

# Music and Sound in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting

### Development of Traditional Harmony

#### REVIEW FROM LAST MEETING:

- earliest music, from 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, a modal music developed around the thinking of the philosopher/mathematician Pythagoras
- endures through the Christian middle ages (with appropriate changes in symbolism) into the early years of the European Renaissance (roughly fifteenth/sixteenth centuries, depending on the country and the issues under consideration)
  - style: monophonic (middle ages, plain chant/Gregorian chant)

#### Renaissance:

- polyphonic (many voices simultaneously)
- a harmonic system—functional harmony (also termed tonic-dominant, “home-key” harmony)
- basic building block: the “circle of fifths,” where any note is considered the fifth note of a scale and therefore leads to a scale beginning five notes away; that scale is considered to begin, again, on a fifth note; this sounds complicated, but it means that you go from the triad built on the note C, to the triad built on the note F (C was the fifth note of an F scale) to the triad built on the note B flat, and so on.

#### Performance example: Bach: *Brandenburg Concertos*

- the circle of fifths is Bach’s bread and butter—he exploits it endlessly and brilliantly

note: a composer is not obligated to work the circle of fifths in a

rigid, locked in way—the brilliance of the all the composers within this system is their ability to come up with surprising and often amazing jumps around the circle—but they will always bring their harmonic progress back to the home key via the circle

More symbolic characteristics of this harmonic system:

- rational, systematic, predictable, like the solar system (Newton's description of the laws governing physical phenomena are formulated toward the end of this period, in 1687 in *Principia Mathematica*, the most famous scientific work perhaps of all time in European science)
- laid out with the same kind of intentionality that perspective rendering is laid out in visual arts; puts harmonic progressions in systematic relationships to each other, as figures in a visual field are given systematic relationships by perspective lines
- unites composition with a mathematical dimension
- gives a new meaning to the idea that music represents rational order and harmony and can reflect or create emotional, psychological order

**FOR ALL THESE REASONS, THIS HARMONIC SYSTEM  
DOMINATES EUROPEAN COMPOSITIONAL PRACTICE  
(AS PERSPECTIVE DOMINATES THE VISUAL ARTS AND  
NEWTONIAN PHYSICS DOMINATES THE PHYSICAL SCIENCES)  
UNTIL THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)**

- this period includes the Enlightenment, which is, philosophically, guided by “reason”
  - representative visual artist: David, realistic rendition of reality
  - representative writer: Voltaire
  - an age of science, following Newton—a very systematized world—
  - interestingly, this is also the age of “classical” music—Mozart, Handel, Haydn, et al

Performance example: Haydn: “Le Matin” (very diatonic work—based on scales, triads

- a non-disruptive music—affirmative of traditional values—and thus valued by its upscale and aristocratic patrons

[note: this is not to say that “reason” as the highest of human values was universally regarded without skepticism: Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* savagely satirizes what might be called “the works of reason” in the form of scientists who carry on bizarre and inane experiments, and Swift’s protagonist, Gulliver, winds up, after his travels, back home in England, satisfied to live out in a stable like a horse because he has just returned from the land of the Houyhnhms, where horses were the “rational” creatures and humans were filthy and nasty. Swift’s implication is that, while reason may be a noble value, humans do not represent it, and their claim to be the noblest of God’s creatures because of their rationality is spurious.]

--WITH THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, AND THE “ROMANTIC REVOLUTION,” COMPOSERS, LIKE ARTISTS IN OTHER AREAS, BEGIN SEEKING NEW ARTISTIC MEANS TO EXPRESS NEW IDEAS AND EMOTIONS

- one can hear (in hindsight) hints of these changes in the complexity of Mozart
- Performance example: last movement of **Mozart: 40<sup>th</sup> Symphony**
  - entirely within the harmonic tradition he inherits from the Renaissance, but begins to exploit the possibilities for chromaticism within the system, to the point that here and there the harmonic “stability” begins to waver
  - that is, Mozart can move so quickly through dominant-tonic progressions and use the chromatically ascending/descending lines they offer that you seem to lose your footing momentarily
  - this possibility has been available to previous composers-- it’s the same harmonic progression—but I’m not aware of any who exploit the chromatic lines to the extent that Mozart does in this piece
  - also goes through what seem like wild, adventurous key changes though again, completely within the logic of the system

**ROMANTIC PERIOD**—hinted at in Mozart’s use of the system

**Beethoven**—a great example of the movement into the Romantic era within the career of a single composer:

- early symphonies sound like Mozart, but by the 9<sup>th</sup> *Symphony*,

he has entered new territory in many ways,  
-- though harmonically, he is still well within the system--  
Beethoven's adventure is in his expansive and extravagant  
approach to structure

--symphonies—Mozart, Haydn, Handel et al  
have consisted of  
-- relatively short movements—5 to 8 minutes  
-- consistent mood, tempo, instrumental pallet within  
a movement

Beethoven, as represented by the expansive 4<sup>th</sup> Movement of the 9<sup>th</sup>  
*Symphony*, combines many forms (changes in tempo, changes in  
instrumental pallet, expansion of orchestra in size as well; adds choral  
element) within one very long movement with several distinct sections

This movement a great break from past structural practice while beautifully  
and brilliantly continuing to exploit the harmonic possibilities of traditional  
practices; could be that he realized the expanded structural approach  
required the continuity of a traditional harmonic approach (or, he simply  
accepted it as the necessary approach to composition at the time)

- variations in tempo, wild harmonic directions, impact of chord progressions can be revelatory—that is, he'll go into a key that you just don't expect to be the next harmonic move, yet it will seem wonderfully logical
- exploits the ambiguity of the diminished chord (again, other composers have had the diminished chord at their disposal—sometimes the innovation is in one's willingness to linger over a device and bring it to a kind of prominence it hasn't had before, or reveal an inherent harmonic ambiguity that hasn't been particularly apparent before)
- major breaks within the movement; one “style” will end, another style will begin—for example, after the first theme is stated (and repeated in a theme and variations form), the music stops, returns to the dissonance of the introduction, stops again, and the vocal quartet section begins

- metrically, Beethoven seems to have planned out the movement so that the meter doubles, then triples, then quadruples while remaining within the same tempo range; one way (in addition to melodic continuity) that he unifies the disparate sections of the movement
- begins out of tempo (unlike previous composers—e.g. Bach, Mozart, Haydn et al)—takes awhile for the tempo to assert itself—hints at other previous movements

What happens after Beethoven?

On the one hand, symphonic writing continues in the works of Brahms, Mendelsohn, Schubert, Mahler—each exploring symphonic form in his own way, each tending to extend harmonic practice as well

But composers also leave the symphony as a venue for composition for “program music”

On the one hand, program music can simply mean music illustrating some extra-musical theme, as with the folk-lore subject of the *Peer Gynt Suite*. On the other hand, the illustration of such a theme can allow the composer a break from the formal restrictions of symphonic writing as well as the emotional restrictions via greater harmonic experimentation

Next performance example: Debussy: *Nuages, Sirenes, La Mer*

- by this time (1880s), composers have begun to explore musical material outside the confines of the symphony; that is, they are beginning to use narrative (not strictly “musical”) material as the guiding principle for composition
- on the one hand this can be categorized as “program music,” that is, the composer writes a piece called “The Peer Gynt Suite”
- titles of these pieces reflect an approach to composition that involves the not-strictly-formed, the changing, the unstable—unlike the kind of “rational” form and harmonic practice of the classical writers

- that is, clouds, the ocean, the alluring sirens (from *The Odyssey*—the women who lure men to their deaths with their seductive song)—these are things that don't have a fixed form, are always in motion, in a state of ceaseless change (at least clouds and the ocean), or draw the rational mind away from its orderly, rational intentions and discipline (the sirens)
- to accomplish this effect, Debussy resorts to tritone harmony—if you go up a tritone (or whole tone) scale, you are actually playing the beginnings of scales in two different keys—for example, C and G flat. The result, relative to more traditional practice, is to create a sense of ambiguity. As the composer moves within the whole-tone/tri-tone harmonies and melodies, it is no longer clear where the tonal center is, or whether there is one in the old sense. It isn't that Debussy never uses tonal sounding chords, it's that the balance has shifted away from them towards more ambiguous, shifting and changing harmonies—you don't expect a return to a home key because it's not clear where it might be—this is like clouds, or the ocean, which are always in motion, never fixed, cover vast expanses without having a determinable “center”;
- for this reason Debussy is described as an “impressionist” composer: he alters the harmonic system to bypass the strict adherence to tonic/dominant progressions—uses tritone—blurs over the “tonal center,” makes it indeterminate, “unfocussed,” like the works of, say, Monet, the painter for whom the term “impressionist” was coined (by critics who didn't like him, by the way)
- Debussy reflects also the turn to an “organic” kind of development—i.e., no pre-determined form; music develops apparently according to its own inner principles, it evolves, grows, trails off—no climactic endings