

The 20th Century / Modern Era

Key Points

- The diverse artistic trends of the early twentieth century were a reaction against Romanticism.
- Early- twentieth- century artistic trends explored simplicity and abstraction and the world of dreams and the inner soul (Surrealism, Expressionism)
- Composers such as Schoenberg and Webern explored new harmonic systems and the extreme registers of instruments.
- Impressionism in music is characterized by modal and exotic scales (chromatic, whole tone, and pentatonic), unresolved dissonances, parallel chords, rich orchestral color, and free rhythm, all generally cast in small-scale programmatic forms.
- The most important French Impressionist composer was Claude Debussy. His orchestral work, Prelude to “The Afternoon of a Faun,” was inspired by a Symbolist poem.
- Early- twentieth- century composers used complex rhythms (polyrhythms) and changing meters.
- New concepts of harmony (polychords, poly-tonality, atonality) pressed music beyond the traditional systems of tonality.
- The twelve- tone method (or serialism) devised by Arnold Schoenberg was an important and influential compositional technique and extreme dissonance became part of the sound palette.
- The great bandmaster and composer John Philip Sousa fostered the American wind band tradition, an outgrowth of the British military band.

- By the turn of the twentieth century, New York City had become the cultural center of America, witnessing the rise of the Broadway musical and the sheet-music business by Tin Pan Alley composers.
- The U.S. involvement in World War I gave rise to a patriotic voice in music, and facilitated the dissemination of American popular styles of ragtime and jazz throughout Europe.
- The advent of radio and “talkie” films promoted music and the “roaring 20s” dance craze.
- Big band jazz and dance clubs provided a brief escape from the difficulties of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the trials of World War II in the early 1940s.
- Throughout the twentieth century, songwriters have focused on important political events and sociological trends as subject material for their music.
- The rise of rock and roll in the 1950s is one of the most significant phenomena in twentieth-century music history.
- Music videos and MTV were important media for the dissemination of rock in the 1980s; other developments led to the emergence of rap.