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 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.
   2. 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.
   3. These pieces toyed with aspects of earlier styles, imitating them without copying them.

C. Stravinsky’s Neoclassical Path
   1. At the end of World War I (1918), Stravinsky composed *Histoire du soldat*.
      a. The ensemble was small, but when compared to 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*.
      a. The music sounds like Pergolesi, which is what Diaghilev thought he had gathered, but it is not by the composer.
   3. These two works (*Histoire du soldat* and *Pulcinella*) were stage works, but Stravinsky soon looked to instrumental pieces for this developing new style.
      a. His *Symphonies d’instruments à vent* was described in 1923 as neoclassical—the first work to receive this title.
      b. The reviewer noted the lack of psychology in this work. It is not associated with aspects of Romanticism.
   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.
   6. One critic, Asafyev, saw in Stravinsky’s music an expression of contemporary reality, not so much a restoration of the past.
      a. Such writings influenced Stravinsky, who sought such praise and wished it to continue.

D. The Music of Stravinsky’s Octet
   1. The Octet is in three movements: *Sinfonia, Tema con variazioni, 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, for elements of his earlier style remain as well, including ostinatos, stable dissonances, and abrupt disjunctures.
      a. For example, the opening trills announce a kinship with the eighteenth century, but everything around those trills marks them as not possibly eighteenth 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. The *Finale* plays on harmonic/tonal expectations, weaving rhythmic features that mark the movement unmistakably Stravinsky.

E. Some Ideas about the Octet

1. Stravinsky sought to control how the public received the Octet by printing his thoughts on the work.
   a. Among the points he makes is the observation that the Octet is not “emotive,” but rather a composition based on objective elements.
   b. The dynamics are limited to *f* and *p*, and, combined with tempos, they drive the composition.

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.”
   a. The work adopts aspects of earlier opera including recitatives accompanied by harpsichord, da capo arias, and a moralizing quintet (as in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*).

II. Twelve-Tone Music

A. The Ivory Tower

1. At the same time as Stravinsky was making great strides with his new objective music (the years after *Rite*), Schoenberg was having major difficulties, composing only infrequently.
   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.

2. He eventually created the Society for Private Musical Performances, a somewhat curious group that met to hear new music.
   a. 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, relations between Stravinsky and Schoenberg were strained, and Stravinsky made comments that irked Schoenberg.
   a. A French journalist had commented that Schoenberg was a “Romantic” and French composers were “Classic.”
b. Stravinsky said that instead of the music of the future (a la the Austro-Germans), he wrote the music of the present.
c. 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.
   a. He worked with aggregate compositions, and he also considered twelve chromatic notes as being a basis for a composition.
   b. The composer/theorist Josek Matthias Hauer had worked with using twelve tones in a row as a compositional structure.
      1) There was great debate in 1925 as to who originated the idea of serialism, Hauer or Schoenberg.

C. Giving Music New Rules
   1. From 1921 on, Schoenberg composed in a style known as serialism, or twelve-tone technique (dodecaphony).
      a. The first piece was the last work in his Op. 23, for piano.
   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.
      a. Each of this can be transposed, resulting in forty-eight possibilities.
   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.
      a. This work uses the prime form and its inversion, and their transpositions at the tritone.
      b. As such, the four rows are four ways to unfold an ordered set of intervals—a single Grundgestalt.
      c. Such careful considerations of the possibilities of a given row is paramount to the composer’s intention.
   8. In spite of the fact that 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.

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, which he claimed dominated music since the eighteenth century.
   a. Schoenberg described “the art of development through motivic variation.”
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 was not a child prodigy, but once he began studies with Schoenberg he pursued composition assiduously.
2. 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.
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.
   a. He used the names of Schoenberg, Webern, and himself in the Chamber Concerto (1925), a birthday present to Schoenberg.
   b. There is an aspect of jest and play in some of his works; he delighted in playing with notes and numbers, and he included many in his works.
5. The Lyric Suite mixes atonality and twelve-tone technique.
   a. Berg chose a row that contains all intervals from m2 to PF in each hexachord.
   b. The tritone, which inverts to itself, occurs in the middle, as a boundary.
   c. Even if the listener is unaware of these detailed intervallic relationships, the music is expressive and intense.
6. 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.
   a. The relationship between the two was kept secret, and Berg’s wife ensured that it remained thus until her death in 1976.
   b. The music contains passages that link BF/AB-flat, which stand for Hanna [B in German being H] Fuchs and Alban Berg [B being B-flat], as well as others items (such as C-C for Dodo, her daughter’s nickname). Numerological messages also appear with these pitches, and other devices “comment” on their relationship.
   c. Berg also makes use of a poem by Baudelaire and quotes Wagner’s Tristan chord as other clues to his feelings.
7. With all of these expressions of love for Hanna, 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, which may have references to an illegitimate child, in addition to more references to Hanna.
   a. In the concerto, 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.
      a. It is in two movements and lasts less than ten minutes.
      b. The row is an intervallic palindrome, which means it is very economical—there are not many possible independent row forms. Retrograde forms are not an issue.
      c. Because of the extreme economy of pitch possibilities, the symphony is harmonious—probably what Webern meant by using the term “symphony.” Everything fits with everything.
   6. Webern’s music looks backward and forward.
      a. Forward in his use of twelve-tone technique and further organization of other aspects.
      b. Backward in his connections with Renaissance composers and Bach.
   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.