Chapter 30: Neoclassicism and Twelve-Tone Music

I. Neoclassicism
A. Introduction
   1. The carnage of World War I reverberated in the arts: hope, glory, beauty, love, etc. seemed out of reach, naive, and unattainable.
   2. Irony was one response.

B. Neoclassicism
   1. After shocking the world with the *Rite of Spring*, Stravinsky went in an entirely different direction in 1923: neoclassicism.
   2. This style was marked by “objectivity,” which composers conveyed by bringing back gestures from previous periods.

C. Stravinsky’s Neoclassical Path
   1. At the end of World War I (1918), Stravinsky composed *Histoire du soldat*.
   2. Soon thereafter, Stravinsky wrote 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. In the 1920s, irony triumphed over sincerity as an artistic aim.

D. The Music of Stravinsky’s Octet
   1. Stravinsky once described the Octet as a revival of “contructive principles” as found in Classicism (late eighteenth century music), but this is only partly accurate, for elements of his earlier style remain as well, including ostinatos, stable dissonances, and abrupt disjunctures.
      a. The opening trills sounds like music from the eighteenth century, but everything is obviously twentieth century.
      b. The figuration sounds like Bach, but the harmony isn’t.
      c. The title suggests pre-sonata form opera (but from whence the form derives), and it is in sonata form.
      d. The classically regular eight-bar theme is octatonic.

E. Some Ideas about the 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.”
   4. In his piano works from the 1920s, Stravinsky attempted to make nonflamboyance a virtue.
   5. Other pieces belonging to this style include the Symphony of Psalms (1930), Symphony in C (1938–40), and Symphony in Three Movements (1945).
   6. The culminating work in this period is his opera *The Rake’s Progress* (1951).

II. Twelve-Tone Music
A. The Ivory Tower
1. At the same time as Stravinsky was making great strides with his new objective music, Schoenberg was having major difficulties, composing only infrequently.

2. He eventually created the Society for Private Musical Performances, a somewhat curious group that met to hear new music.
   a. Performances were not advertised, and critics were not allowed in.
   b. Subscribers didn’t know what was on the program, so they couldn’t pick and choose which performances to attend.
   c. The performers presented accurate renditions of the music.
   d. The repertory varied tremendously, including major composers from all over Europe.

3. 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. In Search of Utopia: Schoenberg and Twelve-Tone Technique

1. During the 1920s, Stravinsky made comments that irked Schoenberg.
   a. Stravinsky said that instead of the music of the future, he wrote the music of the present.
   b. He also made a derogatory comment concerning serial composers.

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. Giving Music New Rules

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.

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. The logic of twelve-tone technique allowed composers to make content and form equal.

9. The clear design of twelve-tone technique answered the call for objectivity in post-war Europe.

D. Back Again to Bach

1. With the twelve-tone method, Schoenberg could both demonstrate a connection to the past and claim to move music into the future.

2. Schoenberg used Bach’s name in rows.
3. Unlike Stravinsky, who saw a timelessness and universality in Bach’s music, Schoenberg saw Bach as a national, German figure.

4. He attributed to the Baroque master a German penchant for counterpoint.

5. He thought that his “discovery” would enable German music to dominate for the next 100 years, but Hitler’s rise to power and persecution of Jews meant that Schoenberg had to leave Europe, heading to the United States in 1933.

E. Berg’s Twelve-Tone Romanticism

1. Berg served in World War I, and Wozzeck reflects something of his experiences.

3. While Berg undoubtedly followed in Schoenberg’s compositional footsteps, he might be the best candidate to be considered heir to Mahler. This is because his music contains aspects of Romanticism, including sensitivity.

4. Berg had a gift for dramatic music, which is demonstrated not only in operas but also in instrumental works.

5. The Lyric Suite mixes atonality and twelve-tone technique.

6. The Lyric Suite has a hidden program that reveals the real dedicatee to have been Berg’s lover from 1925 to 1935.

7. With all of these expressions of love for Hanna Fuchs, Berg uses a Modernist work to communicate Romantic feelings.

8. 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.

9. He finished the Violin Concerto.
   a. Here Berg combined twelve-tone technique with more traditional approaches to melody and form.
   b. He quotes a chorale, Es ist genug, which was harmonized in an unusual way by Bach.

F. Epitome: Anton Webern

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

2. He was not a verbose composer: All of his works fit on three CDs. His work is sometimes described as pointillist.

3. Because he approached order and unity in a more thorough-going method, Webern’s works provided a model for future twelve-tone composers.

4. Webern was a musicologist, and his familiarity with Renaissance structural techniques further influenced his own compositions.

5. Webern’s Symphony, Op. 21 (1928) is exemplary. The row is an intervallic palindrome, which means there are not many possible independent row forms. Retrograde forms are not an issue.

6. Webern’s music looks backward and forward.

7. Descriptions of Webern’s music are often more confusing than the music, and to some people this is deliberate.

8. We know that Webern delighted in the tight structures he created—the aesthetic deliberately became objective and impersonal.