

INTRODUCTION TO 20TH CENTURY MUSIC

PART 1: REACTION TO IMPRESSIONISM

The 20th century in classical music was extremely varied stylistically, thus there was no dominant style. A major element of this music is the increased use of dissonance; hence, the 20th century can also be referred to as the “Dissonant Period” of classical music as much of this music was a reaction to, or against, the common practice period. Composers of the 20th century moved in quite different directions. Some composers continued to write in and expand 20th century elements; others returned back to prior musical periods for their inspiration and wrote works that draw elements from this music, which is known as neoclassicism.

DEFINING “POST-IMPRESSIONISM”

The term “Post-Impressionism” or “Post-Impressionist” generally refer to a historical era, rather than the arts and is a position in time relative to the Impressionist movement, although the term has been changed many times. It is a short time period in history, placed between impressionism and twentieth century (late 19th and early 20th centuries). Although there is no universal dividing line between Post-Impressionism and the beginning of 20th century music, one could use the start of the First World War in 1914, as it signalled a major break in European cultural history.

Artists of this movement disagreed with the subject matter and loss of structure found in impressionist works but expressed these issues in different ways. There were many artists in of this period; each artist found his or her own role or place within this movement. There was no unified movement with regards to encompassing art forms (including music) in Post-Impressionist works. Post-Impressionist works (all art forms), focused on geometric forms, expressive effects and unusual or unnatural colours. Some used colour; others used order and structure.

EXPRESSIONISM: PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

Composers, especially those who continued to write and expand 20th century musical elements, sought a greater emphasis on the freedom of personal emotion and expression. This music emphasizes an immediate expressive feeling, often based on the psychology of the unconscious. Composers tended to avoid elements of traditional Western music (such as melody, harmony and rhythm) as well as cadence, repetition, sequence, balanced phrases and any reference to traditional forms or procedures.

SYMBOLISM

Symbolism is a concept which used symbolic imagery and was used between two extremes: those who focused on traditional academic forms, and those who used brand new forms and fresh contents. Symbolism was not often used, as it represented non-realistic subject matter. The bridge from Post-Impressionist music, in regard to the elements of a musical composition, can be seen in later Post-Impressionist music, and also with the greater use of technology.