

20th CENTURY 1900-present

HISTORICAL THEMES

Phenomenal changes in technology

We live in a century that has moved from the earliest automobiles to supersonic jets and space travel. Science has progressed at a rate unthinkable to earlier generations. We have learned how to eradicate some of the most dangerous of diseases, and to predict and control the forces of nature. We possess the technological ability to control nearly every aspect of our lives. And we also have developed the tools to end all life in an instant.

The advent of instantaneous global communication

We take for granted the fact that we can send and receive messages instantly, at the click of a button. All aspects of communication, entertainment and learning have been fundamentally reshaped by these advances. In fact, what you are doing at this very minute would have been unthinkable a generation ago.

The growth and eventual decline of totalitarian cultures

The Russian and Chinese revolutions and the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany ushered in governments the likes of which had never been seen. The totality of their control and their ability to crush not only human life but also the human spirit is one of the most troubling legacies of our day. At the same time, their decline, along with movements for freedom and democracy in places as different as Poland and South Africa, is a testament to the ultimate strength of the human spirit.

MUSICAL CONTEXT

Ambivalent Attitudes toward the Musical Past

- Some composers have made the conscious decision to distance themselves from the styles and values of the past.
- Claude Debussy said: "The century of the airplane ought to have its own music."
- Other composers have just as consciously tried to return to some aspects of the past, especially the elements of the Classical style.

A Widening Gap between "Art" and "Popular" Music

- Popular music, especially jazz, country and rock, became the central musical focus of the majority of people in the Western world, and its reach covers the globe.
- Composers in the "art" traditions have come to be seen as less relevant in day-to-day life.
- Composers whose music has become more and more complex have widened the gap between art and popular music.

The Advent of Sound Recording

- The distribution of music made possible by recording was instrumental in the growth of popular styles.
- Recordings have changed the way we listen to music. Works from all musical periods are available at any time.
- The techniques of recording and audio production have become important musical elements in their own right.

The Birth of a World Music Culture

- Western music, popular as well as art traditions, has become a world language.
- At the same time, Western musicians have become more and more interested in the music of other cultures. Western composers with non-Western ancestry have likewise sought out the music of their heritage.
- Non-Western ideas have enriched Western styles and have been accepted enthusiastically.
- In the age of global communication, a new "world music" style is starting to emerge. This style freely mixes elements from multiple cultures and is not dependent on the heritage of its creator.

MUSICAL STYLE

- All sounds are possible (even no sounds).
- New instruments and the sounds of popular music have changed the soundscape of the twentieth century.
- Contrapuntal textures prevail in art traditions. Popular traditions are centered on homophonic textures.
- Rhythmic language can be enormously complex.
- Melodies can be long and abstract or reduced to small gestures.
- Any harmonic combination is possible. Composers have made use of extreme dissonance as well as microtonal intervals.
- Form can be controlled to an almost infinite degree, or it may be the result of improvisation and chance.

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Born: June 17, 1882. Oranienbaum, Russia

Died: April 6, 1971. New York, NY

In his own words...

"Consonance, says the dictionary, is the combination of several tones into a harmonic unit. Dissonance results from the deranging of this harmony by the addition of tones foreign to it. One must admit that all this is not clear. Ever since it appeared in our vocabulary, the word 'dissonance' has carried with it a certain odor of sinfulness. Let us light our lantern: in textbook language, dissonance is an element of transition, a complex or interval of tones that is not complete in itself and that must be resolved to the ear's satisfaction into a perfect consonance."



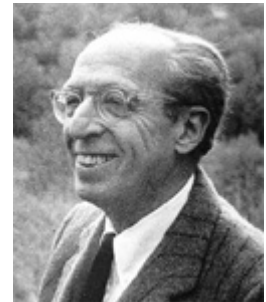
AARON COPLAND

Born: November 14, 1900. Brooklyn, New York

Died: December 2, 1990. Tarrytown, New York

In his own words...

"To explain the creative musician's basic objective in elementary terms, I would say that a composer writes music to express and communicate and put down in permanent form certain thoughts, emotions and states of being. These thoughts and emotions are gradually formed by the contact of the composer's personality with the world in which he lives. He expresses these thoughts (musical ones...) in the musical language of his own time. The resultant work of art should speak to men and women of the artist's own time with a directness and immediacy of communicative power that no previous art expression can give."



DUKE (EDWARD KENNEDY) ELLINGTON

Born: April 29, 1899. Washington, DC

Died: May 24, 1974. New York, NY

In his own words...

"The word 'improvisation' has great limitations, because when musicians are given solo responsibility they already have a suggestion of a melody written for them, and so before they begin they already know more or less what they are going to play. Anyone who plays anything worth hearing knows what he's going to play, no matter whether prepared a day ahead or a beat ahead. It has to be with intent."

