

Twentieth Century Music

Impressionist Music (early 20th century)

The term **Impressionist** is borrowed from a style of painting in which the images were blurred and hazy.



Early 20th Century **Impressionist** composers, such as Claude Debussy, attempted to incorporate the same vague, hazy feelings into their music.

Common characteristics of **Impressionist** music include the **whole tone scale** and **discords**.

The **whole tone scale** is made up from notes that are **tone** apart:



Discords in parallel motion:





Listen to an excerpt from *Voiles* by Debussy played on the piano.
Listen for:

Whole tone harmonies

Vague rhythms

Rubato

Pedal

Listen for:

- Right hand starts quietly, playing a descending phrase in 3rds
- Opening phrase outlines part of the WHOLE TONE SCALE
- This is immediately followed by an OCTAVE leap in bar 2
- The opening phrase repeats but develops into a descending WHOLE TONE SCALE
- The left hand then plays a repeated low note – PEDAL
- The RH enters with a short ascending phrase using whole tones
- LH continues the PEDAL
- Music continues with melodic fragments and harmonies based mainly on WHOLE TONE SCALE but with some use of PENTATONIC SCALE.



Listen to an excerpt from *Prelude à L'après-midi d'un Faune* by Debussy played by an orchestra. The piece was inspired by a poem by the Frenchman, Stephane Mallarmé.

It describes a young faun (a mythological creature of woodlands and forests – part human, but with pointed ears, and horns, tail and feet of a goat) lying under shady trees in the intense heat of a summer's afternoon. His thoughts gradually become more and more hazy as he drowns in the heat.

Listen for:

Solo flute

Vague rhythms

Harp glissando



Listen to some Christmas songs adapted to use the whole tone scale!

Listen to some popular songs that use the whole tone scale

Listen to *Reflets dans l'eau* (Reflections in the Water) by Debussy. As you listen, notice:

- Use of rippling arpeggios/ broken chord patterns
- Vague sense of pulse and use of rubato
- Use of pentatonic scale, whole tone scale and chromatic harmonies

Use the table below to identify relevant features

Melody/ harmony	Rhythm/ Tempo	Timbre	Dynamics

Listen to parts of *La Mer* (The Sea) by Debussy. *La Mer* is a series of three symphonic sketches with individual titles. As you listen to parts of the individual movements, consider which features of the music evoke or create an impression of different aspects of the sea. Use the table below to identify relevant features

	Melody/ harmony	Rhythm/ Tempo	Timbre	Dynamics
<i>From Dawn to midday on the sea</i>				
<i>Play of the waves</i>				
<i>Dialogue of the wind and the sea</i>				



Minimalist Music (20th Century)

Minimalist music is a style of music that evolved during the second half of the 20th Century. **Minimalist** composers, such as Philip Glass and John Adams, deliberately attempted to make their music less complicated by basing their compositions on simple melodic and rhythmic figures that are constantly repeated with only very slight changes each time. Complete pieces are often based entirely on short repeated motifs.

Listen to *Four Organs* – Steve Reich

- This is Minimalism in its purest form. *Four Organs* works out the very gradual elongation of a single chord. This chord is extended one note at a time. There is no change of pitch, timbre, dynamics or harmony. Over the course of the piece the chord grows from a short note to a dense sonic mass.

Phillip Glass is well known for writing a great deal of music for films, as well as several operas.



Listen to an excerpt from *Dance II* by Philip Glass played by **strings**.
Listen for:

Repetition

Simple harmonies

Cross rhythms



Listen to an excerpt from *Giorni Dispari* by the Italian composer Ludovico Einaudi, played by the **piano** and **strings**. Listen for:

Repetition

Simple harmonies

Arco strings

Piano

128

133

138

Minimalist Music

Here are excerpts from the piano piece *Mad Rush* by Philip Glass, illustrating some typical **Minimalist** techniques.

The piece starts with simple harmonies, **repetition** and **three against two**:



As the piece develops the left hand pattern remains very simple while the right hand rhythm becomes more rapid:



Then the left hand starts to match the right hand rhythm but in **contrary motion**:



The pattern then changes slightly as the piece progresses:

