Introduction

Prologue

Monday, January 9, 1956, 7.30pm
Arts Council Drawing Room, 4 St. James's Square, London SW1

A single concert of chamber music, given in London more than half a century ago by a group of unknown student composers and players, visiting from Manchester, marked the start of a new phase in British musical life. Beginnings are difficult: historians exaggerate the new while overlooking what persists unchanged, and yet January 9, 1956 qualifies as an important date in British music, in part because the historical actors themselves were self-consciously promoting a break with past traditions. By name alone, the "New Music Manchester" Group signaled an embrace of the modern redolent of the drive toward cultural re-construction in post-war Europe. They aligned themselves publicly with artists searching for a new language, and with an emergent musical avant-garde of broad European and internationalist sympathies, rather than a more narrowly drawn British tradition.

The three young principals of the Manchester Group – Alexander Goehr, Peter Maxwell Davies, and Harrison Birtwistle, all in their early twenties – may well have savored their overnight reputation as (in one editor's alliterative title) "modernest moderns."[1] It is less clear they or their slightly younger colleagues – the pianist John Ogdon (then 18 years old), trumpeter Elgar Howarth, and cellist John Dow – would have foreseen in January 1956 the lasting impact of their first professional appearance together in London, or accorded it any wider symbolic or historical import. The Manchester Group's influence on British musical life in the past half-century or so depends, naturally, on more than their one Monday-night chamber concert for the Institute for Contemporary Arts. But the concert itself created a stir, not least among the gentlemen of the metropolitan press, intrigued by the improbable idea that six musicians "from the provinces" could dictate artistic fashion to London

[1] Mason, "Manchester musicians in London: 'modernest moderns,'" *Manchester Guardian* (Jan. 10, 1956).

sophisticates.[2] In retrospect, the ICA concert provides a prologue scene for the story I wish to tell in this book.

With the entrance of the New Music Manchester Group, one might mark a point of origin for a new set of artistic initiatives and achievements in British musical life. Here, all of a sudden, was a new awareness of the decisive shifts of expressive means associated with younger European composers, particularly with the radicals gathering yearly at the Darmstadt Summer School meetings. A renaissance of British composition in the early twentieth century had largely skirted the implications of continental modernists of the Schoenberg-Stravinsky axis. The notion of a "time-lag" in the British response to earlier-century modernism, exacerbated by the physical and cultural isolation of two world wars, was commonplace by the 1950s. The Manchester Group's avant-garde image, and their apparent grasp of the latest in post-war musical radicalism – as represented by the music of Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and others – was for London in January 1956 an unexpected development.

The concert was held at 4 St. James's Square, a smart eighteenth-century townhouse near Pall Mall that in 1947 had become the headquarters of the newly established Arts Council of Great Britain. It was a pukka address, with a grand staircase, though the ground-floor rooms – also used for art exhibitions – were fairly intimate.[3] The concert had been arranged by William Glock, the well-known critic (formerly of *The Observer*) who, since 1954, had been chairman of the Music section of the ICA. Under his energetic leadership, the ICA was presenting increasingly ambitious seasons of concerts charting the latest in music at home and abroad. Glock booked the Manchester Group,[4] selected the venue, and published their program ahead of time in his journal *The Score,* respected internationally for its contemporary music coverage. Webern's *Variations* and two pieces by the Greek composer Skalkottas were the only older works – dating from 1936 and 1949, respectively – on a Manchester Group program that included four London premieres (asterisked).[5]

[2] "Modern chamber music: seven novelties," *Times* (Jan. 11, 1956); *Times* reviews were at this period unsigned; Frank Howes, Chief Music Critic until 1960, is possibly the author here.

[3] For a description of the physical premises, see Richard Witts, *Artist Unknown*, 303–4.

[4] In a letter to Glock from Paris (dated Dec. 5 [1955]), Goehr mentions Davies's role in final arrangements for the upcoming concert and offers to provide program notes: William Glock papers, British Library (hereafter abbreviated BL) Ms. Mus. 953, fol. 143r.

[5] Program cited from "I.C.A. Contemporary Music Season," *The Score and I.M.A. Magazine* 14 (Dec. 1955), fold-out (facing p. 68).

Arts Council Drawing Room
January 9 (7.30 p.m.)
New Music Manchester Group
P. Maxwell Davies, Trumpet Sonata*
A. Goehr, 3 Fantasies for clarinet and piano*
E. Lutyens, Valediction, Op. 28
A. Webern, Variations for piano, Op. 27
R. Hall, Sonata for 'cello and piano*
E. Seidel, Fantasia for piano*
N. Skalkottas, Sonatina and Tender Melody

By the mid-Fifties, Glock's awareness of the Manchester Group reflected the recent first appearances on London concert programs of music by both Goehr and Davies. The Society for the Promotion of New Music had programmed a Goehr song cycle (his Op. 1, since lost) in 1953, and Davies's Wind Octet in 1955.[6] Meanwhile, Goehr's *Sonata in One Movement*, Op. 2, was introduced by the pianist Margaret Kitchin at Morley College, and then published by Schott's, where her husband Howard Hartog oversaw the new-music list.[7] These confident and ambitious young Manchester-based composers also found an entrée into London music circles through Goehr's family contacts. His father Walter Goehr had been a student of Schoenberg's in Berlin in the late Twenties and early Thirties; as a boy in London, young Sandy had been encouraged in composition by both Michael Tippett and Mátyás Seiber, close friends and frequent house guests of his father.[8] Walter Goehr's British premiere of Messiaen's *Turangalîla-Symphonie* in 1953 (in two BBC broadcasts) had caused great excitement – a senior critic spoke in bemusement of "rhythmic complications which the ear cannot pretend to gather in."[9] These were followed in 1954 by a concert performance at the Royal Festival Hall, which Goehr *fils* and his friend Harry Birtwistle traveled down to London to attend. Goehr first met Messiaen himself at a party at Felix

[6] SPNM program sheets list Goehr's unpublished *Five Songs of Babel* (1952–53) as a 14-minute cycle of Byron settings, sung by June Wilson (soprano), with Margaret Kitchin (piano) on December 1, 1953; Davies's Octet, played by the Virtuoso Ensemble, was heard on February 1, 1955 in a program including the String Quartet No. 3, composed in 1953 by a 16-year-old Richard Rodney Bennett.

[7] For Donald Mitchell's unkind review of the Goehr, see "Some first performances," *Musical Times* 95 (April 1954), 202. The score of Op. 2 appeared in print in 1955.

[8] Goehr gives accounts of his childhood in the essays "Finding the key" and "Manchester years," in Goehr, *Finding the Key*.

[9] W. R. Anderson, "Round about Radio," 360; see also "Olivier Messiaen's 'Turangalîla,'" *Times* (June 29, 1953), 11.

Aprahamian's later that evening,[10] and both Birtwistle and Davies (who heard the concert on the radio, in Manchester) later recalled the Messiaen work as a crucial early experience.[11]

By the Fifties, Goehr had also come to know Elisabeth Lutyens, the most senior British exponent of twelve-tone serial composition. Her close friendship with Glock likely played a role in giving the Manchester Group its platform, and recent pieces by both Lutyens and Richard Hall – Goehr's, Davies's and Birtwistle's teacher at the Royal Manchester College – lent authority to a program heavy on student works.[12]

Messiaen's music was still controversial in the Fifties, even in Paris,[13] but in London – largely owing to Aprahamian's efforts – he was among the few progressive continental figures beginning to be recognized, even by an audience that had quickly forgotten the open-minded mood of the first post-war years. Younger European avant-garde composers were barely known in British concert life; more than a decade after VE day, the situation could no longer be explained away by citing the forced loss of cultural exchange between 1939 and 1945. A tradition of British insularity in general, and a particular hostility to avant-garde thought, especially from abroad, were deeply ingrained cultural traits. Glock's *Score* magazine, with international circulation of 1,500, was one line of attack against the BBC's "middle-of-the road" music programming of the early 1950s; another was his ICA concert season, a vigorous attempt to surface from a "musical underground."[14] Among British or London premieres in the ICA's 1955–56 season, there was a Wigmore Hall performance of Boulez's Second Piano Sonata (by Yvonne Loriod), a rare British performance of Carter's recent First String Quartet (Juilliard Quartet), and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra performances of works by Dallapiccola and Skalkottas. Glock cultivated personal friendships with composers abroad, traveling widely to European

[10] For reviews of the 1954 concert, see "Festival Hall," *Times* (April 13, 1954); and Ernest Newman, "*Turangalîla*," *Sunday Times* (April 25, 1954). Goehr recalls the Festival Hall concert and party in *Finding the Key*, 42–4.

[11] In a 1968 BBC discussion of the *Turangalîla* performances, Davies speaks admiringly of the music's "deliriously vulgar" aspect; BL National Sound Archive Tape NP454W. See also Jones, "Writings of a young British composer," 31–2, and Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle*, 7.

[12] Goehr was introduced to Lutyens by Malcolm Williamson, one of her private students at the time; see Lutyens, *A Goldfish Bowl*, 241.

[13] On *le cas Messiaen* in the later 1940s, see Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 142–75.

[14] Glock, *Notes In Advance*, 58. "For some years nothing wildly exciting has been happening in London," commented an article welcoming Glock's season of eleven concerts: "New season of Contemporary Music," *Glasgow Herald* (Dec. 26, 1955). SPNM archive cutting.

festivals, and at home supported the latest works of British musicians. The same ICA season saw works by relatively established names: Michael Tippett, Alan Rawsthorne, Alan Bush, and Humphrey Searle; works by the stylistically progressive émigrés Roberto Gerhard and Priaulx Rainier; a choral-orchestral premiere for the little-performed twelve-tone composer Denis ApIvor; among younger names, Glock programmed Iain Hamilton and Thea Musgrave.

Glock's activities in London and at his Dartington Summer School embody the post-war drive for international exchange and artistic renewal. His juxtaposition of British modernists with European and American counterparts reflected the cultural internationalism of the annual ISCM festivals (founded in the 1920s). Efforts for cultural dialogue intensified after 1945 as European governments moved toward closer links in trade and defense, and in the face of the emerging polarities of a global Cold War among super-powers. Boulez's Domaine Musical concerts (founded 1954) in Paris set the most radical works of the young (Boulez himself, Nono, and Stockhausen prominent among them) against a historical backdrop comprising both pre-Classical (Dufay, Monteverdi, Bach) and twentieth-century modernist precursors (Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and especially Webern).[15] Boulez and other promoters – the "Monday Evening" series in Los Angeles, for instance[16] – rejected the notion of a historical break between new and earlier music. German cultural leaders, meanwhile – Wolfgang Steinecke at the Darmstadt International *Ferienkurse* and Heinrich Strobel at Donaueschingen – sharply emphasized *Neue Musik* (New Music) as a separate category attracting a specialist audience.

Press responses to the Manchester Group concert give snapshots of Fifties attitudes to new music in British culture. Davies at the time felt "the papers liked us – except the *Daily Mail* which said the whole thing stank ... The hall was packed out with people standing at the side."[17] Colin Mason's *Guardian* notice, describing the "modernest programme ... London has heard for a long time," praised the contrast of moods in Lutyens's *Valediction*, a point echoed by the *Times* reviewer, for whom Ogdon's performance of Webern's *Variations* revealed "a little

[15] Of 360 works played by the Domaine under Boulez, 155 performances were "contemporary classics," 58 of these works by Webern, 31 by Schoenberg, 28 by Stravinsky. Webern's Op. 10 *Orchesterstücke* were heard six times in fourteen seasons; all of his works except Op. 18 were played. Aguila, *Le Domaine Musical*, 160, 164.

[16] See Boulez, *Orientations*, 428; Crawford, *Evenings on and off the Roof*.

[17] Davies, cited in Seabrook, *Max*, 42.

masterpiece."[18] The same two writers found Davies's Sonata "bold and spirited," admiring its "burning impulse and spontaneity." Goehr's Op. 3 *Fantasias* were variously dubbed "experimental and epigrammatic," "severely forbidding," and "Schönbergian in structure . . . tenuous, evanescent."[19] Donald Mitchell, in a longer *Musical Times* column, noted Goehr's sensitive ear, but found his expressiveness "severely inhibited." With Davies, he refrained from comment, adding only that the concert venue was not acoustically suitable for "such a work's fiercer moments."[20]

All writers explicitly draw attention to serial technique in their reviews, invariably noted as a source of musical complexity, or exemplar of, as John Warrack's *Telegraph* review has it, "the present-day acute concentration on evolving, exploring and developing new techniques."[21] Mason, in a second column (for the weekly *Spectator*) headed "Serial music," remarks on the sudden ubiquity of twelve-tone works, at a point where even the elderly Stravinsky has embraced row composition, as a challenge to "London's professional resisters of these techniques."[22] Citing French "post-Webernian trends," Mason observes that the Manchester Group has been "completely isolated until now from anything going on in London (where there is still little sign of any impact of the recent developments in rhythmic serialism)."[23] The reviewers' excitement at the Group's appearance, then, did not only reflect the chance to hear premieres, or – as noted already – to report on the arrival of unknown Northern artists in the blasé sophistication of the metropolis; as much as anything, the buzz surrounding the ICA concert reflected a growing awareness of a music rich in innovations of technique. Those innovations, moreover, had been gleaned from abroad.

More revealing than grudging or indulgent words of praise is the *Daily Mail*'s exasperated account of the ICA concert under the headline: "The

[18] Mason, "Manchester musicians"; [Anon.], "New Manchester Group," *Times* (10 Jan. 1956), 5.

[19] "New Edinburgh Quartet: London debut," *The Scotsman* (Jan. 12, 1956); "New Manchester Group," 5; "New music," *Jewish Chronicle* (Jan. 20, 1956). The *Scotsman*'s unnamed London critic in 1956 was John Amis. John Warrack, more critically, wrote of Goehr's work as "abstruse pattern-making"; Warrack, "Seven advanced musical works," *Daily Telegraph* (Jan. 10, 1956).

[20] Mitchell, "London music," 149–50.

[21] Warrack, "Seven advanced."

[22] Mason, "Serial music," *Spectator* (Jan. 13, 1956), 50. Mitchell reports that "Webern, Boulez, Messiaen and Stockhausen are the names which emerge in the analytical notes as influences" ("London music," 149).

[23] Mason, "Serial music," 50.

dull young things of the 'Fifties."[24] Percy Cater heard nothing in the program but "shapeless, dismal, and ear-corrupting" sounds. Trying to articulate his frustration, Cater recalls that "In the 'Twenties we used to talk of the Bright Young Things. Why are the Young Things of the 'Fifties . . . so dull?" Cater's question alludes to an earlier British artistic-social avant-garde that was everything the Manchester Group was perceived not to be: of privileged, public-school background, Oxbridge-educated, and chauvinistically Francophone in cultural orientation. Cater figures the Manchester Group's Fifties avant-garde against an earlier modernism that was decadent and dandyish. That scene, clustering at Eton, Oxford, at the Sitwells in London and Diaghilev's ballet in Paris, rejected Victorian aesthetics for parody and fantasy.[25] These earlier British modernists – familiar with Picasso, Proust, Cocteau, and jazz, as well as Joyce and Eliot – had cultivated the androgynous and the exotic. Their musical representatives were the Walton of *Façade*, and the ballet composers Lord Berners and Constant Lambert. Cater was not necessarily aware that the Manchester figures were far from homogenous intellectually or socially – their leaders a Londoner privately schooled at Berkhamsted and two Northern grammar-school boys – or that the Group's aesthetic orientation was itself both German and French. Specifics mattered less than codes and connotations. From his perspective, a British avant-garde in the mid-Fifties was ipso facto an absurd proposition. To quip in 1956 about "young things," shiny or dull, was to treat British modernism as fashion, tried and outgrown, and to hint at a perpetual belatedness in the nation's artistic thought – one more symptom, perhaps, of post-imperial cultural decline.

As "dull young things," the Manchester composers could be dismissed, at least in the popular imagination, as fundamentally irrelevant figures – echoes of an earlier inter-war modernism long since abandoned. What were this earnest trio from up North – "researchers in sound" and compilers of scholarly program notes – doing presenting their Second-Viennese intellectualism in London? Their own intricate scores communicated a certain tightly wound passion, even a muted violence, but this absolute music – Sonatas, Fantasias – did not fit in any easy way with the forthright class-based rebellion emerging in British realist literature, theater and cinema by 1956. The men of the Manchester Group, despite occasional polemical outbursts in the Fifties, were young but never really

[24] Percy Cater, "The dull young things of the 'Fifties," *Daily Mail* (Jan. 10, 1952); SPNM Archive cutting.

[25] For an evocative portrait including the Sitwells, see Green, *Children of the Sun*.

"Angry" – to use typecasting popularized by the *Daily Express* – in the mold of Kingsley Amis or John Osborne, mockers of class-based deference and social pretense.[26] They weren't merely "out for a good time," nor were they – like the visual-arts Independent Group – responding to the post-1945 influx of American popular culture.[27] The tone was much more serious.

Even so, the Manchester Group's music was never publicly examined in relation to post-war visual painting or sculpture. Did their music, or even Lutyens's, suggest any sounding parallels to visual developments – to Francis Bacon's fraught, extreme-state portraits, or the cooler abstractionist sensibility led by Victor Pasmore and his circle? The Manchester Group were not invisible to the culture at large, so much as subjects of an increasingly splintered audience (a problem for cultural historians). Balkanization in arts criticism ensured that new music, however clearly in line with broader artistic currents, was considered according to strictly upheld canons of music-critical discourse. If sculpture, poetry, painting, and theater of the period find points of intersection with what composers were doing, the links are rarely apparent in music journalism of the period. That the Fifties music-critical response to the Manchester Group dwelt mostly on their formalism is typical (as later chapters will show) of the way all new art-music was received in Britain. The focus on form or technique embodies the Cold-War fascination with artistic abstraction, whether as a seemingly ideology-neutral artistic development or, in the international arena, as signifier of Western cultural "freedom" denied Eastern-bloc citizens.[28] In an era of ideological suspicion and escalating existential anxiety – tests of a British nuclear deterrent advanced throughout the Fifties – the Manchester group's self-conscious modernity was simply a matter of its perceived formalism.[29] Abstraction itself, in this particular climate, bears a hermeneutical trace and harbors a paradoxical national significance.

[26] See Hennessy, *Having it So Good*, 503.

[27] A remark by Arthur (played by Albert Finney) in Karel Reisz's film of Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (1959), encapsulates the aggressive embrace of a new youth-culture typical of the Angries: "What I'm out for is a good time. All the rest is propaganda." On the Independent Group, see Robbins, *The Independent Group*; on abstraction and pop art in a broader British context, see Hewison, *In Anger,* 189–91.

[28] On "freedom" as ideologically opaque sign, see Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. For a challenge to Cold-War narratives of medium purification or escapist apoliticism, see Craven, "Abstract Expressionism," 34.

[29] On British artistic abstraction and post-war "suspicion," see Shaw and Shaw, "Cultural and social setting," 6–8.

By the time his Op. 3 *Fantasias* reached London, Goehr's years as a student in Manchester were already over, and he was in France. To attend the ICA concert, he traveled back across the Channel from Paris, where he was enrolled in Messiaen's class at the Conservatoire. Goehr, as the Group's de facto leader, was confident in his opinions and critical of the status quo in Britain. Years later, he observed – accurately enough – that the Manchester Group was, with Lutyens, "the first in England to take the ethos of Schoenberg and Webern (and Messiaen, when he arrived) dead seriously."[30] On the day of the big concert, Goehr's mother – the photographer, Laelia Goehr – caught an instant in British music history with her posed portrait of the smartly dressed Group (**Figure 0.1**).

Birtwistle, the clarinetist and co-dedicatee (with Ogdon) of Goehr's work, had by January 1956 graduated from the Royal Manchester College, and was half-way through his first year of National Service, stationed at Oswestry, Shropshire. While in Manchester, his compositional talents had lain dormant and hidden: he was hungry for new music, but unenthusiastic about Hall's teaching. For the army's Royal Artillery band, Birtwistle took the opportunity of arranging Machaut's *Hoquetus David*, a piece that intrigued him, but there was little time for actual composition.[31] The situation was to change dramatically the following year, with the arrival of his first published score, *Refrains and Choruses* (a story for Chapter 3). Meanwhile, Birtwistle kept his hair cut short, and got up to London to hear concerts of new music.[32] In summer 1956, he spent five days at the Darmstadt festival, hearing among other works the premiere of Goehr's Op. 4 orchestral *Fantasia*.

A few snapshots round out the record of the Manchester Group's ICA concert: of Davies being congratulated on his Sonata by Goehr's father; of Howard Hartog buying him a drink and suggesting he visit him at Schott's about a contract; of Davies joining an SPNM meeting the day after the concert (chaired by William Mann, the *Times* critic) to discuss planned new-music events in Manchester.[33] Goehr, meanwhile, returned to Paris for Messiaen's *classe* (with Davies visiting as occasional *auditeur*),

[30] Goehr, cited in Northcott, *Music of Alexander Goehr*, 12.

[31] On the Machaut arrangement, and Birtwistle's discovery of the *Musica Britannica* edition of Dunstable, see Birtwistle and Maddocks, *Wild Tracks*, 133–5.

[32] He also heard non-classical music while in the Royal Artillery: "I spent my time with the jazz lot. They played jazz records all the time"; Birtwistle and Maddocks, *Wild Tracks*, 59.

[33] Seabrook, *Max*, 42; SPNM Executive Committee minutes, January 10, 1956. Hartog, representing the SPNM, had previously met Davies, Hall and an Arts Council official in Manchester in October 1955, about the possibility of new-music concerts.

Figure 0.1 The New Music Manchester Group, London, 9 January 1956 (left to right): Alexander Goehr (with Audrey Goehr), Harrison Birtwistle, John Ogdon, Elgar Howarth, Peter Maxwell Davies, John Dow