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Fundamental Differences Between Impressionism and Expressionism

During the late 19th century and early 20th century, music began to branch out in different ways. Some types of music favored the classical style, while others were innovative in their sound and structure. Two of the styles that came out of this era was impressionism and expressionism. Although impressionism and expressionism both came from the turn of the century, their composers use very different techniques and produce very different sounds.

Impressionist music uses harmonies and the individual sounds of the different instruments to create a sense of imagery in the listener. One of the most famous impressionist artists is Claude Debussy. Debussy used several hallmark techniques to create a sense of imagery and emotion in his pieces, one of those being an ambiguous sense of tonality. By using whole-tone and pentatonic scales, he was able to create beautiful imagery and an ambiguous sense of tonality. He also often used sequences chromaticism, diatonic scales, major 2nd chords, 7th, 9th, and 11th cords to add to this ambiguity. Between these different compositional techniques, Debussy and other impressionist composers are able to invoke vivid imagery and emotion in the mind of the listener.

One piece where Debussy invokes a sense of imagery and emotion is in his piece, *Nauages* (Clouds). He uses tonal ambiguity, 9th and 11th chords, and chromaticism to create an open, floating feeling. The floating sense given by the melody, different chords, and different tonal centers

creates the image of clouds drifting by. Sometimes, the music is sweet and flowing, and other times, it has a hint of a sinister sound, all portraying the different clouds that could float by during a day. Sometimes the clouds can be peaceful and pretty, and other times, they can be dark and gloomy. Debussy's compositional devices reflect this by juxtaposing sweet sounding tones, melodies, and chords with darker sounds.

Expressionism also evokes a sense of emotion, but the emotions evoked are quite different from that of impressionism. One famous expressionist composer is Anton Webern. Webern used several devices to shape the emotions in his music, the most distinct being the use of the twelve-tone method. The twelve-tone method is a compositional device used to create complete atonality and has a systematic ordering of the twelve chromatic notes. Webern and other expressionists used different arrangements of the twelve chromatic notes called twelve-tone rows. In each row, all twelve chromatic notes must be used, and none can be repeated until a new row begins. To compose twelve-tone music, composers had to be very precise in the ordering and use of each note. The rigorous ordering of the notes in combination with the complete loss of tonality was used to create an uneasy feeling for the audience.

One piece of Webern's music that invokes an uneasy feeling is his collection of short pieces called *Five movements for String Quartet*. The first of the five pieces in the collection is called *Heftig Bewegt*, translating to "violent movement." In this piece, he uses lots of unresolved dissonances, ever-changing speeds, and avoids a sense of tonality entirely. Between these devices, it gives off an eerie, open-ended feeling – living up to its title and purpose exactly.

With the differing compositional devices used between Webern and Debussy, there is a clear difference between the sound, style, and intention of expressionism and impressionism.

Impressionism paints beautiful pictures of moments and emotions, while expressionism seeks to evoke more raw, violent, uneasy, and realistic feelings.

Works Cited

Burkholder, Peter., Grout, Donald., Palisca, Claude. *A History of Western Music*. New York: WW Norton Publishing, 2014. Print.