

## Expressionism and Impressionism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The compositions of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern differ in striking ways, but they are all united in their development of a complete break from tonality, including use of techniques such as the twelve tone row. Initially discovered or, arguably invented by Arnold Schonberg, contemporaries and subsequent 20<sup>th</sup> century composers each yielded radically distinctive results from their individual uses of the twelve tone row, among other more general expressionistic techniques, to mold their own compositional voice.

It is helpful to understand what informed, influenced and brought about the twelve tone row in the first place. Expressionism as a musical movement was influenced strongly by the slightly earlier Expressionist movement in visual art, mostly painting. The Expressionist art movement boomed throughout Europe, most notably in Vienna in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; its parallels with the music composed around the early 1900s are quite striking. Expressionist painters believed that “art should reflect internal rather than external aspects of reality” (Morgan, 74), and this belief led them to the creation of abstract art with no strict ties or traditional pictorial elements. This disconnect from reality yielded a greater amount of personal expression, liberated from the binds of reality and thus freer to convey pure expression and emotion. Wassily Kandinsky, a leading Russian expressionist, was one of the first to create completely abstract paintings. His work coincided with Schonberg’s complete immersion in atonality and athenaticism, free from traditional so-called pictorial conventions of music, i.e. tonality. Both expressionist artist and composer believed that the total abandonment of all previous rules and structures was not only a completely viable art form, but also the only one capable of yielding the pure expressionism they sought.

As mentioned, Schoenberg was the leading atonal, expressionist and twelve-tone composer. Before Schoenberg completely broke off ties with tonality, however, he was responsible for innovations in the tonal-remnant atmosphere of his early compositional years. A prime example is his String Quartet No. 1, which exemplifies his new concept of developing variation, in which literal repetition is avoided in place of a continuous development and transformation of a central theme. Schoenberg, in a related fashion, abandoned complete symmetrical phrases or sections, known as “periods” in favor of unbroken musical thought, or “musical prose,” in which, like his developing variation technique, literal repetition is avoided in favor of constant transformations and evolutions of a thematic foundation, creating one succinct whole. In a sense, these techniques, in their complete continuity and singularity, hint at a complete equality of sections and lack of hierarchal structure that was to be fully cultivated in Schoenberg’s later use of atonality and eventually the twelve tone row, the complete breakdown of tonality. Thus, already in a structural and melodic sense, Schoenberg had introduced the dissolution and equalization of the hierarchal structure inherent in all aspects of tonality.

Schoenberg stays the course in his progressive breakdown of tonality with increasing use of chromaticism in addition to his thematic and structural oneness. Between 1907 and 1909, he became a completely atonal composer. After a progressive weakening of triadic structures and key areas, Schoenberg first explored completely atonal writing in the groundbreaking pieces: the “second String Quartet, Op. 10; Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11; Two Songs, Op. 14; the song cycle *Das Buch der Hangenden Garten (The Book of the Hanging Gardens)*, Op. 15; Five Orchestral Pieces, Op. 16; and the monodrama *Erwartung (Expectation)*, Op. 17” (Morgan, 67). The most important and

overarching effect of Schoenberg's introduction of complete atonality is his new conception of pitch organization, in which dissonant tones are accented so much that they no longer resolve or are even expected to by the listener because of their complete chromatic saturation. This "emancipation" of dissonance, as stated by Schoenberg, creates dissonant harmonic complexes that do not arise from a triadic basis or lead to them; rather, they are their own free harmonic entities, relating only to each other and not to a larger scope (as first explored in the thematic and phrase structure of the earlier pieces discussed).

As atonality consumed the rest of Schoenberg's creative career, he eventually developed an authoritative system for composing completely atonally. Known as the twelve-tone row, Schoenberg conceived "a system capable of incorporating the new dissonant melodic and chordal structures characteristic of twentieth-century music within a more consciously conceived and systematically ordered framework" (Morgan, 187). Schoenberg's first completely twelve-tone work is the Suite for Piano, Op. 24 (1924). According to the clear twelve-tone system, the composition derives its basic pitch material from a uniquely selected sequence of the chromatic scale's twelve pitches, labeled the twelve-tone "row" or "series." The original "prime" form of the row (P) has three related forms: its retrograde (R), the reversed sequence of pitches and intervals of the row, its inversion (I), in which each of the primary intervals is inverted (e.g. a major third upward becomes a major 3<sup>rd</sup> downward, or a minor 6<sup>th</sup> upward), and lastly its retrograde inversion (RI), the inverted form of the retrograde (Burkholder, 819). These manipulations of a single row yield infinite possibilities for atonal composition, and the

subsequent introduction and use of related rows, combinatorially related hexachords and twelve-tone aggregates completely revolutionized and liberated 20<sup>th</sup> century composition.

Anton Webern and Alban Berg were two expressionist composers who can be viewed both as contemporaries and direct disciples of Arnold Schoenberg. Though both are completely distinct from each other and by no means Schoenberg's derivatives, it is enlightening to view Webern's work in relation to the Schoenbergian innovations he no doubt studied. As a uniquely conservative, restrained and concise composer, it was "Webern's mission, and achievement, to adapt Schoenberg's ideas to his own more introverted and circumscribed musical temperament – and in the process to focus on their most basic features with a consistency far exceeding that of the older composer" (Morgan, 78). Webern's extremely small and one-hundred percent meticulous output is strongly informed by his impression of Heinrich Isaac's ability to form strictly controlled musical forms through tight canonic procedures and his sharp independence between parts. Like Schoenberg, Webern's earliest compositions were tonal, but he quickly followed Schoenberg's lead in 1909 with his first atonal work, *Five Songs on texts by Stefan George*, Op. 3. Characteristics reminiscent of Schoenberg include, of course, non triadic atonal harmonies, but specifically vertical combinations highlighting minor seconds, sevenths, and ninths, large intervallic leaps, and most Schoenbergian: continuous evolution of a single thematic idea through differing variational techniques. This thematic kernel however, unlike Schoenberg, was often abstract and not simply a melodic idea with a characteristic rhythm. Rather, Webern's compositional base is a set of pitches that can be shaped into several different compositional formats. This technique led to a

specificity and clarity in Webern's music unparalleled by Schoenberg or any other composer.

A good example of Webern's overall style is apparent in the first two measures of the middle section of the first song in Op. 3 of Five Songs on texts by Stefan George (Morgan, *Anthology*, 177). The basic material in its most concise form is presented in the voice part's first seven notes (m. 6). The right hand of the piano doubles the voice an octave above (and itself a third below) for four notes, before playing a varied version of the last three of these four notes (keeping the E-flat and D), then continuing in m. 7 with the remainder of the seven-note set (G#-B, now doubled with sixths, and the last note embellished by an upper-neighbor C). The left hand derives itself from the seven-note set with an entirely different rhythm. The first four notes are played in order and the last three of the four are then repeated twice, the second time with an added E (imitating the right hand's E in the preceding beat). The seven-note set's final three notes (G-G#-B) then continue in order, after which the series resumes from the beginning, first using the varied form (E-natural) with notes 2-4. At the same time, in m. 7 the voice begins a new statement of the first five notes, transposes up a half step and therefore rising to an E-natural as well. The accompaniment's left hand continues by repeating the E-flat-C#-D group with registral displacements. The final C# and D comprise the outer notes of the closing chord of the section. Thus, the entire inherent structure is quasi-canonic.

Alban Berg presents another distinct 20<sup>th</sup> century voice, which shares the expressionist qualities of Schoenberg and Webern, but employs the same techniques with refreshing originality. The most Romantic and accessible composer of the three who comprise the apex of the Second Viennese School, Berg was musically trained almost

entirely by Schoenberg. Berg was by far the most melodic, lyrical and warm composer of three, able to employ atonal techniques in an almost surprisingly beautiful sense in the most traditional form of the word, especially in his generous vocal output.

A prime example of his style, especially of later years, is his Seven Early Songs (1905-08, published in 1928). In regards to the Schoenbergian and specifically atonal techniques of concern, the Seven Early Songs, in all their warmth and lush romanticism, nonetheless feature chromatic saturation and whole-tone scales to be later developed and seen throughout his work. Like Webern and Schoenberg, Berg composed his Piano Sonata, Op. 1 (1908) as one unbroken movement and still teeters on the edge of tonality due to its B-minor tonal center secured in the beginning and end. Besides these points, the tonal motion is in constant transformation. A uniquely Bergian quality in this Schoenberg inspired one movement work is “the combination of a rather straightforward, if highly compressed, traditional sonata-type structure with rich contrapuntal textures derived from densely woven motivic developments,” lending the sonata a “curious tension and undeniable fascination” (Morgan, 84). An example of Berg’s later work, by the time he completely abandoned tonality, is his Quartet, Op. 3 (1910), which shares characteristics with Schoenberg and Webern, but emphasizes his unique voice most of all. Firstly, like Schoenberg, the work uses developing variation techniques; his use of basic pitch cells as points of development recalls Webern, though in a broader sense. The nontriadic harmonic structure determined mainly linearly and via internal intervallic consistency, is shared by both Webern and Schoenberg. The Quartet is unique to Berg however in its extended length and extremely emotional expressivity with its passionate

thematic gestures and various points of climactic accent (a characteristic Webern and Berg, if used at all, generally minimized greatly), recalling Romantic sentiments.

A parallel musical movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Impressionist movement, which shares less in common with its art movement (occurring almost one hundred years beforehand) temporally and historically than the expressionist movement does, but undoubtedly shares much in common regarding the pointillistic, textural, nature and vibrant qualities employed by Impressionist painters. Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy were the two most iconic Impressionist composers. Each however was prolific in both Impressionist and non-Impressionist composition.

Most apparent in Impressionism music and the art movement is the shared use of coloristic effect. Both artists and composers were primarily concerned with color over anything else, unprecedented by any earlier composers. The coloristic aspects led to a blurring and often gauzy, foggy and dreamy texture/impression. The emphasis on color led to effects imitating nature to a hitherto unheard of degree. An obvious example is Ravel's *Jeux d'Eau* (1901), which imitates varying types of water with extremely decorative and ravishing effects, such as extremely virtuosic repeated non-diatonic scalar runs that are concerned with simply emulating water, or sometimes even a specific aspect of water, over any strong harmonic progression. This quality is shared by Impressionist painters, who cared much more about the light of the object they were painting than its details or reality-like physical definition. Essentially, it involves preference for form over function. Though Ravel borrowed much from Debussy in terms of these coloristic effects along with an inherent wittiness and irony in his music, he was much more classical in

the overall design of his works and more harmonically complex at times. In addition, some of his piano techniques anticipated those of Debussy.

On Ravel's place in French musical history, he writes to the Committee of the National League for the Defense of French Music, "Where I cannot follow you is where you state the principle that 'the role of musical art is economic and social.' I have never considered either music or the other arts in that light... I do not believe that 'for the safeguarding of our artistic national patrimony' it is necessary to 'prohibit the public performance in France of these contemporary German and Austrian works that do not lie within the public domain' ...It might even prove dangerous for French composers systematically to ignore the output of their foreign colleagues, and thus to form a sort of nationalistic group. Our musical art...would not be long in degenerating and immuring itself in commonplace formulas" (Fisk, 256). Here, Ravel shows himself to be the melting pot composer he undoubtedly was. Both politically and artistically, Ravel drew upon not only all different countries' music but also the frowned upon "lower" music of dancehalls, American jazz and much more, to shape his musical personality. This represents another departure from Debussy, who remained a comparatively absolute "classical music" composer, despite the seemingly jazz-like harmonies both composers inevitably explored. These qualities are present in his non-Impressionist work *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1917), which borrows from eighteenth-century dance forms and shows great concern for formal directness, economy, concision, and simplification of comparatively foggy and elaborate Impressionist works.

Ravel also employs his technique of borrowing from various sources in Impressionist pieces as well; an Impressionist piece by Ravel that also showcases his

unique collaging of various musical genres is his *Rhapsodie Espagnole* (1908), which contains clear iterations of musical elements borrowed from foreign places. Further, it is impressionist in extremely atmospheric quality and “richly woven textures, nevertheless maintaining a clarity and expressive understatement” (Morgan, 126), setting it apart from other first decade 20<sup>th</sup> century music.

Ravel’s differences with Debussy are most strongly his lack of ambiguity and mystique that pervades so much of Debussy’s music. This is partly due to Ravel’s more tonal leanings; his harmonic innovations can be analyzed from a tonal perspective, while it can often prove futile to do the same with Debussy. In general, everything in Ravel’s music is more direct, clear cut and defined, including his formal phrase articulations, rhythmic patterns, and overall structure. Similarities, of course, abound between the two composers as well. An interesting example is Ravel’s *Jeux d’Eau* (1901), which both anticipates and emulates many Debussian characteristics. As touched upon previously, the imitation of nature, though not purely a Debussian innovation, was developed to new extremes in which the piano yielded coloristic, pictorial and textural effects never realized before. Ravel masters this Impressionist technique in *Jeux d’eau* with its tinkling, extremely fast, virtuosic and silky smooth though harmonically stagnant piano runs that emulate water perfectly. Though the idea of placing harmonic structure below purely pictorial, textural and naturistic qualities was most developed by Debussy, the actual piano technique used to do so was a Ravelian innovation, especially due to Ravel’s Debussian textural effects being translated onto the piano, an instrument not fully explored by Debussy in an Impressionist fashion up to that time. The strongly structured

triadic extensions and large use of dissonant tones harkened to the harmonic vocabulary of Debussy as well.

Claude Debussy was responsible for giving French music a distinct identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century after years of stagnant musical development. As Robert Morgan well puts it, “In France, where the principles of functional tonality had never been so strongly anchored as in Germany, musical evolution was destined to follow a different path” (Morgan, 40). Debussy’s early String Quartet (1893) reflects some of the first signs of his growing interest in timbral and textural development, as seen by the intense exploration of the sonic capabilities of the four instruments, as well as gamelan elements Debussy heard at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition. Debussy’s burgeoning programmatic conception, so emblematic of Impressionist music, came to its full fruition in the 1890s and can be seen in his opera *Pelleas et Melisande* (1893-1902), which, perhaps against his will, owes much to Wagner in its atmospheric quality, forest setting, and gloomy portrayals of the interior minds of the characters. Further, like his later Impressionist music, which favors color and textural effects over structural harmonic progression, the opera similarly places atmosphere, mood and interior actions of characters’ minds over a truly important tangible story, starkly opposed to, for example, all Italian opera. Further, Debussy develops his Impressionist style in his *Prelude a “L’Après-midi d’un faune”* (1894), which opens with a soft undulating flute solo that serves as the basis of subsequent melodic transformation, illustrating “the type of free ornamental melody of ‘natural curves’ that the composer came to characterize as the ‘arabesque’” (Morgan, 43). Similarly to other Impressionist works in general and Debussy’s overall innovative style, *Prelude a “L’Après-midi d’un faune”* appears to form out of itself in a loose, foggy,

atmospheric backdrop, with inter-connected fragments but little to no strict beginning, middle and end sections.

An extremely prolific and exploratory composer, Debussy didn't limit himself to Impressionism, composing a slew of non-Impressionist works at the very beginning and end of his career. Examples include his Etudes for piano (1913) and the three Sonatas of 1915-17. In the Etudes, formal and textural economy and structure is extremely apparent, and further defined in the three sonatas, to an extreme, almost austere level of constraint. Relating to possible role models or inspirations for his return to more formal, classical procedures, Debussy states of Cesar Franck, "Franck is allied to the great masters for whom tones have an exact meaning within their won sphere; they use them with precision and without ever exacting from them more than is explicit in them." In the restraint and precision so prevalent in Debussy's later work, hints of the neoclassicism era to come are palpable.

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