

Chapter 26: Modernism in France: 1870–1930

- I. Introduction
 - A. At the same time the Austro-Germans were seeking new musical legacies, composers in France were moving in a different direction.
 - B. French composers turned to literature, the visual arts, and music from Russia, Asia, and the United States.
 1. Ballet gained renewed importance as a musical genre under Russian influence.
 2. French composers wanted to deflate the Wagnerian rhetoric and placed a renewed premium on physical sensation.
 - a) They sought pleasure over power.
 3. A complex mixture of influences included Wagner, Impressionism, Symbolism, and international festivals in Paris.
- II. Erik Satie: escaping the shadow of Wagner
 - A. Satie lived a Bohemian life in Montmartre where he was a pianist at a local night club.
 1. He was known as the “laziest” student at the Paris Conservatoire, a counterculture composer who liked to annoy his professors.
 2. Proclaiming himself an anti-Wagnerite was popular, and choosing to write in an “old” style was also popular in the 1880s and 1890s.
 3. Satie’s sarabandes, however, were different, particularly in their use of harmony. “Consonant” seventh and ninth chords became a sign of French style.
- III. Claude Debussy: searching for a new harmonic freedom
 - A. Early years
 1. Satie’s use of harmony was influential.
 2. Composed in 1887, they were not published until 1911, so it took some time for them to circulate.
 3. Debussy’s early works appeared before Satie’s most famous work (the three *Gymnopédies*).
 4. Even though their lives intersected in several ways, Debussy differed significantly from Satie.
 5. When he returned from his travels, Debussy was somewhat of a rebel.
 6. He believed in musical pleasure over rules and tradition.
 7. Nonetheless, he controlled his experiment with new sounds.
 8. Ultimately, in his 1894 Sarabande, he creates an atmosphere of sound where what used to be labeled “dissonant” and in need of resolution does not need to do so.
 9. Debussy’s “Voiles” (1909) demonstrates his harmonic idiom.
 - B. Impressionism and Symbolism
 1. Aspects of “Voiles” correspond to painting techniques: the use of color (timbres) and blurry harmony.
 2. These adjectives are associated with Impressionism, a school of French painting beginning in the 1880s.
 3. Debussy disliked being called Impressionist.

4. The lack of empathy in his art likened him further to the visual arts.
5. The absence of a harmonic push forward can be likened to an artwork that extends in space rather than unfolds in time.
6. Debussy's "Voiles" can also be compared to the French poetry movement known as Symbolism, associated with Baudelaire.

C. *Pelléas et Mélisande*

1. Symbolism was a main factor in several of Debussy's most important pieces.
2. His first famous work, *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), was based on a poem by Mallarmé, leader of the Symbolists after Baudelaire.
3. His only opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, was based on a drama by Maeterlinck, the leader of the Symbolist movement after Mallarmé.

IV. Essentially French: Gabriel Fauré and Maurice Ravel

A. Fauré, an older contemporary of Debussy, was attracted to Symbolist poetry as well and set many poems to music.

1. His settings are known as *mélodie*, a genre of art song.
2. Fauré set many poems by Verlaine.
3. Fauré's Requiem dates from the last quarter of the nineteenth century and is typically French.
4. Restraint is the order of the day—there is no *Dies irae* (the most dramatic part of the Requiem).

B. Maurice Ravel

1. The remaining Impressionist composer was Ravel.
2. His music was more popular than Debussy's, eventually, thanks to the *Bolero* (1928).
3. Influenced by Russian music and study with Fauré, Ravel's music is particularly colorful and sensual (as demonstrated in his orchestration of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, 1922).
4. Ravel capitalized on an exoticism borne of a French father and Basque mother (Pyrenees).

V. New possibilities for women

A. Women artists, in any medium, fought against a variety of prejudices.

1. A few noteworthy women were able to succeed despite almost unbeatable odds.
2. France allowed opportunities much earlier than other European countries (including the United States).
3. Women were allowed to compete for the Prix de Rome beginning in 1903.
4. Four women won it in the first decade they were eligible.
 - a) These include Lili Boulanger (1913).
 - 1) Her sister, Nadia, was an influential teacher in the twentieth century, although she never placed first.

VI. The rebirth of ballet

A. The genre is prominent in France, where it can be regarded as a "wordless opera."

1. *Ballet d'action*, or plot ballet, had a scenario, or planned sequence of dance numbers, which took the place of the libretto in an opera.

- a) Recitative was done as pantomime.
- b) Actual dances were parallel to arias.
2. Adolphe Adam was a successful Romantic ballet composer. His most famous work was *Giselle* (1841).
3. Another popular composer was Léo Delibes, who composed *Coppélia* and *Sylvia*.
4. Later in the nineteenth century, ballet lost credibility as a “serious” compositional product, except ballet remained a serious art in Russia.
5. Tchaikovsky rescued the ballet as a serious musical composition.
6. Sergey Diaghilev (1872–1929) transformed Russian Romantic ballet into a Modernist art.

B. Stravinsky’s *The Firebird* and *Petrushka*

1. Stravinsky agreed to Diaghilev’s request for a Russian folk subject.
2. The first of Stravinsky’s ballets was *The Firebird*.
3. As he composed *The Firebird*, Stravinsky had an idea that would develop into *The Rite of Spring*. He chose, however, to first write a comic piece: *Petrushka*.
4. With the second tableau of *Petrushka* Stravinsky moved into a new realm—octatonicism became a tonality in its own right.
5. The *Petrushka* chord (Ex. 26-4) illustrates outbursts of emotion among the characters.
6. Part of the success with *Petrushka* can be attributed to the magnificent dancing of Nijinsky.

C. *The Rite of Spring*

1. The success of *Petrushka* turned Stravinsky back to the idea of a prehistory ballet, a somewhat common theme among artists of the period.
2. Some of the tableaux are based on historical documents that describe aspects of prehistorical worship practices.
3. Stravinsky sought maximal dissonance and sounded it through an extremely large orchestra, which he used to brilliant effect.

D. Scandalized reactions to the *Rite of Spring*

1. Debussy’s *Jeux* and Stravinsky’s *Rite* were premiered within two weeks of each other.
2. Debussy’s work was not so successful, or at least notorious, and disappeared from the stage until the mid-twentieth century. Its rehearsal numbers were more typical of the 1910s, as was the music.
3. The dress rehearsal of *Rite* went well and a sense of drama surrounded the premiere.
4. The premiere itself is a thing of legend, although the details of exactly what happened are unclear.
5. The work has been described as primitivism (appealing to savages/peasants/raw emotion and far removed from Romanticism)—and even biologism (life is ultimately the sum of physicality). The latter challenged traditional religious beliefs.

6. With Stravinsky's *Rite* being discussed in all the papers and elsewhere under such weighty consideration, Debussy's *Jeux* dropped from such discussion altogether.