Chapter 34: Starting from Scratch: Music in the Aftermath of World War II

I. Germans
   A. Introduction
      1. World War II left the world divided by a new set of alliances. Most of these went along the lines of Communism or Capitalism, led by the Soviet Union on the one hand and NATO on the other. The ensuing struggles for domination in various realms became known as the Cold War.

   B. Zero Hour: The Impact on the Arts
      1. As with World War I, the scale of devastation and destruction haunted people everywhere. Now, however, there was a threat of the future as well.
         a. Some went so far as to say that no art should be created.
      2. Art for the people was associated with Communism; “high” art was associated with Capitalism. With the growing tensions of the Cold War, the gulf between high and low art increased as well.
         3. German writers identified a “zero hour” that defined a time without a past.
            a. Composers felt a desire to start from scratch.
            b. Serialism fit into this idea.
      4. The Nazis had banned Schoenberg and all things associated with his music. These now came to be seen as a sort of resistance.
         a. The ultimate statement on Schoenberg and the zero hour can be found in Boulez’s “Schoenberg is dead” manifesto of 1952 (seven months after the composer’s death).
            1) Boulez (a student of Messiaen) actually defends twelve-tone technique as the direction music should follow.
            2) Webern emerges as the precise model for subsequent serialists to follow, which was applying serial techniques to all matters in a composition.

   C. Total Serialism: Messiaen’s *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités*
      1. Boulez proposed to serialize pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and timbre.
      2. The first famous work to accomplish this was Messiaen’s *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités* (1949).
         a. This is not a twelve-tone work but one that has everything determined by a limited group of elements; it is a study in “hypostatization.”
      3. The next step was total serialism, accomplished in Boulez’s *Structures* (1951).
         a. He applies the technique to pitch, duration, dynamics, and attack.
         b. The paradox with this music is that having determined the plan for a piece, it objectively unfolds. The listener, however, does not understand that.
         c. Boulez noted that the time for performance of scores had passed, now it was time to analyze only.

   D. Darmstadt
      1. The zero hour composers were situated in Darmstadt, an American-controlled town in Germany.
         a. The aim was to spread American political and cultural values.
         b. Early leaders there included Krenek and Varese.
c. Others came to dominate: Boulez, Stockhausen, and Maderna.
d. Notable names associated with Darmstadt include Ligeti, Xenakis, and Berio.

2. Total serialism offered a way out of expression and subjectivity that was abstract, pure, and unemotional.

3. Critics of total serialism noted a misappropriation of scientific prestige; others saw it as nihilist.

II. Americans
A. Interdeterminacy: John Cage and the “New York School”
   1. The American counterpart to the European post-war avant-garde centered around Cage. (“One of the most influential creative figures in the world.”)
   2. Like the Europeans, the American sought to eliminate the artist’s ego and personality from the product.
   3. Cage’s ideas were an extension of the earlier American experimentalists.
   4. He worked to counter the supremacy of traditional pitch organization as the basis for making music.
   5. He sought to redefine music.

B. Music for Prepared Piano
   1. Cage invented the “prepared piano.”
      a. The pianist plays from normal notation, but because the piano has been altered, strange sounds occur.
      b. His most famous piece in this regard is *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946–48)
   2. At a stage in his life when he decided to give up composition unless it did more than communicate, Cage began to study Zen Buddhism.
      a. The concept of nonexpectation in Zen corresponded to Cage’s ideal of experimental music.
      b. He worked on compositions for which the outcome was completely unpredictable.
      c. Cage also became familiar with the *I Ching* (Chinese book of changes—the art of reading premonitions to gain knowledge unavailable to reason).
   3. Cage mixed Zen with *I Ching*. The predetermination of the *I Ching* yielded the music-producing algorithm sought by the zero hour composers, but Cage then added chance instead of serial operations as the path of progression for a work.
   4. The music of Cage and Boulez ultimately sounded similar but was reached by opposite means.
      a. The two met and at first got along well.
      b. They eventually parted ways.

C. Silence
   1. One of Cage’s main contributions was to challenge the way people think about music.
   2. He questioned the nature of the musical work.
   3. His *4’33”* (1952) is his ultimate experiment in indeterminacy.
   4. In this work, Cage said he was trying to erase the boundary between art and life.
There are further implications of control—particularly of performer and composer. Here the audience must engage in the silence because they have been taught to listen at a concert.

D. “Permission”: Cage’s Influence
   1. Cage’s influence extended beyond musicians.
   2. Following Cage’s ideas, Earle Brown began to challenge concepts of notation.
   3. Cage influenced theater, most famously with “happenings.”
      a. This type of theater is associated with Samuel Beckett.
   4. Cage led various schools and other educational workshops.
      a. The first was at Black Mountain College in North Carolina.
      b. In the late 1950s he taught a course called “Composition of Experimental Music” in New York City.
         1) This course included poets, painters, and composers.
         2) La Monte Young, a well-known composer, produced Compositions 1960 that involved radical physical movement of a piano as part of the performance, as did Piano Piece for David Tudor #1.
   5. Several theater pieces inspired by Cage went further. These are described in the text.

E. Preserving the Sacrosanct: Morton Feldman
   1. Feldman was an associate of Cage who competed with him in the search for aesthetic autonomy.
      a. Jackson Pollack was among their acquaintances.
      2. Cage’s music required a meticulous and demanding methodology.
      3. Feldman’s was more abstract from the beginning.
         a. His notation avoids specific pitches.
         b. He moved away from notation, but noticed that without it performers were free to follow their own ideas, which is not objective. He returned to notation.
      4. Some of Feldman’s pieces are quite long, the result of which is a special aesthetic experience.
         a. His music is associated with the artwork of Mark Rothko.
            1) Feldman’s tribute to the artist, Rothko Chapel (1971), has orchestration that reflects the octagon Rothko was working on at the time of his suicide in 1970.
               a) Effects include merger, collage, motivic play, and chant-like melody in the viola.

F. Conversions
   1. American music also had a group of composers that were similar in ideas to the German zero hour composers.
   2. Copland moved to serial techniques.
      a. It followed in the steps of his experience with the Committee of Un-American Activities.
      b. He moved from populist music to a rather unpopular style (with audiences).
      c. In spite of the use of serial techniques, the intervals and voicings clearly identify the sound as that of Copland.
   3. The most surprising convert to serialism was Stravinsky.
a. He had been so dismissive of serialism in previous decades that his turn to this style in the early 1950s was unexpected.
b. At this point, Stravinsky had seemed out of touch with what was going on in classical music composition, and the young composer Robert Craft was instrumental in pushing him into new territory.
c. Stravinsky’s *Requiem Canticles* (1966) show how the eighty-four-year-old composer adapted to new techniques.

G. Academicism, American Style
1. Craft conducted Stravinsky’s *Requiem Canticles* at its premiere at Princeton University.
2. Princeton was a leading school for composition and theory at this time, thanks largely to the efforts of Milton Babbitt.
   a. Princetonian serialism differed from that of the zero hour school in that the former was optimistic, the latter pessimistic.
3. Babbitt was a trained mathematician as well as musician.
4. He developed “set theory” in 1946 as a basis for the analysis of twelve-tone technique.
   a. Some of the terms he used have become standard in the analysis of twentieth-century music.

   1) These include pitch class, aggregate, and combinatorial.
5. He also composed in a manner similar to the zero hour composers, a little prior to their works, but did not publish the compositions (with one exception). This left him with some resentment, because they had credit for the new ideas that he had also developed.
6. Babbitt was criticized for being “too academic,” but he relished this label.
   a. He is associated with logical positivism.
   b. He introduced concepts of logic from math into music composition.
7. The increase in funding for the sciences in the United States, spurred on by the success of Sputnik, resulted in an increase in new-styled composition in the United States, the “new PhD music.”
   a. This music required a specialist virtuoso, as the techniques were difficult for performers.

III. Electronics
A. Electronics: An Old Dream Comes True
1. Composers such as Varese and Cage had been searching for something that could create new sounds. The answer was electronic music.
2. Many saw music as needing to be free, and electronics offered that option.
3. New instruments, such as the theremin, were invented.
4. The possibility of “played back” sound developed in Germany in the 1930s. This allowed the splicing of performances to eliminate mistakes.
5. Tapes opened new doors to ideas about music composition.

B. *Musique concrète* versus *Elektronische musik*
1. The use of electronics opened the door for two distinct camps. One sought to incorporate sounds of the real world in music; the other to create new sounds.
2. In 1948 French engineer Pierre Schaeffler coined the term *musique concrète* to described the real-world approach.
   a. His friend Pierre Henry’s *Orphée 53* consisted only of sounds on tape.
   b. Messiaen, Boulez, and Xenakis were interested in this music, but only Xenakis maintained that interest.
3. In Italy, Berio promoted *musique concrète*. His crowning achievement is *Thema*.
4. Zero hour composers took a different approach to electronic music, calling theirs *Elektronische musik*.
   a. It was a music completely removed from worldly associations. It was pure sound.
5. A rivalry between the French (clarity and wit) and Germans (profundity) ensued.
6. The two were reconciled in Stockhausen’s works in which he used both approaches: real sounds and synthesized sounds.

C. The New Technology Spreads
2. The composers associated with computer music were in the universities, notably Columbia and Princeton.
   a. Columbia had a music synthesizer installed.
   a. It played in the Le Corbusier pavilion and became one of the most famous pieces of all-electronic music.
5. Cage did not attach himself to any particular academic institution but did compose electronic music.

D. Electronics and Live Music
1. From its beginnings, the issue of live performance and electronic music was an issue.
   a. The social event was the concert. If the music wasn’t being performed, part of the social agenda changed.
2. In the 1960s composers from Eastern Europe began to write music that sounded like electronic music but was performed on traditional instruments.
   a. Some of these were Ligeti.
3. His *Atmosphères* was for large orchestra without percussion.
4. He tried to achieve music without articulation.
5. Others in this group include Penderecki, Lutoslawski, and Gorecki.
6. Penderecki wrote orchestral tone clusters and structured his “sonority pieces” based on timbres.
7. The best known of his compositions is *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*.
8. Initially rejected by publishers because it was deemed too expensive to publish, Penderecki gave it a new title with political implications.

IV. Elliott Carter
A. Music in History: Elliott Carter
1. The most prominent American “intellectual” composer at the end of the century was Carter.
2. He was not part of the university “PhD music” crowd.
3. He tried his hand at various techniques but ultimately focused his energies on rhythm.
4. Carter sought to find a way to bridge objective time with subjective (psychological) time.
5. The technique most associated with Carter is “tempo modulation” or “metrical modulation.”
   a. He figures accelerandos and ritardandos (occurring simultaneously) to combine with regular beats so that the meter or tempo changes, almost imperceptibly.
   b. Carter’s pieces are hardly something that the audience member can grasp, and they are also difficult to analyze. Because of these properties, his music is seen as intellectual.
   c. Carter’s techniques show that he is familiar with an astounding variety of musical practices.
      1) The First Quartet, composed in the early 1950s while Carter was on a Guggenheim Fellowship, exemplifies the multiple-level complexities of the composer’s aesthetics.
      2) This work enjoyed considerable success.
      3) Its success Carter contributed to its “importance”—he specifically described it thus.
B. Carter’s Later Career
   1. Carter’s reputation continued to grow after his First Quartet, including a Pulitzer Prize for the Second Quartet.
      2. He became associated with the Modernist movement.
         a. Stravinsky lauded Carter’s compositions.
         1) He confessed to not being completely able to understand the music.
         b. He pronounced them an “American masterpiece,” the first according to many, and therefore noteworthy.
C. “Who Cares If You Listen?”
   1. Much of the music composed in the early twentieth century eventually received approval from audiences.
   2. The composers in this chapter, however, did not win such popular approval.
   3. Babbitt provided the reasoning behind their music in a lecture originally entitled “The Composer as Specialist,” which is now known by another title: “Who Cares If You Listen?”
      a. Babbitt compares music to the sciences and notes that specialized training is necessary to understand modern music.