



## An Introduction

Music written during the same musical period tends to share various characteristics: baroque music is elaborate with lots of fast notes; classical music is serene and balanced; romantic music is dramatic and full of emotion. In the 20th Century however, composers took music in so many different directions that it can be hard to characterise. Composers wanted to experiment and innovate; they borrowed from different musical styles and were inspired by art and philosophy. The result is an era with many varied styles and exciting musical developments.

Although many composers wanted to break away from the past, there were still plenty of composers continuing the romantic tradition. English composer Edward Elgar, Richard Strauss from Germany and the Russian composer Rachmaninoff wrote large-scale symphonies and sweeping, passionate melodies. They stuck to the rules of tonality which told composers how to combine notes in a way that was pleasing to the ear. Other composers, such as Stravinsky and Prokofiev began their composing careers by looking back to the rule books of the classical and baroque eras creating a style called neoclassicism (or new classical) which mimicked music from hundreds of years earlier.

Some 20th century composers such as Shostakovich, Bernstein and Copland looked outside of classical music and to jazz or world music for their inspiration. George Gershwin traversed the boundaries between musical theatre, jazz and classical music and often combined elements of all three. His piece Rhapsody in Blue is a triumph of this crossover, opening with a beguiling clarinet glissando, sliding upwards before starting the tune. Meanwhile, Benjamin Britten and Debussy both used elements from Balinese gamelan music in their compositions. French composer Debussy also looked to the visual arts. He developed a style called impressionism which, like impressionist art, aimed to capture emotion, mood and colour rather than focus on detail.

If these composers were borrowing from elsewhere, there were others who wanted to go back to the drawing board completely. Composers such as Schoenberg, Berg and Stockhausen rejected rules about tonality. Most music has a set key signature which determines which notes



can be used, which notes go well together and which do not. These composers experimented with tonality and some embraced dissonance (combinations of clashing notes). The music was not universally liked but it has been seen as an important contribution to modern music. Some pieces broke the rules by using non-instruments and electronic sounds or, in the case of John Cage's 4'33'', pieces consisting of no music at all and only the sounds of the surrounding environment. Stockhausen even wrote a string quartet where each member of the quartet was supposed to be flown up in a different helicopter. Unsurprisingly, it is not often performed!

Not content with the way music was becoming increasingly complicated, a group of American composers created what became known as minimalist music. Philip Glass and Steve Reich became popular for their sometimes hypnotic music which layered repeating and subtly changing sequences of notes or rhythms. Different Trains by Steve Reich used recorded speech and train sounds as the basis of melodies in a piece exploring the experiences and horrors of World War II.

Though some 20th Century music challenged listeners, it has also resulted in new techniques, new instruments and new methods. Some of these have been adopted by popular music and carried forward by newer composers. It also celebrated music from the past and from different cultures – without being tied to it.

## EXPLANATION FOCUS

1. How are the composers mentioned in paragraph 3 linked?
2. What is the writer's opinion of Rhapsody in Blue? How do you know?
3. How can we tell that some 20th Century music is controversial?
4. What is the writer's view on the Helicopter Quartet?
5. What is the writer's overall view on 20th Century music?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**V**

What does innovate mean?

**V**

Which word is closest in meaning to 'copied'?

**R**

Which two neoclassical composers are mentioned?

**R**

Who wrote Rhapsody in Blue?

**I**

Why do you think that the Helicopter Quartet is rarely performed?

## Benjamin Britten

Benjamin Britten is one of the greatest English composers of the 20th Century. He is especially known for composing operas – stories told through music and singing – but he was a prolific composer in many different styles and was also a renowned conductor and pianist.

Britten was born in Suffolk in 1913 and his musical abilities shone through from a young age. He learned to play the piano not long after he could talk and, with the encouragement of his mother, started composing before he was even in school. He studied composition formally from the age of 12 including with other musical heavyweights Frank Bridge and John Ireland. He continued his studies at the Royal College of Music in London where he had been awarded a scholarship. Upon graduation he started writing music for film, radio and theatre alongside his other composing.

In 1937, Britten met the tenor Peter Pears who was to become his long-term partner, inspiration and collaborator. Together, they travelled to the United States. When the second world war broke out, the two were advised to remain where they were rather than risk the journey home. They stayed in America until 1942 where Britten continued composing. However, his longing for home (and most especially, his love for the coast where he had grown up) grew too strong and Britten and Pears sailed back to England. Britten was a pacifist who disagreed with fighting of any kind. As such, once in England, he needed to apply as a conscientious objector in order to ensure that he would not be called up to fight. On appeal, he gained exemption from any military service arguing that he should be allowed to serve his community as his conscience dictated by using his musical skills. Britten was luckier than fellow composer, Tippett, who was imprisoned for refusing military duties.

Britten continued work on his opera Peter Grimes, the tragic story of an outsider ostracized by his community. It was first performed in 1945 at London's Sadler's Wells Theatre with Peter Pears in the lead role. It was a hit and is still considered the finest English Opera since Purcell some 300 years earlier. The musical depictions of the sea are especially evocative, conveying the



gentle ripples in the moonlight or the violent power of a storm.

Not long after Peter Grimes, Britten wrote 'A young Person's Guide to the Orchestra'. In a similar way to Saint-Saens' The Carnival of the Animals and Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf, the piece was a way of introducing children to different instruments. Another piece which deserves a specific mention is Britten's War Requiem completed in 1962. This large-scale choral work was written for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral, rebuilt amongst the ruins of the original cathedral, bombed during the second world war. In it, Britten invokes the horror of war and gives a voice to his own views on the futility of war.

Alongside his musical legacy, Britten – together with Peter Pears – founded the Aldeburgh Festival and created the Snape Maltings Concert Hall. Not long before his death in 1976, Britten was given the title Lord Britten. This honour recognises the immense contribution Britten made to English music.

## RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. When did Britten return to England?
2. What is a pacifist?
3. Which composer was sent to prison for refusing to fight?
4. What event was the War Requiem composed for?
5. What festival did Britten and Pears start?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**V**

Which word tells us that Britten composed a lot of music?

**E**

How do we know that Britten did not receive his military exemption on the first attempt?

**V**

What does ostracized mean?

**V**

What does evocative mean?

**S**

**Order these events 1-6:**

Britten met Peter Pears.

Britten composed the War Requiem.

Benjamin Britten attended the Royal College of Music.

Britten was made a Lord.

Britten travelled to America.

Britten was exempted from military service.





## Britain's Youth Tribes

Young people – or youths - as a group distinct from either children or adults really became a force to be reckoned with in Britain as the country recovered from the horrors of the second world war. Immediately after the war, there had been a baby boom with a jump in the birth rate. Unlike their parents' generation, these 'baby boomers' became teenagers and twenty-somethings in an era of peace and prosperity. There were large numbers of young people who had the luxury of both free time and money to spare. They spent it on fashion and music often in ways that set themselves apart from other groups and of course, the older generation. Who were these cultural tribes who influenced music and fashion in this period?

### The Teddy Boys (Teds) – 1950s

The first youth tribe to emerge after the war became known as the Teds or Teddy Boys because of their dress choices reminiscent of the Edwardian times (Ted being a shortened form of Edward). They wore tailored velvet jackets, ties and skinny (drainpipe) trousers. Musically, the Teddy Boys were fans of the new rock and roll music emerging from the United States. The music of Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis raced up the British charts and ignited a generation of young people keen to let loose and have fun. However, some took the fun too far and the Teddy Boys were seen by some as a menace and groups of young people got reputations as dangerous mobs.

### Mods and Rockers – 1960s

This pair of rival groups only added to the fear that young people were dangerous trouble-makers. Mods were clean-cut, smart young people, riding scooters and listening to ska, blues and soul music. They became fans of the British band – The Who – who, although not mods themselves, wrote a 'Rock Opera' in honour of the mods called Quadrophenia. The Rockers meanwhile were leather-clad, motorcycle-riding rock and roll fans. The mods and rockers came to blows in a series of fights in the normally sleepy and well-to-do seaside towns on the south coast. Meanwhile, the Beatles emerged ready to take the world by storm and dismissed the conflict, instead calling themselves 'Mockers' and taking elements from both groups.

## Hippies – 1960s

With their long hair and floaty, colourful dresses and flared trousers, the hippies have come to represent the swinging sixties. They stood for freedom and expression and loved to gather at music festivals where folk music by the likes of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez was their soundtrack. The Beatles embraced the new style and attitudes and that shift is represented in their album Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. Another band to emerge from this era – Pink Floyd – have become one of the best-selling bands of all time.

## Punks – 1970s

Loud, angry and brash, the punks did not hide their desire to upset the status quo. The movement arose from a dissatisfaction among young people about the government and the police. Whilst the Teddy Boys revelled in a newfound wealth and freedom, by the mid 1970s, unemployment started to rise just as prices were also spiralling upwards. To highlight their rebellion against society, punks died their hair bright colours and some spiked it up into a hairstyle called a mohawk. They expressed their protests in music too, in a genre called punk rock. British band The Clash became popular in the UK and the US and their album 'London Calling' is often ranked as one of the best albums of all time.

### RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. Where did the name Teddy Boys come from?
2. Which group used to ride motorcycles?
3. Which British Band wrote Quadrophenia?
4. What difficulties were faced by young people in the 1970s?
5. What is a mohawk?

### VIPERS QUESTIONS

**E**

What is a tribe and why have these groups been called youth tribes?

**V**

What is suggested by the phrase 'well-to-do'?

**E**

What did the Beatles mean when they called themselves 'mockers'?

**V**

What phrase tells us that Punks wanted to upset the normal way of things?

**V**

What is meant by the phrase 'revelled in'?



## John Cage's 4'33"

A musician walks on to a stage. He bows and the applause resonates through the auditorium before eventually petering out. The pianist – in a smart tailcoat - sits at the grand piano which takes pride of place at the very centre of the platform. He opens the lid of the keyboard and then closes it again. He sits there for precisely 33 seconds then briefly re-opens the lid and closes it once more, resetting the stopwatch for another two minutes and 40 seconds. He turns the page on his music. Finally, he repeats the opening and closing manoeuvre one more time before sitting for a final one minute and 20 seconds. He stands and acknowledges the audience having played not a single note; the applause is a little confused this time and a ripple of bemused chatter ripples around the room. The performer leaves the stage.

So went the premiere for John Cage's work entitled 4'33" (four minutes and 33 seconds) and other performances since its first outing in 1952 have followed a similar routine albeit with different instruments. The piece is controversial for containing not a single note. Some dismiss it as a stunt or a joke at the expense of hundreds of years of musical tradition. Despite this, it has become an icon of 20th Century classical music and notorious amongst musicians. It is one example of the way composers were subverting traditions, exploring new ideas and challenging audiences.

John Cage was born in 1912 in California, US. He was a free-thinker from a young age and was interested in ideas and art before he eventually pursued music in particular. In his music, he was keen to experiment and break free from any rules and conventions. He made use of a 'prepared piano' in several works: a piano which had been adapted and tampered with so that it made new and unique percussive sounds. He was fascinated by Eastern philosophy and composed music based on chance by using coin tosses or an ancient Chinese text called the I Ching to tell him what notes or rhythms to write next. He thought this captured the random and constantly changing nature of reality and prevented him imposing his own preferences on the music. Another piece used 12 radios with the 'performers' twisting and turning the dials to tune in and out



of different stations. Snatches of speech or music would break through in between crackles and hissing of radio static. Chance would ensure a a one-off soundscape would be created each time.

The work 4'33'' follows on from these ideas and is heavily inspired by Cage's interest in Zen Buddhism. 4'33'' is not about four and half minutes of silence: rather, it is an invitation for those present to attend to and appreciate the noises in the world around them. Whether it is the rustle of clothing, the sound of one's own breath, the patter of raindrops on the roof or the hum of the building itself, the sounds will not assemble in that particular combination at any other time again. Cage found something deeply profound in stopping to engage in the world without trying to mould it into something beautiful, ordered or anything other than it is.

Musical joke, publicity stunt or spiritual experience, there's no denying that 4'33'' has proved to be significant to the development of 20th century music and John Cage himself professed it his most important work.

## VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. What does the phrase 'petering out' mean?
2. What does the word notorious suggest about people's opinions of 4'33''?
3. Which word in the second paragraph is closest in meaning to 'overturning'?
4. Which word in the 3rd paragraph is closest in meaning to customs?
5. What is a soundscape?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

- I** How does the mood change over the course of the performance described in the opening Give evidence to support your answer.
- R** When was 4'33'' premiered?
- E** Why is the word 'performers' written in inverted commas?
- R** What is one example of how Cage used chance in his compositions?
- S** What is the same and what is different about each performance of 4'33''?



## Stravinsky's Rite Of Spring

30th May 1913

### 'Rite' Sparks Riot

A performance of Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's latest composition has descended into chaos at its premiere yesterday at the Champs-Élysées Theatre in Paris. Outraged audience members expressed their objection to the new and controversial ballet – entitled 'The Rite of Spring' – with what some have described as a violent riot and others as a 'lively debate'. Whilst the exact details are yet to be verified, witnesses have claimed that items were thrown at performers, threats were dealt and the police were forced to intervene to prevent the incident escalating even further.

Igor Stravinsky is perhaps best known for his earlier ballets Firebird and Petrushka, both of which have received considerable critical acclaim. The premiere for this most recent work was a sell-out with all of Paris high society flocking to be there for opening night. Whether they already had misgivings about the subject matter chosen – a primitive pagan spring ritual enacted through dance – is not clear. What is clear is that even before the first notes had been played, the mood in the room was one of considerable tension. Depicting a young girl dancing herself to death, even through the medium of dance, was always bound to be inflammatory. The jeering and hissing began almost immediately and disputes arose between different factions within the audience. There appears to have been a large group of people intent upon disrupting the event. However, the performance was able to continue and it even received a standing ovation at the end (albeit alongside continued hostility from others).

The composition has sent shock waves through the musical world. Indeed, there have been accusations that it is deliberately violating every rule or convention upon which western classical music has been built. The piece incorporates dissonant chords with loud, jarring and repetitive rhythms at times giving an impression almost as chaotic as the Parisian audience itself. One horrified witness complained, 'It was just noise. I couldn't make head nor tail of it.'



Sometimes, it was like the two halves of the orchestra were playing completely different pieces. It was a mess.'

But there are those who have offered a different view. We spoke to a critic off the record who was keen to put forward another opinion. 'The piece may be challenging,' he told us, 'but it is also exhilarating. Thrilling even. Something this new and revolutionary will always cause some hysteria amongst those who are resistant to any change, but I feel sure that The Rite of Spring is destined to stand the test of time and become a true classic.' He went on to remind us that the great composer Beethoven was also considered a rule-breaker. 'All of the greatest composers – indeed all great artists – must be willing to take risks,' he insisted. 'Otherwise there will never be anything new. Stravinsky will – in my view – be remembered as one of the greats.'

Whether The Rite of Spring will ultimately go down as a great musical disaster or a spectacular artistic triumph is an open question. The theatre has insisted that, for now at least, the show will go on. Performances are also planned in London next month. London theatre-goers will therefore have the chance to decide for themselves.

## VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Which phrase tells us that the facts of the matter have not been proven or confirmed?
2. What does 'intervene' mean?
3. What word in the second paragraph is closest in meaning to 'praise' or 'approval'?
4. What word or phrase could replace 'misgivings'?
5. Which word in the second paragraph describes something that is likely to make people angry?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**R**

Where was the first performance of the Rite of Spring?

**S**

What caused the outrage about the performance?

**I**

What evidence is there that the critic may be worried about how his or her views would be received?

**E**

What evidence is there in the text to support the idea that Stravinsky was a great composer?

**E**

How has the writer tried to ensure the article is balanced?

## Answers - Escaping the Workhouse:

1. They all took inspiration from outside classical music: from jazz, world music or art.
2. The writer likes it: they describe it as a triumph and the opening as beguiling.
3. The writer says it is 'not universally liked' and says it challenged listeners.
4. The writer seems to find it a bit ridiculous, surprising or extreme.
5. That it is important/significant: it has led to the development of new instruments, methods and techniques and influences other new music. The writer talks of 'exciting developments'.

V: To come up with new ideas

V: mimicked

R: Stravinsky and Prokofiev

R: George Gershwin

I: It is likely to be very expensive and impractical to get 4 helicopters.

Answers - Stage 6 - Benjamin Britten:

1. 1942
2. Someone who disagrees with fighting
3. Tippett
4. The consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral
5. The Aldeburgh Festival

V: prolific

E: The phrase 'on appeal'

V: Excluded, shunned, avoided

V: Brings strong images or feelings to mind

S:

Britten met Peter Pears. 2

Britten composed the War Requiem. 5

Benjamin Britten attended the Royal College of Music. 1

Britten was made a Lord. 6

Britten travelled to America. 3



Answers - Stage 6 - Britain's Youth Tribes:

1. From their Edwardian inspired dress.
2. The Rockers
3. The Who
4. Unemployment and rising prices
5. A spiked up hairstyle worn by punks

E: A tribe is a group of people with shared language, culture and history. The groups in this text are similar to tribes because they are united by their fashion and music tastes. It is meant to show that they identify strongly with their group.

V: Polite, comfortable, wealthy

E: It was a combination of the words mod and rocker meant to signify that they were both.

V: Upset the status quo

V: enjoyed, loved

Answers - Stage 6 - John Cage's 4'33'':

1. Fading away, gradually coming to an end
2. It was famous but not in an entirely positive way.
3. Subverting
4. conventions
5. A combination of sounds in an environment

I: The applause resonating as the performer comes on the stage suggests enthusiasm for the performance. However, afterwards, the applause is confused and there is bemused chatter. People aren't sure what to make of it.

R: 1952

E: To demonstrate that they aren't exactly performers in the normal sense.

R: Rolling a dice or using the I Ching to decide what to write, relying on radios so that the result is always different, chance in the sounds which will appear during 4'33''.

S: It is the same length with the same timed sections however the sounds in the background will be different each time.

## Answers - Stage 6 - News Report – Premiere of Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring:

1. yet to be verified
2. Get involved in a difficult situation to stop it getting worse/ step in.
3. Acclaim
4. doubts, worries, concerns, scepticism
5. inflammatory

R: The Champs-Élysées Theatre in Paris

S: The subject matter of a pagan ritual and including a dance of a girl dancing herself to death and also the music itself which was challenging.

I: He or she speaks 'off the record' – they don't want their name associated with the comments.

E: His other compositions were well-received, the critic explains that great composers need to take risks and break rules which Stravinsky does, he compares him to Beethoven.

E: They have included different opinions eg. explaining that it could be seen as a violent riot or a lively debate, included the information about the standing ovation as well as about the riot, included quotations expressing different viewpoints, explained that it's an open question how the piece will be received in the future.