**Chapter 9**

**Isms for Orchestra**

After about 1910 the symphony began to be a less important means for composers to express themselves. Due to a number of political and economic issues brought on by the first world war of the 20th century, many composers turned to composing for smaller ensembles. This doesn’t mean that composers completely abandoned the old forms or writing for the orchestra. In the 20th century many composers such as Americans Charles Ives and Aaron Copland, Russians Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich wrote symphonies and program music for large orchestra. And, this continues to the current day with composers like John Adams, Libby Larsen, Augusta Read Thomas, and John Corigliano. However, new forms of music intended for orchestra were also developed in the 20th century. Around the turn of the 20th century a new form of music called impressionism developed. The term, taken from painting usually means music in which tone color is very important, form is less important, melodies are long and often sound directionless because of a lack of rhythmic pulse. Much of this music is written for the orchestra because it can offer the largest number of combinations of instruments. Impressionistic orchestral music usually has a title that sets a mood or scene—rarely telling an actual story. It uses scales that are non-Western that help destroy the sound of one note being most important in a work.

Impressionism began in painting with the works of Monet, Manet, and Dega. In music the works of Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Paul Dukas are impressionistic in style. And, tone color became most important—more important even than rhythm or melody.

 Perhaps the most important composer of impressionistic music was Claude Debussy. Debussy lived from 1862 to 1918 and spent most of his musical life in Paris. His style is one in which musical sounds are most important; not melodies or rhythms. He borrowed sounds from music of East Asia and the Pacific Rim. And, he created these new sounds by infusing the traditional orchestral sound of the time with new scales, new harmonies, and new combinations of instruments that imitated the music he heard from Asia. His works *La Mer, Three Nocturnes,* and *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* are all excellent examples of the impressionistic style.

Another of the earliest and most interesting isms of the 20th century was called expressionism. Expressionism was developed by a group of composers working in Vienna in the early part of the 20th century. It is a sort of hyper expressive music that depicts extreme emotionalism and inner feelings. Like impressionism, the movement began in painting. One of the most famous paintings of this style is Edvard Munch’s “The Scream.” Expressionism’s champion composer was Arnold Schoenberg. He and his pupils Anton Webern and Alban Berg created music that sounds atonal (meaning one note is not more important than another), has large swings in dynamics, huge and angry sounding accents, and is dissonant to the ears. Schoenberg lived from 1874 to 1951 and began his career in Germany. He later immigrated to the United States where he taught at both USC and UCLA. Expressionism is complex and emotional music. The structure of the music is very ordered, almost mathematical in nature. But it doesn’t sound so. Its passionate irregular rhythms, long melodies that defy memory, and lack of resolution of dissonant sounds create an extreme sounding music. Schoenberg also infused into expressionism a new system of writing music called the twelve-tone system in which he uses all twelve pitches. Music prior to this made use more regularly of just the primary seven notes of the scale. This new system lacks the sound to most people’s ears of a "home" base sound.

In the early part of the 20th century some composers wrote music that was reminiscent of the Baroque and Classical eras. This Neoclassical music was intended to be absolute music without any programmatic aspects. Composers writing in this style imitated the forms, symmetry, and gracefulness especially of the Classical era. The music for orchestra is smaller in scale, lighter in texture, and tonal. The style resulted in a combination of Classical era ideas of restraint and formal structure with 20th century harmonic language. The style was a reaction to the overly expressionistic music of impressionism and expressionism.

The most important composers of Neoclassicism were Sergei Prokofiev, Aaron Copland, and Igor Stravinsky. Prokofiev lived from 1891 to 1953 in Russia under the Soviet system of control of culture. He was one of the world’s leading concert pianists of the early 20th century. Prokofiev wrote several popular works for the stage that were reworked into concert versions, including his ballet *Romeo and Juliet,* the children’s piece *Peter and the Wolf,* and his scores for the films *Lieutenant Kijé* and *Alexander Nevsky.* Both Copland and Stravinsky will be studied in the chapter on ballet.

Another important style of orchestral music of the 20th and 21st centuries is minimalism. It is a style of concert music based upon the notion of creating a long work from a single idea that is repeated again and again without much variation. Minimalism is usually very clear tonally and it is easy to identify the specific rhythmic or melodic motif that is the basis of the work. Important composers of this style include the American composers Steven Reich, Philip Glass, and John Adams.

The final ism of orchestral music of the 20th and 21st centuries studied in this chapter is neo-romanticism. It is a reaction to the avant-garde music of the 20th century- the electronic music, chance music, and expressionism. It is a return to the large orchestral style of the 19th century, hence its name. Orchestral pieces in this style are usually for large orchestra and have lush sounding melodies set in both traditional and non-traditional orchestral forms. The music is greatly influenced by film music, and in many cases sounds similar to a film score. In fact, many of the composers of both this style and minimalism are also well-known film composers.

Some of the greatest neoromantic composers include Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich and Americans Samuel Barber, David del Tredici, George Rochberg, and Libby Larsen.

Over the past 300 years music for orchestra has changed in style significantly. However, the intent has not. People are still interested in going to a concert hall to hear a large orchestra play instrumental music in some form or other; suite, symphony, or symphonic poem. Composers have developed styles such as impressionism, minimalism, and neo-romanticism to match with society’s needs and tastes at the time. Over time the orchestra has become larger making it more capable of expressing a wide range of dynamics and tone colors. The orchestral music of today is less rigid in form and structure than that of the Baroque and Classical eras. But it as capable of expressing human emotions as ever.