

6.1 Overview of Contemporary Music History

In one sense, contemporary music history can be summarized as modernism (1900s – 1950s) followed by postmodernism (1960s – Present). Dates are highly approximate. This is one understanding of the development of contemporary music, and other interpretations are certainly possible.

Approximate dates	Approximate contemporaneous streams	The classical music “story”	Other happenings
1600ish to the present	Traditional tonality	Tonality is a vibrant and developing tradition at least until the middle of the twentieth century. Contrary to much scholarship, I do not believe that composers such as Shostakovich and Vaughan Williams represent “anachronisms.” Rather, the tonal works of Mahler and Sibelius flow forward into a continued vibrant tradition of tonal composition. Shortly after the inheritors of the tonal tradition reached the end of their productivity around the middle of the century, new (independent?) streams of tonality developed as a reaction to the experimental tendencies of “serious” music.	
1890ish – 1920ish <u>EXPERIMENT</u> <i>FREEDOM</i> <i>“ROMANTIC”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Futurism • Impressionism • Primitivism • Expressionism 	<p>During this highly experimental period, many composers sought the “future” of music:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Debussy</i> through the modal scales and non-Western influences of Impressionism • <i>Stravinsky</i> through the rhythmic primitivism of his Diaghalev ballets, and • <i>Schoenberg</i> (later <i>Webern</i> and <i>Berg</i>) through atonal expressionism. • In America, <i>Henry Cowell</i> and <i>Charles Ives</i> experiment with new harmonic and rhythmic resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World War I, the first modern war, has a profound cultural impact • Ragtime develops into early New Orleans jazz (Also called “classic” or “Dixieland”)
1920ish – 1945ish <u>CONSOLIDATE</u> <i>STRUCTURE</i> <i>“CLASSICAL”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neoclassicism • Serialism • Nationalism 	<p>This period saw a consolidation of certain experimental tendencies from the first part of the century:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Stravinsky</i> and <i>Ravel</i> experimented with Neoclassicism, attempting to find a way forward by incorporating the order and balance of earlier eras. • The serialist experiments of <i>Schoenberg</i> became consolidated into a “school” in the works of <i>Webern</i> and <i>Berg</i>. (<i>2nd Viennese School</i>) • Many nationalist movements came to the forefront in the years leading up to and surrounding WWII: <i>Ives</i> and <i>Copland</i> in America; <i>Vaughan Williams</i>, <i>Holst</i>, and <i>Walton</i> in England; <i>Strauss</i> in Germany; <i>Prokofiev</i> and <i>Shostakovich</i> in Russia; <i>Bartók</i> in Hungary, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World War II • New Orleans jazz becomes Swing, which leads to the Big Band era • Records and later radio give the entire United States a “shared” cultural experience

<p>1945ish – 1960ish</p> <p><u>ULTIMATE EXPERIMENT</u></p> <p>STRUCTURE “CLASSICAL”</p> <p>VS.</p> <p>FREEDOM “ROMANTIC”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total serialism • Indeterminism • Texture music 	<p>While the tradition of tonality continues to grow and develop, the experimental or “modern” tradition reaches chaos from two opposing directions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Composers such as <i>Messiaen</i> (one piece only), <i>Milton Babbitt</i>, and <i>Pierre Boulez</i> attempt total control by serializing all musical parameters, not just pitch (<i>total serialism</i>) 2. Other composers, in particular <i>John Cage</i>, release control to chance or performer choice to varying degrees (<i>indeterminism</i> or <i>chance music</i>) <p>The end result of both approaches is a music whose aural perception belies the complexity and subtlety of the underlying constructive techniques. In the end, both musics give the illusion of chaos.</p> <p>Simultaneously, electronic music becomes a viable art form, and some composers take advantage of timbre and texture as a foreground element (1960ish <i>Threnody</i> by <i>Ligeti</i>).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cold War, etc. • Jazz relegated to “art music” heard by few people, as Rock n’ Roll becomes the most popular music among white listeners; blues and R&B develop in popularity within the African-American community
<p>1960ish – 1980ish</p> <p><u>TONAL BACKLASH</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimalism • Neoromanticism • Polystylism 	<p>While the experimental tendencies of serialism and indeterminism continue, and the last of the “direct” links to the tonal tradition end their careers (or lives), composers begin new paths to tonality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimalism (<i>Terry Riley</i>, <i>Steve Reich</i>, <i>Philip Glass</i>, later <i>John Adams</i>) uses ostinato and limited harmonic resources to create highly stable (some would say repetitive) tonal structures • Neoromanticism (ex: <i>George Rochberg</i>) renews interest in lyrical tonality in the vein of the nineteenth-century tradition • Polystylistic composers such as <i>Schnittke</i> intentionally juxtapose styles within single pieces or even movements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peace movements and Vietnam • Man on the moon (1969) introduces a new era of technological progress • Interest in non-Western musics increases in America and Europe • Popular music increasingly fractured
<p>1980ish – 2000ish</p> <p><u>CONSOLIDATE</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postminimalism • New Complexity / Avant-garde • Continued neoromanticism • Electronic music • Timbral music 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>John Adams</i> combines minimalism with development techniques from the tonal tradition to create postminimalism • Some composers seek intellectual rigor in the form of extremely complex rhythmic and pitch patterns • Electronic music comes into its own as the computer develops • Composers like <i>Corigliano</i> develop intensely personal neoromantic styles • “Art music” takes freely from a variety of influences and cultures; non-Western composers such as Takemitsu and Tan Dun increase in influence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cold War ends; Berlin Wall torn down 1989 • Rapid advances in technology and healthcare • Unprecedented prosperity and need • Proliferation of musical styles
<p>2000ish – Present</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decategorization 	<p>“Anything goes”; Personalized media experiences & intensive cross-fertilization render stylistic classifications moot. Could this signal the end of historical progression in art music? If so, is “art” music dying? Or having a rebirth?</p>	

