

Chapter 28: Neoclassicism and Twelve-Tone Music: 1915–50

- I. Introduction
 - A. The carnage of World War I shattered the ideals of Romanticism.
- II. The First World War and its impact on the arts
 - A. The wave of shock produced by the Great War reverberated in the arts. A preference emerged for spoken over sung, reason over feeling, and reportage over poetry.
- III. Neoclassicism
 - A. After shocking the world with the scandalous *Rite of Spring* (and a few other works), Stravinsky went in an entirely different direction in 1923 with his Octet for woodwinds. This work marks the beginning of a new style: Neoclassicism.
 1. This style was marked by “objectivity,” which composers conveyed by bringing back eighteenth-century gestures, although it could include aspects of Baroque, popular music of the 1920s, and even Tchaikovsky.
- IV. Igor Stravinsky’s Neoclassical path
 - A. At the end of World War I (1918), Stravinsky composed *Histoire du soldat*.
 1. The ensemble was small, by comparison with the *Rite*, and featured instruments associated with jazz.
 2. Soon thereafter, Diaghilev and his recent choreographer Massine teamed up with Stravinsky to do a work based on eighteenth-century music: *Pulcinella*.
 3. These two works (*Histoire du soldat* and *Pulcinella*) were stage works, but Stravinsky soon looked to instrumental pieces for this developing new style.
 4. The raw aspect of *Rite* was noted early on. This aspect connects it with the lack of Romanticism (“renunciation of ‘sauce’”) noted in the later works.
 5. In the 1920s, irony triumphed over sincerity as an artistic aim.
 - B. The music of Stravinsky’s Octet
 1. The Octet is in three movements: *Sinfonia*, *Tema con variazioni*, and *Finale*.
 2. Stravinsky once described the Octet as a revival of “constructive principles” as found in Classicism (late eighteenth-century music), but this is only partly accurate because elements of his earlier style remain as well, including ostinatos, stable dissonances, and abrupt disjunctures.
 - C. Stravinsky on his Octet
 1. Stravinsky sought to control how the public received the Octet by printing his thoughts on the work.
 2. He originally intended the essay as irony, but eventually came to believe in its ideas.
 3. He describes the Octet as a “musical object.”
- V. Arnold Schoenberg’s twelve-tone revolution
 - A. At the same time Stravinsky was making great strides with his new objective music (the years after *Rite*), Schoenberg was having major difficulties, composing infrequently.

1. He eventually created the Society for Private Musical Performances, a somewhat curious group that met to hear new music.
2. The ideals of this group are related to Hegel's thoughts concerning art as something not for consumers—which leads to the legacy of the “Ivory Tower.”

B. The road to twelve-tone music

1. During the 1920s, relations between Stravinsky and Schoenberg were strained, and Stravinsky made comments that irked Schoenberg.
2. Schoenberg thought that Stravinsky's use of old techniques was not moving the art forward.
3. Ultimately, however, both composers rejected Romanticism (“sauce”) for objectivity.
4. The sources of Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique have been debated for some time.

C. The rules of twelve-tone music

1. From 1921 on, Schoenberg composed in a style known as serialism, or twelve-tone technique (dodecaphony).
2. A tone row is an ordering of all twelve pitches. It provides both melodic and harmonic material.
3. The row occurs in four orderings: prime, inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion.
4. The internal properties of a row are of crucial importance and can dictate, or at least drive, the direction of a work.
5. Ordered interval content is the primary aim. These define other properties.
6. Serialism was the result of Schoenberg's desire to emancipate dissonance; it allowed more objectivity.
7. The Suite for Piano was the first major work that used twelve-tone technique throughout.
8. Although he criticized Stravinsky's foray into earlier practices, Schoenberg also adopted aspects of the past, as can be seen in his use of “minuet,” “gavotte,” etc., and also into contemporary popular music (a foxtrot).
9. The logic of twelve-tone technique allowed composers to make content and form equal.
10. The clear design of twelve-tone technique answered the call for objectivity in postwar Europe.
11. With the twelve-tone method, Schoenberg could demonstrate both a connection to the past and a claim to move music into the future.

VI. Alban Berg's twelve-tone Romanticism

A. Berg was not a child prodigy, but once he began studies with Schoenberg, he pursued composition assiduously.

1. He served in World War I, and *Wozzeck* reflects something of his experiences. The opera premiered in 1925, although he had finished it in 1922—before adopting twelve-tone technique.
2. The *Lyrical Suite* mixes atonality and twelve-tone technique.

3. The *Lyric Suite* is dedicated to Zemlinsky, but there is a hidden program that reveals the real dedicatee to have been Berg's lover from 1925 to 1935.
4. With all of these expressions of love for Hanna, Berg uses a Modernist work to communicate Romantic feelings.
5. Berg's final opera, *Lulu*, was suppressed by his wife. It is highly sexual in content, and this may have embarrassed her. Berg did not finish the orchestration.
6. He finished the Violin Concerto, which may have references to an illegitimate child, in addition to more references to Hanna.

VII. Anton Webern's structural rigor

A. Webern differs from Berg and Schoenberg in his strict approach to serialism.

1. His entire mature compositional output is about three hours of music. His work is sometimes described as pointillist.
2. Because he approached order and unity in a more thorough-going method, Webern's works provided a model for future twelve-tone composers.
3. Webern was a musicologist, and his familiarity with Renaissance structural techniques further influenced his own compositions.
4. Webern's Symphony, Op. 21 (1928), is exemplary.