

## *Atonality and European Influence*

The nadir of the American Depression was 1933, the year Roosevelt took office and had to close the banks, the year the only thing we had to fear was fear itself. In Germany, on January 30, Adolf Hitler was named chancellor. On March 1, the Nazis declared their intention to remove Jews from all university posts. The Jewish composition teacher of the Prussian Academy of the Arts, Arnold Schoenberg, fled Berlin in May, and arrived in New York on October 31. He taught at Boston's Malkin Conservatory for one miserable year (his health unequal to the New England weather), then moved to Hollywood. By 1935 he had obtained a position at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he would teach until 1944. He died in Los Angeles in 1951.

European artists scattered. Igor Stravinsky began touring America in 1937 and applied for American citizenship in 1939. Stravinsky also lived in Los Angeles (he and Schoenberg met only once, at a mutual friend's funeral), and moved to New York shortly before his death. Paul Hindemith, denounced by the Nazis as a "cultural Bolshevik," emigrated to America in 1940 and taught at Yale from 1940 to 1953. Béla Bartók moved to New York in 1940.

This means that, within a seven-year period, the world's four most famous composers all abandoned Europe to converge on the United States. From 1940 to 1945, all four lived here. Schoenberg's presence extended to 1951, Hindemith's to 1961, and Stravinsky's until 1971. (This does not even take into account many slightly less important émigrés, such as Kurt Weill and Ernst Krenek.) American classical music had always exhibited a strong bias toward European composers, but until the 1930s, those composers lived far away. Now, they were suddenly among us, and the complexion of American music altered tremendously. As Milton Babbitt put it in 1975,

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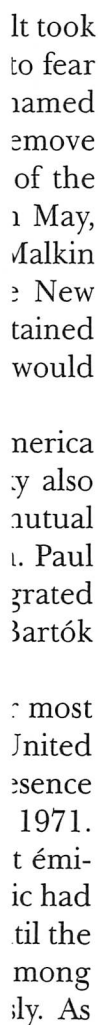
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characterization. Babbitt's music represents the opposite extreme in which notes are registrally scattered. Still other composers (Copland in his Piano Quartet, for example) use a row within a freely atonal texture and some (Carter and Perle) develop their own structuralist pitch systems analogous to but different from twelve-tone method.

In July of 1921, after crafting his first twelve-tone row, Schoenberg had written, "Today I have discovered something which will ensure the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years." By the late 1950s, Schoenberg's claim had come to seem prophetic, for from that point twelve-tone music dominated what was "acceptably modernistic" in American music for a full quarter-century. Sessions and Copland, both Stravinskyites, both turned to twelve-tone writing in the early fifties, as did Stravinsky himself, sounding the death knell for neoclassicism. The dichotomy between Stravinsky and Schoenberg had been that between musical image and musical language, between irreducible sonic inspirations and the search for a note-to-note intelligible syntax. Later in the century, in the 1980s, composers would swing back toward Stravinsky and toward image, partly through the influence of Morton Feldman. But for the composers discussed in this chapter, the quest was to inherit and perfect a musical language.

The postwar years also brought about a 180-degree shift in the way composers were expected to make a living. With millions of veterans returning to college, enrollments began to swell. Professors were greatly in demand, advanced degrees not always necessary. Before World War II, a full-time university position was considered an eccentric livelihood for a composer. By the mid-sixties, it became the expected career path. Ultimately, this trend reinforced the turn toward twelve-tone music. At first, universities put up a horrified resistance to twelve-tone technique, calling it mathematics rather than music. But, once inside the door, the twelve-tone composers found their work so well-suited for classroom explication that the university became their haven. Given the dearth of major performance opportunities and critical discussion of new music, American composers who teach often depend on their students for the dissemination of their work and reputation.

## The Neoclassicists

America's neoclassic movement, the wing that followed Stravinsky rather than Schoenberg, had a short-lived success, its achievements all but obliterated by the hegemony of twelve-tone music after 1955. Although many Americans had been propelled into musical careers by the centrifugal force of *Le Sacre*, around 1922 Stravinsky abandoned the asymmetric rhythmic ferocity of his early music and began reinterpreting the formal articulations of eighteenth-century music, in works such as *Pulcinella*,

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*Capriccio*, *Symphony in Three Movements*, and *Oedipus Rex*. Following this new phase, the neoclassicists tended to write nonprogrammatic music in the abstract, traditional forms of the Baroque and Classical eras: symphony, serenade, sonata, partita, divertimento, wind quintet, string quartet, concerto. As opposed to twelve-tone music's chromatic atonality, their music represented the diatonic tonality of the 1940s and 1950s, a tonality not rooted in folksy American tunes like Copland's and Harris's, but impersonal, rhythmically straightforward, and highly contrapuntal. The movement was associated not only with Stravinsky and Boulanger, but with New England and Harvard's composition professor, Walter Piston.

The composer who, more than any other, came to symbolize America's hard-core neoclassic movement with its devotion to Stravinsky was Harold Shapero (b. 1920 in Lynn, Massachusetts). Though he had studied with Slonimsky, Krenek, and Piston, and would soon work with Hindemith and Boulanger, Shapero fell under the spell of Stravinsky when the latter was Harvard's Norton Professor in 1939–1940, delivering the lectures later collected in *The Poetics of Music*. Copland, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1949, called Shapero's subsequent music "baffling," describing it in terms that could have applied to the neoclassicists in general:

Stylistically, Shapero seems to feel a compulsion to fashion his music after some great model. Thus his five-movement Serenade for string orchestra . . . is founded upon neoclassic Stravinskian principles, his *Three Amateur Piano Sonatas* on Haydnesque principles, and his recent long symphony is modeled after Beethoven. For the present he seems to be suffering from a hero-worship complex.<sup>3</sup>

Shapero's magnum opus, his *Symphony for Classical Orchestra* (1947), does end in a finale of Beethovenian bombast, and has been revived in recent years with considerable success. A pianist and conductor, Shapero taught at Brandeis from 1952 on. Another neoclassicist on the Brandeis faculty was Irving Fine (1914–1962), who studied with Piston and Boulanger. Not prolific, he wrote a Symphony, a Violin Sonata, a String Quartet, and some choruses for *Alice in Wonderland*.

Quincy Porter (1897–1966, born in New Haven to a family of Yale professors) studied with Horatio Parker and David Stanley Smith, in Paris with d'Indy, and back in America with Bloch. Porter's most important works include his ten string quartets, *Concerto Concertante* for two pianos and orchestra (1952–1953), *New England Episodes* for orchestra (1958), and Harpsichord Concerto (1959). The return of the harpsichord after a 150-year hiatus is a dead giveaway of neoclassic concerns, and Porter's charming concerto alludes to Baroque textures not only in its choice of solo instrument but its melodic ornamentations as well. A violist, Porter became dean of the New England Conservatory in 1938, then taught at Yale from 1946 to 1965. That he was as much neoroman-



tic as neoclassic is made clear by the Brahms quotations in his lovely "Elegiac" Oboe Quintet of 1966.

In fact, as a descriptive category, neoclassicism is forced to cover a wide range. If one generalizes it to extend to the filling of classical forms with new materials, then Walter Piston, Vivian Fine, and Vincent Persichetti must be included, even though their works are lyrically romantic and emotively expansive, devoid of Stravinsky's ironic emphasis on rhythmic surprise. Piston (1894–1976) studied with Boulanger and Dukas in Paris and became the leading compositional figure at Harvard from 1926 to 1960. His music is almost all instrumental, including eight symphonies and five string quartets, and almost all in abstract, classical forms; although one programmatic ballet, *The Incredible Flutist* (1938), remained his most popular work for decades. While he never joined the Americanists in quoting folk tunes, his music is melodic and highly accessible, yet also dedicated to New England ideals of polished polyphony. In 1965, he, too, gave up fighting the spirit of the times and turned to twelve-tone composition.

Vivian Fine (b. 1913) was Ruth Crawford's most notable student and also studied with Cowell and Sessions. Her compositions are classical as to form and romantic as to feeling. She taught at Bennington from 1964 to 1987. Persichetti, who taught at Juilliard from 1947 on, is an extremely versatile composer whose facility in modern styles is evident in his influential book *Twentieth-Century Harmony*, a virtual catalogue of every possible harmonic tendency. Though his music is romantic in feeling and stylistically difficult to pin down, his devotion to classical forms is evident in the genres of his output: he wrote nine symphonies, twelve piano sonatas, six piano sonatinas, eight harpsichord sonatas, and fourteen serenades.

### *Roger Sessions*

Once considered a European composer by Americans and an American by Europeans, Roger Sessions (1896–1985) consciously grafted his own music onto the European tradition. In youth he was a follower of Stravinsky; as his style developed, though, he gravitated naturally toward twelve-tone technique and wrote his first twelve-tone works in nearly the same year as Stravinsky's own conversion to dodecaphony (1951).

Born December 28, 1896, in Brooklyn—on the same street, in fact, as Aaron Copland—Sessions came from a musical and literary family. After entering Harvard at fourteen, Sessions transferred to Yale, where, like Ives, he studied with Horatio Parker. He would have studied in Europe had not World War I been raging at the time. Instead, he worked privately with the Swiss émigré Ernest Bloch, who became his most important musical contact. When Bloch took a job as director of the Cleveland Institute of Music, Sessions followed him there.

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While in Cleveland Sessions wrote his first major work, which would remain his most popular for several decades: *The Black Maskers*, incidental music written in 1923 and arranged into an orchestral suite in 1928.

In 1924, with his father footing the bill, Sessions and his wife began a stay in Europe—Paris, London, Geneva, Florence, Berlin, Rome—that would occupy most of the succeeding eight years. A 1931 grant brought him to Berlin; his recognition of the growing Nazi menace hastened his return to the United States, where he resumed his teaching career. His sixty-year pedagogic career included positions at Smith College, Cleveland Institute of Music, Boston University, Princeton, Berkeley, Harvard (for the Norton Lectures), and Juilliard.

Sessions had no qualms about drawing his techniques from the European masters, saying, “I have no sympathy with consciously sought originality.”<sup>4</sup> His music after *The Black Maskers* leaned closer to the chromatic, contrapuntal idiom of Berg or Schoenberg. Sessions disagreed with a common perception that one had to choose between tonal and atonal composition. “The borderline between tonality and atonality,” he once said, “is a very, very wide one. You don’t step over the threshold from one to another. You have to go down a long, long, long corridor.”<sup>5</sup> Sessions made the transition so gradually that there is no break in style, nor does the music sound twelve-tone in the sense that all twelve pitches are constantly in use. A lovely example is the *Andante* from the Third Symphony (1957). A twelve-tone row floats languidly in the clarinet while other lines derived from it are slowly built up in the harp and horns (see example 5.2).

Sessions’s orchestral style is easily characterized. The most noticeable element is soaring melodies in the violins, accompanied by closely spaced counterpoint in the woodwinds and brass, with climaxes punctuated by drums and mallet percussion. A slow, painstaking composer, he was sometimes unable to finish a work by a concert deadline. Composition of his Violin Concerto required the years 1930–1935, his opera *Montezuma* took from 1947 to 1963; the latter has never been a critical success. Such slowness delayed the rise of his reputation, which did not fully begin until the fifties, with the appearance of his Third through Ninth Symphonies, and later his orchestral Rhapsody (1970) and Concerto (1979–1981), and his cantata after Whitman, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d* (1964–1970).

### **Listening Example: Piano Sonata No. 3**

Sessions’s music is easier to approach than that of many later twelve-tone composers because his compositional building block always remained, not the individual note or interval, but the gesture. Few of his works demonstrate this principle so concisely as the Third Piano Sonata (1965). The work’s three movements reverse the usual fast–slow–fast classical

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EXAMPLE 5.2 Roger Sessions, Symphony No. 3, third movement.

pattern; the outer movements are relatively subdued, while the second is a violent "scherzo." The third movement was written as an elegy for John F. Kennedy.

Typical of the Sonata is its continual, and changing, division of the twelve pitches of the scale into four trichords (three-note chords). This process is visible at the beginning (example 5.3). The top line of these opening chords—A-flat, G-flat, F-flat—spells out a mi-re-do motive which will become more important in the third movement. The exposition of this movement moves slowly through groups of sonorities back to

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EXAMPLE 5.3 Roger Sessions, Sonata No. 3, opening.

a transposed version of the first. Then, after a pause, a development follows (example 5.4). The development's violence gradually focuses on intense streams of midregister clusters. The recapitulation then enters *subito piano* (suddenly quiet), leading to an ending that almost states the opening backwards (example 5.5).



EXAMPLE 5.4 Roger Sessions, Sonata No. 3, first movement, development.



EXAMPLE 5.5 Roger Sessions, Sonata No. 3, end of first movement.

The second movement is a violent rondo; the Schoenbergian opening theme recurs no fewer than five times, though in a sense its intervals are always present. A quieter center section, *piu tranquillo*, restates the theme in a favorite Sessions texture, as a wide-ranging melody over a set of recurring bass sonorities (example 5.6). The third movement opens with the melody that came to Sessions upon hearing of Kennedy's death (example 5.7). The mi-re-do motive and its inversion/retrograde per-



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*f* *molto* *dim molto*

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*mp sempre dim.* *p molto*

più tranquillo ( $\text{♩} = 63-66$ )

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*pespr.* *p* *p molto*

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*p* *pp*

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EXAMPLE 5.6 Roger Sessions, Sonata No. 3, second movement.



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(In memoriam: Nov. 22, 1963)

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EXAMPLE 5.7 Roger Sessions, Sonata No. 3, opening of third movement.

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## Stefan Wolpe

Though born in Berlin, Stefan Wolpe (1902–1972) wrote the works for which he is best known in the United States. He was not a twelve-tone composer; when he did use a serial row it was likely to have more than twelve notes (as in the Passacaglia of 1936, with its twenty-two-note row). Instead, he developed a playful idiom which contrasted sets of pitches in fluid and surprising textures.

Wolpe's life divides into three stylistic periods, corresponding to geographical location. He started out, in Berlin, as a composer of Hindemithian *Gebrauchsmusik* and theater music, but of explicit political sympathies. His music of this period is dissonantly tonal, and densely textured. The ascension of the Nazis drove him to Vienna, where he studied with Webern (1933–1934), and to Palestine the following year. In Palestine his music began to absorb Hebrew influences and a more exotic tonality. His *Ten Songs from the Hebrew* (1936–1939) is more texturally fluid than the music of his German period and remarkable for its individualistically ambiguous tonalities.

In 1938 he moved to New York, and thereafter he lived in Greenwich Village except for a four-year stint at Black Mountain College (1952–1956). Here his style underwent another drastic change. The tight, spare, atonal works of his American period give the impression of Webernesque pointillism freed from the twelve-tone row to pursue unpredictable asymmetry. He headed the music department at C. W. Post College of Long Island University from 1957 to 1968, but he developed Parkinson's disease in the mid-sixties. His motor abilities degenerated, and by decade's end his writing was an illegible scrawl.

The early masterpiece of Wolpe's American period was *Enactments*, a massive, densely pointillistic work for three pianos that sounds like the aural analogue of a late Jackson Pollock canvas. Such late works as *Form* (1959) and *Form IV: Broken Sequences* (1969) for piano, the Trio for flute, cello, and piano (1964), *Piece for Two Instrumental Units* (1962–1963), the String Quartet (1969), and *Piece for Trumpet and 7 Instruments* (1971) illustrate Wolpe's method of moving from one field of pitches to another, sometimes gradually, sometimes suddenly, always with vivid imagination.

### Listening Example: Form

Wolpe's *Form* (1959) is a tiny, three-minute masterpiece, a perfect example of his pitch-set contrasts in miniature crystalline clarity. The piece divides the twelve pitches of the scale into two hexachords (sets of six pitches each). The first is blankly stated in the first six quarter notes: A $\flat$ , F, B $\flat$ , A, G, E. Immediately, those pitches are transformed into brittle, arrhythmic configurations for three and a half measures, until suddenly the other six pitches—F $\sharp$ , C, D, C $\sharp$ , E $\flat$ , B take over (example 5.8). For the rest of the

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EXAMPLE 5.8 Stefan Wolpe, *Form*, opening.

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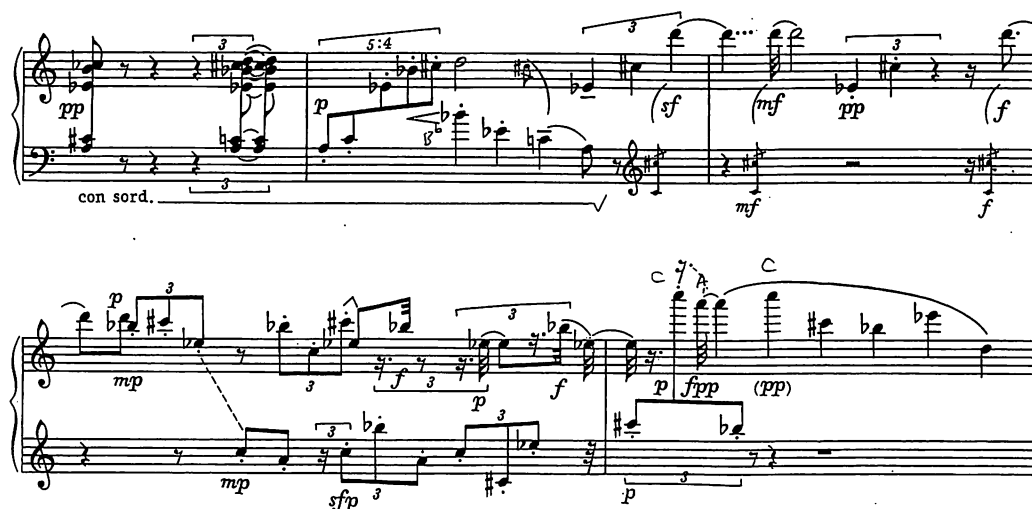
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piece, Wolpe fixates on one or another of these pitch areas (or transpositions of them), articulating the same pitches in myriad rearrangements (example 5.9). It is reported that Wolpe enjoyed watching fish in an aquarium to get his inspirations, which helps explain why his notes shimmer, freeze, then dart in a new direction with such spontaneity.



EXAMPLE 5.9 Stefan Wolpe, *Form*.

### Elliott Carter

Starting out in neoclassicism and ending up in atonality, Carter has had a musical career parallel to that of Sessions, but with significant differences. Carter wrote many more neoclassic works than Sessions; and although he abandoned neoclassicism, Carter never turned to twelve-tone technique. Another difference is that Carter's emphasis has long been on rhythm, tempo contrasts, and dramatic characterization, concerns very different from Sessions' pitch-centered European musicality.

Born December 11, 1908, in New York, Carter studied at the Horace Mann School with Clifton Furness, who, as luck would have it, was one of the handful of people who had realized the importance of, and were in touch with, the reclusive Charles Ives. Furness introduced Carter to Ives in 1924, and Carter helped decipher several of Ives's messy pencil manuscripts. The two were frequently in touch until 1932, and Ives wrote Carter a recommendation to Harvard.

Then, in 1932, Carter went to Paris and studied with Boulanger, who offered an aesthetic outlook very different from that of the circle around Ives. His early ballets *Pocahontas* (1936–1939) and *The Minotaur* (1947) are neoclassical, suggesting Milhaud, Hindemith, or Prokofiev. It perhaps shows how much Europe had pushed Carter toward neoclassic

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Elliott Carter, shown with Pierre Boulez. *Courtesy BMI Archives.*

concerns for logic and formal clarity that, in a 1939 review, he excoriated Ives's *Concord Sonata* upon its premiere by Kirkpatrick:

In form and aesthetic it is basically conventional, not unlike the Liszt Sonata, full of the paraphernalia of the overdressy sonata school. . . . Behind all this confused texture there is a lack of logic which repeated hearings can never clarify. . . . The esthetic is naive, often too naive to express serious thoughts, frequently depending on quotation of well-known American tunes, with little comment, possibly charming, but certainly trivial.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, Carter abused his earlier friendship with Ives by suggesting that the latter added dissonances to his scores decades after they had been written in order to make them sound more up-to-date. The charge has since been refuted by musicologists specializing in Ives's manuscripts.

In 1948 Carter began composing the work that marks the beginning of his mature musical personality: the Sonata for Cello and Piano. In this work, for the first time, Carter tackled the problem of creating a drama of two instruments as two different personalities. He achieved this most interestingly through rhythmic means; for example, in the first movement, keeping a steady, metronomic beat in the piano, against which the cello plays a rhapsodic, accelerating and decelerating line. Carter's most celebrated rhythmic device has become known as metric modulation, or tempo modulation. By analogy with harmonic modulation from one key to another, metric modulation shifts from one tempo to another via a notatable rhythmic ratio. One of the clearest and most effective such shifts is found in a passage from the Cello Sonata (example 5.10), in which the



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The musical score is for Elliott Carter's Sonata for Cello and Piano, measures 25-30. It is written in 3/8 time. Measures 25-29 show a cello line with a dotted sixteenth-note and a piano line with a dotted eighth-note. Measure 30 shows a change in tempo, with the cello line marked 'mf' and the piano line marked 'pp'. The score includes various dynamic markings such as *p sub.*, *espr.*, *mf*, *p*, *sost.*, and *pp*. There are also tempo markings like  $\text{♩} = 80$  and  $\text{♩} = 30$ .

EXAMPLE 5.10 Elliott Carter, Sonata for Cello and Piano, metric modulation.

dotted sixteenth-note of the old tempo becomes the eighth-note of the new tempo.

Nancarrow met Carter in New York in 1948 and soon after sent him the score of his Rhythm Study No. 1; it spurred Carter's interest in textures in which several tempos run at the same time. Carter wrote his String Quartet No. 1 in 1951. In the opening measures, the cello plays four equal beats per bar, the viola six, the second violin  $3\frac{1}{5}$ , and the first violin  $1\frac{1}{5}$ , for a total tempo resultant of 10:15:8:3. Such tempo contrasts continue throughout the work. As an homage to the composers who preceded him in such explorations, Carter quotes Ives's Violin Sonata No. 1 in the cello in the first movement, and the Nancarrow Study No. 1 in the third movement.

Carter's First String Quartet was his first major critical success, the work that brought him to public attention. From here on his works would increase in their variety of simultaneously contrasting characterizations. The Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord (1952) retains hints of Carter's neoclassic style in its instrumentation and cadences; in the first movement the harpsichord acts as metronomic timekeeper against the other instruments' more varied rhythms. In the mid-fifties Carter visited the new-music center of Darmstadt, Germany, where he found the composers around Boulez and Stockhausen scaling new heights of notational and conceptual complexity, and still getting

expert performances of their music. This convinced him that he could transcend previous limits of performance difficulty.

The systems of characterization in Carter's late works are ingenious, though sometimes so complex and so based in minute distinctions as to become difficult to distinguish by ear without analysis of the score. The Double Concerto (1961) pits a harpsichord on the left side of the stage against a piano on the right, each with its own chamber orchestra behind it. The two groups are distinguished by, among other things, the pitch intervals in their vocabularies. The harpsichord orchestra plays minor 2nds, minor 3rds, perfect 4ths, tritones, minor 6ths, and minor 7ths; the piano orchestra plays major 2nds, major 3rds, perfect fifths, major 6ths, and major 7ths.

The continuous form is divided into a seven-part, symmetrical arch:

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|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Introduction        | 7. Coda               |
| 2. Harpsichord cadenza | 6. Two piano cadenzas |
| 3. Allegro scherzando  | 5. Presto             |
| 4. Adagio              |                       |

Carter's Symphony of Three Orchestras (1976) divides a large orchestra into three parts, each of which has its own four movements. Each orchestra moves to the next movement independently, so that the second movement of one orchestra will overlap with the first movement of another, and so on. His *Night Fantasies* for piano (1979–1980) is based around a large-scale tempo contrast, 175 against 216 (10.8 beats per minute against 8.75), the beats coinciding only in the third measure and the final one.

Carter has never explored his complex systems in the spirit of pure sonic experimentation, like the ultramodernists and experimentalists, but always in the service of a wider, philosophic programmatic speculation, often with literary associations. In this respect he is reminiscent of Ives—a physics-driven, abstract Ives, that is, with no use for marching bands, hymn tunes, or references to the everyday world.

### *Listening Example: Second String Quartet*

Carter's Second Quartet (1959) is the most widely analyzed of his works for a good reason: it's the most classically clear example of his dramatic characterization of members of an ensemble as contrasting like characters in a play. Each instrument has its own adjectival characterization, its own time sense, and even its own dominant intervals, seen in example 5.11. Though continuous, the twenty-minute piece divides into nine

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No. 2.

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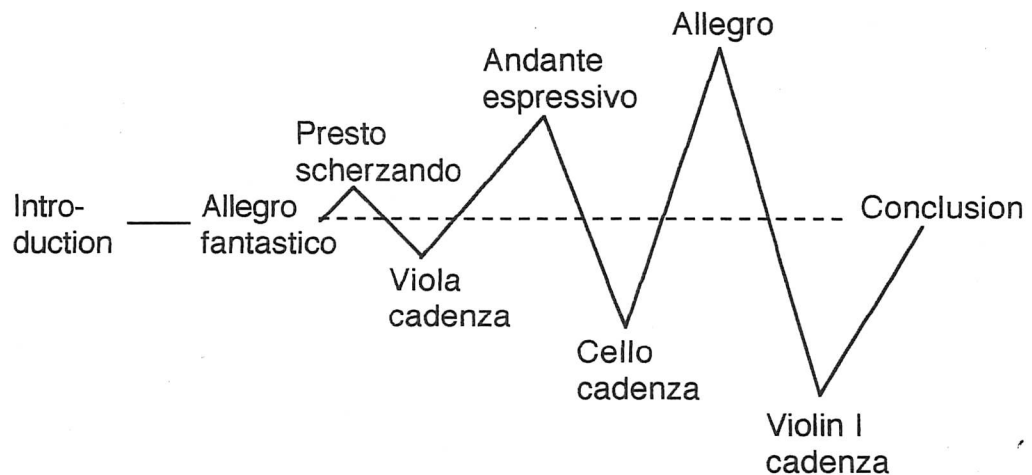
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EXAMPLE

INSTRUMENT	CHARACTER	RHYTHMIC TYPE	INTERVALS
Violin I	fantastic, ornate, mercurial	fragmented fast/slow	minor 3rd perfect 5th
Violin II	laconic, orderly, humorous	metronomic	major 3rd major 6th major 7th
Viola	expressive	rubato	tritone minor 7th
Cello	impetuous	accelerando ritard	perfect 4th minor 6th

EXAMPLE 5.11 Elliott Carter, instrumental characterization in String Quartet No. 2.

sections, as outlined in example 5.12.<sup>7</sup> The *Allegro fantastico*, *Presto*, *Andante*, and *Allegro* represent the four movements of the classical string quartet. The horizontal center axis of this plan represents a midpoint between independence and cooperation; the higher above that center line the more the instruments cooperate, the lower, the more independent they act. The *Presto* includes tempo modulations that revolve around the second violin's pizzicato metronome, which marks off time even though its beat is not shared by the other instruments (example 5.13). In the final *Allegro* the instruments begin to exchange characters and build up common structures, accelerating in a series of waves. Just at the point of their potential merging, everything explodes, leading to a fragmented conclusion.



EXAMPLE 5.12 Elliott Carter, nine sections of String Quartet No. 2.



**Presto scherzando** II  
 (♩ = 175) (with rhythmic precision in all parts)

SOLO - sempre to [241] *pizz.* *pp* *leggero sempre*  
 ♩ = 140 *p* (ma ben marc.)  
*pp* *leggero sempre* *pp*  
*pp* *p* *mf* *pp* *espr.* *pp* *mf* *pp*

EXAMPLE 5.13 Elliott Carter, String Quartet No. 2, Presto scherzando.

*Milton Babbitt*

When Schoenberg arrived in New York, he was met at the boat by Lehman Engel (1910–1982), who had grown up in Mississippi with another composer, Milton Babbitt (b. 1916). Engel secured Babbitt an introduction to Schoenberg. And Babbitt would become, more than anyone else, the composer who carried out the ultimate implications of Schoenberg's twelve-tone method in American music.

Born in 1916, Babbitt grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, where his world revolved around the twin poles of mathematics (his father's profession) and popular music. He could later boast, "I know the lyrics of every popular song between '26 and '35,"<sup>8</sup> and one of his first large-scale musical efforts was a musical comedy (*Fabulous Voyage*, 1946) intended for Mary Martin; the project fell through. Babbitt studied at Washington Square College with Marion Bauer (1887–1955) because she was one of the few composers in the country with an interest in twelve-tone music.

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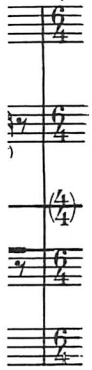


Milton Babbitt seated at the RCA Synthesizer in the late 1950s. *Courtesy BMI Archives.*

He later studied privately with Sessions, though in the years when Sessions was still “fundamentally anti-Schoenberg.” Babbitt taught mathematics at Princeton (1942–1945) before he taught music there (1948–1984), and he additionally taught at Juilliard from 1973 on.

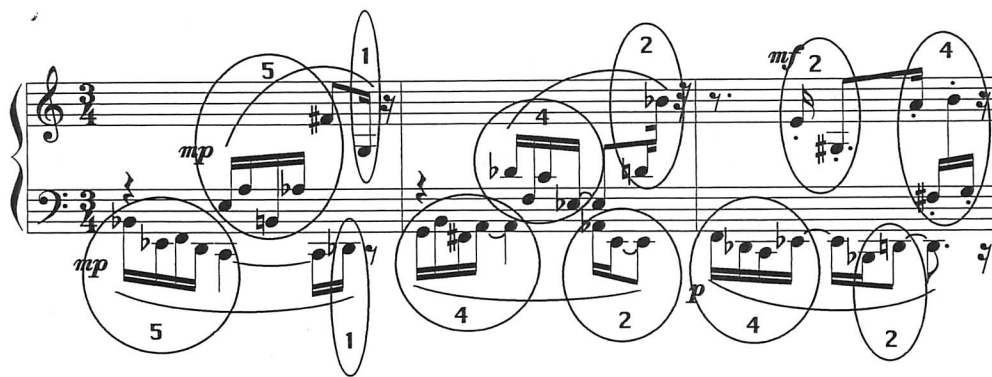
In 1947–1948, Babbitt wrote two pieces—*Three Compositions for Piano* and *Composition for Four Instruments*—in which, for the first time, the idea of the row was applied not only to pitch, but to rhythm. For a simple example, in the first *Composition for Piano*, two forms of the row are played at once, one in the left hand and another, transposed up a major third, in the right. Within each hand the rhythmic grouping of pitches also follows a row of four values (5–1–4–2) which is also retrograded (2–4–1–5), “inverted” (1–5–2–4), and retrograde-inverted (4–2–5–1) (example 5.14). Olivier Messiaen achieved a similar feat a few months later, drawing correspondences between pitch and duration in his *Modes et valeurs d'intensités* of 1949, the work that launched the serialist movement via his students Boulez and Stockhausen. For once an American composer had discovered an innovation, working within the European tradition, that the Europeans would soon follow.

Babbitt's application of the row to note groupings did not exhaust his experiments in serial rhythm. In 1962 he published a method of “time-point sets,” by which a measure could be divided into twelve equal beats analogous to the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale. A row of twelve pitches could then be mapped onto a series of time points within



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EXAMPLE 5.14 Milton Babbitt, use of rhythmic row 5-1-2-4 in *Three Compositions for Piano*.

EXAMPLE 5.15 Milton Babbitt, *Post-Partitions*.

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a bar of 3/4 or 12/16 meter. One of the clearest configurations of Babbitt's time-point system is his piano piece *Post-Partitions* (1966). This work also demonstrates a further step in Babbitt's pitch thinking, the concept of the *all-partition array*. A conceptual advance beyond the tone row, the array is an intricate overlay of several forms of a twelve-tone row in such a way that twelve-tone sets are formed not only by each individual horizontal line, but moment-to-moment by the combinations of tones from different rows.

Example 5.15 shows the first page of *Post-Partitions*. Example 5.16 shows the section of the array from which the first section of the piece is built. Note that, within each staff, the staccato notes (notated here as 16ths) spell out one form of the row, the sustained (whole) notes another. Example 5.17 gives the six underlying divisions of the measure to which the time-point system is applied, respectively 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, and 32 divisions per measure. Within each implied tempo, time-points are picked out analogously to the pitches of the row. Here they are numbered in the twelve-tone analysis style that substitutes "t" for 10 and "e" for 11.

Babbitt's compositional efforts center around the role of the specific properties of a twelve-tone row in determining the overall structure of a composition. He defined and thoroughly developed the concept of combinatoriality, which is the property of one segment of a row being identical with a transposition of another segment (or its inversion).

Block 1 (mm. 1-8)

EXAMPLE 5.16 Milton Babbitt, all-partition array from *Post-Partitions*.



EXAMPLE 5.17 Milton Babbitt, rhythmic array from *Post-Partitions*.

Combinatoriality determines what forms of a row will combine well with what other forms. Babbitt uses a wide variety of register and dynamics to articulate the divisions and dispensations of his tone-rows.

In 1959 Babbitt published an article in *High Fidelity* magazine that was intended to be entitled "The Composer as Specialist"; instead the editors altered it to a more inflammatory "Who Cares If You Listen?", giving a negative spin to Babbitt's career that he's never completely shaken off. In the article Babbitt compares the situation between composer and audience to that between physicist or mathematician and layman. If the layman cannot follow the latest developments in theoretical physics without extensive training, why should music be otherwise? Given this allowance, the isolation of the composer, presumably within the university, becomes unavoidable.

Why should the layman be other than bored and puzzled by what he is unable to understand, music or anything else? It is only the translation of this boredom and puzzlement into resentment and denunciation that seems to me indefensible. After all, the public does have its own music, its ubiquitous music.<sup>9</sup>

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"I dare suggest," Babbitt continues,

that the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition.<sup>10</sup>

Babbitt is music's ultimate rationalist. He does not believe in music's ability to communicate on an emotional level, and he once chastised a critic in print for stating that the music of Mendelssohn lacks real depth; not because Babbitt disagreed, but because he found such a statement literally meaningless.<sup>11</sup> He feels that a composer who claims to compose "intuitively" is simply choosing to remain ignorant of the restraints that he unconsciously imposes on his musical materials. Babbitt is determined to be conscious of every minute compositional decision and to know the reason in each case.

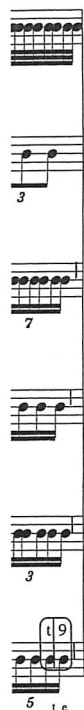
### *Listening Example: Philomel*

The other side of Babbitt's activity besides his advancement of the twelve-tone language is his work in electronic music. He found that with synthesizer and tape he could achieve the precision for his detailed scores that, at that time, no performers were able to provide. *Philomel* (1964) was written for the soprano Bethany Beardslee and incorporates her voice into the tape part, so that we hear her singing in counterpoint with a fractured, distorted version of herself. Babbitt asked the poet John Hollander to write him a text specifically for the piece, and Hollander responded with a text narrating the ancient Greek myth of Philomel.

Philomela and Procne are sisters, daughters of Pandion, king of Athens. After her marriage to Tereus, king of Thrace, Procne misses her sister and sends Tereus to go bring her back. Tereus, however, rapes Philomela in the woods and tears out her tongue to prevent her from telling anyone. Procne finds out, however, and in revenge kills her and Tereus's son and serves him to Tereus for dinner. When Tereus realizes what Procne has done, he pursues the women into the woods, but before any more harm can be done, the gods turn all three into birds.

The strategy in the taped sounds concerns the transformation of voices when Philomela first loses her tongue, then finds her voice transformed into that of a bird. The first section of Hollander's poem is plays on the protagonists' names:

Philomel: I feel  
           Feel a million trees  
           And the heat of trees



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- Tape: Not true trees—  
 Philomel: Feel a million tears  
 Tape: Not true tears—  
           Not true trees—  
 Philomel: Is it Tereus I feel?  
 Tape: Not Tereus: not a true Tereus—

The second section (which begins at 5:02, five minutes and two seconds into the piece) is called the "Echo Song":

- Philomel: O Hawk in the high and widening sky,  
           What need I finally do to fly,  
           And see with your unclouded eye?  
 Tape: Die, die, die. . . .

In the third section (beginning at 11:29), Philomel is reflecting on her pain. The voices on tape no longer answer, though the taped music sometimes follows her voice in unison. Her words become birdlike, syllables broken into two-note motives. The Webernesque angularity of the vocal line, a cliché in so much twelve-tone music, here perfectly suits Philomel's anguish and her increasingly birdlike character. More direct and more dramatic than many of Babbitt's works, *Philomel* exists at a beautiful moment in which the resources of electronic music and the technique of the twelve-tone language mesh perfectly with the poetic expression.

### *Other Atonal Expressionists*

Some composers attempted a fusion between the pitch methods of twelve-tone music and Stravinsky's propulsive rhythms. Chief among these was Arthur Berger (b. 1912 in New York), who studied with Piston (at Harvard), Boulanger (in Paris), and Milhaud (Mills College). Though Schoenberg was his early influence, Boulanger's training turned him toward Stravinsky. His *Duo for Cello and Piano* (1951), for example, combines Stravinskian diatonicism with Webernesque pointillism. Often working as a music critic, Berger has taught at Brandeis and New England Conservatory, and, in 1962, with the composer Benjamin Boretz (b. 1934), he founded the important and ongoing journal *Perspectives of New Music*. The rhythmically spiky yet melodic charm of his best music—such as his orchestra piece *Ideas of Order* (1953)—managed to fuse the best of both worlds.

One of the most attractive, though highly idiosyncratic, alternatives to twelve-tone technique has come from George Perle (b. 1915, Bayonne, New Jersey), who developed his own personal, flexible brand

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of serialism through a happy misunderstanding. In 1937 he happened on a score to Berg's *Lyric Suite* and discovered through it Schoenberg's twelve-tone system. Instead of regarding the row, however, as an inviolable ordering of the twelve pitches, he considered it a modified scale within which the composer could move around at will. He later discovered his mistake (in the course of becoming the world's leading authority on Berg), but by that time he had discovered so many possibilities in his own system that, as he put it, "Schoenberg's idea of the series seemed so primitive compared to mine." Perle calls his own method "twelve-tone tonality."

If Perle's language is atonal, however, his form often tends toward the neoclassic. His major works include the Concertino for Piano, Winds, and Timpani (1979), *A Short Symphony* (1980), *Ballade* for piano (1983), four Woodwind Quintets (1959, 1960, 1967, 1984), and Serenade No. 3 for piano and chamber orchestra (1983). This last piece in particular has a mercurial, lyric charm that very little atonal music can match. Perhaps because Perle does not adhere to strict twelve-tone practice, his harmony offers more variety of mood and is capable of great sweetness.

Ben Weber (1916–1979) is one of the most accessible (and sadly neglected, perhaps because he held no university position) of twelve-tone composers, his sturdy music characterized by dynamic rhythmic momentum. Although he studied music theory at Chicago's De Paul University, he was basically an autodidact. However, a meeting with Schoenberg (who lectured at the University of Chicago in 1946) convinced him to learn twelve-tone technique. His works include a *Symphony on Poems of William Blake* (1950), a Violin Concerto (1954), and a Piano Concerto (1961) that is finely melodic and, though twelve-tone, not terribly dissonant.

Ulysses Simpson Kay (1917–1995), one of the century's leading black composers, was the nephew of well-known jazz cornetist Joseph "King" Oliver (1885–1938), who encouraged his studies. Kay studied with Hanson and Bernard Rogers at Eastman and with Otto Luening at Columbia, and attended Paul Hindemith's classes at Tanglewood. His output includes five operas, a symphony (1967), an oboe concerto (1940), and three string quartets (1953, 1956, 1961). He is best known, though, for his symphonic essay *Markings* (1966), based on the book by the Swedish statesman Dag Hammarskjöld. *Markings* is an atonal tone poem with an impressively romantic sweep, aided by the expert orchestration that is Kay's trademark.

Ralph Shapey (b. 1921 in Philadelphia) has always been something of an outsider, largely because of his relative isolation in Chicago. Though he's taught at the University of Chicago since 1964, he spent his life up to that point in relative poverty, as a free-lance conductor and violin teacher in New York. He is one of the composers (the other major one is Morton Feldman) associated with the abstract expressionist



painters of the 1940s. A wonderfully cantankerous personality, he became embittered in the sixties over lack of sympathetic treatment of his music, and in 1969 declared a moratorium on performances and publication—not, however, one that was strictly enforced. In 1976 he officially relented, and in 1982 he received the MacArthur “genius” award (\$288,000 over a five-year period).

Shapey's music is neither twelve-tone nor systematic. His paradigms are the classical forms—he is especially proficient at variation technique—but his methodology is to work with large blocks of dissonant harmony, transforming them with an abundant imagination, an attribute he shares with his primary teacher, Stefan Wolpe. A section is often made up of a few simple but thorny sound images, shifted and shuffled against each other for a chaotic variety. His chamber and piano works are superb, especially the *Fromm Variations* (1966–1973, dedicated to the Chicago music patron Paul Fromm), *21 Variations for Piano* (1978), *Three for Six* (1979), and the Sixth and Seventh String Quartets (1963, 1972), the last of which he calls his answer to Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*.

### Notes

1. Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982), p. 46.
2. Edward T. Cone, “In Defense of Song: The Contribution of Roger Sessions,” in *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 2, No. 1, Autumn 1975, p. 97.
3. Aaron Copland, “The New ‘School’ of American Composers,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 14, 1948.
4. Andrea Olmstead, *Roger Sessions and his Music* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985), p. 51.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
6. Elliott Carter, *The Writings of Elliott Carter* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 51.
7. From David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter* (London: Eulenberg Books, 1983), p. 198.
8. Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982), p. 46.
9. Milton Babbitt, “Who Cares If You Listen?,” reprinted in Gilbert Chase ed., *The American Composer Speaks* (Ann Arbor: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 239.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
11. Milton Babbitt, “The Structure and Function of Musical Theory,” in Boretz and Cone, eds., *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1972), p. 11.

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