
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Border Crossings

We began our discussion of musical developments in the early decades of the twentieth century with Robert Musil's formulation of the "sense of possibility." Musil was writing in the context of the external and internal "loss of cohesion" that accompanied the splintering of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and modernity's profound transformations of many aspects of daily life. As we consider some of the directions taken by composers, performers, and audiences in the early twenty-first century, it becomes clear that the pace of change in the world around us and within us continues to accelerate, rendering "systems of happiness and balance" to help us maintain our equilibrium more necessary than ever.

A short list of the major events and trends of the past 25 years includes the end of the Cold War (signaled by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991); the creation of the European Union in 1993 and the emergence of China, India, and Brazil as new world economic powers; the rapid formation of vast global networks of wealth, information, and communication (Google was founded in 1998 and Facebook in 2004); and the final mapping of the human genome in 2003. Based on new discoveries in quantum mechanics, cosmologists now maintain that our universe is only one of an infinite number of parallel universes in which every possibility has been realized. Add to this a growing awareness of climate change, the rise of global terrorism, the resurgence of new forms of nationalism and fundamentalism,

and the construction of new walls and lines of demarcation, and it becomes clear that many of the real and imaginary boundaries that have shaped the lives of people around the globe over the past century have been comprehensively redrawn. Indeed, just as some historians have argued for a “long nineteenth century” lasting from 1789 to 1914, the momentous changes around 1991 have given rise to the notion of the “Short Century,” based on the belief that a “short twentieth century” (1914–1991) has already given way to a new epoch.

As Leonard Meyer predicted in 1967 (see Chapter 13), our era of “fluctuating stasis” has produced many composers who continue to explore all the various -isms and styles we have investigated in this book. At the same time, border crossings of every kind have opened up new possibilities for music-making. All the examples cited below have precedents in the twentieth century and previous epochs. Yet in each case it can be argued that the very different contexts of our time give them all new meanings and implications. As John Adams noted in 1998, “We’re in a kind of post-style era. Composers my age and younger, we are not writing in one, highly defined, overarching expression, like Steve Reich or Luciano Berio would write.”

The emerging generation of composers and performers has much less invested in the old battles, historical narratives, and anxieties than their elders do. Musil’s “possibilist” notion that things “could probably just as well be otherwise” would now strike many as self-evident. And while as many voices as ever are clamoring that things have to be the way they are, their uniformity of perspective and ultimate authority have never been less. On the contrary, contemporary composers must establish a direction and context for their music in the absence of either traditional constraints or supports that allowed previous generations to attract attention and be heard.

GLOBAL ENCOUNTERS

The most obvious examples of border crossings today are the countless forms of transnational, post-national, and post-colonial music-making that we noted in our brief discussion of world music traditions at the end of Chapter 13. Despite legitimate concerns about the homogenizing force of global media and communications, there is clear evidence of the resilience of local traditions, alongside the emergence of hybrid cross-cultural forms of music-making. The Austrian-born Lukas Ligeti (b. 1965), the son of Györgi Ligeti, founded the band Burkina Electric, which features the West African singer and composer Mai Lingani. A percussionist with a background in jazz and computer music, Ligeti describes the band’s style as “electronic dance club music, related to Western DJ culture, but using elements of traditional music, in this case from Burkina Faso.” The proliferation of local hip-hop dialects around the world signals trends that also appear in electronic music, jazz, and other genres.

Another border-crossing figure is Osvaldo Golijov (b. 1960), who was born into a Russian-Jewish family in Argentina and spent his early twenties in Israel before coming to the United States in 1986 to study with George Crumb (see Chapter 13). Golijov has worked with rock, jazz, folk, and classical musicians, and among the early influences he cites are classical chamber music, Jewish liturgical and Klezmer music, and the new tango style of the Argentinean composer Astor Piazzola. Golijov's lullaby for voice and piano *Lúa descolorida* (Moon, Colorless, 2002), based on a text by the Galician poet Rosalía de Castro, alludes to the melismatic vocal lines in François Couperin's *Leçons de ténèbres* (1714), the luminous harmonies of Franz Schubert's C-Major String Quintet (1828), and the rhythms and harmonies of Spanish dance.

As never before, such transnational border crossings are moving in both directions. For example, the Javanese gamelan composer and ethnomusicologist Rahayu Supanggah (b. 1949) studied in Paris and has collaborated with artists and musicians in Europe and the United States; he and stage director Robert Wilson created *La Galigo* (2004), a theatrical work based on the ancient Indonesian epic. Reversing this trajectory, the American composer Evan Ziporyn (b. 1959) based his opera *A House in Bali* (2009) on a memoir by Colin McPhee (see Chapter 8) and his own study of gamelan music. Premiered in Bali, the work combines newly composed music for a gamelan ensemble with rock-inflected, Postminimalist passages performed by a small group of strings, electric guitar, keyboards, and percussion.

MUSIC IN-BETWEEN

Popular music elements feature prominently in the works of many composers, such as the British composer Thomas Adès (b. 1971). In his chamber opera *Powder Her Face* (1995), Adès alludes to 1930s popular song, tango, and twentieth-century opera styles from Berg to Weill; he has also drawn on electronic dance music in his rave-inspired "Ecstasio," from his orchestral work *Asyla* (1997). But our new epoch is defined still more clearly by the movement of composers, performers, and audiences across the traditional boundaries separating popular, avant-garde, indie, jazz, folk, and classical music. Indeed, the clear hierarchy that once demarcated such categories is steadily disintegrating.

Unlike the Postmodernists of the late twentieth century, who tended to keep all musical languages at an ironic distance, many composers today feel at home in more than one milieu. The American composer Nico Muhly (b. 1981) has written orchestral works for major orchestras and scores for *The Reader* (2008) and other films, all while collaborating with such diverse musicians as Björk, Grizzly Bear, and Antony and the Johnsons. In "The Only Tune," from his wide-ranging CD *Mothertongue* (2008), Muhly and the folk musician Sam Amidon reconceive the folk song "The Wind and the Rain" in various avant-garde transformations before concluding with an ethereal arrangement featuring fiddle, guitar, and celesta.

Other notable figures developing this in-between zone include DJ Spooky, Missy Mazzoli, Bryce Dessner, Daniel Bernard Roumain, Mica Levi, Sufjan Stevens, Joanna Newsom, Yo-Yo Ma, and Chris Thile.

Festivals, performance venues, and record labels facilitate such border crossings by offering a common ground where audiences of different tastes and backgrounds can come together. A 2011 concert presented by the New York-based Wordless Music organization included György Ligeti's Chamber Concerto; the Philip Glass/David Bowie/Brian Eno Symphony No. 4, *Heroes*; and the premiere of an orchestral work called *Doghouse* by Radiohead guitarist Jonny Greenwood. The 2009 album *Central Market* by Tyondai Braxton, guitarist and singer for the rock band Battles and the son of Anthony Braxton, includes rock songs, playfully eclectic orchestral compositions, textural electronic works, and Postminimalist loop-based pieces.

Film scores have played a particularly important role in blurring the distinctions between "serious" and "popular" compositions. John Corigliano (b. 1938), who has been a significant force in American music since the 1970s, arranged his Neo-Romantic score for the film *The Red Violin* (1998) as a freestanding Suite for Violin and Orchestra (2000). The Chinese composer Tan Dun (b. 1957), now residing in the United States, has emerged as a leading transnational figure on the strength of pieces like the *Symphony 1997: Heaven Earth Mankind*, commissioned to celebrate the reunification of Hong Kong with China, and his scores for the martial arts film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Hero* (2002).

Here, too, the influence goes both ways, as in the Austrian composer Olga Neuwirth's (b. 1968) opera *Lost Highway* (2003), based on the film of that name by David Lynch. The work begins with an ominously swelling drone that builds to a sudden orchestral outburst, evoking Lynch's long opening credit sequence, which shows a car's headlights hurtling through a deserted nighttime landscape. This climax gives way to layered loops of electric guitar, strings, winds, and sampled voices, before the live singers finally appear. The staging of *Lost Highway* includes video projections and recorded sounds, as well as electronically manipulated live instrumental and vocal parts. Neuwirth speaks of being inspired by the "rapidly changing visual and auditive perspectives" in the film to create an experience of "innumerable (architectural and emotional) spaces inside and outside."