Developing wider listening – the 20th century: part one

KS4/5

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A cultural crossroads

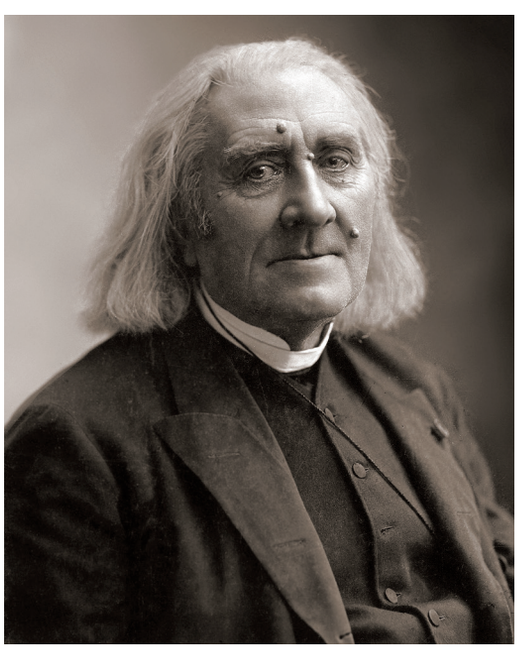
Understanding the background and context to music they play or listen to is an incredibly useful skill for all music students. This series aims to broaden that knowledge of musical style across the ages, partly in readiness for GCSE and A level 'wider listening' questions, but also to increase students' enjoyment of the music they encounter, as they make links between one piece and the next, and between music and the wider cultural world. We've already covered the Baroque period (November 2020), the Classical period (April 2021) and Romantic music (July 2021).

In the 20th century, so many different musical styles developed that we're going to devote two in this series of developing wider listening resources to it. In this resource, part one, we'll look at some of the music emerging in the early part of the century, charting its move from tonal to non-tonal as composers sought to find new voices. Then, in part two, we'll look at later 20th-century developments in music as the rise of mass media changed the course of musical style for ever.

The old and the new

At the end of the Romantic period (covered in *Music Teacher*, July 2021), music found itself at a large and complex junction. The huge diversification of musical styles in the 20th century, from atonal music to minimalism, impressionism to jazz, and avant-garde to rhythm and blues, is due to a range of factors, but one thing many composers at the start of the century shared was a feeling that harmony and tonality had reached a kind of dead-end.

One vivid illustration of the way harmonic style was changing in the late Romantic period can be found in the final compositions of Hungarian composer Franz Liszt (1811-86, pictured). A noted virtuoso and composer of the 19th century, Liszt became quite experimental in the last years of his life, and his style underwent a change that no one could have seen coming. His new directions in harmony and tonality foreshadowed the music of the 20th century some 30 years before that century even began.



This can be seen in two examples of Liszt's late works, both written for piano. Let's have a closer look at them, by way of a comparison activity.

The Stravinsky Fountain in Paris, which contains sculptures inspired by the composer's work.

Comparison activity: two piano pieces by Liszt

Liszt was a celebrated composer and performer who had been amazing audiences with his prowess on the piano since his early teens, and was famous across Europe. In his later years, he took minor holy orders and concentrated on more introverted, experimental pieces.

Nuages gris ('Grey Clouds') is a short, quite simple and evocative piece describing a moody sky. This performance (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYKl41e_hoU**) comes with a score, and your more experienced pianists might be able to play much of it.

It was written in 1881, and its harmonies are based around **augmented chords** such as the one picked out at the very beginning. Ask your students to listen to it and note down their thoughts prompted by the following questions:

- What **key** is the piece in? Can we tell? Does it change? What makes the key ambiguous?
- Find examples of augmented chords and other **non-diatonic** features. Are there any **major or minor triads** or **cadences** in the piece?
- How does Liszt use the elements of music to depict a grey, cloudy sky?

Though the piece is in a kind of minor key, the basis of the tonality is **modal** (based on Hungarian folk modes), and Liszt's harmonies are based on the use of chords as **sonorities** rather than to signal cadences and keys. Augmented chords are chromatic in nature, and Liszt uses them to create a new sound world, something that influenced Debussy.

Now, compare *Nuages gris* with Liszt's *Bagatelle sans tonalité*, written in 1885 and quite possibly Liszt's most experimental work. As students listen and follow the score here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=yc_HjEa8k5k**), ask them to consider the following questions:

- What similarities can you spot between this piece and *Nuages gris* in terms of chords and tonality?
- What examples can you find of chromatic melody writing, and chromatic harmony?
- Though it's hard to pin it down into a key, *Bagatelle sans tonalité* can be described as having a number of **tonal centres**. What do you think this means?
- In what ways is this piece **virtuosic**, as so many of Liszt's earlier pieces were?

Liszt's harmony is based on a number of **diminished** chords, such as the **diminished 7ths** that end the piece. Diminished 7ths contain a **tritone**, the most **dissonant** of all intervals. Liszt's chromatic melodies often **oscillate** around a given note, most commonly D, which suggests that though Liszt did not want to write in any particular key, there is a pull towards this note, which can therefore be seen as a tonal centre. This kind of non-tonal harmonic thinking interested many composers of the 20th century, as we shall see.

There were many composers who straddled the two centuries and composed very successfully in tonal styles that might easily be described as late Romantic. Gustav Mahler (Austrian, 1860-1911) wrote symphonies and orchestral song cycles; Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) succeeded Verdi as a composer of incredibly popular and dramatic Italian operas; Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) continued the successful 19th-century Russian tradition with his symphonies and piano concertos; and Richard Strauss (German, 1864-1949) wrote towering, programmatic tone poems and operas, following on in a sense from Wagner.

New faces were appearing, however, who were not satisfied with any kind of continuation. Inspired by the experiments of composers like Liszt, they strove to redefine and refresh musical style, and in the process they cast out some of the 'traditions' of melody, harmony, tonality and rhythm that had underpinned music since Bach's day. This resource will take you and your students on a whistle-stop geographical tour of some of the best examples of early 20th-century musical diversity, with suggestions for listening, performing and composing activities.

New sounds in France

Vétheuil in Summer *by Claude Monet, 1880, which gives the impression of flickering sunlight on the water*

In the second half of the 19th century, French painting was dominated by the work of a group of artists who became known as the **impressionists** – Monet, Renoir and many others. Their emphasis was on mood and suggestion rather than direct representation of objects, people or scenes. Lines and colours were blurred, brushstrokes were visible, and much attention was paid to the effect of light. Some 20 to 30 years later, the term appeared again, this time applied to the work of Claude Debussy (1862-1918), much to the composer's disdain. You only need to spend a short time listening to Debussy's music to understand why.

Debussy's music focused on creating **colour** through new uses of harmony and sonority. Impressionist orchestral music used big orchestras, but rarely playing loudly or simultaneously. Harmony and texture were rich, with basic chords extended with **added 6ths and 7ths**, and chains of **parallel chords** pulling the music away from more traditional harmonic progressions. Debussy found a new way to write tonal music without too much suggestion of the tonality.

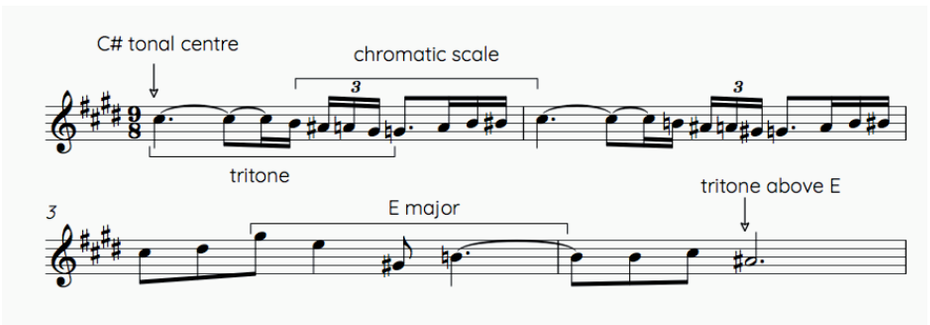
Listening, performing and composing activity – Debussy's 'sound'

Debussy's colourful sound owed much to his harmony, just as we saw in Liszt's late works. But he also used **instrumental sonorities** and **non-diatonic scales**. Get your students to listen a couple of times up to 3:08 of this performance (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlLoXvamfZw**) of Debussy's orchestral work *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, a piece written in 1894 and described by composer and conductor Pierre Boulez as marking the beginning of modern music.

Ask them to think about the flute melody, which returns four times in this extract. What kind of scale does it resemble? How does it differ each time it returns?

Ask them also to watch the video closely and look at the instruments Debussy uses, and how he uses them. The piece is descriptive of a dream – what makes it sound this way?

Debussy aims for transparent textures in which different sonorities are clearly heard, focusing mainly on woodwind and making good use of two harps. He presents the melody on the flute, but each time there are different orchestral 'colours' and textures supporting it.



The flute melody is chromatic and covers the interval of a tritone from C sharp to G, making it non-diatonic. It is based around a tonal centre of C sharp, tricking us into thinking that it is in C sharp minor, but surprising us with an E major triad in the third bar, before immediately giving up on that key by introducing the dissonant note A sharp.

The first presentation sounds like it is in **free rhythm** and it is followed by a bar of silence. The second uses much fuller orchestral sonority, and the third and fourth presentations are varied rhythmically, finally ending (after three minutes) with the work's first cadence, in the key of B major. You might like to show your students later in the piece, around seven minutes in, where the theme returns, this time covering a more tonal perfect 4th rather than a tritone.

Claude Debussy in 1908

Debussy loved to experiment with non-diatonic scales and modes, and you can usefully spend some time introducing some of these to the class through a performing and composing activity. Get them to work in pairs experimenting with writing melodies using any of these Debussy favourites:

- The **whole-tone scale**
- The **chromatic scale**
- The **major and minor pentatonic scales**
- The **Phrygian, Lydian and Mixolydian modes**

Also prominent in France in the first half of the 20th century were Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) and Eric Satie (1866-1925). If you have time, you could play examples of other music by Debussy and these composers, such as:

- Debussy: 'Voiles' from his piano *Préludes* **(www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVVojkZC4jI**)
- Ravel: *Miroirs* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=0A4Lxm3IpvY**)
- Satie: Gnossienne No. 1 (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=onR3D3ZyqUI**)

Vienna and atonality

At the start of the 20th century, the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg felt strongly that music was in some kind of stylistic turmoil, and that the increasingly chromatic language of his contemporaries was nearing its limit. His own early compositions, influenced by Liszt, Wagner and Mahler, were harmonically complex and almost Romantic in style, but he soon became one of the first to try writing with a complete lack of tonality.

Schoenberg soon realised that **atonal** works lacked one of the crucial components found in all music since Bach – the use of keys to structure the music. Many of the pieces from his atonal period are short, such as his *Six Little Piano Pieces*.

Listening activity: Schoenberg's atonality

Play the first of Schoenberg's *Six Little Piano Pieces*, written in 1911 (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZleqbjwEuA**).

Get your students to describe their reactions and thoughts – can they see any similarities with the Liszt pieces we looked at earlier? What do they notice about the use of harmony, rhythm and the piano itself?

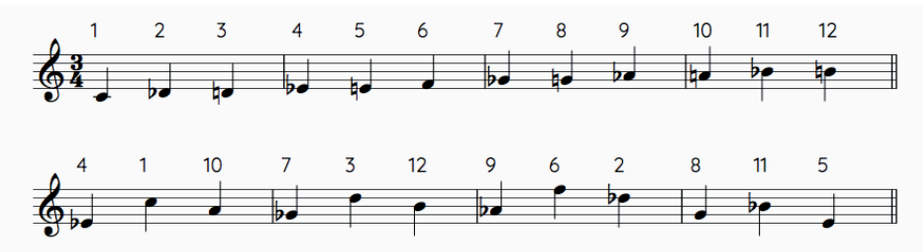
In order to bring some kind of form back without resorting to keys and **modulation**, Schoenberg devised a system that he called the **12-tone method**, where each note in the chromatic scale was played in a predetermined order (called the **row** or the **prime order**) and not repeated until all 11 of the other notes had been sounded. This row could be developed in various ways, such as playing it backwards, turning it upside down, transposing it or turning it into chords.

Schoenberg showed how, through transposing up or down by semitones, there were a total of 48 different versions of any given note-row. This almost mathematical way of developing material and structuring music became popular with Schoenberg's followers, Alban Berg (1885-1935) and Anton Webern (1883-1945), who adapted the method to suit their own compositional style, which had become known as **serialism**. Other composers, like Stravinsky and Boulez, also experimented with the 12-tone method.

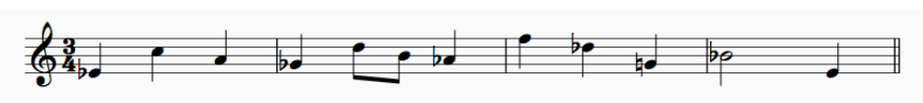
Composing activity: using a note row

As a class, in small groups or individually, students can try their hands at writing a melody using a note row by following these steps:

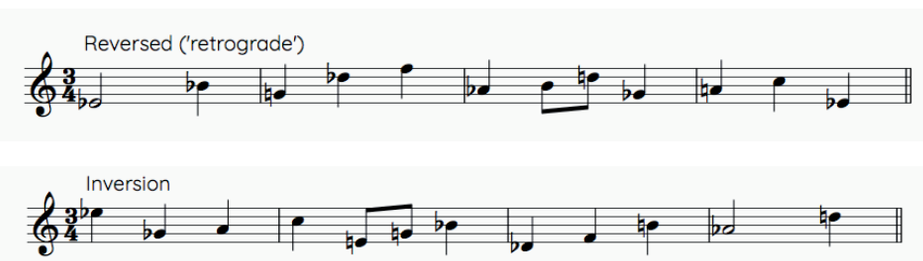
1 Take the 12 notes of the chromatic scale and arrange them into a different order, such as in the example below.



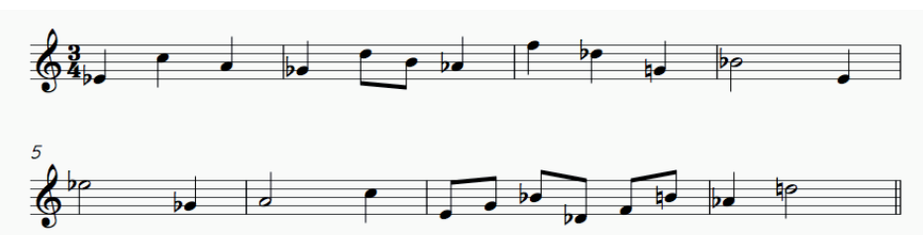
2 Add rhythm and metre to make a melody using this version of the row, like this:



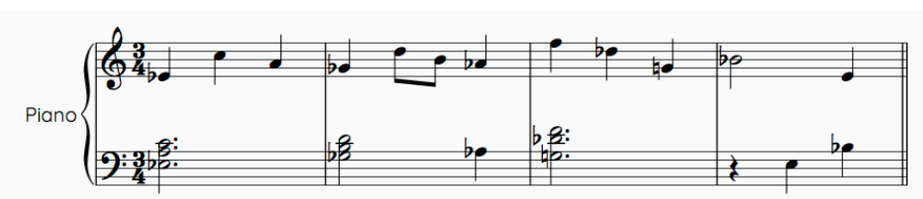
3 Reverse or invert the row, like this:



4 Write an answering phrase that uses this new version:



5 They can harmonise their new piece with **verticalisation** – making chords from notes of the row, like this:



This is an over-simplified example, but you could play your students an excerpt from the opening of Berg's Violin Concerto of 1935, shown here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoGzNmf_AUw**) with a score. It starts by exploring the intervals between the open strings of the violin, before introducing Berg's row in bar 15. This quite Romantic – almost tonal sounding – example of serialism might convince your students that the idea had potential!

From Russia to America – via Paris

In 1913, the third of three ballets written by the young Russian composer Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) for the Ballets Russes dance company in Paris was premiered. The disturbance caused by the audience at this first performance of *Le sacre du printemps* ('The Rite of Spring') is famous, but the work quickly became known as one of the greatest masterpieces of the century. Its infectious, primitive-sounding rhythms, use of **bitonality** and dissonance, folk-like melodies and vast orchestral sounds caused waves through the entire musical world when it was first performed.

Stravinsky in the 1920s

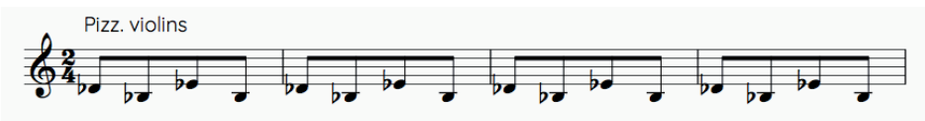
Students can read about the alleged 'riot' at the first performance of *The Rite of Spring* here (**www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22691267**).

Performing and listening activity: *The Rite of Spring* deconstructed

Let's find out about more about Stravinsky's era-defining 'modern' style, by deconstructing the section called 'Augurs of Spring', which can be found between 3:34 and 7:14 in this fantastic performance by Sir Simon Rattle and the London Symphony Orchestra (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkwqPJZe8ms**).

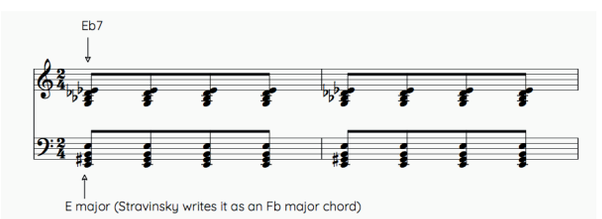
This is a wonderfully **homorhythmic** part of the work, mainly in 2/4 time, with much use of bitonality and **syncopation**.

Just as the extract gets going, an **ostinato** begins on pizzicato strings that binds the whole section together. Get your students to play it.



What might the key be at this point? What intervals does Stravinsky use in the ostinato? What chord do the notes of this ostinato make? Ask your students to listen to the whole of 'Augurs of Spring' and track the ostinato through it.

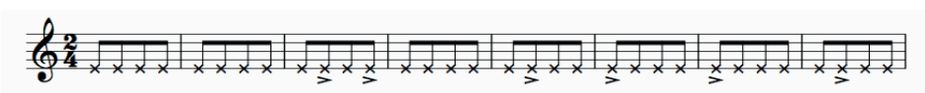
Going back to the beginning of the extract, soon after the introduction of the ostinato, a famous passage begins, consisting of a chord introduced by strings, played with repeated down-bows and emphasised on different beats of the bar by the horns. This famous chord can be described as a **note cluster** and also as an example of bitonality. It is most definitely dissonant! It consists of two 'tonal' chords, superimposed with little consideration for tonality.



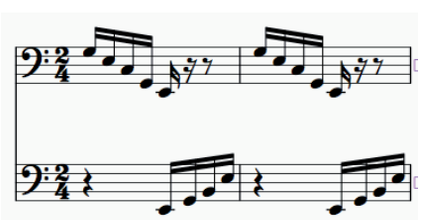
The accents, doubled by the horns, come apparently randomly – here's the rhythm with the accents shown. Get your students (possibly in pairs) to play the bitonal chord in this rhythm and see if they can place the accents in the right places.

Finally, you can allocate the two parts of the chord and the ostinato to different students, and create your own 'Augurs of Spring' on keyboards, using the musical snippets provided as a guide.

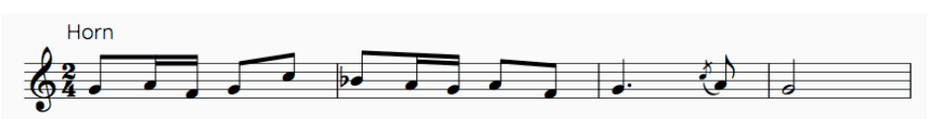
You could also ask the students to spot these two 'modernist' features:



1 A dovetailing arpeggio played by the bassoons. This accompanies some appearances of the ostinato.



2 A lyrical, Russian folk melody played on the horn. This becomes one of the main melodic features of 'Augurs of Spring':



Finally, Stravinsky's approach is to take these elements – the ostinato, the chord, the accents, the rhythm and the folk melody – and combine them all to make an exciting, compelling and colourful section that continually builds, becoming texturally more and more complex with decorations coming thick and fast from all over the orchestra. Finish the activity with one more playing of this thrilling piece of music.

Who knows where this love for giant orchestras and vast palettes of musical colour would have been taken, if it hadn't been for the outbreak of war in Europe just a year after the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*? After the war, economic cutbacks made it impractical for composers to write for large groups, and there was a feeling that the excess of late Romantic and early 20th-century orchestral music had to be addressed.

Stravinsky was one of the first to compose for smaller groups, and at the same time looked at ways to incorporate the more austere style of the Baroque and Classical period into his music. The results were some of the best **neo-classical** works of the time, such as *Pulcinella,* a ballet written for the same Paris company as *The Rite of Spring*, with artwork by no less than Pablo Picasso. Stravinsky's younger compatriot Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) also settled in Paris after the Russian revolution of 1917, writing his *Classical* Symphony in the same year.

At the same time, in the same city, a group of young radical composers, who were heavily influenced by Satie, were also associating with Picasso and other notable Paris-based arty types. Known as 'Les six', they similarly looked back to earlier genres and mixed in modern concepts such as bitonality and **jazz** rhythms. The most notable members of this group were Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), who spent time in South and North America and came back to Paris with all kinds of Latin and jazz ideas in his head, and Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) who borrowed heavily from Renaissance and Baroque genres.

Further listening: neo-classicism and fusion

Some examples to play:

- Prokofiev: Symphony No. 1 *Classical* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXO-hB6jNTI**). Prokofiev did not like the term 'neo-classical', calling it 'Bach on the wrong notes', but gave this 1917 work its name himself, accepting that he intended it to be a modern reinterpretation of Haydn and Mozart's style.
- Stravinsky: *Pulcinella* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVEcJnlHUMM**). Written in 1920, it is re-imagined music from the Baroque and early Classical periods. It's very different to *The Rite of Spring*!
- Milhaud: *Le boeuf sur le toit* ('The ox on the roof') (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iqZ-lyUsNM**) also written in 1920 shortly after Milhaud returned from Brazil.

You might be wondering what the American connection mentioned in the title to this section might be. As political turmoil increased in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Rachmaninov all moved to the USA, Stravinsky remaining there until his death. A number of American composers of the 20th century were strongly influenced by the work of these three composers. Milhaud had also spent time in the US, composing his jazz-influenced work *La création du monde* after experiencing the jazz clubs of Harlem.

A particularly strong influence on the music of the 20th century was French teacher and conductor Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979). Among her students were such diverse composers as Aaron Copland, Philip Glass, Astor Piazzolla, Burt Bacharach and Quincy Jones, so it's no exaggeration to say that she influenced music from American ballet to Argentinian tango, from 1960s pop music to Michael Jackson.

Aaron Copland (1900-90) is often seen as representative of a new, unmistakably American style of art music that came out of that country in the 20th century. His ballets *Rodeo* and *Billy the Kid* are justifiably famous, as is his iconic *Fanfare for the Common Man*, but as a final suggestion for listening, I've picked his beautiful work *Quiet City* (1941), given a poignant, socially distanced performance here at the BBC 2020 Proms (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-LhiLdEGTQ**). It's hard to think of a better piece to represent what the world has experienced over the past two years.

As a final exercise, and as they listen to this piece, you could ask your students to make a list of key 20th-century musical features, as we have done for other periods of music in the developing wider music series. I've deliberately resisted doing that here, as there are so many and they are so diverse, but it would be interesting to see what your students came up with. My guess is that the contents of such a list will depend heavily on which examples of music encountered in this resource have resonated with them the most.

Next time, we'll continue our journey by exploring the even more diverse music of the second half of the 20th century.