**Chapter 3**

**How Music Has Changed Over Time**

This book is not about music history. Instead I hope to introduce you to a number of musical styles and compositions that you have not heard before. Hopefully some of these will appeal to you and be interesting enough to you to make you want to hear more pieces like them. If we can accomplish this we have accomplished our goals. So, throughout much of the text we will try to focus on the music itself, how it sounds and why it was written. Along the way we will also learn some history about how music developed in Western society over the past 1000 years and we will learn some facts about composers and time periods. This chapter is intended to give you an overview of the type of music written during the six historical time periods covered in this text.

The earliest time period that we will deal with is the Middle Ages, approximately the years 450–1450. This time is often referred to in western Europe as the Dark Ages because few people were literate and general living conditions were deplorable. The Middle Ages in Western society was dominated by religion, specifically by the Catholic church. Almost all Western art of the time was sanctioned by and commissioned, or created for the glory of God and the Catholic Church. The church was a great patron of the arts and learning in general in this time period, and without it, and its immense wealth, the arts would not have flourished. We call religious music sacred music. And music of the world is called secular music. To be sure, there was a great deal of secular music in the Middle Ages, we just don’t know much about it. Records were primarily maintained by the church, and it kept track of only sacred music.

Much of the sacred music of the time was vocal music. Instruments were just not very developed yet, and they didn’t sound very good. Since most of the art music was for the church, it naturally was created in forms that followed the liturgy. Forms that were important in this time were the chant, organum, the motet, and the mass. These will all be discussed in later chapters. For now, just remember that they all were written for performance during church services.

Music of the Middle Ages was primarily monophonic or polyphonic. As you learned in an earlier chapter monophonic means one melody, polyphonic means two or more at the same time. We know very few composer names from the Middle Ages but those whom we do know were French. The composers Leonin, Perotin, and Machaut were all associated with the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris or Rhiems and were important figures in the Middle Ages. A special woman named Hildegard of Bingen was a well-known abbess who wrote morality plays, poetry, and music.

Composers rarely notated the tempo of a piece of music or what instrument or voice was intended to perform the piece. They didn't even say whether the music was intended for a soloist or for an ensemble.

For the most part, music of the Middle Ages can be characterized as vocal, sacred, and relatively short. We begin our study by hearing some of the earliest Western music that we know—chant. We call this type of music plainchant or Gregorian chant and we will study it in Chapter 4.

As western Europe emerged from the Dark Ages a rebirth of interest in knowledge and learning occurred. We call this the Renaissance. We ascribe this name to approximately the years 1450 to 1600. Just as the late Middle Ages were greatly influenced by one geographic center, France, these years were dominated by the art and culture of Italy. Throughout Europe the focus shifted from the Church and the afterlife to man and life on earth. Artists and musicians made their works more about life than about spiritualism. Music of the church still was important to be sure, but secular music was at least as important. Musicians were employed by courts and towns, as well as by churches. It is during this time that the Protestant Christian religions were formed.

Music in the Renaissance was both sacred and secular, but we consider this time a secular time period. With the rebirth of learning, many more people were literate and cities kept as good records as did the churches. Because of this we know of many more musicians from the Renaissance era. Composers such as Josquin, Palestrina, Monteverdi, Susato, and Dufay were all important, and we will learn of their music throughout the course.

A new way of composing music, called homophony, was developed in this period. Homophonic music of this time may have been a reaction to the rhythmic complexity of the late Medieval motets. It sounds more like harmonized melodies than independent countermelodies.

During the Renaissance, certain elements of music began to change. Dynamics begin to be used, at first through the adding or dropping out of voices. There was also a wider range of tempos used in music. Melodies generally have wider ranges with more leaps between notes in them. Texture becomes important—composers can now contrast simple melody with both polyphony and homophony. This allows for longer pieces of music as composers start to use repetition and contrast to create musical works.

Polyphonic music continued despite the rise of homophony. Both were used in the most important types of music in the period; the motet, the mass, and the madrigal.

One of the leading composers of the time was Guillaume Dufay, who lived from 1400–1474. Born in France, he spent most of his time in Italy and was one of the best- known musicians of the Renaissance. This celebrity status was also new to the Renaissance. In this time period we have much better record of leading composers and how they worked—partly because of the notation system developed in the late period of the Middle Ages.

The old forms of sacred music in the Middle Ages continued in the Renaissance. But new forms of secular music like the chanson (a love song) or the madrigal (an entertainment song) became very popular.

Instruments were better in the Renaissance than the Middle Ages. And, there is a good deal of evidence that they were important in courts and city festivals. But they still did not sound as good as the voice and as such instrumental music remained inferior to vocal.

Music in the Renaissance, like today, was everywhere. Art music could be heard in the churches, courts, city festivals, and from traveling musicians.

At the end of the Renaissance period the city-state of Venice became one of the most influential centers of musical life. And, there was no more important place than the cathedral of St. Mark. The most important composer in Venice was named Giovanni Gabrieli who lived from 1555–1612 and worked as organist and composer at St. Mark’s.

Expanding upon the concept of instrumental consorts and using more homophony than polyphony he and other composers created a new style of music. This type of music helped make instrumental music the equal of vocal music. It exploited tone colors by using “choirs” of instruments to play separately in some sections of the music and together at climactic moments. The same thing happened in vocal music of the time. Gabrieli used the natural acoustics of St. Mark’s Cathedral to make even more of these tone colors, using choirs of instruments and voices to imitate and answer one another as well as to combine for magnificent and impressive sounds.

Composers realized that in order to create some of the tone colors and sounds that they desired they would have to control the music more than in the past. They started to write music for specific instruments, or groups. They started to notate how loud or soft a passage of music should be performed. They created new forms called canzonas that contained imitative polyphony and huge homophonic chords.

The period of musical history that follows the Renaissance is called the Baroque period and it lasted from about 1600 to 1750. In contrasting the music of the two periods we might think of the following characteristics.

Music of the Renaissance was mainly written for voice; in the Baroque period instrumental music becomes equally important. Vocal music in the Renaissance was composed for groups of singers, Baroque music features soloists. Renaissance music was mainly for the church and private chamber; this continued in the Baroque but music for the theater and concert hall was added. Many more average people heard art music in the Baroque period than in the Renaissance.

Other stylistic features of the new period include a dominance of rhythm. Baroque music is incessantly rhythmical; and often the rhythms are repeated over and over again and regular in beat recurrence, much like our music today. Another change is the importance of the bass line in music. This allowed for the development of homophony and its extension called harmony. Harmony is the use of chords and their logical relationships to one another to make the background for a melody. Our music today is based upon harmony. Chords sound like they are going somewhere and we can hear and predict where the home chord or sound of a piece of music is. These were new ideas to the Baroque and have dominated Western music ever since.

The two most important composers of the time were George Frederick Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach. Handel was well known in his time, a traveling musician known internationally. Bach was little known and spent most of his life working as a simple church musician in Leipzig Germany. He has become, over the centuries respected as one of, if not the greatest composer to have ever lived. There were many great composers of this time period including Antonio Vivaldi, George Phillip Telemann, Claudio Monteverdi, and Henry Purcell. Music of the time was becoming international in style, but we usually think of Germany as the geographic center of Baroque music.

In the Baroque, new forms of music developed; the three most important were the fugue, the concerto, and the opera. Music was both polyphonic and homophonic in texture. The fugue is a polyphonic and imitative, usually brief work—often for a keyboard instrument.

The concerto gave rise to the star performer as a vehicle for musical virtuosity. And the opera was created as a new way to deliver a dramatic play. It remains one of the most popular and important forms of music still today.

The Baroque era gave way to the Classical period. The Classical era was the years 1750–1820 and in this time much music was written that we today refer to generically as Classical music.

The time period was dominated by two great composers; Franz Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Ludwig van Beethoven, also a great composer of the time was important in both the Classical and Romantic time periods as a sort of bridge between the two styles.

Classical era music is very elegant, refined, restrained, and stately. It is the music of the aristocrat. Its rhythms are regular and melody is the most important musical element in this time period.

Sacred and secular music are both written during this time, but secular music becomes more important than sacred. Instrumental music surpasses vocal music in importance during the Classical era. The symphony and the string quartet become the most important forms of music. And, the concerto, especially the piano and violin concerto are important throughout the period.

Opera continues to be the most important vocal form and it splits into two styles; opera seria and opera buffa. Buffa is simply comic opera and it becomes very popular with the general public.

During the Baroque era the organ and harpsichord were the most commonly used keyboard instruments. But, in the Classical era the piano was invented and it quickly became the most popular of instruments, especially for concertos.

The music of the Romantic period, which is usually said to be the years 1820 to 1900, is highly individual in nature. Music of the 19th century is present in most of our everyday lives. We hear it in elevators, movies, commercials and TV, cartoons, and some of us hear it as the main repertory in concert halls and opera houses.

Self expression was prized above all else in art, and music became the king of the arts during this period because it was thought to be the most capable of expressing personal emotions.

Music of the Romantic era was dominated geographically by Germany. The list of internationally renowned composers and performers of this period is too long to consider in this one semester course even if we dedicated the entire term to the 19th century. The star composer and performer was truly born in this period. The old patronage system of working for one court or church was no longer in place. Composers were supported by the wealthy and aristocratic but no longer as servants; they were now revered as superior beings and idols. Romantic era music is difficult to categorize because each important composer had his or her own individual style.

During the 19th century the elements of music changed in the following ways:

Rhythm became much more expressive and free. Tempos within works fluctuated frequently and with large ranges. Free rhythm is one of the most important elements used by Romantic era composers as an expressive device. A sort of ebb and flow of music across time helped express feeling.

Melody of the period became very much like speech. It is long, irregular and unstable. Melodies tend to have large leaps of pitch and take a long time to build to a climax.

Harmony in the Romantic period was also used as an expressive device. Composers learned to use certain harmonic sounds to make the audience be fearful, joyful, sad, and other emotions. They did this by combining notes differently in chords than their predecessors and by making the logical progression of these chords less apparent, or at times to mask or defeat this progression completely. By the end of the period the concept of a “home” sound or note began to lose importance.

Tone colors were greatly expanded in this time period. The orchestra added many new instruments and doubled in size from the Classical orchestra. This provided the composers with a wealth of new combinations of instruments. Instruments became much more refined during these years and many traditional instruments took on new capabilities because of technological advances.

Romantic composers almost completely abandoned the Classical set forms. Those that they retained expanded beyond recognition to most concertgoers. It was no longer important to be able to predict the return of a melody or identify a section of a piece. Even the concept of movements of works disappeared by the end of the period. Musical works in general became longer, some considerably so. By the end of the period one symphony might be the entire length of a concert and some operas were over three hours in length.

Thematic unity became a much used device to tie pieces together. As music was used more and more to tell a story it became important that different characters or moods be recognizable. This was done by creating a theme or melody associated with them. This is still commonly done in movie music today. Take, for example, the music John Williams has written for the *Star Wars* movies. Each primary character has a melody associated with him or her and if you listen carefully you will hear it in the soundtrack when those characters are important in the movie. This concept began in the Romantic period.

The concert hall and opera hall became the primary places to hear music. And the public was truly welcome for the first time. Even small chamber works or works that in the Classical era would have been performed in homes of wealthy aristocrats were performed in the concert hall. The piano, violin, and orchestra reigned supreme as the instruments of virtuoso performers. And it became increasingly the case that composers are no longer performers.

The piano became the most popular instrument as it became somewhat affordable for home use and the industrial revolution gave rise to more free time for the middle class.

Many composers wrote short and passionate works for solo piano. Chopin and Franz Liszt were important writers of this kind of music that could be played and enjoyed best in the home.

The 20th century to the present time is what we call the Modern Era. Perhaps we lack the historical perspective to know who and what is most important in this time period. But it appears that composers of the modern time felt that the Romantic era composers had developed art music as far as they could without significant changes. During the modern period they began to reject many of the conventions and notions about music of the past and the modern period became an eclectic mix of styles. Tonality, especially, was questioned and even the notion of melody became less clear-cut.

Around the year 1900 western European art music split into at least two major camps; those composers we might call traditionalists and those we now call modernists. The traditionalists wrote music that expanded on and was based on the music of the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods. Modernist music, sometimes also called music of the avant-garde, is full of experimentation and rejection of the musical ideas of the past. This move was mirrored in the other arts as well; and just as the music of the Romantic period was influenced by literature, the music of the 20th century has a close association with painting.

The movement called modernism was actually very brief, about 1890 to 1920. But the impact of the music and the influence of the composers are felt today. The time is marked particularly by a sense of human progress and confidence, especially in science. This continued to challenge organized religion. Though this had been happening since the Classical era, it became more of a social issue during the 20th century. In the 20th century not all art was representative, both in visual art and in music. This caused melody and harmony to be less important in music because they have traditionally been the primary indicators of meaning in music. In the past, music had always been based upon a certain logical system—this system of sound and meaning was overthrown in the music of the 20th century. As musicians heard more often (because of science and technology) the musics of other cultures, they began to borrow sounds, scales, and instruments from Africa, the Far East, and others for their own music. In music up to the 20th century composers had created contrast and conflict in music by creating dissonant, or un-restful sounds that then had a logical point of resolution. Much of the music of the 20th century rejects this notion and allows these dissonances to remain unresolved. This gives the music an unfinished and sometimes unfocused sound. In much music of the 20th century melody is fragmented and unimportant; and the music lacks that “home” sound or pitch that was all-important in Western music up until this time.

The world now often thinks of the United States as a center of culture. However, at the beginning of the 20th century that was not yet the case. This development really did not take hold until after World War II. You might think of music in the 20th century in three historical periods; prior to World War I, between the two world wars, and after World War II.

Avant-garde music had three primary champions at the beginning of the 1900s; Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg. They helped create very swift changes in music and each is associated with at least one major musical movement or “ism.”

As stated above, melody and harmony lost their place as the most important musical elements. In their place composers of the 20th century made tone color and rhythm the most important aspects of their compositions.

Perhaps the most important composer of music in which tone color is dominant was Claude Debussy. Debussy's name is always associated with a type of music called Impressionism. The term, taken from painting, usually means music in which tone color is very important, form is not important, and melodies are long and often sound directionless because of a lack of rhythmic pulse. Much of this music is written for the orchestra because it can offer the largest number of combinations of instruments. Debussy lived from 1862–1918 and spent most of his musical life in Paris. His style is one in which musical sounds are the most important thing, not melodies or rhythms. He borrowed sounds from music of East Asia and the Pacific Rim. And he created this new sound by infusing the traditional orchestral sound of the time with new scales, new harmonies, and new combinations of instruments that imitated the music he heard from Asia

Igor Stravinsky was Russian and lived from 1882–1971. He spent most of his life in Paris and America due to political problems of the time. The music for which he is most famous was written at the beginning of his career and is often referred to as Primitivism. Much of his music was written for ballet or other staged event. Its most important musical element is rhythm and his music often has repeated rhythmic patterns, irregular beats, and very accented rhythms. He manipulated rhythms such that they took on the quality of melodies and were the unifying factor in his music. His early music is also very Russian nationalistic in sound. Later in life he was the leader of another “ism” called Neoclassicism. This movement was a return to the order and symmetry of music of the classical era with a modern tonal basis.

A third type of modernism at the beginning of the century was called Expressionism and its leading proponent was Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg lived from 1874 to 1951 and began his career in Germany. Like Stravinsky he immigrated to the United States. Expressionism is complex and emotional music. The structure of the music is ordered, almost mathematical in nature. But it doesn’t sound so. Its passionate irregular rhythms, long melodies that defy memory, and lack of resolution of dissonant sounds create an extreme sounding music. Schoenberg also infused into expressionism a new system of writing music called the twelve-tone system in which he uses all twelve pitches. Music prior to this made use more regularly of just the primary seven notes of the scale. This new system lacks the sound to most people’s ears of a “home” base sound.

During this time the break between popular music and art music occurred. Popular music remained tonal and accessible to the public and art music became more esoteric and elitist. However, thanks to technological developments music is more accessible and cheaper to acquire than ever before in history.

The second half of the 20th century saw developments in styles called Minimalism and NeoRomanticism. Minimalism attempts to create musical works through repetition and limited development of musical ideas. NeoRomanticism, as its name might portend, is an attempt to return to the ideals of the Romantic ear, but with 20th century spin. Both types are particularly successful in film scores.

Finally, the development of jazz in America has had a great impact on art music. Many composers attempt to integrate the qualities of jazz and classical art music to create today’s style.