

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.

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Contents

List of Figures [page xi]
List of Tables [xv]
List of Contributors [xvi]
Preface [xix]

PART I CONTEXTS I [1]

- 1 Theorising Serialism
CATHERINE NOLAN [3]
- 2 The Aesthetics of Serialism
MARCUS ZAGORSKI [20]
- 3 Serialism in History and Criticism
ARNOLD WHITTALL [37]

PART II COMPOSERS [55]

- 4 Arnold Schoenberg and the ‘Musical Idea’
JACK BOSS [57]
- 5 Alban Berg’s Eclectic Serialism
SILVIO DOS SANTOS [73]
- 6 Rethinking Late Webern
SEBASTIAN WEDLER [87]
- 7 Milton Babbitt and ‘Total’ Serialism
ANDREW MEAD [108]
- 8 Pierre Boulez and the Redefinition of Serialism
CATHERINE LOSADA [125]
- 9 The Serial Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen
IMKE MISCH [140]
- 10 Luigi Nono and the Development of Serial Technique
ANGELA IDA DE BENEDICTIS AND VENIERO
RIZZARDI [154]

- 11 Stravinsky's Path to Serialism
MAUREEN CARR [183]
- PART III GEOGRAPHIES [203]
- 12 Serialism in Western Europe
MARK DELAERE [205]
- 13 Serialism in Canada and the United States
EMILY ABRAMS ANSARI [225]
- 14 Serialism in Central and Eastern Europe
IWONA LINDSTEDT [241]
- 15 Serialism in the USSR
PETER J. SCHMELZ [253]
- 16 Serialism in Latin America
BJÖRN HEILE [266]
- 17 Serialism in East Asia
NANCY YUNHWA RAO [278]
- PART IV CONTEXTS II [301]
- 18 Towards an Authentic Interpretation of Serial Music
PETER O'HAGAN [303]
- 19 Metamorphoses of the Serial (and the 'Post-Serial' Question)
CHARLES WILSON [317]
- 20 Technologies and the Serial Attitude
JENNIFER IVERSON [340]
- References* [365]
Index [405]

Figures

- 1.1 Schoenberg's row tables for the Suite op. 25 [page 5]
- 4.1 Part of Schoenberg's set tables for the Suite op. 25, with a pitch-class map [60]
- 4.2 Schoenberg, Prelude op. 25, bb. 1–3 [61]
- 4.3 Schoenberg, Prelude op. 25, b. 13 [62]
- 4.4a and b Schoenberg, Prelude op. 25, bb. 17b–21 [64]
- 4.5a and b Schoenberg, Piano Piece op. 33a, bb. 1–9 [66]
- 4.6a and b Schoenberg, Piano Piece op. 33a, bb. 14–22 [69]
- 4.7 Schoenberg, Piano Piece op. 33a, bb. 32b–34 [71]
- 5.1 Berg's illustration of the row set in the *Lyric Suite*, borrowed from F. H. Klein (Berg 2014: 203) [77]
- 5.2 Berg's illustration of the all-notes and all-intervals chord [78]
- 5.3 Berg's illustration of axis of rotation generating the C major and G \flat chords and scales [78]
- 5.4 Pitch reduction of Berg's Violin Concerto, Part II, bb. 125–37; after Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Musiksammlung F21 Berg 27, fols. 20 v–21 r [84]
- 6.1 Webern, string trio fragment, M. 273, bb. 1–5 and 2{a}, accompanied by some analytical annotations, based on a transcription of the manuscripts and sketches as provided in Wörner (2003: 75 and 88); the sources are archived at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel [94]
- 6.2a, b, and c Klumpenhouwer network interpretation of Webern's string trio fragment M. 273, bb. 1–2 and 2{a}, as defined by Lewin (1990) and Klumpenhouwer (1991) [95]
- 6.3a, b, c, and d Webern, 'Dein Leib geht jetzt der Erde zu', M. 276: transcription of the sketch of the first melodic idea and twelve-tone row, 'Sketchbook I', p. 11, archived at the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, accompanied by some annotations highlighting the constitution of the interval vector space as illustrated in Table 6.1 [97]

- 6.4 Reconstruction (modified transcription) of Webern's fragment 'Dein Leib geht jetzt der Erde zu', M. 276, 'Sketchbook 1', p. 11, archived at The Morgan Library & Museum, New York [98]
- 6.5 a and b Webern, Symphony, op. 21/ii, final variation (reduction), accompanied by some analytical annotations [101]
- 6.6 Webern, Cantata No. 1, op. 29/iii, bb. 34–43 (reduction) [106]
- 7.1 Trichordal array composed into fifteen subsets of four elements [112]
- 7.2 Trichordal disposition in the last section of *Composition for Four Instruments* [114]
- 7.3 The opening block of a four-part all-partition array [117]
- 7.4 Duration patterns in *Composition for Four Instruments* [120]
- 7.5 Time-point rows and an aggregate realisation [121]
- 8.1 Pitch-class multiplication as described by Boulez. $e*c$ (ec) results from realising each one of the ordered pitch-class intervals that occur above the bass in e (the multiplicand) over each pitch-class of c (the multiplier) [126]
- 8.2 Annotated reproduction of pre-compositional table for 'Séquence', from Third Piano Sonata. Paul Sacher Foundation, Pierre Boulez Collection (Mappe H, Dossier 2 f,1) [127]
- 8.3a and b Transformation graph modelling the partitioned row and other levels of structure in 'Séquence', from Third Piano Sonata; partitioned row for 'Séquence' [129]
- 8.4 Summary of serial developmental techniques [131]
- 8.5 The consequence of transposing a chord by the retrograde of embedded pitch intervals (in registral space) is a common tone in pitch space [132]
- 10.1a and b *Composizione per orchestra [No. 1]* (1951). Sketch of the precompositional material for bb. 17–25, Archivio Luigi Nono (facsimile) [159]
- 10.2a and b *Polifonica–Monodia–Ritmica* (1951). Generation of 'degrading' intervallic material of the opening four-part canon of *Polifonica* (bb. 1–40) [162]
- 10.3 *Polifonica–Monodia–Ritmica* (1951). Four-part canon (bb. 1–40) built by reading each of the four derivations right to left, bottom up, beginning with sparse sounds and gradually filling the space (score, *Ars Viva*, excerpts: bb. 1–28) [165]

- 10.4 *Polifonica–Monodia–Ritmica* (1951). Serial permutations of the Afro-Brazilian rhythm ('Jemanjá') employed in the movement *Polifonica* (sketch, Archivio Luigi Nono; facsimile) [166]
- 10.5 Typescript of Luigi Nono with text selection and sketches for *Cori di Didone* (Archivio Luigi Nono) [170]
- 10.6 *Il canto sospeso*, no. 2: schematic rendering of the first three rotations of the parametric series [175]
- 10.7 *Il canto sospeso*, no. 2: the final outcome of Nono's compositional device as represented in the score (Ars Viva AV 50) [176]
- 10.8 Multi-parametric module prepared for *Sarà dolce tacere* (used in the second section, bb. 26–67) [179]
- 10.9 Representation of the various group types obtained from the transformation of an original group [182]
- 11.1 *Cantata*, 'Ricerca II', overlapping sets [184]
- 11.2 *Cantata*, sketch page showing serial variants [185]
- 11.3 *In memoriam Dylan Thomas*, diplomatic transcription of sketch page [187]
- 11.4 Vlad's chart of various forms of *Threni* row [191]
- 11.5 *Threni* condensed orchestral score, bb. 5–18. © 1958 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission. [192]
- 11.6 *Movements*, original (prime) row, split into hexachords α and β [195]
- 11.7 *Movements*, diplomatic transcription of sketch page, annotated with rotation of hexachord 6–7 [196]
- 11.8 *Elegy for J.F.K.*, diplomatic transcription of sketch page [200]
- 12.1a and b O. Messiaen, 'Île de feu 2' (scale subjected to permutation) and 'Île de feu 2', bb. 8–27. © Durand S.A. [208]
- 12.2 Michel Fano, *Étude for 15 instruments*, bb. 1–10 (sounds as written) [213]
- 12.3 Bo Nilsson, *Zwanzig Gruppen*, excerpt from the piccolo part [222]
- 17.1a and b Luo Zhongrong's tone row and *Picking Lotus Flowers*, bb. 1–8 [284]
- 17.2a, b, and c *Gagaku* melody, tone row, and Yoristsune Matsudaira, 'Variations', bb. 1–3 [292]

- 18.1 Anton Webern, draft of first variation, third movement of Piano Variations op. 27, bb. 12–23 [307]
- 18.2 Anton Webern, draft of fourth variation, third movement of Piano Variations op. 27, bb. 56–66 [307]
- 20.1 Milton Babbitt sketch, perhaps for *Composition for Synthesizer* (1961) or *Ensembles for Synthesizer* (1964), showing how music notation was translated into the five-channel parameters of the RCA Mark II. Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center Records, 1958–2014. Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. Temporary inventory box CPEMC-00264 [351]
- 20.2 Yellow Magic Orchestra, ‘Technopolis’, sectional formal plan. Dotted line marks temporal halfway point. X = groove, A = Japanese melody, B = flute melody, C = trumpet canon [355]
- 20.3 Programming the MC-8 using numeric translations of pitch and duration at specific timepoints (for example, measures and beats or ‘steps’). Owner’s manual, p. 24 [357]

Tables

- 1.1 Row forms from Schoenberg's Suite op. 25 [page 5]
- 6.1 Interval vectors of the 4–7 tetrachord family, based on Forte (1973) [95]
- 7.1 Instrumental disposition in *Composition for Four Instruments* [114]
- 7.2 The seventy-seven possible ways of partitioning twelve parts into lyne segments of various lengths [116]
- 10.1 *Il canto sospeso*, no. 2: table coordinating the all-interval series with the duration Fibonacci series (I–XV: bb. 108–42; XVI–XIX (proportional canon): bb. 142–57) [174]
- 10.2 *Il canto sospeso*, no. 2: table coordinating the dynamics series with the all-interval series [174]
- 15.1 Music in Rudolf Lück (ed.), *Neue Sowjetische Klaviermusik*. Cologne: Gerig, 1968 [257]

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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.

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.