The Cambridge Companion to Serialism

What is serialism? Defended by enthusiastic champions and decried by horrified detractors, serialism was central to twentieth-century art music but riven, too, by inherent contradictions. The term can be a synonym for dodecaphony, Arnold Schoenberg’s ‘method of composing with twelve tones which are related only to one another’. It can be more expansive, describing ways of composing systematically with parameters beyond pitch – duration, dynamic, and more – and can even stand as a sort of antonym to dodecaphony: ‘Schoenberg Is Dead’, as Pierre Boulez once insisted. Stretched to its limits, it can describe approaches where sound can be divided into discrete parameters and later recombined to generate the new, the unexpected, beginning to blur into a further antonym, post-serialism. This Companion introduces and embraces serialism in all its dimensions and contradictions, from Schoenberg and Stravinsky to Stockhausen and Babbitt, and explores its variants and legacies in Europe, the Americas, and Asia.

Martin Iddon is Professor of Music and Aesthetics at the University of Leeds. He is a composer and musicologist, the author and editor of multiple volumes devoted to post-war music, including New Music at Darmstadt, John Cage and David Tudor, John Cage and Peter Yates, and, with Philip Thomas, John Cage’s Concert for Piano and Orchestra.
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Edited by
MARTIN IDDON
University of Leeds
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Contributors

EMILY ABRAMS ANSARI is Associate Professor of Music at Western University.

ANGELA IDA DE BENEDICTIS is Scientific and Research Manager at the Paul Sacher Foundation.

JACK BOSS is Professor of Music Theory and Composition at the University of Oregon.

MAUREEN CARR is Distinguished Professor of Music at Pennsylvania State University.

MARK DELAERE is Professor of Music at the University of Leuven.

SILVIO DOS SANTOS is Associate Professor of Music at the University of Florida.

BJÖRN HEILE is Professor of Music (Post-1900) at the University of Glasgow.

MARTIN IDDON is Professor of Music and Aesthetics at the University of Leeds.

JENNIFER IVERSON is Associate Professor of Music at the University of Chicago.

IWONA LINDSTEDT is Professor of Music at the University of Warsaw.

CATHERINE LOSADA is Professor of Music Theory at the University of Cincinnati.

ANDREW MEAD is Professor of Music Theory at Indiana University.

IMKE MISCH is Director of Research at TU Braunschweig.

CATHERINE NOLAN is Professor of Music at Western University.

PETER O’HAGAN is a pianist and writer specialising in contemporary music.

NANCY YUNHWA RAO is Professor of Music Theory at Rutgers University.
List of Contributors

VENIERO RIZZARDI is Professor of Music at the State Conservatory of Padua.

PETER J. SCHMELZ is Professor of Music at Arizona State University.

SEBASTIAN WEDLER is Assistant Professor of Musicology at Utrecht University.

ARNOLD WHITTALL is Professor Emeritus of Music at King’s College London.

CHARLES WILSON is Lecturer in Music at Cardiff University.

MARCUS ZAGORSKI is Assistant Professor of Music at Comenius University.
Preface

In the year I was an MPhil composition student, there were two of us working with Robin Holloway: me and another young British composer, Benjamin Harris. Ben wrote elegant, beautifully crafted music, in which he worked hard – and always successfully – to fuse a strict usage of the twelve-tone method with the sonic language of an essential English tradition, epitomised by his namesake, Britten. Thinking of myself, at the time, as a loyal, orthodox student of the post-minimal composer, Steve Martland – with whom I had been studying privately since the beginning of my undergraduate studies – I regularly pestered Ben to justify the necessity, or value, of the strict approach he took to dodecaphony. At the same time, in my own music, I was making use of rhythmic devices I had borrowed (if also misunderstood) from Brian Ferneyhough, introduced to me by Fabrice Fitch, himself a Ferneyhough student. These involved the systematic use of number series to create both metrical structures and the rhythmic frames which filled them. Pitch was determined, and later added, by a separate process, which involved rotations – if memory serves – of Messiaen’s modes of limited transposition. On one occasion, I outlined these systems and devices to Ben as a way, I imagined, of showing precisely why I thought his reliance on a Schoenbergian method unnecessary. Ben’s response to my parametric approach to material was inevitable: ‘Why!’ he exclaimed, ‘You’re more of a serialist than I am!’

If, as Sebastian Wedler says in his contribution to this volume, the image of Webern which emerges in the reception history seems like the hydra, serialism writ large feels chimerical. Defining it involves fusing together elements which could not – indeed cannot – co-exist (and nonetheless do). But, more, it sometimes seems to take on the quality of myth: no shortage of composers figured their practices in opposition to the ‘strictness’ of a serial method, yet pinning down more than a handful of pieces which pursue such dogmatic adherence to serial ‘rules’ is a challenge. If anything, what emerges here is surely the individual quality (and qualities) of the approaches taken with respect to a centre which could never have been expected to hold, not least because it is not, and perhaps never was, a single thing.
xx  

Preface

As Catherine Nolan and Marcus Zagorski note in the first two chapters in the present volume—on a theme which runs throughout the text in many different configurations—serialism has been taken to be a synonym for dodecaphony, of the twelve-tone method, where the twelve-tone row is figured as a series; it has been taken to indicate an extension of dodecaphony, such that twelve-element series of musical parameters other than pitch are treated in analogous ways, alongside pitch; it has been taken to define a ‘multiple’ serialism, wherein independent musical parameters are treated systematically in some way before their (re)combination, even where none of those parameters are divided up into groups of twelve; it has been taken to indicate a sort of general mode of thought which might proceed from and encompass all of the above, but also modes of composing which, though interested in the separability and independence of parameter, are less concerned—if concerned at all—with the necessity for systematic or rigorous treatment of those parameters. In this last case, such definitions begin to bleed into what Adorno described as musique informelle or post-serialism, categories themselves less neatly dissociable from serialism than the privative ‘post’- of the latter category might suggest, as Charles Wilson argues. Indeed, as Jennifer Iverson proposes, this sort of more expansive terrain might afford productive readings of musics which exhibit apparently serial characteristics even if in much less familiar territory—in sampling, in EDM, in hip hop—in ways which surely reveal the instability at the heart of any singular, totalising attempt to pin serialism down.

In similar vein, though the text contains detailed examinations of the composers surely most readily recognised as having been the past century’s leading composers of serial music—Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Anton Webern, Milton Babbitt, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Nono, and Igor Stravinsky—as well as its familiar geographical heartlands of Western Europe and North America, it seeks to press beyond this, insisting on serialism as a performed music and showing the vibrancy of approaches to serialism in Eastern Europe, Russia, Latin America, and East Asia. This, too, figures the ways in which serialism ceased to be the property of a small coterie of expert composers, notwithstanding the brilliance of their respective contributions, and became part of a much more diverse musical conversation, in terms of activity, geography, ethnicity, and gender alike.

With this more expansive, increasingly global view, it becomes clear that for every occasion serialism has been decried as a sort of restrictive artistic straitjacket, there is another where it has acted as a totemic expression of
apparently unlimited artistic freedom. Although on one, ultimately globally northern, view serialism seems like a historical trend – so bound up with the needs and compulsions of the twentieth century that it can be, at best, a potent mirror for the contemporary world – this broader one suggests that there may, yet, be new statements to be made with and through it.

The preparation of this volume took place, in large part, against the backdrop of the pandemic, and its development was, perhaps unsurprisingly, significantly slower than it might otherwise have been as a result. I owe an enormous debt of thanks to all of the contributors for their good humour and mutual understanding of the various challenges faced by us as a body of scholars during this period. Sam Ridout’s help in ensuring editorial consistency across the text was immeasurably valuable. I am grateful, too, to Kate Brett and her team at Cambridge University Press for their support and faith in the project from start to finish.

In mind of the brief anecdote above, which I have had often in my mind in working on the contributions to this volume, I would like to dedicate it to three formative figures: to the memory of Steve Martland, because I think it would have made him laugh to figure in any guise in a volume dedicated to serialism; to Robin Holloway, in gratitude for challenging, inspiring conversations about Lulu and why it sounds the way it does; and to Fabrice Fitch, who thought I might have some promise, probably before anyone else did, and was kind enough to tell me so.