

Chapter 29: Music between the Wars: 1920–40

- I. Introduction
 - A. American vernacular music, especially ragtime, jazz, and blues, was increasingly influential on both sides of the Atlantic.
 - B. The composers known as “Les Six” were influenced by Surrealism and American popular culture. The best-known members were Darius Milhaud and Francis Poulenc.
 - C. Anti-Romantic trends were evident in interwar Germany.
- II. Popular music and classical composers: ragtime, blues, and jazz
 - A. The Roaring Twenties is often referred to as the “Jazz Age” although jazz had been evolving for decades.
 1. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the most notable changes in music—or at least those that had the largest impact on the greatest number of people—were in popular music.
 2. A largely improvised idiom, jazz’s origins came to be found in several places: ragtime, the blues, and the call-and-response techniques associated with African American music.
 - B. Jazz’s impact on French music
 1. American jazz was also popular in Europe, particularly France.
 2. Milhaud traveled to Harlem to hear jazz, and his *La Création de monde* (1923) uses a jazz band scoring. It blends different traditions in a Neoclassical vein.
 3. Ravel’s *Violin Sonata* also includes aspects of jazz in its harmony, blues notes, and syncopation.
- III. In search of the “real” America
 - A. Aaron Copland in Paris
 1. During the 1920s, American composers sought to define an American style in classical music.
 2. Copland traveled to Paris to study and spent time under the tutelage of Nadia Boulanger.
 3. Boulanger took on American students and promoted the aesthetics of Stravinsky. (She had his approval to do so.)
 4. Copland was drawn to jazz after hearing a performance in Vienna in 1923.
 5. Copland struggled with his own voice initially.
 - B. George Gershwin and popular music
 1. Gershwin’s early life resembled Copland’s in several ways: both from Brooklyn, Jewish parents who had immigrated, study with Goldmark, musical careers that began in their teens.
 2. The songs played by song-pluggers belong to Tin Pan Alley, named for an area of music publishing in New York that sprang up in the 1890s.
 3. Rodgers and Hammerstein were a successful duo who wrote Broadway musicals beginning with *Oklahoma!* in 1942 and continuing to *The Sound of Music* in 1959.

4. In 1924, Paul Whiteman, a popular bandleader, requested that Gershwin compose a work for piano and dance orchestra and suggested the term “rhapsody.” The result was *Rhapsody in Blue*.

C. Duke Ellington

1. Duke Ellington was widely considered the greatest jazz composer of the period.
2. In the early 1930s he announced that he was writing a piece that would “portray the experiences of the coloured races in American in the syncopated idiom.”

IV. Surrealism in music

A. Satie’s *Parade*

1. American music grew in popularity throughout the 1920s and 1930s.
2. The divide between high and low music grew as well.
3. In 1917, the Ballets Russes performed *Parade* by Satie (and Cocteau).
4. Satie and Cocteau avoided any conventional attempts to astonish or impress, but rather celebrated normalcy.
5. Apollinaire noted the “clarity and simplicity” of *Parade* that elevated French music above German.

B. Further forays in French Surrealism: Les Six

1. A new group of composers who followed Satie were known as “*Les Six*”: Poulenc, Milhaud, Auric, Honegger, Tailleferre, and Durey.
2. American popular music figured prominently in their aims.
3. Five of Les Six collaborated in 1921 on a project with Cocteau: *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel*.
4. During World War II, Poulenc turned away from Surrealism to more religious subject matter, but returned to it in 1944.
5. Milhaud’s Surrealism relates to his theory of polytonality—a collage of keys.

C. American Surrealism

1. Virgil Thomson represents Surrealism in America.
2. Gertrude Stein, also a member of their circle, was interested in “stream of consciousness,” which is governed by free association.
3. Thomson’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* is representative.
4. Like Stein, Thomson was interested in the interplay of sound and meaning.

V. Music in Germany between the Wars

A. Germans struggled with identity after World War I. There were several different responses, including that of Schoenberg and twelve-tone technique.

1. Another alternative was *neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), a foil to the Romantic make-believe.
2. *Zeitoper* represents an interest in popular, relevant, and communicative art.
3. A related idea to *Zeitoper* is *Gebrauchsmusik*—music for use.
4. The main proponent of this was Hindemith.

B. Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck*

1. Because they were timely, the operas discussed above fell out of the repertory as time moved on.
2. Berg's *Wozzeck* has had the best staying power of the German operas from the 1920s.
3. *Wozzeck* combines elements of Romanticism and Expressionism with ideas from the 1920s: postwar disillusionism, irony, political critique, archaic musical forms, and popular culture.
4. Atonal and disturbing, the work was nonetheless an international success.

C. Music for political action

1. Some composers felt that music should provide social commentary, not just satiric fun (as in Hindemith and Krenek or the French).
2. Kurt Weill's *Zeitopers* did just that and were compared favorably to *Wozzeck*.
3. Weill collaborated with Bertolt Brecht.
4. The most famous Weill/Brecht collaboration was *The Threepenny Opera* (1928).
5. Like *Wozzeck*, *The Threepenny Opera* is a commentary on how society deals with the poor.
6. *The Threepenny Opera* counteracts operatic conventions in numerous ways, such as having part of it sung in front of the curtain.

D. From Vienna to Hollywood: operatic techniques in film scores

1. The operas discussed above caused much discussion during the 1920s and 1930s. They were some of the last truly popular operas.
2. The support for such operas dried up when the Nazis came to power.
3. The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing economic slump also affected the viability of opera houses.
4. Another factor was films, especially those with singing.
5. Erich Korngold was one of the earliest to adapt classical music to the screen.
6. Max Steiner, another European immigrant, also turned to film scoring, using a special technique of leitmotifs underneath the score ("underscoring").
7. Several of the successful film composers, including Korngold and Miklós Rózsa, led double lives in the movie industry and as classical composers.