

Introduction

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The transformation of what?

What is musical modernism? Is it a musical *style*, inescapably marked by rebarbative traits such as dissonance, atonality and a fragmented musical surface, confronting listeners with insurmountable difficulties in its resistance to traditional ideas of musical beauty, its avoidance of melody or familiar harmony, its lack of regular pulse, rhythm or groove, its rejection of recognizable musical forms and ideas of expression? Or, is modernism rather a musical *epoch*, starting with the outburst of atonal expressionism of the Schoenberg school before 1910 and finally coming to an end with the advent of minimalism, neo-tonality, new simplicity, neo-romanticism and postmodernism around 1970? Is modernist music still, as Stockhausen and Boulez once saw it, the prophetic art of the future, a project of progress, enlightenment, critique and liberation, invoking new aesthetic forms and ‘nie erhörte Klänge’, or has it ultimately imploded into the hermeticism of its own ivory tower? Is it a morally superior attack on easy listening, musical laziness and the instant gratification of a ubiquitous consumerism, or is it, regardless of whether one sees it as a style or an epoch, something that has long since lost any power of attraction it may have once held for audiences, musicians or scholars? Was post-war modernism, as Richard Taruskin proclaimed, nothing more than an epiphenomenon of the Cold War,¹ a playing out of politics in the cultural sphere? And today, in the second decade of a new century and sixty years or more after some of its defining works, is modernist music, as Arved Ashby has noted, despite his otherwise sympathetic attitude,² close to becoming irrelevant?

According to the authors of this book, modernism is neither a style nor an epoch; it has neither imploded nor come to a historical end. Rather, musical modernism is an attitude of musical practice – in composition, performance and listening – that involves an increased awareness of its

¹ Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century: The Oxford History of Western Music*, 5 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2010), vol. V, pp. 18–22.

² Arved Ashby, *The Pleasure of Modernist Music: Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology* (University of Rochester Press, 2004), p. 36.

own historical situation and remains alive and kicking as a vibrant musical force among musicians, festivals and audiences on all continents of the contemporary world. As soon as music starts reflecting upon its own language – its means of expression – it takes on a historical self-awareness that amounts to modernist, critical reflection. From this view, musical modernism simply involves a heightened consciousness of the relations between present and past, between present and future and between continuity and discontinuity in the history of music; in brief, it provokes an acute awareness of the condition of historicity that has always been embedded in the present moment of musical experience.

Such a historical awareness was already a characteristic of Beethoven's world and of the modernity that erupts with the French Revolution and the philosophy of Hegel. What is the late style of Beethoven if not a compositional wrestling and musical meditation on this condition of temporal and historical fragility? To be sure, Rimbaud's imperative that 'il faut être absolument moderne' and Nietzsche's call to 'forget about history to be able to live' are both countered by a sense that one must incorporate and reflect upon history in order to be able to transcend it. From this longer historical gaze, musical modernism – in the midst of its enduring search for new soundscapes and new modes of expression – is inextricably tied to an earlier age, because modernism is a product of the historical self-consciousness that what is now has not always been and will not always be the case. It is subject to constant change, or – as we prefer to call it in the title of this book – it is subject to perennial transformation. On closer study, there is no violent break, no simple rupture with the past but rather processes of gradual transformations taking place from within, taking place and taking time.

For that reason, this book takes the long view of musical modernism, a perspective that has perhaps become possible only after the changes within modernist practices that have happened over the last six decades. It begins from the sense that modernism denotes a musical attitude that not only stretches back further than we might previously have imagined but is still ongoing. The idea of transformation thus displaces the familiar periodizations of music history which miss the bigger picture because of a narrow idea of music history as the history of musical 'style'. Therefore, not only do the contributors to this volume refer back to classical and romantic musical culture, but equally they show little interest in the idea of 'postmodernism', a term which appears relatively rarely in the pages that follow. Compared to other cultural forms, musical practice and musical criticism were late to adopt the term, which, after a brief but

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provocative currency in the early 1980s, seems now to have been largely abandoned. What proponents of postmodernism suggested as contrary or even anti-modernist elements of cultural practice now seem, from the longer view of a transformed modernism, simply part of its inherently contradictory nature. Lyotard's insistence that the postmodern denotes not a coming after but a moment of self-reflection within modernism thus becomes self-evident from this longer view.³ Modernism, from this perspective, shows no sign of having reached its end, either as a historical era or as a cultural and aesthetic force. Instead, one might talk of a 'Second Modernism' (Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf)⁴ emerging after 1980, a transformation of the trajectory of the modernisms both of the early part of the twentieth century and of the post-1945 period.

Modernism and tradition

On the one hand, then, musical modernism itself has changed: it is no longer what it was, either in the post-1945 decades or in the years around 1910. On the other hand, the idea of a transformed modernism presumes a certain coherence and belonging together of the diverse musical practices of well over a hundred years. This is the contradictory nature of transformation, one played out most obviously in musical modernism in its complex relation to tradition – a relation that retroactively contributes towards changing what we conceive of as the basic traits of that tradition. A single example illustrates the point: Schoenberg's 'break' with tonality around 1909 has generally been regarded as a clear rupture with the past, yet Schoenberg himself insisted that his work continued rather than rejected musical tradition. An essential formative trait of music from Bach to Brahms – the interrelation and integration of motifs and themes to create a play of similarities and differences – was taken up by Schoenberg and magnified, both in the free atonal works and in dodecaphony. It was only through his 'break' with tradition that this previously unreflected and latent aspect of music was taken up and articulated, that is, the recognition that structural integration, and not tonality in itself, was the decisive tool in giving musical form to a work. Schoenberg's contribution to the history of music is thus not restricted to the creation of new works of music; he also retrospectively changed our view of what, in fact, are the essential traits of that tradition. To put it

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester University Press, 1984).

⁴ Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Frank Cox and Wolfram Schurig, *Facets of the Second Modernity: New Music and Aesthetics in the 21st Century* (Hofheim: Volke Verlag, 2008).

more strongly, new music not only retroactively alters our view of tradition but may in fact change the tradition itself.

Musical tradition is thus not a given, but rather a kind of chameleon, the colours and appearance of which change according to posterity's shifting basis of understanding. Modernism and tradition are entities interwoven in complex and even paradoxical ways, one dependent upon the other, one defined by its other. At least four typical attitudes towards tradition emerge within modernism. There is the desire to forget about tradition, discard it and break with it (as with Russolo, Varèse, Scelsi, Cage, Xenakis, the historical avant-garde or the early advocates of integral serialism in the 1950s like Stockhausen, Nono, Boulez); the desire to recall tradition, become conscious of it and perpetuate it (as with Schoenberg, Berg, Britten, Henze, Rihm, Gubaidulina, Pärt or Silvestrov); the attempt to create tradition anew, (re-)construct it and change it retroactively (as in Stravinsky, Bartók, Webern, Messiaen, Lachenmann, Ferneyhough, Dillon, Saariaho or the late Boulez); and the aim even to put the temporal and structural paradoxes of modernism and tradition into play in the music itself (as in Ives, Zimmermann, Ligeti, Berio, Kagel, Kurtág, Reich, Adams or Schnittke).⁵ That many of these composers might easily be placed in more than one category underlines the complexity at hand: breaking with tradition, carrying on tradition and 'creating' tradition anew become inseparably interwoven enterprises. Such paradoxes lie at the heart of the concepts of both 'modernism' and 'tradition', making the historical idea of a rupture with the past and determining a new start in history too simplistic to be tenable. The literary historian Paul de Man sees, in his reading of Nietzsche, how the spontaneous move to forget the past which characterizes all of modernity immediately falls back into remembering it: 'One is soon forced to resort to paradoxical formulations, such as defining the modernity of a literary period as the manner in which it discovers the impossibility of being modern.'⁶

What becomes clear is that the nature of the transformations witnessed in the past five or six decades forces us to rethink a narrow conception of modernism itself, in part because it forces a reappraisal of its relation to tradition. Later modernism, far from being some final phase or

⁵ Erling E. Guldbrandsen, *Tradisjon og tradisjonsbrudd. En studie i Pierre Boulez: Pli selon pli—portrait de Mallarmé* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997). Chapter 1, 'Modernisme og tradisjon', pp. 13–126.

⁶ Paul de Man, 'Literary History and Literary Modernity' in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis, MN: Methuen, 1983), pp. 142–65, p. 144.

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progression from earlier modernism, thus shows itself to be a reworking and recouping of many of its earlier concerns. Understanding this as a process of transformation, contained within a relatively ‘steady state’,⁷ suggests ways not only of understanding recent musical practice but also of rethinking the historiography of modernism more broadly. Put simply, the transformations taking place in recent decades – in composition and performance practice, and in the theoretical frameworks of musicology – imply a redrawing of the map of musical modernism as a whole. One might go further, and suggest that it is precisely the changes in musical practices of recent decades that have allowed us not only to see *modernism* in a different perspective but to do so because we now see the history of musical *modernity* as a whole in a different perspective. The reconfiguring of our understanding of the history of the modern has its roots in the 1960s – witness Michel Foucault’s analysis of the historical epistemes of Western culture – but it was not until relatively recently that the writing of music history began to rethink its idiosyncratic set of periodizations. The latter still tends to reinforce a narrowly stylistic definition of modernism, cut off from previous eras by a rhetoric of rejection. A number of publications of the last decade propose a wider view, suggesting that the idea of modernity might be a more useful model for understanding music history; one consequence of this – but perhaps also one point of departure – has been a much richer and more contradictory conception of modernism.⁸

Musicology and modernism

Modernism remained a central preoccupation of musicological study throughout the twentieth century, unsurprisingly since it was in this century that the discipline of musicology came of age. Not only the teleological conception of music history but also ideas of formalist musicology, structural music analysis, a certain objectivism in the view of the artwork

⁷ Arnold Whittall, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century*, revised edn (Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁸ Karol Berger and Anthony Newcomb (eds.), *Music and the Aesthetics of Modernity: Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); John Butt, *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Andrew Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Jonathan Goldman, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, and François Nicolas, *La Pensée de Pierre Boulez à Travers ses Écrits* (Paris: Delatour, 2010); Jeremy Begbie, *Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Julian Johnson, *Out of Time: Music and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

and the idea of music theory conceived as hard-core science, all went neatly together with modernist ideas of high art, objectivism and elitist aesthetics. Thus, when formalist musicology was profoundly challenged during the 1990s, so too was the general idea of modernist music as a historical ‘telos’ and aesthetic centre of the musical world. The subsequent changes can be summarized as a long series of dichotomies following the simple model of a ‘turn’ from *this* to *that*: a turn from musicological formalism to cultural studies, from absolute music to socio-historical context, from elitist art to popular music, from Western biases to globalized perspectives, from a presumed masculine worldview to feminist and gender theory, from authors’ intention to listeners’ experience, from score to performance, from construction to perception, from closed work to open text, from structure to gesture, from *ratio* to pleasure, from brain to body, from intellectual distance to social participation, from unity to plurality of meaning, from ‘meaning’ to ‘use’ and from closed institutions of autonomous art to multimedia events, crossover genres and festivals, new technologies and interactive social media. Such a list is not devoid of paradoxes, not least because almost all of these ‘turns’ had already occurred within the realm of modernist music itself and have been successively propelled and disseminated from there. The very model of conceiving historical development through simple dichotomous ‘turns’ is in itself nothing more than a historiographical trope, a narrative of progress, a model of thought that modernism had long since problematized within its own compositional and performative self-reflection. The evidence of this is massive, spanning from modernism’s early embrace of open form, aleatoricism and new technologies to its inclusion of the sounds and instruments of world music, of radical idiomatics and new blends of global and historical styles. While critical dismissals of modernism are perennial outside of modernism – most recently from cultural studies on the one hand and cognitive sciences on the other – modernism’s own attitudes of constant self-criticism and self-transformation remain undiminished and belie the many proclamations of its historical death.

The starting point for the diverse set of investigations collected in the present book is thus neither the theorization of cultural epochs and ideas of history nor the over-hasty announcement of the end of modernism. The starting point is, instead, the material practice of musical composition, performance and reception – not simply in and for themselves but also in terms of the way they take up, question, remember and reformulate music of an earlier modernism. If what emerges is a rethinking of the idea of musical modernism as a whole, from the 1890s through to the present (a long twentieth century), it is one that is derived from a study of recent

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music's engagement with its own past. The book makes no attempt to give any account of canonic composers, trends and directions of modernist music and does not aim in any way to be historically representative, let alone exhaustive. There are plenty of key figures not covered here (Messiaen, Stockhausen, Xenakis, Feldman, Kagel and several others), and there is little discussion of the American avant-garde, minimalism, spectralism or neo-romanticism. The exploration of musical modernism here is, instead, largely a consideration of European practice and one rooted mainly in considerations of acoustic musical works and their performances (as opposed to electronic music and questions of new technologies and media).

In place of any survey or overview of modernism, the topic of this volume is instead the idea of its *transformation*, explored here from three different but clearly interrelated perspectives:

Part I, 'Rethinking modernism', discusses the changing relation between modernist music and its wider contexts of cultural reception and historical reinterpretation – the way this music plays with historical elements inside constantly shifting and new frameworks.

Part II, 'Rewriting modernism', discusses transformations in the poetics and aesthetics of compositional writing, in musical analysis and in listening experience – the way this music plays in the tensions between strictness and freedom, necessity and chance.

Part III, 'Replaying modernism', discusses the way in which the role of the performer takes on a far more significant status in relation to the concept of the modernist work, not only in so-called theatrical pieces but also in works where the composer's authority appears to govern the most meticulous details – in the presentation of the music in fluid and transient performative acts of interpretation, playing and listening.

Rethinking modernism

Part I of this book considers the changing contextual frameworks in which musical modernism has taken place and by means of which it has been understood – history and historiography, culture and listening, politics and geography – and a changing relationship of modernism to its audience, including signs of a growing rapprochement with aspects of popular music. The map of musicological and critical conceptualizations has changed over recent decades – from formalist structural analysis towards criticism and cultural contextualization, from issues of composition (the musical text, compositional techniques, aesthetic theory) to issues of performance (the performing body, radical idiomatics) and

listening (aesthetic experience, subject position, sound studies), from concerns of universality and abstraction towards the historically and geographically particular, from spatial hierarchies (centre and periphery, high and low) to a decentred and paratactic field of musical genres and cultures.

Key to rethinking the discourse of musical modernism is rehearing the music, and all the chapters in Part I proceed by bringing musical works into productive and critical tension with the categories through which we understand them. The rethinking of musical modernism from a historical viewpoint is certainly one part of the recent transformations in how we think and write about it. But it is surely in the material practices of musical composition and performance – as sound – that the greatest transformations have taken place.

In that respect, Susan McClary's 'The lure of the Sublime: revisiting the modernist project' is itself a highly significant sign of a transformation in the reception of this repertoire. Her highly polemical and influential essay 'Terminal Prestige' of 1989,⁹ itself instrumental in helping to create that change – as an articulation of what began to emerge as a postmodern position in music – expressed a sense of frustration with the institutional insularity of high modernism, especially what she calls the 'institutionalized prohibition against addressing meaning'. Her remarkable revisiting of the topic twenty-five years later, in the chapter presented here, not only discovers quite the opposite in more recent modernist repertoires but finds through them a way of rehearing the music of an earlier modernist tradition. With reference to three recent operas (by Kaija Saariaho, George Benjamin and Salvatore Sciarrino), she explores the idea of a transformed modernism in terms of music that foregrounds the sensuality of desire, embraces lush and opulent soundworlds and is not afraid to be directly communicative. How should we understand the return of models of human emotion in music that an earlier modernism had apparently expunged? McClary does not only find a new emphasis on the expressive and rhetorical power of music and its intelligibility to audiences; she also offers a more sympathetic historical reading of 'why' earlier modernist music was as it was, acknowledging the situation in which post-war composers found themselves. In a new interpretive effort, taking up the long historical gaze, she traces back the problem to the opposition of the beautiful and the sublime in the late eighteenth century, suggesting that

⁹ Susan McClary, 'Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition', *Cultural Critique*, 12 (1989), 57–81.

the presumed masculine, rational ideal of the sublime eventually came to overrule the feminine, sensual qualities of musical beauty in the normative poetics of high modernism. Although presenting a political recontextualization of modernism as seen through the lenses of aesthetics, history, gender study and cultural institutionalization, McClary does not contest the historical problem of ‘beauty’ falling into ideology in the mid-twentieth century (from Schoenberg to Stockhausen and from Adorno to Boulez). Her search for a recovery of the category of the beautiful thus represents a vivid challenge to the idea of what a critical music might be in the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

In ‘Return of the repressed: particularity in early and late modernism’, Julian Johnson traces a transformed musical compositional aesthetic in two relatively late works by two key composers of the post-war avant-garde that recoup a sense of memory and particularity of voice and place: Ligeti’s sonata for solo viola (1994) and Berio’s *Voci* (1984) for solo viola and ensemble. This shift in compositional focus offers a perspective from which the whole of musical modernism might be rethought. Ligeti’s sonata for solo viola resonates with Bartók’s sonata for solo violin of fifty years earlier. Bartók’s concern for particularity of musical voice is linked to his own ethnomusicological work beginning as early as 1906, with its insistence on the particularity of musical sound that escaped the ‘rationalization’ of musical notation. Johnson concludes that, ‘the relays between the later and earlier parts of the twentieth century suggest a continuity of concern rather than a narrative of rejection and overstepping, a transformation of recurrent tensions rather than any trajectory of development’. The problem, he suggests, lies with the conceptualization of twentieth-century music history, a ‘telling’ of the story of musical modernism that later practice forces us to rethink.

Arnold Whittall, in ‘Expressionism revisited: modernism beyond the twentieth century’, offers a specific illustration of this long view of musical modernism by taking the category of ‘expressionism’, so often confined to a thinking of modernism pre-1920, and rediscovering it in the music of five British composers working at the start of the twenty-first century – Richard Elmsley, Rebecca Saunders, Simon Holt, James MacMillan and Jonathan Harvey – in accordance with what Whittall has explored elsewhere in terms of a ‘modern classicism’. Through close readings of musical texts he shows how this music, very much of the early twenty-first century, nevertheless relates back to earlier modernist concerns (as far as Wagner), providing a sense of modernism that ‘is not just persistent but multifarious’, multiple and transformational. Moreover, not least in the introductory pages of his chapter, Whittall offers a compressed survey and a vigilant rethinking of

how musicology has been constantly wrestling with the conceptualization of modernism throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Maybe modernism has survived for so long, Whittall suggests, precisely because its evolving identity reflects its capacity to interact with a succession of different aesthetic and compositional tendencies, spanning from expressionism to the avant-garde, neoclassicism, experimentalism, spectralism, new complexity and even minimalism, none of which tendencies have precluded the others' existence, but have rather endured and supplemented each others' presence.

In 'Erik Bergman, cosmopolitanism and the transformation of musical geography', Björn Heile considers the rethinking of musical modernism not just historically and temporarily but in spatial and geographic terms – so often neglected in accounts of music history that prioritize technical issues. Its focus on the Finnish composer Erik Bergman, a composer who himself embodied so many of the stylistic twists and turns of musical modernism, through dodecaphony, serialism and aleatoricism, then proceeds to examine Bergman's pioneering attitudes to world music which later modernism may be seen to have taken up (a topic that Heile has previously discussed in regard to Stockhausen and others). In the face of a narrow idea of abstract internationalism and alleged 'universalism' espoused by the post-war avant-garde, Heile explores a theory of 'critical cosmopolitanism' in relation to Bergman's music, by narrating the composer's long career as a voyage in three stages: at first exploring outwards from his native Finnish origins, exploring the realm of the Other and then returning back to his own, transformed musical self.

The idea that musical modernism was somehow opposed to popular culture is both true and false – Satie and French neoclassicism, to say nothing of Eisler and Weill, chart a course that arcs out in a quite different trajectory from that of Schoenberg and Webern. Once again, more recent transformations of modernist practice force us to rethink the binary oppositions implied by the aesthetics of Adorno and the Darmstadt generation. David Metzger's 'Sharing a stage' charts the growing proximity between modernist music and popular idioms – a convergence that provokes some serious questions about our understanding of what modernism is and has been. This is not a debate about 'high' and 'low' culture, but rather a cross-genre inquiry into a new ease of coexistence between presentations of modernism and popular music. Metzger finds shared interest in musical ideas of sonic flux, fragmentation, purity, density and simultaneity that produce common ground between the music of Sonic Youth, Public Enemy and Aphex Twin and that of modernist 'concert' composers. His conclusion is that modernism is a continuing and vital force capable of