

20th CENTURY / MODERN

Era Overview

Imagine yourself at a piano concert. The performer sits at the keyboard and closes the lid to cover the keys. For exactly thirty seconds, he sits in silence, and then uncovers the keys. He covers them again, and sits in silence for two minutes and twenty-three seconds. Once more, he uncovers the keys, but just as quickly recovers them. One minute and forty seconds of silence. He then opens the cover, and walks off the stage.

Turn on the radio. Turn the dial and you hear a mix of Top 40, oldies, rap, country, classical, jazz. Go to a concert hall and hear music of the last century, of the last decade, of Tibetan monks. Walk the streets of a large urban area and hear the sounds of India, Afghanistan, Peru, South Africa.

This is twentieth century music—new music, world music, call it what you will. All music. This presents us with a challenge. How do we listen to so many types of music and make sense of them? Especially those kinds of music that challenge our very definition of music.

Let's start with the above scenario, a description of a real performance of a real piece: John Cage's *4'33"*. What would you have heard at that first performance? At first, silence. Then some shuffling in the seats, an uncomfortable cough, and more silence. You might have heard more: people harrumphing and leaving, angry hisses and angrier hisses back. And what did John Cage want you to hear? All that and more. Any sound that existed was, for Cage, something to listen to and play with—to appreciate on its own terms. Much of the music that you have or will listen to in this unit falls into this category. The rules are different for each piece.

When we listen to Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*), with its harsh harmonies and driving rhythms, we listen to it in the same way as we would Berlioz or Smetana. Stravinsky is telling a story, but his language is different. It is more dissonant, more rhythmically driving. On the other hand, we have to listen to Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* in an entirely different manner. There is still a story, but the language has changed so much as to be unintelligible. Instead, we listen for mood (effectively evoking in these examples the plodding world of the mad protagonist and the cruel precision of the doctor who torments him). This is difficult music, the result of an incredibly complex musical system. But simply because a piece of music is carefully crafted with a technique that seems foreign to us doesn't mean that we can't understand what is going on. Composers are still communicating, we just have to accept the rules.