

## Preparing for A105: Tradition and dissent in music

From Book 2, *Tradition and Dissent*, Chapter 6 Tradition and Dissent in Music: Dmitri Shostakovich, pp. 193-5.

From the chapters you have already studied in Book 2, you should have a good understanding of the words ‘tradition’ and ‘dissent’ and be able to apply them to different disciplines within the arts. For example, in Chapter 2 you looked at the ways in which poets build on traditions established by preceding generations of writers. You will find a similar approach adopted in this chapter on music, which looks at traditional musical practices, both in terms of forms and performance.

In music, the word ‘tradition’ can be understood to mean many different things. Here is a list of some of the issues that this word might raise:

- unbroken musical traditions passed on through time and place
- the revival and reinvention of traditions
- how musical tradition is transmitted
- **ethnography** (collecting folk and other musical materials) and the preservation of tradition
- the creation, establishing and dissolving of musical traditions.

Below you can see some of the different ways in which three twentieth-century composers have described what they understand by the word ‘tradition’. It may help to know that the quotation from Ernst Krenek (1900–91) refers to the fact that many composers adhere to compositional procedures established in the past, for example musical forms such as the **opera** aria that you studied in Book 1, Chapter 6. Igor Stravinsky’s (1882–1971) description of tradition as not simply ‘handed down’ recalls the phrase used by Paul Muldoon in his interview for ‘What am I? Beasts and tradition’ on the Audio CD for Chapter 2.

Tradition, then, is the continuity of ideas expressed through the repetition of procedures.

(Krenek, 1962, p. 27)

I am merely very prudent with the word, for it now seems to imply ‘that which resembles the past’—the reason, incidentally, why no good artist is very happy when his work is described as ‘traditional’. In fact, the true tradition-making work may not resemble the past at all, and especially not the immediate past, which is the only one most people are able to hear. Tradition is generic; it is not simply ‘handed down’, fathers to sons, but undergoes a life process: it is born, grows, matures, declines, and is reborn, perhaps.

(Stravinsky, in conversation with Robert Craft, 1960, p. 33)

I venture to credit myself with having written truly new music which, being based on tradition, is destined to become tradition.

(Schoenberg, 1984, p. 174)

## **Activity**

Make a list of three or four types of music that relate to the word ‘tradition’ as used above. (To get you started, note that a hymn might be regarded as a type of musical tradition.)

## **Discussion**

There is no definitive answer to this question, and every individual will come up with different possibilities and a range of traditions. These are some of the examples that I thought of:

- Christmas carols: these are handed down over time and traditionally sung in December
- folk songs
- the tradition of playing particular concerts in specific venues, for example the Last Night of the Proms at the Albert Hall in London and the New Year’s Day concert that takes place every year in Vienna (see Figure 6.1)
- songs that are taken out of their original context and transformed into a new tradition, for example ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’, originally a song from the 1945 musical *Carousel* and now the anthem of Liverpool Football Club.

From the examples given above you will see that there is no such thing as a static and unchanging tradition. Any artistic tradition (and you have addressed this in your work so far in Book 2) is always receptive to outside influence and is therefore always evolving and changing. As you saw in Chapter 2 with regard to poetry, no artistic form can exist by just repeating traditional formulae. The same is true of music: there has to be innovation in order to keep an art form alive.