



Four Major Music Genres of the 20th Century

--A Brief Analysis of Impressionism, Realism, Nationalism and Serialism Styles

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Abstract. The 20th century in Western music was an era of diverse musical styles, with various genres emerging due to societal factors. Among these, the focus lies on the four major music genres. This paper analyzes the background, characteristics, and representative figures of these four major music genres. Additionally, it provides appreciation and analysis of representative compositions and musicians within each genre. Furthermore, personal reflections and considerations regarding the four major music genres are presented.

Keywords: Four Major Music Genres, Musical Styles, Appreciation, Compositional Style.

1 Introduction

Twentieth-century Western music, also known as modern Western music or "new music," witnessed significant changes. This century saw two world wars, economic crises, and global turmoil, leading to profound psychological shifts among people. Against this backdrop, the development of music underwent dramatic transformations. "Innovativeness" became a common characteristic in the artistic realm of this era, with unconventional ideas and radical experiments emerging incessantly. On the other hand, there was an emphasis on the diversification of artistic styles, with works from both conservative and avant-garde factions being presented simultaneously. Their collective reaction against romanticism in music prompted the emergence of music genres such as impressionism, expressionism, serialism, and 20th-century nationalism.

2 Overview of Music Genres

Twentieth-century Western music demonstrated diverse developmental trends, with each genre possessing unique and distinct creative philosophies. Among them, impressionism, realism, nationalism, and serialism undoubtedly stand out as the four most representative genres of this period [1]. These genres not only exhibit distinct characteristics in musical style but also play crucial roles in the development of music history.

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Due to the different backgrounds of these four major genres, each has its own distinct features. The following will analyze the commonalities among these four major music genres during this period.

2.1 Overview of Impressionism

2.1.1 Origin of Impressionism

The Impressionism music genre (Impressionism music, also translated as Impressionist music) originated in France in the 1860s. Influenced by Impressionist painting and symbolism literature, artists such as Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir gradually infused their pursuit of light and shadow effects into the field of music. They attempted to use music to imitate the colors and light effects in painting, thus forming an Impressionist music genre [2].

2.1.2 Characteristics of Impressionism

Impressionism is a musical style from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Its characteristics can be summarized as follows.

First, Impressionist music attaches great importance to timbre and sound effects; Impressionist music places great emphasis on color and atmosphere and avoids traditional musical structure and harmony. Composers use the special timbres and playing techniques of various instruments to create unique sound effects. For example, Debussy used the soft tone of the piano and delicate playing techniques in "Moonlight" to imitate the hazy and soft moonlight.

Second, Impressionist music is structurally ambiguous and open; it often uses vague harmonies, free forms and complex decorative melodies. Composers no longer strictly follow the traditional musical form structure but pay more attention to the overall atmosphere and expressiveness of the music. They often use free melody lines and rich harmonic changes to create a musical space full of imagination and fantasy.

In addition, Impressionist composers liked to use diatonic and pentatonic scales to create unique musical colors.

2.1.3 Analysis of Representative Works of Impressionism

(1) Debussy's "Moonlight"(Clair de lune)

Debussy's "Moonlight" is a typical Impressionist music work. A piano solo by Debussy, through soft melody and rich timbre changes, it presents a serene and dreamy atmosphere under the moonlight. The whole song shows a quiet and dreamy music world by imitating the hazy and soft moonlight. The composer uses a variety of piano playing techniques, such as soft touch keys, delicate timbre changes, etc., to create unique sound effects. At the same time, the composition shows ambiguity and openness in structure. There is no clear division of musical form, but a unique musical atmosphere is created through free melody lines and harmonic changes.

(2) Ravel's "Boleiro"

"Boleiro" is an orchestral work by Ravel, with its unique rhythm and melody lines showing the dance characteristics of Impressionist music. The entire piece is based on

Spanish folk dance and uses rich instrument configurations and playing techniques to show a dance scene full of energy and enthusiasm. Composers use the special timbres and performance techniques of various instruments, such as the rhythmic percussion and the portamento of strings, to create unique sound effects. At the same time, the music is cyclical in structure, promoting the development of music through constant repetition and change.

2.2 Overview of Expressionism

Expressionism is a music style from the early to mid-20th century, which is characterized by strong emotional expression and breakthroughs in traditional music forms. The following is a specific analysis of the background, characteristics and representative works of Expressionist music.

2.2.1 Origin of Expressionism

European society at the beginning of the 20th century was in the midst of turbulent changes, including the outbreak of two world wars, the acceleration of the Industrial Revolution, and the rapid development of science and technology. These social changes have caused tremendous changes in people's lifestyles, values, and emotional experiences. In this context, Expressionist musicians tried to express their personal inner world through music and reflect the dilemmas and anxieties of human existence. Expressionist music often features dissonant, tense harmonies, and distorted, exaggerated melodic lines to convey deep emotional and psychological states. The main representatives of Expressionism are Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg[3].

2.2.2 Characteristics of Expressionist Music

Among the music genres of the 20th century, Expressionism was a very important genre. It reflected the profound changes in the social, political and cultural environment at that time, and was closely related to the social unrest and spiritual crisis in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. In terms of its characteristics, the main points are as follows:

The first is the intensity of emotional expression. Expressionist music emphasizes the direct and strong expression of emotions and pursues the transmission of strong emotions and moods through music.

The second is the complexity and instability of harmony. In terms of harmony, expressionist music often adopts complex and unstable harmonic structures, emphasizing the free use and change of harmony to achieve emotional expression.

The third is the diversity of musical instruments and timbres. Expressionist music advocates the diverse use of instruments and timbres to enrich the expressive power and emotional conveyance of music.

The fourth is the change and processing of rhythm. In terms of rhythm, Expressionist music often uses irregular changes and processing techniques to reflect inner unrest and chaos.

2.2.3 Analysis of Representative Works of Expressionism

Arnold Schoenberg is the main representative of the Expressionist school of music. In the early days of Expressionism, Schoenberg's major works include "Night of Light", "Pelleas and Melisande", "Chamber Symphony", the opera "Expectation" and "A Survivor from Warsaw"; Berg, who also created works at the same time as Schoenberg, was also a major representative of Expressionism. His representative works include the opera "Wozzeck", "Lulu" and "Violin Concerto"[4].

To sum up, the expressionist music genre of the 20th century emerged in a specific social background. Its musical characteristics are mainly reflected in the intensity of emotional expression, the complexity and instability of harmony, and the diversity of instruments and timbres, as well as the variation and processing of rhythm[5]. At the same time, there are also many representative works showing the artistic charm of this genre.

2.3 Overview of Serialism

Expressionism is a musical style from the early to mid-20th century that is characterized by strong emotional expression and breakthroughs in traditional music forms. Expressionist music often features dissonant, tense harmonies, and distorted, exaggerated melodic lines to convey deep emotional and psychological states. The main representatives of Serialism are Anton Webern and Pierre Boulez.

2.3.1 Origin of Serialism in Music

Serialist music, also known as serial music or serialism, was an important genre in the field of music in the mid-20th century. Its emergence is related to the technological and philosophical developments in the mid-20th century. Composers of this period pursued absolute rationality and objectivity in music, and tried to explore new possibilities in music through mathematical methods. First systematically used in his works by the Austrian composer Arnold Schönberg, he attempted to organize the pitch, rhythm and other musical elements of music through strict sequential rules.

2.3.2 Characteristics of Serialism in Music

The core feature of serialist music is the application of the "twelve-tone system". This means that the composer takes notes from a fixed twelve-note sequence and creates music through different arrangements, repetitions, and variations. This method breaks the traditional rules of harmony and melody, giving the music unprecedented complexity and depth[6].

2.3.3 Analysis of Representative Works of Serialism in Music

Driven by Schoenberg, a representative of the expressionist music genre described earlier, serialist music gradually developed and influenced many later composers. Representatives of serialist music mainly include Anton Webern, Alban Berg and Luciano

Berio, and later the American composer Leonard Bernstein and others have become important figures in the development of serialist music.

The most representative work for the in-depth exploration and application of the "twelve-tone system" is Anton Webern's "String Quartet". This work fully demonstrates the creation methods of "twelve-tone system" and "overall sequence". Webern created a music form that is both abstract and expressive[6] through his meticulous processing of the twelve-tone sequence and his ingenious combination with other musical elements.

In general, the serialism music style is an important change in the field of music in the 20th century. It broke the traditional rules of music creation and opened up a new path for subsequent music development. Although this style of music was controversial in its early days, over time it became accepted and loved by a wide audience.

2.4 Overview of Nationalism

2.4.1 Origin of Nationalism in Music

The rise of nationalist music in the 20th century is related to the rise of nation-states and the strengthening of national identity. Many countries experienced political and social changes during this period, and composers began to pay more attention to the expression of local culture. In the field of literature, many writers began to pay attention to the theme of local culture and national identity, such as William Butler Yeats in Ireland and Rabindranath Tagore in India, and their works reflected respect and exploration for national traditions. The main representatives of nationalism in the 20th century are Béla Bartók and Arnold Schoenberg.

2.4.2 Characteristics of Nationalism in Music

The characteristics of nationalist music are mainly manifested in two aspects. First of all, it attaches great importance to national characteristics and folk elements, and integrates folk music, folk dance and other elements into music creation, making the works full of national customs and local flavour. Secondly, nationalist music is unique and innovative in structure. It often adopts the rhythm, melody and other elements of folk music, and combines it with modern composition techniques to form a novel and unique musical language.

2.4.3 Analysis of Representative Works of Nationalistic Music

In terms of representative composers and works, Smetana's "My Motherland", which uses the history, legends and folk music of Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) as its material, has a beautiful melody, sincere and touching emotions, and is the main representative work of the nationalist music genre; and Grieg's "Peer Gynt Suite", which uses Norwegian folk stories as its theme, dance music and folk language full of folk imagination, is a classic of nationalist music. These works not only demonstrate the composer's deep feelings for the national culture, but also reflect their unique talent and innovative spirit in music creation.

3 Comparative Analysis of the Four Major Music Genres of the Twentieth Century

The four major music genres of the 20th century all have their own characteristics under the influence of their own backgrounds, but they are also connected and influenced each other to some extent.

From a common point of view, the music of these periods all showed breakthroughs and innovations in traditional music forms and expression techniques. Whether it is the musical color and atmosphere of Impressionism, the exploration of local culture by 20th-century nationalism, the emotional expression of Expressionism, or the structural processing of Serialism, the music of these periods tried to expand the expressive power and possibilities of music through new methods. At the same time, musicians in these periods were seeking their own unique artistic language to reflect the social, cultural and spiritual outlook of the times in which they lived.

From the perspective of differences, impressionist music was influenced by symbolist literature and impressionist painting during its development. Its works are good at expressing inner changes, pursuing sensory impressions, and creating mysterious and hazy artistic conceptions; Expressionist music boldly innovates and breaks through the traditional music structure in the form of music, focusing on expressing the fear of reality. It often uses exaggerated expression techniques to express inner emotions through the distortion and abstraction of reality[4]. In addition, while emphasizing the traditions and cultural characteristics of the nation, nationalist music also absorbs elements and techniques from other music genres to form a unique music style. Serialist music draws on knowledge and methods from other fields such as mathematics, logic, science and technology to a certain extent, bringing new possibilities to music creation.

To sum up, the four major music genres of the twentieth century each have their own unique artistic characteristics and historical background, but at the same time there are connections and mutual influences. The exchange and integration between these genres not only enrich the expression of music art, but also promotes the innovation and development of music art.

4 Appreciation of Musical Style and Impressionist Art Movement: Using Debussy's Music as an Example

4.1 Characteristics of Impressionist Music

Impressionist music emphasized color and atmosphere and avoided traditional musical structures and harmonic progressions. Debussy's music often uses vague harmonies, free forms and complex decorative melodies to create a unique musical color. In addition, he also likes to use diatonic and pentatonic scales to further enrich the expressive power of music.

4.2 Analysis of Debussy's Representative Works

4.2.1 Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune" (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun).

Full title of the work: "Prelude to Afternoon of the Faun" (Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune)."Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" (L.86) is an orchestral work composed by Debussy in 1894, inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé's poem of the same name. At the beginning of the work, the melody of the flute and the harmony of the woodwind instruments create a hazy and mysterious atmosphere(See Fig 1).



Fig. 1. Excerpt from the musical score of 'Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun '

4.2.2 La Mer

Full title of work: "The Sea", L.105. Brief history of the work: This is an orchestral work composed of three movements, completed in 1905. Impressionism reflection: In the first movement, the delicate textures of woodwinds and strings imitate the undulations of the waves, showing the infinite changes of the ocean(See Fig2).



Fig. 2. Excerpt from the musical score of 'The Sea'

4.2.3 Estampes

Full title of the work: "Printemps" (Estampes), L.111. Brief history of the work: This is a set of three piano pieces composed in 1903. Impressionism reflection: In "Carnival in Brazil", complex rhythms and changeable harmonies depict the lively scene of the Brazilian Carnival(See Fig 3).



Fig. 3. Excerpt from the musical score of 'The Brazilian Carnival'

4.3 The Relationship between Impressionist Music and Other Art Disciplines

The style and ideas of Impressionism music are also reflected in the visual arts. For example, the Impressionist painters captured the instant feeling of natural landscapes and daily life through changes in light, shadow and color, which are similar to Debussy's music in pursuing instant feeling and atmosphere. In addition, impressionist literature also tends to capture momentary emotions and feelings, which has something in common with the ambiguity and freedom in Debussy's music[7].

5 Conclusion

After analyzing and researching the four major music genres of the 20th century, and appreciating that Claude Debussy's music works as outstanding representatives of Impressionist music, the overall feeling is that this period is an important milestone in the history of music. From the innovative harmony, orchestration and form of the work, it shows a new way of musical expression. Debussy's music not only influenced later music creation, but also had a profound impact on other art forms.

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