

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Music

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### ANCIENT PERIOD

Once again with music, as earlier with literature or philosophy, we have very little to say about the world of Western Europe, in the centuries (millenia?) which preceded the advent of Christianity and the Fall of Rome. There are early—more than 20,000 years early-- archeological remains of musical instruments, scattered through Europe—and there are portrayals of performing musicians on the walls of caves throughout France and Spain, but since music disappears, after having been aired, there are no remains once it has been aired. Whence, then, this thing called music even came from, will therefore remain among the mysteries of the phenomenon. What spurred the making of this 40,000 year old bone flute from 'France,' of which I am presently looking at a reproduction? Was it the desire to communicate, the need to give a warning, the inherent joy of the production?

### POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

**Liturgical chant**, emerging from the actions of the mass, was the first impulse to a distinctive music rooted in Christianity. Saint Ambrose collated much of this material in the fourth century A.D.; the majority of the church music popular at the time represented the type of chant practiced in Rome. (Real popular music? The music of the streets? We're not talking that always human daily buzz, so dealing with what we have, with what survived, we remain with what we know, what had institutional church status to build it. Yet we have ahead of us, not far, plenty of later mediaeval secular song, itself developing concurrently with the liturgical.) For several centuries, the primary growth within this liturgical music came from the invention of *tropes*, musical or textual enrichments, by which the musical material of the mass became more popularly engaging.

**Polyphony.** Onto the base of liturgical chant the biggest developmental innovation, emerging during the early Middle Ages, was *polyphony*, 'the simultaneous sounding of two or more melodic lines.' With the development of polyphony, as was made clear by the eleventh century Italian monk and theorist, Guido d'Arezzo, one could enjoy such high octane events as two voices singing over and under one another, and at the same time singing two different songs. The next great development, was *Ars Nova*, which sprang in the fourteenth century from the intellectual milieu of the Church of Notre Dame.

### Popular music.

By the early twelfth century there was a fully developed secular/popular current in mediaeval music. Especially in France, first among the so-called *goliards*, itinerant clerics and students, then among the more knightly *troubadours*, these dashing individuals—*meistersingers* and *minne*(love) singers in Germany—became a fixed and romantic factor in regions like southern France, where they commingled with poets in a rich literary/musical symbiosis. (Richard Wagner's 19th century opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg*, deals with the times of this group.) The master of the art-song was the Frenchman,

Guillaume de Machaut, who was especially noted for his dexterity in the polyphonic song form of the *motet*.

## RENAISSANCE

Cities like Dijon and the court of Burgundy were by the fifteenth century rich centers of musical entertainment—that is essential parts of cultured living among the higher, and more sensitive, aristocracy; generally centers where an acclaimed musical group would take up temporary residence, bringing its instruments with it. It is hard to locate a Renaissance for Western European music history, in the senses in which it applies to a rather distinct period for the history of European painting or literature; and yet the growth of cultural matrices like the two mentioned sites above is so widely spread, throughout the Europe of the late fifteenth century, that we can usefully call this period the Renaissance. It was the foundation for a rapid uptick in secular music—of course the mass-centered music of the High Christian period was no longer hot—with much of singing madrigal, and finally the wonderful new discoveries among instruments, and the ways in which the technology of making new instruments—organ, stringed keyboard instruments—led to the discovery of new musics for the mind to do with those instruments.

## SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

**Baroque.** The baroque era (1600-1750) introduced a critical turn in musical practice in Western Europe. In short, the system of musical modes, which was based on the eight principal church services of each year, was replaced, as the wear and tear of time and new expressive needs pushed it aside; that mode system found itself replaced by a system of tonality which would shape Western music until at least 1900, a new system based on 'contrasting keys, or sets of interrelated notes and chords deriving from a major or minor scale.'

**Opera.** Opera, a manifestation both of ancient text, and new tonality, was one of the first dramatic expressions of what we would be most comfortable calling the Renaissance in Western Music, for the opera forged in that period of discovery and risk has remained one of the vivid hallmarks of our entire musical background. The impulse into opera was given by the early seventeenth century Camerata group in Florence. Foremost among the composers close to this group was Monteverdi, who himself wrote two operas—*Orfeo*, 1607; *L'arianna*, 1608—before returning to Venice. The masters of French opera, which characteristically exploited dance sequences and strongly emotional episodes from Greek mythology, were Jean-Baptiste Lully and Jean-Philippe Rameau. England gave the world Henry Purcell, with his *Dido and Aeneas* and other masque-like opera forms. Important to say, in this context, is that other singing and instrumental forms—like the cantata and oratorio—were simultaneously pulling in widening audiences, from among the newly moneyed middle class that was starting to announce itself throughout Europe, in the mid-seventeenth century. The same groups, baptized now into a taste for the new kinds of composition made possible by new kinds of instruments, proved now equally susceptible to those new forms of instrumental composition, the *sonata* and *concerto*, which were beginning to feature in many public venues, and which were to feature as major cultural display cases until our day. Antonio Vivaldi was among the many geniuses of this new form of growingly personal (but infinitely shaded) instrumental entertainment.

**Bach and Handel.** With these two German composers, each born in 1685 in the same part of Germany, both reared as organists in the Lutheran Church, the brilliance of the baroque became both intense and mature: Handel, because of his training in Italy, went into dramatic works—secular cantatas, opera, oratorio—especially after he moved his life to England; Bach, who was lifelong employed as an organist, by the Lutheran Church, tended to work within those spiritual terms, excelling in 'passions, cantatas for church services, liturgical organ pieces, and harpsichord compositions, many instructional in purpose.' This last rider takes us to the mysterious heart of the work of Bach, arguably (the humble editor opines) the climax of Western musical achievement. One might say that the rigor of the originally mediaeval effort to adjust tropes and scrutinize notational values falls, with Bach, into the more advanced tonal system that had developed with the Renaissance, and that had opened the expressive ground for the finest of spiritualities working in the confines of an immaculately precise productive system.

## EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

**Rococo.** The Rococo style, thriving on the increasing richness of instrumental possibilities, and the growing finesse of audience attention, opened out into the eighteenth century with particular aplomb in Germany, where one of Johann Sebastian Bach's son, Carl Philip Emmanuel, helped to motivate the 'sentimental style' movement, within the framework of what was coming to be called Rococo. This style foregrounded the subtle dance impulses coming from France, and the inheritance of Father Bach's rich spirituality. The German century of genius, out and around this growing rococo tradition, was to bring to full expression the work of German composers who were flourishing by the second half of the eighteenth century; for the first time in western music history instruments, and not human voices, were serving as the main drivers of new work. In the at that time highly favored movement within German musical creativity, we were already familiarizing ourselves with creators like Joseph Hayden, and with the young Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), who (like his literary contemporary, Johann Goethe) was to overlap the classical and the romantic expressions of his time, if not erase the release of time-bonding altogether, in the case of the greatest music.

**The symphony.** In a music creativity world in which sonatas, trios, piano concertos, and symphonies were the chief attention, the symphony gradually moved to front rank, for social relevance, and availability to deep and complex expression. It was not long before the symphony, in the hands of powerful conductors, and composers like Beethoven, took over the task of representing large cultural waves, and at least aspired to providing a voice for its time. (It was for this kind of claimed grandeur of articulateness that the philosopher Hegel admired the Beethoven symphony as a true historical action.) At the same time the symphony rises to the eighteenth century's highest level of claim and aspiration, intimate counterpart forms, like that of the originally eighteenth century chamber music quartet, to our day remain a factor in in-house musical entertainment in Europe.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Romanticism.** The Romantic period opens here, though in musical development it is in many ways hard to distinguish from the so-called classical brilliance of the preceding century. With the development of the century three main kinds of musical presentation crept into dominating attention: the symphony orchestra; the piano (which had squeezed out such earlier formative instruments as the clavichord); the solo voice with piano accompaniment. The distinctive new features of performance in the period were length—symphonies lasting typically more than an hour; and 'instrumental color and variety', that is to say a great new power of emotional expressiveness. Once again, periodization by centuries is particularly difficult when it comes to the history of music; and seemingly easier when one approaches the development of the history of literature, where, to stick with our present example, the eighteenth century poetry of Western Europe breaks sharply to be replaced by the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth or Heine or Lamartine.

**The opera,** with the free range it gives—not for the fulness of historical expression like Beethoven, but for the fulness of individual passion—as we find it in the Romantic heart-builders of Verdi (*La Boheme*; *La Traviata*) and Puccini (*Madame Butterfly*)—the opera becomes a benchmark achievement for the popular passions of the nineteenth century. The operatic achievements of Richard Wagner (1813-1883) In Germany were perhaps representative of the best and the worst developments of nineteenth century music, as they touch on nationalism, the passion of the group, and the power of the Volk to elevate and pervert thought. In works like *Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg*, to which we referred earlier, Wagner takes us back to the cultural texture of the Middle Ages, and for the only time in his creative life writes comedy in music. Nor does he touch the specific issues of German nationalism, for which the Nazis wished to appropriate him, though Wagner was on paper an opponent of Judaism, and in his exaltational tempos, which impels us into the wind, he provides quasi visionary passages of sublime beauty which carry us to the ultimate good or bad of our souls.

## THE MODERN PERIOD

**Contrasts.** With the modern period a great diversity of musical styles wins public favor. The contrast between them can be illustrated by a pairing off the Romantic tone poem composers, Debussy and Ravel, against the atonalists Schoenberg and Stravinsky.

**Schoenberg; Stravinsky.** Arnold Schoenberg stands out for his adoption of a twelve tone scale, in which all tones of the octave are serialized. The result is instrumental music which to the ear trained on the classical octave, seems harsh and discordant. Stravinsky, daring both in atonal experiments and in unprecedentedly brilliant and dashing collisions of sound and color, is the man whose *Rite of Spring* drove Parisian audiences dashing into the streets—so chromatic and surprising was that operatic work. By contrast with these two experimenters—and allies like Hindemith, Berg, Bartok—there were dream like composers of infinite charm—like Debussy and Ravel—who enchanted audiences with romantic inner poem landscapes. Multiple varying cultural milieux and ever wider choices for instrumentation both contributed to the broad palette of new experiences awaiting the growing musical audience during the first half of the twentieth century.

**Johnny.** Your son, Johnny, with his ear phones and his smart phone is not likely to be listening to Stravinsky, when his face fills with that distant look. For between the tonalists we cited here, as heralds of the new century, and the world of jazz, bebop, rock, and their innumerable offspring, there runs a gamut of 'modern music,' which is as different from Stravinsky as is the electronic and now digitalized world of our society and culture. Johnny is listening to the echoes of the digital revolution, as they play out in the difference between him and say his granddad, who may still enjoy opera, may even—possibly—enjoy Beethoven or Mozart, but who has no clue, and wants no clue, of the exquisite musical journey that has brought him to where he is.

### Discussion questions

What are the big turning points, in the development of the History of Western European music? Would you name the Renaissance, the Barocco, the turn to the atonal, in the twentieth century? Is the developmental line of Western European music similar to that of the dance or literature?

How would you fill in the music-development space that separates Stravinsky from Johnny? From what branches of the Western European musical tree did the themes, individuals, and passages come that shaped a new musical world for Johnny? Were the clashing cymbals of Tupac Shakur's grinding anger forged in the workshops of cities like Detroit rather than in the music hall?

The Church served as central factor in the development of Western European music. At what stage of that development, in your opinion, did the Church begin to surrender its musical hegemony? Does church—mosque, synagogue—figure at all significantly now, in the formation of Western European music?

### Suggested readings

Boyd, Malcolm, *Bach*, Oxford, 2000.

Cook, Nicholas, *Music: a very short introduction*, Oxford, 1998.

Hill, John Walter, *Baroque Music (1580-1750)*, New York, 2005.

Leaver, Robin, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, Grand Rapids, 2007.

Merwe, Peter van der, *Roots of the Classical*, Oxford, 2004.

Miles, Russell, *Johann Sebastian Bach: An introduction to his life and works*, Englewood Cliffs, 1962.