



New and Subversion, Inheritance and Return

——Similarities and Differences among the Three Main Musical Genres from 1900 to 1945.

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Abstract. The music of the 20th century was characterized by innovation and transformation. Before 1945, three major musical genres emerged: Expressionism, Neo-Nationalism, and Neoclassicism. This paper analyzes the commonalities shared by these genres, specifically their "new" characteristics, while also addressing their differences, manifesting in the subversion of traditions, the integration of inherited elements, and a return to classical forms. Expressionism radically disrupted traditional notions of music composition, whereas Neo-Nationalism incorporated ethnic elements into modern and contemporary music. Neoclassicism sought a return to the rational structures of classical music. The modern musical landscape of the early 20th century reflected various dimensions of serious music. This paper further explores the similarities and differences among these three primary musical genres, their interrelations, and the emerging pathways of contemporary music trends.

Keywords: 20th Century Music ; Expressionism ; Neo-Nationalism ; Neoclassicism ;

1 Introduction

In the 20th century, society not only experienced significant upheaval but also witnessed a technological boom. The prevailing slogan of Western culture and art was "Eliminate the 19th Century! People no longer adhered to a single artistic philosophy

or proposition. Instead, they began to explore a wide range of experiments across various artistic domains.[1] Against this historical backdrop, the music of the 20th century exhibited distinctive characteristics: it was broad and diverse, innovative, and rebellious, in stark contrast to earlier musical forms.

When discussing the music of the 20th century, we often consider 1945 as a significant historical dividing point. The music produced before this year was characterized by an atmosphere of exploration and experimentation. In contrast, after 1945, a more diverse and innovative integration emerged, marked by the rise of electronic music, the exploration of avant-garde music, and the advent of postmodernist music. Among the three main musical genres that developed before 1945, Expressionism was notably rebellious, emphasizing the direct expression of inner emotions. Neo-nationalism blended tradition with modernity, showcasing the diversity of national cultures. Meanwhile, Neoclassicism sought return and rationality, advocating for balance and stability. These three genres had different focuses on innovation and tradition, collectively shaping the multifaceted nature of early 20th-century music. This article will examine and summarize the similarities and differences among these three genres.

2 The Common Point of the Three Genres—— "New"

The history of music in the 20th century witnessed unprecedented changes, which embodied the core keyword of the 20th century - "innovation". Expressionism, Neo-Nationalism, and Neoclassicism each promoted the innovation and development of music in different ways.

First of all, the "new" of Expressionism lies in its abandonment of depicting the external world through traditional music. Instead, it seeks to convey inner emotions directly and profoundly. This marks a significant breakthrough in the quest for formal freedom and the redefinition of traditional structures. Composers are no longer constrained by conventional rules of melody and harmony; they instead articulate their inner experiences through innovative musical language. This fresh approach to musical expression positions Expressionist music uniquely within the landscape of early 20th-century music.

Meanwhile, Neo-Nationalist Music is also exploring a new path. It emphasizes respect for traditional culture and traditions but does not stay in simple replication and imitation. Instead, composers combine traditional musical elements with modern

aesthetics to create new musical works with a sense of time and modernity. This fusion not only enriches the expressiveness of music but also promotes communication and understanding among different cultures.

Neoclassical music represents a significant "new" direction in the musical landscape. It seeks to return to the purity and harmony found in classical aesthetics, but it does not advocate for a complete reversion to classical music. Instead, neoclassical composers employ strict structural design and profound musical insight to blend classical and modern aesthetics, resulting in works that embody both classical style and contemporary elements. This fusion of the classical and the modern allowed neoclassical music to occupy a prominent position in the history of 20th-century music.

Overall, the three major schools of Expressionism, Neo-Nationalism, and Neoclassicism each exhibited distinct "new" characteristics in music composition before 1945 in the 20th century. The coexistence and evolution of these schools not only enriched the diversity of music but also reflected the adaptability and creativity of musical art in response to the changing times and societal needs. Collectively, they formed an essential and significant chapter in the history of 20th-century music, leaving behind invaluable artistic legacies and profound inspirations for future generations.

3 The Differences Among the Three Genres

3.1 Expressionism -Subversion

Expressionism emerged during a period of social transformation in the early 20th century. Its most significant characteristic was the rebellion against tonality, the foundation of Western traditional music. This rebellion marked the end of the era of "common practice composition", which had developed over hundreds of years.[2] Additionally, the subversive nature of Expressionist music is reflected in two key aspects.

First, Expressionist Music is subversive in emotional expression. It perceives the world through personal feelings and intuitions and separates objective reality from subjective feelings. Composers express their inner loneliness, despair, pessimism, and even pathological psychology through unconventional creative approaches and sound effects.

Secondly, expressionist music boldly subverted traditional compositional techniques. Composers completely abandoned the concept of tonality and adopted atonal methods, such as the twelve-tone series and other innovative compositional approaches, to enhance the expressiveness of music, bringing it closer to the intense emotions deep within people's hearts.

Schoenberg, a pioneering composer, boldly abandoned traditional tonality in music composition and developed the twelve-tone serial composition method. He freely arranged the twelve tones of the chromatic scale into a fundamental tone row, known as the "Prime Series", Then, the Prime Series is processed by three methods: Retrograde, Inversion, and Retrograde Inversion. Therefore, a rectangular array of 12x12 can be constructed through sequence prototypes, such as Schoenberg's Piano Concerto OP.42.

	I ₃	I ₁₀	I ₂	I ₅	I ₄	I ₀	I ₆	I ₈	I ₁	I ₉	I ₁₁	I ₇	
P ₃	3	10	2	5	4	0	6	8	1	9	11	7	R ₃
P ₈	8	3	7	10	9	5	11	1	6	2	4	0	R ₈
P ₄	4	11	3	6	5	1	7	9	2	10	0	8	R ₄
P ₁	1	8	0	3	2	10	4	6	11	7	9	5	R ₁
P ₂	2	9	1	4	3	11	5	7	0	8	10	6	R ₂
P ₆	6	1	5	8	7	3	9	11	4	0	2	10	R ₆
P ₀	0	7	11	2	1	9	3	5	10	6	8	4	R ₀
P ₁₀	10	5	9	0	11	7	1	3	8	4	6	2	R ₁₀
P ₅	5	0	4	7	6	2	8	10	3	11	1	9	R ₅
P ₉	9	4	8	11	10	6	0	2	7	3	5	1	R ₉
P ₇	7	2	6	9	8	4	10	0	5	1	3	11	R ₇
P ₁₁	11	6	10	1	0	8	2	4	9	5	7	3	R ₁₁
	RI ₃	RI ₁₀	RI ₂	RI ₅	RI ₄	RI ₀	RI ₆	RI ₈	RI ₁	RI ₉	RI ₁₁	RI ₇	

Fig. 1. : Schoenberg's Piano Concerto Op. 42 sequence of the 12x12 rectangular matrix.

Schoenberg's Expressionist Music reflects the alienation of society by breaking traditional aesthetic norms and creating a brand-new musical language. With genuine emotional expression, he reveals people's feelings of loneliness and pain in modern

society, emitting dissonant sounds to social reality, which is a "rebellion" and a "negation" of the dominant social consciousness.[3]

Berg's early musical style was influenced by Mahler and Schoenberg. His twelve-tone compositions suggest a sense of tonality. [4]His works incorporate both atonal compositional techniques and occasional tonal elements in the arrangement of pitches. Additionally, in his operatic creations, Berg subversively employed innovative techniques such as speaking, chanting, and equal rhythm.

On the contrary, Webern's early works were more avant-garde, devoid of any trace of tonality. His compositions were notably brief, and he employed pointillistic techniques to achieve innovative writing.

Three composers fundamentally transformed the concept of tonality in 19th-century music through innovative compositional techniques. They boldly challenged traditional methods of emotional expression and creativity, embraced the groundbreaking idea of atonality, and showcased their interpretations of the subjective experience within the realm of musical aesthetics. As a result, expressionist music has made a lasting impact on the history of music.

3.2 Neo-Nationalism- Inheritance

Another school of music before 1945 - "The Neo-nationalism School of Music" as a continuation of the 19th-century Nationalist Music, not only inherited the essence of its predecessors but also found a new direction in the wave of Expressionist Music, that is, through innovative compositional techniques and harmonic language, integrating national elements with modern musical concepts to create musical works that are both nationally characteristic and rich in the sense of the times. Neo-nationalism music in the 20th century has forged a new musical path, incorporating innovative compositional techniques. It is a combination and application of the strengths of nationalist music, traditionalist music, and modern music.[5] Different from expressionism, although it also emphasizes individual expression and emotional release, the Neo-nationalism school focuses more on the in-depth exploration and re-creation of national culture, aiming at presenting the cultural diversity and historical depth of different nations through music. Bela Bartok is undoubtedly one of the most representative composers of Neo-nationalism in this era.

Bartok's application of nationalism is most significantly manifested in his direct citation and integration of folk songs, which inherit the essence of predecessors. In his works, the melodies of Hungarian folk songs are ever-present, bringing a rich ethnic flavor to the audience. But the further innovation lies in the constructed "seven-tone scale" namely the "Bartok scale" as later generations call it. Meanwhile, Bartok was good at the ingenious combination of polytonal scales with folk song melodies, enhancing the expressiveness of the music, greatly enriching the tonal color, and demonstrating his profound understanding and unique application of musical language.

Furthermore, compared with Schoenberg's "twelve-tone system", Bartok was unique in his application of the "twelve-tone system". He incorporated the elements of the Hungarian national pentatonic scale, interwoven with the special interval relations of the twelve-tone system, creating a musical style that is both national and modern. In addition, Bartok was also adept at using non-tertian chords and the unique beats of folk music. He ingeniously drew on the rhythm patterns of folk music, such as robust beats and sharp, tension-filled melodies, transcending the constraints of traditional tonality. At this point, this reflects the differences between the "new" nationalism of the 20th century and the nationalism of the 19th century.

Bartok's music inheritance not only utilizes the compositional techniques of folk music but also reflects his profound understanding of and expression of the national spirit. His works often convey a deep concern for the nation's destiny, an elevated appreciation of its spirit, and beautiful expectations for its future.

Through the presentation of Bartok's musical works, Neo-nationalism music intricately weaves together a rich national cultural background with contemporary musical concepts, resulting in a style that honors tradition while embracing innovation. This inheritance is evident not only in the direct citation and integration of folk music elements but also in the deep exploration and reimagining of the national spirit, making musical works an important carrier to show the diversity and historical depth of national culture.

3.3 Neoclassicism - Return

Neoclassical music emerged at the intersection of social changes and the evolution of musical art following World War I. The harsh realities of the war prompted artists to seek simple and rational expressions, moving away from late Romanticism.

Simultaneously, the rise of new musical genres and techniques fueled composers' enthusiasm for innovation while also instilling a desire to reconnect with earlier musical traditions. Consequently, neoclassical music was born. Although this musical movement, titled "Back to Bach", the forms and styles characteristic of the eras of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, neoclassical music does not merely replicate these traditions; rather, it represents a new definition. This movement rejects the excessive expression and fantasy prevalent in the late romantic period, positioning neoclassicism as a resistance to late romanticism.[6]

Neoclassical music emphasizes the balance and stability of the art form, advocates a more rational and moderate emotional expression, and abandons exaggeration and subjective catharsis in favor of an objective and rational aesthetic. Therefore, the "return" of neoclassical music is not a simple retro but a profound exploration of multiple dimensions.

Firstly, it revisits the musical styles of the Classical, Baroque, and Renaissance periods, demonstrating an artistic pursuit that spans ages. Secondly, Neoclassicism reestablishes a musical approach that emphasizes reason and logic. Additionally, Neoclassicism also returns to the simple but effective music-making techniques of earlier times.

The Russian composer Stravinsky is undoubtedly the most dazzling pioneer and practitioner of neoclassical music creation. He put forward the concept of "emotionless" music, emphasizing order and rules, and began to consciously return to classical music materials, exploring the expression of the essence of music. In many of Stravinsky's works, there is a strong objectivity and a relative indifference and rationality, while there are also certain emotional factors, retaining some romantic styles.[7] Works of this period, such as "Pulcinella", have become classic works of Neoclassical Music.

For example, the "Les Six" in France also exhibited the characteristic of "return". The works of "Les Six" largely regressed to the style features of Classicism. Although they did not completely adopt the musical form structure and musical materials of Classicism, they were closely related to Classicism in musical style and aesthetic pursuit. Secondly, the composers of "Les Six" returned to rationality and moderation in emotional expression, discarding the exaggerated and subjective catharsis methods in late Romantic music. They paid more attention to conveying an objective and rational aesthetic feeling through music, enabling the audience to have a calm and profound emotional encounter during the listening process. Finally, the composers of

"Les Six" also returned to the early simple and effective musical language in their creative techniques. They did not pursue complex harmonies and showy playing skills but paid more attention to the internal logic and expressiveness of the music itself.

Neoclassicism, as a musical genre that emerged in the early 20th century, arose in response to Expressionism—an exceptionally rebellious musical style. Contrasting with Expressionism, Neoclassicism embodied a pursuit of "return," highlighting the diversification and coexistence of opposing elements in music during this era.

4 Conclusions

In the three major musical genres of the 20th century before 1945, "new" was closely linked to subversion, inheritance, and return. Subversion is reflected in the challenge and breakthrough of traditional forms, such as expressionism's objective and direct expression of inner emotions and the dismantling of tonality in compositional techniques, which embodies expressionism's "newness"; In the three major musical genres of the 20th century before 1945, "new" was closely linked to subversion, inheritance, and return. Subversion is reflected in the challenge and breakthrough of traditional forms, such as expressionism's objective and direct expression of inner emotions and the dismantling of tonality in compositional techniques, which embody expressionism's "newness." Inheritance, such as neo-nationalism, integrate more modern elements based on respect for tradition, reflecting the "new" of neo-nationalism. Return is seen in neoclassicism, the pursuit of the purity of classical aesthetics and the combination of modernity, which makes it clearer that neoclassicism is the interpretation of the word "new." This further clarifies the neoclassical interpretation of the word "new."

Therefore, in the long history of music and art, the three major music genres of the early 20th century were different from any previous period of commonality in music writing, always emphasizing their "new" innovativeness, and composers took individuality and uniqueness as the starting point for highlighting the value of their music and opened up new directions for music creation. This laid the foundation for the more pioneering music of the late 20th century and even today.

Expressionism, neo-nationalism, and neoclassicism, as the three main musical genres in the 20th century before 1945, have played an important role in the history of music. Through their respective innovations and explorations, these three genres promoted the diversification of musical forms, styles, and content. They not only

provided rich materials and inspiration for later music creation but also made important contributions to the improvement and development of music theory. Therefore, an in-depth study of the characteristics of each of these three genres and an observation of their correlation with the common characteristic of “newness” is of great significance to our understanding of the overall picture of the history of music in the twentieth century as well as our outlook on the future development of music.

At the same time, looking at the entire field of art (not limited to fine arts, literature, dance, etc.), the three musical genres of Expressionism, Neo-Nationalism, and Neoclassicism reflect the diversified development of the art of music, which is consistent with the diversified nature of the art of the twentieth century itself and leaves behind classic, aesthetically-valuable artistic treasures throughout the entire history of art in the twentieth century.

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