

Aus Null: 1945–ca. 1975

The year 1945 is generally called *Stunde Null*—zero hour—a designation that bleakly suggests the pervasive devastation of Europe at the end of World War II. Culturally, this devastation was not measured primarily in lives lost in battle, or in the length of time during which the arts in Europe were subject to totalitarian control and most modernism was banned as *entartete Kunst*, “degenerate art.” In Germany, in particular, it was measured in those artists who ran afoul of the Nazi state, and also, more insidiously, in those who found an all too easy accommodation with it. The infamous “letter from Richard Wagner’s own city of Munich”—which denounced Thomas Mann for a lecture on Wagner in which he warned against the Nazi appropriation of Wagner’s music, essentially forcing Mann into exile—carries the signatures of most of Germany’s musical elite, among them Richard Strauss.²³

Yet the predicament of music was but one aspect of the situation of the humanities more generally. The assumption that great art could humanize and redeem, which had been central to nineteenth-century artistic culture and had bound artists and audiences together despite their growing differences, was now put into question by the rise of radical inhumanity in the heart of one of Europe’s most cultured nations. The literary critic George Steiner, for one, writes of men who could “sing Schubert in the evening and torture in the morning,”²⁴ and has commented elsewhere that some of those “who administered the ‘final solution’ in eastern Europe were avid connoisseurs and, in some instances, performers of Bach and Mozart...[or] cultivated a knowledge of Goethe, a love of Rilke.”²⁵

The effect was to place a question mark not just around modernism or romanticism but around the humanizing aspirations of the entire European cultural tradition. The Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno, one of the presiding spirits behind the new musical avant-garde, sought the roots of the problem in the Enlightenment itself, locating the sources of anti-modern

²²For some important qualifications, see Taruskin, “Shostakovich and the Inhuman” in *Defining Russia Musically*, 468–544.

²³ For English translations of both the letter and the lecture that occasioned it, see Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

²⁴ George Steiner, “The Muses’ Farewell,” *Salmagundi* 135/136 (2002):148–56, 150.

²⁵ George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Toward the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 77

barbarity at the very inception of modernity.²⁶ The myth of modernity that had animated much prewar modernism assumed a newly despairing, estheticized guise: in Adorno's Marxism, all hope of utopia has vanished from the world to take refuge in art, the last locus of resistance to a mechanized and inhuman society.

Academy and Avant-Garde

The ambition of the new generation of composers that gathered around Adorno in the German city of Darmstadt was thus to remake music *aus Null*, "from nothing," to create an artistic utopia purged of the evils of the past. The principal means seized upon for this remaking was the twelve-tone technique developed by Schoenberg, which was now taken and applied to "parameters" other than pitch. This approach, known as integral serialism, was foreshadowed by the 1949 *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* of Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992), but Messiaen, though one of the preeminent twentieth-century composers, was both intellectually and musically a figure of a different age, for whom serial technique was a passing interest. It was Messiaen's pupil Pierre Boulez (1925–2016), the leading composer and fiercest polemicist of the post-war ultramodernists, who developed the technique most fully in a series of works leading up to his *Structures I* (1952), in which pitch, duration, articulation, and dynamic level are all independently serialized, set on separate but interlocking trajectories that produce a sonic surface of dizzying unpredictability.

Works like *Structures I* were derided by contemporary critics as *Augenmusik* ("eye music"), exercises in sterile intellectualism, where structure has little connection to what is actually heard. But this was to miss the significance of Boulez's music in several ways. First, the serial system limited composers' freedom less than might be expected: the free choice of instrumental color, articulation, register, and melodic contour in Boulez's early masterwork *Le Marteau sans maître* (1955), bound within the iron control of serial technique, produced an effect of lucid, controlled fury utterly characteristic of the composer Messiaen poetically likened to "a lion being flayed alive." More importantly, however, what is significant about *Structures I* is precisely what is *not* heard:

I wanted to eradicate from my vocabulary absolutely every trace of the conventional, whether it concerned figures and phrases, or development and form; I then wanted gradually, element after element, to win back the various stages of the compositional process, in such a manner that a perfectly new synthesis might arise[.]²⁷

The coordination of rhythmic, metrical, and pitch structure is a fundamental constituent of what is normally understood by the idea of *style*—of the shared linguistic background, more or less unconscious, against which musical communication takes place. The uncoupling of these elements that takes place in integral serialism is thus a uniquely efficient way to forge a musical

²⁶ For a representative selection of Adorno's musical writings, see Theodor Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992). Regarding his indictment of the Enlightenment, see Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

²⁷ Pierre Boulez, "Nécessité d'une orientation esthétique (II)," in *Canadian University Music Review* 7 (1986): 61.

language unencumbered by the stylistic legacy of the past. In a famous assault on Schoenberg, Boulez excoriated the progenitor of serialism for his failure to recognize the implications of his own discovery. After deploring precisely those stylistic aspects of Schoenberg's twelve-tone music that linked it to the classical past, Boulez held up as an alternative model Schoenberg's pupil Anton Webern (1883–1945), who had stripped his later music of ornament and Romantic gesture until its dodecaphonic skeleton was plainly exposed to fashion an oeuvre of jeweled precision and aphoristic brevity. It was Webern rather than Schoenberg, Boulez declared, who pointed the way toward the future. And it was a future that one resisted only at the cost of irrelevance: “since the Viennese discovery every composer outside the serial experiments has been *useless*.”²⁸

In his mellow old age, when he had transformed himself from a high-modernist firebrand to a pillar of the musical establishment, Boulez would almost ruefully explain his attack on Schoenberg in the oedipal terms popularized by Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*: “one has to kill the father.”²⁹ But what one can observe in the ferocity of the young Boulez's polemics and the music of *Le Marteau sans maître* is something more significant. With the other composers who emerged from or were influenced by the intellectual milieu of Darmstadt, like Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis, and György Ligeti, Boulez represents the emergence in music of a true *avant-garde*, characterized (in the words of the scholar Renato Poggioli) by a “transcendental antagonism” bordering on nihilism, which finds joy in “beating down barriers, razing obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way,” and a “febrile anxiety to go always further”—an artistic movement of restless, relentless self-invention, shorn of the fetters of the past.³⁰

The *avant-garde* rebelliousness that had been embodied between the wars by such artistic movements as Dada and Futurism found full musical expression only with the rise of the Darmstadt generation. But aspects of it can be found in the radicalism of the young Schoenberg, whose call to express “*oneself!*” and not one's “taste...upbringing...intelligence, knowledge or skill” is mirrored, in more clinical terms, by Boulez's professed desire to “eradicate” the conventional from his music, and in the figure of Eric Satie, who in his *Vexations* for piano instructed the performer to play a simple bass melody, harmonized by a relentless procession of augmented fourths, 840 times. Satie found a spiritual successor of sorts in the American composer John Cage, whose most famous work instructs a pianist to remain seated silently at the instrument for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, and who opened his “Lecture on Nothing” (1959) by announcing that “I am here and there is nothing to say.”³¹ As Poggioli notes, the puckish humor that seeks to confound bourgeois taste is the obverse of the rebellious fury that rails against it,³² and Cage is in this sense the American counterpart to the Darmstadt School, the postwar *avant-garde*'s other, more optimistic face.

²⁸ Pierre Boulez, “Schoenberg Is Dead” in *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966; reprint ed., 1991), 135.

²⁹ Pierre Boulez in a colloquium at Harvard University, Fall 2005, as recalled by the present writer.

³⁰ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1962; reprint ed., 2011), 26.

³¹ John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 109.

³² Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 36–37 and *passim*.

The figure who was thought at the time to be Boulez's American equivalent, Milton Babbitt (1916–2011), was in fact up to something quite different. In 1958 the popular magazine *High Fidelity* published an article by Babbitt originally entitled "The Composer as Specialist," which the magazine's editor changed to the superlatively avant-garde "Who Cares If You Listen?" In the scandal that greeted the article's publication, its sensationalistic title received such attention that what was truly provocative about it was all but missed. After acknowledging the growing plurality of current musical practice and most composers' increasing distance from both audiences and musical institutions, Babbitt argued that this distance was an inevitable result of contemporary music's increasing complexity: "[The] time has passed when the normally well-educated man without special preparation could understand the most advanced work in, for example, mathematics, philosophy, and physics." The solution to the problem was for music, as for these other disciplines, to find its place in academe, because "granting to music the position accorded other arts and sciences promises the sole substantial means of survival for the music I have been describing."³³

In large part through Babbitt's efforts, composition did indeed find a place in the university, a development that may have been necessary for its survival, but that nonetheless changed it in significant ways. In American postwar academia the means and methods of the hard sciences, to which an immense prestige had accrued for their role in winning the war, became the norm by which artistic activity was judged, and composers came to speak of their music as a kind of "research." The term "academic" came into practice as an epithet for the music of university composers, denoting a sterile rationalism. Yet just as often, the result was a strange split between theory and practice: in most of Babbitt's own writings, the qualitative terms that had dominated Romantic musical discourse were rigorously eschewed in favor of a fine-grained analysis of music's verifiable, empirical details, conveyed in a dense idiom derived from mathematics and symbolic logic. Yet his masterpiece, *Philomel*, is a jaggedly lyrical setting for soprano and electronics of a profoundly passionate text, in which the gradual subsumption of the soprano voice by the tape part mirrors the absorption of the individual into the irrational, indifferent beauty of Nature.

The scientific ambitions of the postwar musical academy were of a piece with those of the other humanities; "Who Cares If You Listen?" was published a mere year after Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*,³⁴ which attempted to codify literary criticism into a human science as rigorous as sociology or economics. But the effects of new music's migration into the academy were more far-reaching. Once new music was principally supported by the academy, it was also beholden to it, and had to change as the academy changed, sometimes in ways directly contrary to the wishes of those who first installed it there. Ultimately the interaction of these two forces—the academy and the avant-garde—is the source of most of the transformations that have shaped new music since the 1960s.

³³Milton Babbitt, "The Composer as Specialist" in *The Collected Essays of Milton Babbitt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 48–54.

³⁴Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

Postmodernism and Postmodernity: Since the 1960s

Central to the development of musical modernism was a belief that history had a meaning and a purpose, in terms of which countless composers from the time of Richard Wagner to the heyday of international serialism in the 1950s and 1960s sought to understand themselves. This esthetic was so pervasive that even the interwar attempt to reclaim the classical past was often framed in the language of historical progress, as when Arnold Schoenberg introduced the twelve-tone method with the claim that “I have discovered something that will assure the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years.”³⁵

The idea of postmodern music, like that of modern music, contains a crucial ambiguity, in that it may be defined both loosely and narrowly, in reference to a general cultural period or a specific esthetic stance. In the looser sense, postmodern music could simply mean music that is “after modernism,” music for which key modernist esthetic principles have ceased to hold force. More narrowly, postmodern music could mean music that actively embodies, whether explicitly or implicitly, a vision of the arts and of human life consonant with that articulated by the intellectual movements collectively known as “postmodernism.”

In the loose sense, the postmodern era in music may be said to have begun once the modernist narrative of historical progress had lost its grip on the minds of a sufficient number of artists and critics. This is sometimes dated in terms of significant defections from the ranks of card-carrying modernists, of which one of the most notable was that of George Rochberg (1908–2005) who, in series of works following the death of his son in 1964, turned to the harmonic idiom of Beethoven to express a personal grief which, he had come to believe, the dodecapronic technique of his earlier music was incapable of communicating.³⁶

Rochberg’s later music, like that of composers such as the American David Del Tredici (b. 1937) or the German Wolfgang Rihm (b. 1952), came to be called “neoromantic.” The designation neoromanticism suggests the neoclassicism of the 1920s and 1930s, but differs from it in crucial ways. The classical past, in Stravinsky’s hands, had been recast into something distinctly and self-confidently “modern,” at once personalized and distanced like the borrowed materials in a Cubist collage. In contrast, the neoromanticism of Rochberg and his compatriots, for the most part unabashedly unironic, reflected a growing disillusionment with the modernist historical narrative itself, a belief that one could, after all, step outside the stream of time. Neither the old musical beliefs nor the new ones were held unanimously: there had always been successful composers, like Samuel Barber (1910–1981), who had resisted the historical imperatives of modernism, while a high modernist like Elliott Carter (1908–2012) remained widely acclaimed and influential into the twenty-first century, producing some of his most admired works, like the *Clarinet Concerto* (1996), late in his career. But while it had been possible for Barber’s modernist contemporaries to dismiss him as a conservative, the position of the postwar avant-garde itself now came to be seen as conservative. History appeared, paradoxically, to be on the side of those who no longer believed in it.

Postmodernism in the narrower and stronger sense of the word also has its roots in the 1960s. Like modernism itself, its rise was catalyzed by a period of revolutionary hope and

³⁵ Josef Rufer, *The Works of Arnold Schoenberg: A Catalogue of His Compositions, Writings, and Paintings*, trans. Dika Newlin (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 45.

³⁶ Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1982), 340.

subsequent disillusionment, expressed in the United States by the sweeping loss of faith in authority that followed the Vietnam War, and in France by the Social Revolution of 1968. Following the example of French thinkers like the historian Michel Foucault and the philosopher Jacques Derrida, many in the academic humanities came to look with suspicion upon principles that had been central to Romantic and Modernist esthetics, such as the ideal of unity (that an artwork, like a human personality, should be an integrated whole), the ideal of timelessness (that an artwork can or should transcend the cultural context in which it was created), and, ultimately, the belief in history's purposiveness.

If artistic unity was no longer a desirable goal—if even the individual, as Foucault suggested, was but an assemblage of disparate parts at war with each other³⁷—then pastiche or collage was a truer reflection of experience than the organically integrated artwork prized by modernism. Musical collage was popularized by composers in the 1970s who probably did not see themselves as postmodernists, such as Luciano Berio (1925–2003) in his *Sinfonia* (1968–1970), but it was pushed to an exuberantly postmodernist extreme by works like John Zorn's (b. 1953) *Cat o' Nine Tails* (1988), in which expressionist quartet-writing, tonal harmonies, and cartoon sound effects succeed each other with manic rapidity.

The mention of cartoons (one of Zorn's avowed influences was Carl Stalling's music for the midcentury cartoon series *Looney Tunes*) brings up what is perhaps postmodernism's most salient feature, the erasure of preexisting distinctions between "high" and "low" culture, as well as between one's own culture and others'. The esthetics of European high culture, to which even so scathingly critical a figure as Adorno had remained attached, were now suspected of being (in Foucault's characteristic terms) nothing more than a "discourse" justifying the domination of the weak by the strong, the poor by the wealthy, non-Europeans by Europeans. Previously despised forms of popular or commercial music (as in Zorn's compositions), as well as non-Western musical traditions ranging from Balinese gamelan to Ghanaian drumming, became as central to many composers' styles as the European Classical and Romantic tradition in which they had been schooled. Steve Reich (b.1936), one of the founding figures of what became known as minimalism, integrated the study of north African rhythmic techniques he had undertaken in pieces like *Clapping Music* (1972) into a series of works that, like his celebrated *Music for Eighteen Musicians* (1976), aspired to be as "non-Western" at the deepest formal level as they were in their surface content, deriving their structure from gradually unfolding rhythmic cycles rather than goal-oriented development.

Another postmodern gambit was to reject the distinction between "depth" and "surface" altogether as an outmoded and morally suspect vestige of Romantic esthetics. In his breakthrough opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1975), Reich's minimalist rival and sometime comrade-in-arms Philip Glass (b. 1937) fused a pared-down tonal harmonic vocabulary and a deliberately mechanical rhythmic idiom into music whose compelling physical power and aggressive flatness—deliberately defying the norms of voice-leading and contrapuntal

³⁷ "Who fights against whom? We all fight each other. And there is always within each of us something that fights something else." Michel Foucault in conversation with Jacques Alain Miller and Alain Grosrichard, *Ornicar* 10 (July 1977), quoted in Alasdair Macintyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 53.

independence that had been central to Romantic conceptions of musical depth³⁸—helped make him the first classically trained composer since Stravinsky to achieve genuine celebrity status.

Independent of this shift in composers' esthetic ideals, but shaping it in crucial ways, was a shift in their demographic makeup. Much of the received story of musical modernism is, lamentably, a story of the achievements and follies of men; even a pioneering figure like Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953) enjoyed nothing like the recognition accorded to literary modernists like Virginia Woolf or Gertrude Stein. This was a result of more than simple prejudice: the affinity between the modernist ideal of the autonomous composer and a particular norm of masculinity is captured pithily in Charles Ives's famous—albeit probably apocryphal— injunction to his fellow concertgoers to “stand up and take your dissonance like a man.” Unsurprisingly, then, the growing number of prominent women in contemporary music has included not only figures like Kaija Saariaho (b. 1952), one of the preeminent living modernists, but also a particularly large proportion of those musicians—like Laurie Anderson (b. 1947) and Pauline Oliveros (b. 1932)—who have abandoned the modernist compositional ideal entirely in favor of more performative or communal forms of music-making.³⁹

Racial demographics have changed significantly as well. Many of the best-remembered musical achievements of African Americans in the earlier part of the twentieth century belonged to styles, like jazz, that were considered categorically distinct from “classical music” as normally defined. An accomplished composer like William Grant Still (1895–1978), much lauded during his lifetime, fit the definition more comfortably, but he has been comparatively neglected by posterity. The latter decades of the twentieth century, however, saw an increasing number of African-American musicians entering classical music as both performers and composers. At the same time, the institutional and stylistic boundaries dividing the worlds of contemporary composition and jazz, like so many other boundaries in a “postmodern” age, had come to seem increasingly arbitrary to many, including, presumably, members of the panel that awarded the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in music to the groundbreaking Free Jazz saxophonist and bandleader Ornette Coleman (1930–2015). During this period Asian-American composers, many of them students of the Chinese-American master Chou Wen-Chung (b. 1923), also came to occupy prominent places in both the concert hall and the academy.

Perhaps the most significant change, however, took place more than a thousand miles from the musical centers of Paris and New York. The crumbling of the modernist vision of history in the United States and western Europe happened even as another great monument to historical necessity, the Soviet Union, was beginning to crack, exposing composers who chafed under the constraints of Socialist Realism, like Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931) and Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998), to the full accomplishments of an avant-garde that was already being abandoned in the West. To many on both the left and right, the final disintegration of the Soviet Union seemed for a time to signal “the end of history” (as in the title of Francis Fukuyama's much derided 1992

³⁸ See Holly Watkins, *Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought: From E.T.A. Hoffmann to Arnold Schoenberg* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 22–50, *passim*.

³⁹ See Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

work of political theory),⁴⁰ leaving behind not only a postmodernist culture but a new condition of being, postmodernity.⁴¹

The peculiarity of the term “postmodern,” whether construed as an artistic or intellectual movement or as a larger cultural condition, is that the word itself is defined only negatively, by what it comes after. And the prevailing feature of the current musical landscape is that it is, indeed, easier to define negatively than positively. At the close of the twentieth century, various musical movements, ranging from post-minimalism and neoromanticism in the United States to spectralism in Europe, had made their bid to inherit high modernism’s dominant place in the musical landscape, but none had secured anything like the hegemony it once enjoyed. This very condition of unresolved heterogeneity is sometimes claimed to be an unprecedented cultural development, the artistic corollary to the end of history.

Yet the postmodern is deeply interwoven with what came before it, and much that seems new is in fact old. Both postmodernism’s rejection of Romantic ideas of depth and its antihumanism—famously embodied in the pop artist Andy Warhol’s claim that “I want to be a machine”⁴²—have their antecedents in the esthetics of T. E. Hulme, which informed Stravinsky’s neoclassicism.⁴³ Even the widespread contemporary rejection of the European music tradition itself, and the eager search for authenticity in other musical cultures, is an intellectual inheritance of Romantic nationalism, seeking in an exoticized “other” the imaginary purity Romantics had imputed to the German peasantry. In their social stance, as well, many postmodern artists remain incorrigible modernists, understandably loath to relinquish the prophetic role in which modernism had cast them; one of the principal inspirations behind much of musical postmodernism, John Cage, was the embodiment of this role *par excellence*.⁴⁴ Such affinities call into question the absolute novelty that is sometimes claimed for the postmodern, and one observer, the musicologist Richard Taruskin, writing in 2003, saw “reason to doubt whether postmodernism is anything more than the latest modernist phase.”⁴⁵

What does seem to have ended, however, is not history but—at least for many artists, and for the time being—the ideology of history: the belief that it follows a meaningful trajectory, with purposes, goals, and dictates, and that its dictates are embodied in a particular artistic style or practice. This idea, which dominated the musical life of the twentieth century, seems to have expired by its close. At the date of this writing, however, one of the twentieth century’s great historical ideologies, Marxism, is experiencing a decided revival in popularity. If there is anything to be learned from the fate of other ideas declared dead over the course of the past century, like God and the nation-state, it is that the dead have a way of returning when least expected.

⁴⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

⁴¹ One representative theory of postmodernity is presented in Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc, 1983).

⁴² G. R. Swenson, “What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I” in *Art News* 62, no. 7 (November 1963), 26.

⁴³ Richard Taruskin, “The Dark Side of the Moon” in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 210.

⁴⁴ See Alex Ross, “Searching for Silence,” *The New Yorker*, 4 October 2010, accessed 29 July 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/searching-for-silence>.

⁴⁵ Taruskin “Sacred Entertainments” in *The Danger of Music*, 289.

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