THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

The Underground Renaissance:
Acknowledging Early 20th Century Black Musicians as Forefathers of Modern Musical Culture

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SPRING 2022

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for Baccalaureate degrees
In Music and Psychology
with honors in Music

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ABSTRACT

The culture of modern classical performance has changed considerably since the early romantic period. The expectations of the audience began to shift; Beethoven demanded complete silence at the beginning of his Ninth Symphony, and Mendelsohn specifically asked that his Scottish Symphony be played without applause between movements. In the twentieth century, the audience became even more removed from the performance, with composer-scholars like Milton Babbitt arguing that the study of music should be purely academic, not to be judged and shaped by the ears of the common folk. At the same time, a new musical culture was emerging in the United States. Black music, specifically the blues, was casual and improvisatory. It served as a complete cultural contrast to the etiquette and stylistic correctness that held sway in Europe. Some aspects of blues have been incorporated into modern compositional practices, such as a swung rhythm, creative modes, and extended harmonies (seventh and ninth chords, etc.). However, the relaxed atmosphere and form of Black music in the early 20th century has been far more culturally inspirational to modern popular music. The true renaissance of 20th and 21st century music, the huge impact of Black peoples' musical innovations, has been hidden in low-brow compositions for decades. In my thesis recital I have made an effort to acknowledge and legitimize Black music so that it is respected in the academic community. I have chosen repertoire that begs to ask where the line should be drawn between modern classical music and jazz.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank the music department at Penn State University for encouraging me in my musical endeavors, especially Chuck Youmans, Timothy Shafer, and Margaret Higgins. Thank you to Zeke Winitsky for endless thoughtful conversation on these topics, for inspiration, friendship, and the world's best page-turning. To Kyle Zingales, your generosity and support have been integral. To Mom and Dad, who have always seen me as a creative and worthy musician. To Saint Paul's United Methodist Church, Abba Java, and all their associated persons, especially Sarah Coker-Voigt and Jeff Helffrick.

Part 1: Essays

1: Parallels Between Historical Classical Performances and Modern Jazz

In Mozart's time, going to the opera meant a night of high excitement; contemporaneous accounts indicate that the environment was rowdy to say the least. Attendees "pushed, shoved, [and] argued," their way through the night, an environment usually associated with modern rock concerts (Burden 2012, 29). Folks were beaten and bruised, and, in some instances, left wounded from the row of spikes that was put in place to keep them at bay (Burden 2012, 29).

A half-century earlier, Baroque pieces were played on quiet clavichords with a more amiable setting. It was common for the musician to improvise; composers made room for entire cadenzas and expected intense embellishments on their works, including appoggiaturas, trills, rolled chords, passing tones, and more (Burroughs 2014). Bach and his contemporaries frequently used figured bass, which provides only the lowest note in the chord, then indicates the quality of the chord with the use of written intervals in Arabic numbers above or below it, as seen in Figure 1 (Leibson). By omitting the upper notes of the chord on the score, the performer could make their own decisions about the octave, the rhythm, and the texture of the bassline. In this way, composers ceded some control of their own music; the performers had the authority and creative opportunity to make it their own (Schelhase 2017).

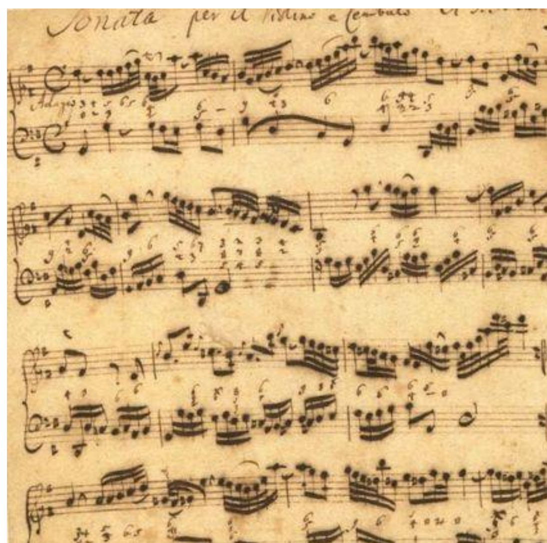

Figure 1: J.S. Bach: Sonata in G Major for Violin and Basso Continuo BWV 1021

Today's "historically informed" scholars argue over the tiny uncertainties in Baroque compositions: 'Is this *really* a triplet against even eighth notes, or is this just how swung eighth notes were transcribed? How fast is *andante*, really? How many appoggiaturas would Bach have added to his Sarabande? How quickly should I roll these chords? Is it acceptable to play these pieces on a modern piano instead of a harpsichord?'

This detail-oriented focus on the conventions of Baroque music is meant to accurately portray the composer's original intentions, but it is tempting to wonder if the spirit of the improvisations had an equal effect on the performance. By focusing on replication, modern Baroque performers have limited themselves creatively; perhaps another way to recreate the past is to emphasize the creative liberties that these composers encouraged (Rubinoff 2009).

While academic musicians argue about the past, new styles of music, especially music made by Black Americans, have opened a portal into the musical culture of yesteryear. Jazz and

the blues encourage improvisation in the same way that Baroque characters did—including embellishments on the melody and bass line.

Every improviser has their own style, of course, but there are educational materials that outline the very basics of jazz improvisations, and the techniques are similar to those of the Baroque period (Rubinoff 2009). Modern performers frequently use arpeggiation, neighboring notes, trills, mordents, grace notes, and others to add decoration to well-known melodies ("Embellishing the Melody" 2018).

Jazz scores, like figured bass, use shorthand. However, instead of including numerical intervals above the bass note, the score specifies the chord, as seen in Figure 2. The bass instrument also has freedom in terms of register, texture of the chord, and the rhythm, much like figured bass.

Figure 2: Misty sheet music

By the same token, the culture of most live concerts today parallels the audience expectation of the Baroque and classical periods. After a performance of the "Paris" Symphony in 1778, Mozart wrote a letter to his father: "Right in the middle of the First Allegro came a Passage I knew would please, and the entire audience was sent into raptures — there was a big *applaudißement*; [...] I began the movement with just 2 violins playing softly for 8 bars — then suddenly comes a forte — but the audience had, because of the quiet beginning, shushed each other, as I expected they would, and then came the forte — well, hearing it and clapping was one and the same. I was so delighted" [Ross 2010a]. Mozart's audience displayed their excitement for the piece by applauding and cheering, which is not unlike the culture of most jazz clubs in the mid 20th century. Big Jay McNeely performed in Los Angeles in 1963 to a passionate crowd, including two young men who can be seen cheering the artist on. This kind of reaction was not uncommon for the jazz club, where not only applause, but also social interaction, was allowed (Burland 2016, 22). These traditions remain today; the audience has substantial sway in the success of the jazz performance, according to a study by the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (Brand 2013).

Figure 3: Big Jay McNeely performing in 1963

There are many parallels, then, between classical and jazz music. The improvisations of the Baroque time mirror the techniques used in jazz soloing, both in the tendencies for melodic ornamentation and the development of a basso continuo. The acceptable audience etiquette for Mozart's symphony in 1778 would also be appropriate in a jazz club in 1963. Aesthetically, these two time periods differ greatly, but there are many similarities between their performers and their audiences.

2: Black Influences on Modern Music

The controversy surrounding Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer Prize typifies academia's reaction to Black-influenced music. Some critics celebrate the album's success; Zachary Woolfe, the classical music editor for *The New York Times*, asserts that "it is belated and necessary that the award widen to encompass a fuller picture of what music is" (Pareles 2018). Others disagree, claiming that the Pulitzer Prize should be reserved for highbrow classical composers; they reject Lamar's lack of formal education and are offended by the vulgarity of the album (Roberts 2018).

There is obviously a tectonically deep rift between classical and rap, but it did not stop the Pulitzer Prize judges from recognizing Lamar's work. In that respect, a gap that separated Elvis from Shostakovich, and Duke Ellington from Benjamin Britten, has perhaps begun to be bridged. And that gap is centered on Blackness.

Nearly every genre of popular music of the current day can be traced back to Black influences. The 12-bar blues formed the basis of rock music, and Elvis Presley, described as the "King of Rock n' Roll," found inspiration from countless Black artists who set the tone for his musical innovations (Hanson 2012). Ike Turner, a Black pianist involved in the early Rock scene, describes his encounters with Elvis and claims that he inspired Elvis' popular "rubber legs" dance move. A few of Elvis' earliest songs were written by a Black artist, Otis Blackwell, who also inspired Elvis' vocal technique and musical decisions (Varga 2017).

Country, another style significantly impacted by early Black music, would not exist without the banjo—an instrument derived from lutes in West Africa. Enslaved people brought this musical style to the United States, where it was quickly appropriated in minstrel shows (Osei 2020).

The history of rap is more complicated, but Blackness has always been a central inspiration. In the 1970s, MCs in New York City block parties innovated new ways to make music (Dye 2007). MCs frequently interacted with the audience between tracks, which evolved into speaking in rhymes over the music. DJs picked apart their favorite disco, funk, and soul songs and repeated the most percussive sections as backing tracks (Dye 2007). Thus the origins of rap stemmed from disco, funk and soul, which each evolved from a combination of urban subcultures, most notably R&B in the 1960s ("Where Did Disco Come From?"). The term R&B replaced the popular term "race music," which was an umbrella term to describe all African American tunes in the 1940s ("From 'Race Music' to 'Rhythm & Blues'" 2010).

Nearly all of the most popular forms of music on the radio today can be traced back to Black individuals of the early 20th century or earlier (Osei 2020). While Black singers were improvising over 12-bar blues in the early twentieth century, Schoenberg was composing in a speechlike vocal style he called *Sprechstimme*, for example, in *Pierrot lunaire* (1912). The two styles, as aesthetically contrasting as black and white, nonetheless mirror each other on paper. Both look for a middleground between singing and speaking, and both support those melodies with novel harmonic choices. But whereas Schoenberg's style became a central direction of High Modernism, the Blues gave rise to important trends in American popular music.

One important contrast between the two is the Blues' adherence to tonality. Harmonically, the style moves beyond the triad and accepts the seventh and ninth as consonances, but it never challenged the necessity of a tonal framework.

This loyalty to tonality, rather than a rejection of it, was taken over in most popular music. In fact, much popular music relies on the scale with the least amount of dissonance possible, the pentatonic scale. This scale is one of the oldest ever discovered; researchers in

Germany found a rudimentary flute that was used nearly 40,000 years ago, and the tones it produced outlined the major pentatonic scale (Minnix 2016). Confucius, a Chinese philosopher born in 551 BC, described the scale's therapeutic properties in the *Book of Rites*. The scale is also found in ancient Aztec and Inca culture, Hungarian, Middle Eastern, Celtic, and others ("The Origin of the Pentatonic Scale" 2020). The pentatonic scale has undoubtably served as an important aspect of many ancient cultures, so it is thus unsurprising that the many common types of music today— rock-and-roll, pop, bluegrass, funk, and many others—take the pentatonic scale as a melodic and harmonic guide (Khe 1977).

3: The Plight of Recent Classical Compositions

Contemporary classical music, commonly referred to as "art music," is of course far-removed from the tastes of the general population. This is not by accident; Milton Babbitt, in his controversial essay "Who Cares if you Listen?" (a title added by the editor) held that the skill and importance of contemporary classical could only be appreciated by the educated (Fletcher 2008). But laypeople simply ignored this and other highfalutin High Modernist claims, from Schoenberg's serialism to John Cage's philosophical art pieces, rejecting their technical "innovations" and retaining faith in music's most approachable and consistent values: repetition, tonality, and performance.

The public's opinion of these new musical concepts is generally negative; in fact, atonality is sometimes cacophonous enough to force its audiences to defy all rules of concert etiquette. In 2019, during a performance of Berg's *Three Pieces for Orchestra*, dozens of people stood up and left the space in the middle of the performance (Ross 2010b). A study from the University of Milano-Bicocca found that subjects correlated atonal music with self-described "agitation" and their physiological responses to atonal pieces indicated anxiety and psychological tension (Proverbio 2015). But what makes this music so unlikable?

The psychological motivation of the general population's musical preferences is not difficult to discern. The mere exposure effect, which states that one's preferences are dictated by the mere fact of one's experiences, explains a great deal on its own (Hopper 2019). Babies in the West are exposed to tonality from birth; lullabies and nursery rhymes are inescapable (Ross 2010b). The rejection of a tonal hierarchy in music, therefore, is unlike anything the average person has heard before, and unlikely to be accepted without substantial reconditioning.

Repetition in music within the pieces themselves is also a significant predictor of the pieces' success and likability. Research from the University of Southern California found that repetitive songs are more likely to reach the Top 40 (Nunes 2017). Another study manipulated twentieth century pieces and asked subjects their opinion. The subjects agreed that the 20th century pieces that were subtly altered to included repeated sections were more enjoyable and "more likely to be written by a human" compared to the original compositions (Shumaker 2017). Schoenberg himself asserted that "intelligibility in music seems to be impossible without repetition" (Ross 2010b).

It is perhaps not a surprise, then, that total serialist works are "almost universally reviled upon a first listen" (Hansen 2021). Total serialism takes Schoenberg's musical innovations a step further, and organizes not only the twelve tones of the chromatic scale on a matrix, but also dynamics, register, rhythm, articulation, and tone. This style is meant to emphasize randomness and reject repetition in its entirety, this way, music would be unencumbered by human emotion and preference (Hansen 2021). It is unfortunate for total serialists, then, that people show a clear preference for "human-sounding" works. In other words, randomness and atonality in music is antithetical to key theories of human psychology.

Innovations in music, however, are constant, and popular music has found its own ways to push the boundaries, albeit in ways that the average person's ear can find appealing. There are moments of noisy chaos, as for example in The Rolling Stones' "She's A Rainbow," that are acceptable to the audience but highly successful and influential.

The difference might be that while heavy metal and rock-and-roll are still focused on the aesthetic quality of the music itself—i.e., the musical dimension most of interest to listeners of popular music—Cage and Babbitt were more philosophical, more content to occupy ivory

towers. Contemporary music has become a medium for conversation, especially about musical technique. Works are written to provoke discussion about technical construction, or even about the difference between music and noise. In other words, composition has become more cerebral than beautiful, and the public agrees.

Part 2: Program for March 28, 2022 Lecture-Recital

Jimmy Dorsey, arranged by Frankie Carle: *Blue Champagne*

Aaron Copland: *Four Piano Blues*

Claude Debussy: *Le Petit Negre*

Nikolai Kapustin: *24 Jazz Preludes, III*

John Cage: *In a Landscape*

John Cage: *Haikus*

Nikolai Kapustin: *8 Concert Etudes, Prelude*

Part 3: Lecture Script

I've spent my whole life preparing for recitals. They weren't quite as important as this one, but I treated them like they were. I spent over a year getting ready to audition for colleges, so that I could drive three hours and sit in a room with three faculty members for fifteen or twenty minutes. The pieces I practiced were always just barely too difficult for me; enough to hopefully encourage me to expand my technique, but in reality, it separated me from my work. The window of time that I could shamelessly perform these pieces was tiny; they were never good enough. My friends would ask me to play something for them and I couldn't- "it's not memorized yet" "I shouldn't play it at a fast tempo right now, I have to practice it slowly." I would sit at the piano and there was literally nothing that I could show for thousands of hours of practice. Once a piece was good enough to be performed, I was quickly hurried onto the next project. I was in college when I realized how much joy there was in playing easier pieces. Pieces that I could sit down and play without warming up, without apologizing to my teacher about the state of the memorization.

I started gigging in the summer after my freshman year. I sat in an outdoor space near a few tables at a beautiful vineyard where I usually poured wine. My boss had an opening for a musician and suggested I try my hand. I had to fill three hours. I was massively unprepared; I didn't even own a microphone. Here I am performing that day- with a 2x4 and a tripod as a microphone stand. I remember how worried my mom was, she expected me to re-learn all of my classical works and play them all the way through on my dingy electric keyboard. I believe I

told her not to worry, I'll just sing Adele, people love Adele. And I did, and they do! And it took me ten minutes to learn a song; I was comfortable expanding on the chord charts wherever I saw fit, and I'm a good enough singer to get by. I sang songs that I wrote, too, songs loosely inspired by Chet Baker and the dramatic state of my love life.

I remember I tried to play one of my favorite Beethoven movements, mostly to appease my mom, but it was beautiful and easy enough. I literally stopped in the middle of it. I played one wrong note and that was it, I got off track. The tables around me didn't know if they should clap or not. I told them not to, and then I moved on.

That performance led me to wonder why there is such a difference in the way we experience classical music and popular music. Was it always like this? Has classical music always been so rigid in its performance and instruction? Was it ever calmly performed among friends and strangers with little preparation and without heart-stopping pressure on the performer? The answer is yes.

Classical and Baroque performances were significantly different from what you're experiencing now. The performer was often as important as the composer, and the audience was free to move about and chat amongst themselves. I've studied plenty of Bach, and I've even taken a course on how to play music of his era in the most historically accurate fashion. I learned over my four years at this university that the seemingly archaic, stagnant pieces I studied had originally been played with creativity and exuberance. Performers were expected to play different notes than what was written. The best keyboardists of the time added appoggiaturas and trills and rolled chords and plenty of decoration. They composed entire cadenzas on the spot, and would rely on encouragement from the audience to continue their playing.

Large-scale performances like operas were frequently met with rowdy audiences when things didn't go according to plan. On this day in 1763, the Royal Opera House abolished half-off tickets sold during intermission, resulting in patrons storming the stage. I can't imagine a reaction like this to any classical concert I've ever been to.

This idea of a passionate audience and creative performances has faded over the course of the intervening centuries, but it was reborn in what I call an **underground renaissance**: a rebirth of popular, casual, and/or improvisatory music that stems from African American musicians in the early 20th century. Blues started to take shape in the early 1900s; the style was expressive and improvisatory; it could be performed by ensembles in rowdy bars or by one man and his guitar. Often there were relatively few expectations of the audience, compared to the rigid etiquette in place in the classical music realm around this time. Look at this picture of these guys losing it to Big Jay McNeely in a jazz club in 1953 and compare it to this illustration of the Royal Theater in 1784. The audience is active and rowdy, they're not afraid to draw attention to themselves or make noise. This culture revitalized the very human urge to create and participate in music-making, as opposed to studying it.

I've tried to focus on the art of improvisation for this recital. This, to me, is a way to pay respect to the Baroque style and to the original pioneers of jazz, and to draw attention to the common ground they share.

This piece is called *Blue Champagne*. It was very popular in its time and has been recorded again and again by big bands and solo pianists and sultry jazz singers. I enjoy this piece because of its authenticity—it checks all the boxes of early jazz. The rhythms are swung, the harmonies are rich, it follows verse-chorus form, it's tonal, and it's singable.

There are two large sections in this piece, both of which are to be repeated. On the repeats, I'm following in Bach's footsteps and improvising my own melody. Enjoy.

*play *Blue Champagne**

Aaron Copland, the composer of this next piece, was born in 1900, which is around the time a development that I call "The Split" happened between modern classical and popular music. Classical music was already starting to drift away from the general public, with the bourgeoisie instead seeing performance as an opportunity to display their wealth and highbrow tastes. Meanwhile popular music, much of it by Black performers for use in more relaxed venues, grew at an astounding rate.

The latter setting would have been familiar to Mozart, whose performance experiences were markedly different from the concert atmosphere of modern classical music. After a performance of the "Paris" Symphony in 1778 he wrote to his father, "Right in the middle of the First Allegro came a Passage I knew would please, and the entire audience was sent into raptures — there was a big applaudißement; [...] I began the movement with just 2 violins playing softly for 8 bars — then suddenly comes a forte — but the audience had, because of the quiet beginning, shushed each other, as I expected they would, and then came the forte — well, hearing it and clapping was one and the same. I was so delighted, I went right after the Sinfonie to the Palais Royale — bought myself an ice cream, prayed a rosary as I had pledged — and went home" (Ross 2010a).

In 1835, just 57 years later, Robert Schumann had evolved a different opinion regarding his audience. "[F]or years I have dreamed of organizing concerts for the deaf and dumb, that you

might learn from them how to behave yourselves at concerts, especially when they are very beautiful. You should be turned to stone pagodas" (Ross 2010a).

Did we catch the shift in attitudes? It's quite subtle, right? (*sarcasm*). We go from Mozart, who is delighted at his audience's applause, to Schumann, who wishes his audience would turn to stone. This brings us to the beginning of the twentieth century, when the popular music industry took off.

The way I see it, there are two main catalysts for the split. One is Tin Pan Alley, and the other is discrimination from more "cultured" classical music listeners. Tin Pan Alley, a section of New York City, was dedicated to publishing and selling sheet music. They sold sheet music all over the city, and copyright laws were pretty much nonexistent at the time so they were pretty good at it. An article from the Songwriters Hall of Fame describes that "[n]ever in the history of American popular music were so many genres centered in one area… Between 1900 and 1910, more than 1800 "rags" had been published on Tin Pan Alley, beginning with "Maple Leaf Rag" by Scott Joplin. In 1912, [Tin Pan Alley composer] W.C. Handy introduced popular music to the underground sound of the Blues" ("Tin Pan Alley" Acoustic Music). By the 1920s, a substantial industry was dedicated to the playing and recording of Jazz. So we can see that early Black music, mostly ragtime at this point, was starting to take off.

Ideally, the classical music world would see the success of this and at least appreciate it, but unfortunately, largely due to racism, there was pushback. A paper by Trinity University says that "[by 1910, T]he older and more classically- and academically-inclined white listeners were **decidedly against ragtime**. At least in part, this was caused by ragtime's […] role as popular music, but, as with jazz, there was a racial aspect as well. Again, this music originated in the

low-class black saloons, performed almost exclusively by African American musicians. As such, the more cultured white listeners rejected it as ‘lower art,’ not only because it was performed by black musicians, but also because it was formed outside of European art music” (Stephens 2017). Hence, we see a culture of gatekeeping within classical music that doesn’t concern itself with anything mainstream, especially if the mainstream is Black music.

Instead, these white listeners intensified the sacralization of their own musical culture. This culture is generally antithetical to the atmosphere of the popular jazz club; it becomes less and less approachable for the lower class for many complex reasons, but I’ll focus on two reasons tonight: 1- its harsh expectations for etiquette and 2- its increasing preoccupation with tonal experimentation. According to Alex Ross, around 1900, “[T]he concert hall began to take on a peculiar social burden. In America, especially, members of the upper and middle classes embraced the symphony orchestra as a faux-European bastion in a world of vulgar commerce.” Can we guess what the vulgar commerce was? In 1909, we start seeing the first official “No Applause” rules appear in Germany, separating the audience from the experience of music. More specifically, on the technical side of things, Schoenberg broke from tonality altogether in Pierrot lunaire (1912), experimenting with speech-song and intense chromaticism. Let’s give it a listen.

In the world of Jazz, the year 1900 saw popularity in ragtime, vaudeville songs, minstrel acts, etc., which all draw influence from Black culture. Pushback occurred, for example in 1901, when the American Federation of Musicians denounced jazz, and calls it “unmusical rot” and “such musical trash” (Fredericks 2021). Nonetheless, Black music continued to grow in popularity with the help of jazz clubs and the Tin Pan Alley, and by 1920, new styles had emerged. We have Dixieland Jass, the Blues, the Charleston, not to mention the culture of the

speakeasy. And then radio came along, which further amplified this music. By the summer of 1929, right before the great depression, the stocks for the Radio Corporation of America went up 588%, and it took Black music along with it ("1890s – 1930s: Radio").

Now, this popularity is impossible to ignore. And a few individuals who were indoctrinated into classical music were curious and anxious to explore these new musical innovations that the public was so entranced with. One such musician was Aaron Copland. His Four Blues isn't fully jazz; it's a privileged white man's best attempt at it. But in spite of his classically training, he did use some specific compositional techniques that are unique to jazz: swung rhythms, emphasis on repetition, dense, unexpected harmonies, syncopation rhythms, and more. This leads me to wonder, is Aaron Copland taking inspiration from jazz to make jazz more acceptable to his elitist audience, which I think would be a pretty noble cause, or is he appropriating it, picking and choosing which specific jazz technicalities he can add to his works so that he can be praised for his creativity (the same technicalities that Black musicians are shunned for)?

I urge you all to form your own opinions as I play this next piece: Aaron Copland's *Four Blues.*

(*plays Copland *Four Blues**)

Now I know what you're all thinking... but what about impressionism? Excellent question. Not everything in early 20th century Europe was centered around atonality, in fact, there was quite a bit of rebellion. Debussy's "velvet revolution" was about adhering to whatever was pleasurable to the ear (Ross 2018). Debussy believed in harmonic freedom; he believed in the rejection of music theory, but not tonality. He found new ways to build sound, he used

parallel chords, also known as planing, for a new musical texture. He also adopts seventh and ninth chords into his musical vocabulary as extensions of the tonic. A lot of his technical and aesthetic ideas mirror jazz in significant ways, and he is cited as an inspiration to many jazz artists.

For example, listen to Lang Lang play *Reverie.*

Jazz artists of the 20th century picked up on Debussy's haunting originality. Producers added words to *Reverie*, and it was recorded by none other than Ella Fitzgerald.

Not only are jazz and impressionism alike in their compositional technique, they are also extremely similar in their aesthetic philosophy. See if you can tell me if each of these quotes is written by Claude Debussy, or a jazz musician. "How are you gonna be a revolutionary if you're such a traditionalist? You hold onto the past, but [this]is about the future." Next: "Music is the space between the notes." "It bugs me when people try to analyze [this] as an intellectual theorem. It's not. It's a feeling." "The music is easy to love but hard to explain." "This has the air of not having been written down." Lets check our answers. First, Jazz, then impressionism, jazz, impressionism, and impressionism. Hard to tell apart, right?

A question arises: Who is influencing whom? *Le Petit Negre* shows obvious similarities to a ragtime hit, "Hello Ma Baby." Was he appropriating from a popular style? Perhaps, but if so, it did not help his popularity with the broader public. In any case, his music has always been fascinating and beautiful to me, and I hope to you as well. Here is *Le Petit Negre*.

(*Plays *Le Petit Negre**)

(Intermission)

(*plays *Kapustin 24 Jazz preludes: III**)

This jazzy, foggy, ethereal piece by Nikolai Kapustin wonderfully opens the conversation about recent classical works. My goal of this second half is to convince you that modern classical works can be easily understood with a bit of context and open-mindedness. But first, we must acknowledge their shortcomings. Kapustin's contemporaries, Milton Babbitt, John Cage, Berg, Webern, Schoenberg, separated themselves from the audience pretty purposefully. In an essay later titled "Who Cares if you Listen," Milton Babbitt asserted that high quality modern classical music should be a thing of universities and scholars. He didn't think that laypeople would be able to understand the intricacies and philosophies of contemporary works. I don't know, sounds pretty pretentious to me. And as this style is distancing itself from everything mainstream, it is also rejecting musical traditions – or one might even call them "laws" – that have been in practice for centuries, for example tonality. The use of scales and harmonic patterns is absolutely ancient, but Schoenberg had done away with it in 1920s with the invention of serialism. A brief explanation of serialism: Each note in a chromatic scale is numbered zero through eleven before it starts over at 0 in the next octave. These twelve numbers can be arranged in any order and the integrity of the pattern cannot be changed. The pattern in its entirety can be flipped upside down, played backwards, played fast, played slowly, what-have you, but the order of the notes stays the same (Magazine, BBC Music 2016). This chromaticism uses the twelve tones without any harmonic support or structure; pieces of music are often written by random chance, with the next tone chosen by the roll of a die. And if there's anything I've learned in my psychology classes, it's that the human brain does not like unpredictability. The human mind does, however, love repetition. One of my favorite psychological theories is the Mere Exposure Effect, which states that the more you're exposed to something, the more you grow to like it. This applies to your neighbors, the food you eat, and yes, the music you listen to. It can be applied to large scale

ideas such as tonality as a whole, or as small scale as how many times a chorus repeats in a song. Yes, there was a study done that showed that people preferred to listen to songs that were more repetitive than not.

Here are a couple of further thoughts on the matter: From Elizabeth Margulis' book, *On Repeat, How Music Plays the Mind-* "Repetitiveness actually gives rise to the kind of listening that we think of as musical. It carves out a familiar, rewarding path in our minds, allowing us at once to anticipate and participate in each phrase as we listen. That experience of being *played* by the music is what creates a sense of shared subjectivity with the sound." And none other than the inventor of serialism, Arnold Schoenberg, claimed that "Intelligibility in music seems to be impossible without repetition."

John Cage was a person also concerned with breaking the rules of musical tradition, someone who thought a lot about the role of repetition. He is perhaps best known for his piece *4'33,* four minutes and thirty-three seconds of complete silence. The performer is to sit in front of the piano and never play a note. He says that "there is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot" ("John Cage" *Encyclopædia Britannica)* In Cage's book *Silence*, he describes his experience in a completely soundproof room. And he still heard two noises, the sound of his own heartbeat, and the buzzing of his nervous system (Cage 1961, 5). He believes in noise; he thinks that listening to the sounds all around us can connect us to nature. So, he writes these extremely unpredictable and unexpected pieces to "liberate noise from its subordination to pitched sound" ("John Cage" *Encyclopædia Britannica).*

As expected, John Cage's "music" (*finger quotes*) is purposefully unexpected and unpredictable because it lacks any sort of perceivable pattern. There are no remnants of form, no verse chorus or ABAA to be found. There is hardly any harmonic structure; the chords that you'll hear in this next piece would be better described as "clusters." These pieces are in 4/4 time, but they're quite slow, so maybe you can perceive of some steady pulse, but this is unlike most of his other music. There aren't patterns in the dynamics; there is hardly anything to suggest a phrase. There are marks in these pieces that are impossible to achieve: a sforzando on a rest, and a legato marking over a two octave jump in one hand. All of this unpredictability adds to an atmosphere of disorientation and uneasiness. Again, our psychology loves repetition, it loves when things repeat, and when it is deprived of that, the brain can feel stranded.

All this is to say that if this next piece confuses you a little… Good.

*plays John Cage *Haiku**

With Cage's *Haiku*, I thought to myself, is there a way to make his noise music a little more likeable, or at least more understandable? For the most part, Cage refuses to give tonal context to his pieces. We usually start and end with chaos. So, I've decided that the way to make Cage approachable is to add visual context. Film. Luckily for us, John Cage's music is in Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island*, and the uneasiness that is purposefully woven into his scores complements the scene beautifully, in my opinion.

There are other styles that John Cage employs that are more easily understood. That is, they don't need to be exemplified with the help of visuals or any other context. One such style is minimalism, which came about as "a rejection of European modernist trends such as the complex and mathematically-strict Serialism" (Reich 2018). Cage was not himself a minimalist, but his

music did have a profound effect on that style, particularly through *In a Landscape*, my next piece. Here we find a kind of proto-minimalism, which reacts against serialism by leaning into simplicity; minimalism boils music down to its most approachable basics. Those basics are repetition, diatonic scales, especially the pentatonic scale, and a slow harmonic rhythm, if any. That is, there are rarely any chord changes; it mostly stays in the same place.

This piece sounds very different from the last John Cage piece I played. See if you can connect with the steady repetition; see it if the simplicity brings you peace or boredom.

*plays John Cage *In a Landscape**

Kapustin's jazz and John Cage's *In a Landscape* have a lot in common. This proto-minimalism is, in my opinion, significantly easier to listen to than some of Cage's other pieces, by emphasizing repetition, tonality, formal structure. When I think of minimalism, I think of peace and silence. Unlike atonal art music, jazz adopts these same ideas and adds another level of not only philosophical but technical creativity. Jazz is more energetic, the consistent syncopations invoke movement, invoke dance.

These two styles use the same musical equation, the same ingredients, and create the capacity for two of the most human experiences: peace, prayer, mindfulness; dance, movement, energy.

And I ask again, as I have before, is Kapustin a classical composer or a jazz one? And for the first time in this presentation, I have a new answer. A heavily researched, highly academic answer, which is this: Who cares?

Sure, Kapustin was a white man composing in the 20th century who was inspired by jazz and eventually incorporated it into his pieces (Walls 2021). Yes, we've heard that a few times now. But what distinguishes him from his contemporaries is that he fully embraces *all* aspects of jazz; he doesn't cherry-pick the most accessible techniques of jazz compositions to make his pieces seem creative. He adopts it all: the consistent syncopation, the fast tempo, the complicated but aesthetically pleasing harmonic progressions; all of it. He calls his preludes *24 Jazz Preludes*, not Preludes Loosely Inspired by Jazz. To accept jazz as a whole is also to accept Blackness. What Kapustin attempted, I believe, is to undo some of the damage done by racist critics in the early 20th century. By fully immersing himself in Black music and giving credit where credit is due, maybe he started to rejoin the two branches of The Split.

And I leave you with this. To the musicians, and especially the music educators in the audience, we must work to undo the racism of the early 20th century and rejoin this spit between Black inspired music and modern classical. We should lean into jazz and blues, really lean into it. This music is valid and interesting, there is a reason it was so popular with the American public in the 1920s. This elitism that we have been taught serves us no purpose; there are parts of modern classical and jazz that are really quite similar when you break it down. There should be no discrimination between highbrow and lowbrow styles; listen to what makes you feel good, and observe the prejudices that you carry that might be left over from bourgeoise Europeans a decade ago.

And to the rest of you in the audience, remember that if you don't know a lot of recent classical music, that's not your fault. Scholars have been trying to make this music difficult for the public to listen to for decades. And remember that most of the music that you listen to, I bet

has its roots in Black history. And for everyone, be unashamed of whatever your musical preference is, you don't have to defend it to anyone, but don't be afraid to branch out and listen to completely different styles without judgement.

And with that, I offer my final piece, Kapustin's *Prelude* to his 8 concert etudes. Thank you to everyone that came out.

Part 4: Recording of Lecture-Recital

https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=YCpEWQ7lqu8

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