

## Postmodernism in Music

Postmodernism is a term that has been used extensively to describe general trends and specific works in many different cultural contexts, including literature, cinema, architecture and the visual arts. This *Introduction* clarifies the term, and explores its relevance for music through discussion of specific musical examples from the 1950s to the present day, providing an engagement between theory and practice. Overall, the book equips readers with a thorough understanding of this complex but important topic in music studies.

- Outlines and addresses the problems of defining what we mean by postmodernism
- Explores when postmodernism begins
- Engages with a broad range of literature and sources, inviting wider reading and thinking
- Uses specific musical examples to present ways of interpreting music that can be defined as postmodernist.

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Cambridge Introductions to Music

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KENNETH GLOAG



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*In memory of my father*

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## Preface

This book is an introduction to postmodernism in music. It aims to provide an introduction to what we understand by postmodernism in general and to further explore some music that can be heard as appropriate examples of it. However, this exercise is not as straightforward as this statement may suggest. Postmodernism is an illusive term and, as will be discussed in chapter 1, it remains highly resistant to definition. The application of postmodernism to music, both through the identification of specific musical practices as postmodernist and as a broad framework of interpretation, would seem to only offer new problems. This book will not always necessarily solve such problems but it will provide some directions and seek to put in place a context for further debate and discussion. The approach will often be knowingly provisional, posited at the level of suggestion, which invites the reader to do their own interpretive work in order to begin to shape their own responses and inform their own conclusions.

Postmodernism is often claimed to be about plurality, fragmentation, difference. All of which means that there is a great deal of music that could feature in this book. There is a degree of diversity to the music that is discussed here, beginning with John Cage in the 1950s and ending much more recently with DJ Spooky. Between these two points many different musical contexts and practices are highlighted. Some of the music selected for discussion reflects my own personal tastes and interests while in some instances, such as the case studies of George Rochberg and John Zorn, their inclusion is based on the existing literature that situates the music in relation to postmodernism, with the wish to build dialogues with what has already been written forming a central strategy in the book. But this book does not offer a comprehensive account, no book could, and there is much that is not featured. One notable exception is the phenomenon of world music and its reflection of a global culture and economy, which for some is an extension of postmodernism. I think this particular set of issues demands an introduction of its own.

## Reading

Clearly postmodernism implies some form of relationship to modernism, and it is important to have some understanding of that earlier context and concept before

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moving fully to confront postmodernism. However, although this book does touch upon some key aspects of modernism it cannot offer a full account. Inexperienced readers will therefore find it useful to engage with some background reading and listening in relation to modernism. I suggest Leon Botstein's excellent survey of modernism in *New Grove* as a starting point.<sup>1</sup>

One of the key books regularly referenced here is *The Condition of Postmodernity* by David Harvey. It also provides a quite brilliant synopsis of modernism and I think that this forms an important background, particularly as it comes within the context of a book on postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> A general awareness of the main developments in twentieth-century music will also help to provide an initial orientation. Arnold Whittall's *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music* presents an overview that can act as an invaluable guide to the music of the period.<sup>3</sup>

All the literature that is cited in the book, and some others that have exerted an influence on the writing of it, is presented again at the end in the form of a bibliography. There is no list of recommended reading as such. Throughout this book there are many quotations, at times quite extensive, from other books and articles. This book is in part a text about other texts. Postmodernism is always in some way a discourse, a debate about what we think it means and to which it might be applied. It is therefore essential that we engage with what has already been written on the subject. Chapter 1 provides an overview of some of the general, theoretical literature on postmodernism. This is highly selective, but many of the key thinkers and key texts that are featured do remain central to postmodernism. It is hoped that readers will not only use this overview as foundational to what follows in this book, but will also pursue some of the ideas that are presented here through the reading of the selected quotations back into the context from which they came. Often there will be suggestions for further reading and development in the form of references given in the notes. It is not expected that every reader will engage with every suggestion, but it is hoped that some will choose to follow certain directions and ask their own questions.

Given the initial complexity that seems to often envelop discussions of postmodernism some readers may find it useful to look at some other concise surveys by way of introductory co-reading. I still find Jann Pasler's discussion of postmodernism in *New Grove* to be a highly effective summary,<sup>4</sup> and Derek Scott's 'Postmodernism and Music' is an admirably concise outline of postmodernism and its relevance for music.<sup>5</sup> I also think that the early stages of David Bennett's *Sounding Postmodernism* provide a highly valuable account of postmodernism and music.<sup>6</sup>

At various points in the book specific concepts and contexts are mentioned – feminism, intertextuality, subjectivity, among many others. In some cases clarification of a concept and some background will be given but it is not always possible to

stop the flow of the discussion to fully explain such terminology, but nor is it considered necessary to provide a glossary. Rather I think it would be more productive for readers to seek clarification when required through reference to other texts. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick's *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts* provides helpful accounts of many concepts, including postmodernism,<sup>7</sup> and *Musicology: The Key Concepts* by David Beard and myself is directed specifically to the exploration of such concepts from a musicological perspective.<sup>8</sup> I think many readers would benefit from easy access to both books.

## Listening

It is hoped that the descriptions of music given at various stages of the book will encourage readers to seek out the relevant recordings and scores, and form their own impressions of both the music and the interpretation of it that is presented. The list of recordings provided only brings together those recordings that have been featured in the discussion. It does not, for example, include recommended recordings of works as such, particularly those only mentioned in passing. Given the nature of the issues that this book engages with I think it would be highly appropriate for readers to respond through their own listening preferences. I am always surprised and stimulated when I ask students to bring recordings of what they hear as postmodernism in music to the discussion, and I hope readers will pursue that speculative but thought-provoking process for themselves.

Dates are provided for specific works, recordings, composers and musicians that are considered to be central to the main direction of the discussion but not when mentioned only as passing references and suggested points of comparison.

## Acknowledgements

David Harvey mentions in the preface to his book *The Condition of Postmodernity* that he cannot recall when or how he first became aware of the term postmodernism. I share that sense of uncertainty as to how or when I first encountered it, although I do know that reading Harvey's book was a pathway to a better understanding of the seemingly complex nature of postmodernism. But, if I cannot reconstruct exactly the first encounter, then certainly the memory of one of the first direct engagements is based on my own undergraduate student experience at Surrey University in the late 1980s and being asked by George Mowat-Brown to write an essay that critiqued Christopher Butler's book *After the Wake* (thanks, George!). That essay, and the supervision of it, pointed me in the direction of postmodernism, which has remained an area of interest since that time.

Postmodernism has featured extensively in my teaching at Cardiff University over many years and in many different contexts, and I would like to thank all those students, undergraduate and postgraduate, who participated in many relevant discussions. In particular I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Alexis Paterson, whose doctoral research on minimalism and postmodernism overlapped with the planning of this book.

I would also like to thank several friends and colleagues at Cardiff University – David Beard, Keith Chapin, Sarah Hill, Nicholas Jones, Clair Rowden, Peter Sedgwick and Charles Wilson – for their interest and support. I would also like to thank the music library staff at Cardiff University for their help and assistance in many ways.

I also extend thanks to Vicki Cooper and her colleagues at Cambridge University Press for their help and support for this book, and I would like to thank, once again, Nicholas Jones for his work in preparing the music examples.