Musical Communication and the Process of Modernity

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THE debate on modernism that has taken place over recent decades in musicology is full of contradictory claims and methodological uncertainties. The '-ism' suffix tends to place the concept in a negative light, making it seem tendentious and exclusive. Modernism is portrayed as the predominant force in music schools and the concert hall, as an ideological apparatus with technocratic components or as a utopia with ominous implications; it is sometimes even under suspicion of connivance with dictatorships of the twentieth century. Often cited as the prime examples of musical modernism are the 12-note system and integral serialism – two approaches that are represented as one single monolithic and self-referential system despite their differences and internal articulations. The critique draws on statements by commentators from a whole range of disciplines who are labelled indiscriminately as 'postmodernists': Susan Sontag, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Harold Bloom, Frederic Jameson, Umberto Eco and others. In its most polemical utterances it culminates in an ethical judgment that admits of no reply: modernism is academic, authoritarian, intolerant, chauvinistic and colonialist. This attitude is borne out in various ways in works by Georgina Born, Susan McClary, Lawrence Kramer, Derek B. Scott and Richard Taruskin, and prevails in many texts on postmodernism in music.[1]

The misunderstandings and distortions that permeate the debate on modernism result from a cursory analysis of the process of modernity within which the musical facts, theories and works under discussion occur. Modernity is a tenet of the philosophy of history: the concept delineates a set of premises that were defined during the aftermath of the French

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[1] Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley, CA, 1995); *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley, CA, 2000); Susan McClary, 'Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition', *Cultural Critique*, 12 (1989), 57–81, repr. in *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture*, ed. David Schwarz, Anahid Kassabian and Lawrence Siegel (Charlotteville, VA, and London, 1997), 54–74 (this essay was originally a 1988 conference paper); Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley, CA, 1995); Derek B. Scott, 'Postmodernism and Music', *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim (London, 2011), 182–93; Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 2005), v: *The Late Twentieth Century*, 411–14; *Postmodern Music: Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judy L. Lockhead and Joseph H. Auner (New York, 2002); Kenneth Gloag, *Postmodernism in Music* (Cambridge, 2012). The present overview concentrates on the main bulk of the critique of modernism, leaving out (for reasons of space) some important contributions that show signs of inverting the trend: Alastair Williams, *New Music and the Claim of Modernity* (Aldershot, 1997); *The Pleasure of Modernist Music: Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology*, ed. Arved Ashby (Rochester, NY, 2004); *Music and the Aesthetics of Modernity*, ed. Karol Berger and Anthony Newcomb (Cambridge, MA, 2005); *The Modernist Legacy: Essays on New Music*, ed. Björn Heile (Aldershot, 2009); David Metzer, *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, 2009).

Revolution, whose representative minds engaged themselves in defining the new historical phase. Self-reflectivity is thus inherent in the process of modernity, and it relies on constant evaluation and criticism of its achievements. Jürgen Habermas pointed out how this specific trait went hand in hand with the formation of a new 'time consciousness': modernity defines itself through 'the reflective clarification of its own standpoint from the horizon of history as a whole'.[2] The consciousness of the relations between past and present, continuity and discontinuity, has characterized art music in various ways over the last two centuries. In fact, the pursuit of the 'new' is not an abstract principle with ideological nuances but one component of 'time consciousness'; it is expressed in the historical distance that transpires in enquiries into the compositional techniques of earlier periods (undertaken by generations of composers), as well as in the theorizing with which the composer defines the issues he/she is faced with and above all in the creation of sound forms which stimulate new communicative dynamics. These sound forms characterize the *Jetztzeit* not simply for their novelty content but also as the expression of the general subjectivity captured at a given moment. In discussing this dimension of collective awareness, Theodor W. Adorno introduced the distinction between the empirical 'I' and the 'collective subject', while Carl Dahlhaus similarly distinguished between the biographical and the aesthetic subject.[3] The fact that a general subjectivity may mark the *Jetztzeit* makes apparent two aspects which Habermas related to one another in his reconstruction of the 'discourse of modernity': 'subject-centred reason' and 'inter-subjective communication'.[4]

Instrumental reason ('instrumentelle Vernuft'), which in modern societies takes the forms of industrial production, economic planning and administrative apparatus, has in the field of music a peculiar manifestation: the construction of sound worlds and listening modalities. Thus production is a fundamental concept of modernity, informing all the various spheres of cultural life and social action.[5] Opponents of modernism tend to view construction, exemplified by 12-note technique and the serial organization of the sound space, as an end in itself. This assessment fails to take into account the fact that all musical compositions imply construction, and this is defined with respect to a specific realization in sound; thus, the debate should move from the abstract level, where the focus is construction as a principle, to the concrete level involving a discussion of the adequacy of the procedures enacted vis-à-vis the result obtained. In other words, it should be turned into an aesthetic rather than an ideological judgment.

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[2] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1987); I propose here a different translation of the passage. Karol Berger, in 'Time's Arrow and the Advent of Musical Modernity', *Music and the Aesthetics of Modernity*, ed. Berger and Newcomb, 5–19, explores the concept of 'time consciousness' in music.

[3] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman (London and New York, 2004), 219–23; Carl Dahlhaus, *Beethoven: Approaches to his Music* (Oxford and New York, 1993), 30–42.

[4] See Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, MA, 1991), especially the article 'The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism: The Critique of Reason Since Adorno', 36–94.

[5] *Ästhetische Moderne in Europa: Grundzüge und Problemzusammenhänge seit der Romantik*, ed. Silvio Vietta and Dirk Kemper (Munich, 1998), 37.

The centrality of construction can be considered a parallel phenomenon to the affirmation of a 'means/ends rationality' which, according to Max Weber, is the salient feature of societal modernization. In the field of music, too, the productive drive can turn into a mechanism that spins on its axle without producing meaning. However, modernity has come up with a corrective: the dynamic of the cultural sphere itself, which makes selections on the basis of shared criteria, identifies and discusses the problems that occur, determines the paradigmatic value of certain works and rejects other solutions. This dynamic is public and intersubjective. Far from being an element that has been disregarded by modernity and mysteriously reinstated by postmodernist music, communication is an aspect inherent in the process itself. Seen in these terms, self-reflection appears not only as a premiss for the creation of new techniques and the mutation of the sonic imaginary, but also as a decisive factor for the articulation of historical processes. The crisis is inscribed in the process, not a catastrophic event produced by chance or destiny – and this also concerns the 'crisis' of tonality. Habermas came up with a different interpretation of the phenomena viewed as manifestations of postmodernism, recognizing them as signs of a critique of procedural rationality, which is focused on the subject, and of a movement to the fluid and open operativity of intersubjective networks. This dialectic has also taken place in the sphere of musical composition through the progressive differentiation of approaches – a pluralization of modernity which can only be grasped if one considers the whole complex in its overall dynamic, rather than one specific sector. The opposition of very different aesthetic (and compositional) options, which characterized the twentieth more than any previous century, is the clear demonstration of this differentiation. At just about the same time as Habermas was formulating his critique of postmodernism, Charles Taylor pointed out the need for a second approach to modernity, taking what he called a 'cultural' perspective.[6] In the following decades, the dialogue between philosophy and anthropology has produced the notion of 'hybrid modernity', highlighting the multiple and transnational nature of the process; as Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar explains: 'Modernity has travelled from the West to the rest of the world not only in terms of cultural forms, social practices, and institutional arrangements, but also as a form of discourse that interrogates the present.'[7]

Jonathan Kramer has listed 16 aspects in which the music of postmodernism differs from that of modernism. Here I shall deal only with the eighth: '[Postmodernism] considers music not as autonomous but as relevant to cultural, social, and political contexts.'[8] This is one of the recurring issues in discussions about modernism, and the one that has given rise to the greatest confusion. Martin Scherzinger has illustrated a different outlook, showing that far from distancing itself from social reality, the adherence to the principle of autonomy actually

[6] Charles Taylor, 'Two Theories of Modernity', *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham, NC, 2001), 172–96.

[7] Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, 'On Alternative Modernities', *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Gaonkar, 1–23 (p. 14). In the domain of music the idea of hybrid modernity was developed by Steven Feld; see in particular his *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana* (Durham, NC, 2012), 201–43.

[8] Jonathan D. Kramer, 'The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism', *Postmodern Music: Postmodern Thought*, 13–26 (p. 16).

implied in the twentieth century taking a standpoint in relation to this reality.[9] His argument, which takes place mostly on the theoretical level, can be integrated with a reconstruction of the debate that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century in response to the direction indicated by the cultural policy of the Soviet bloc. The sphere of this debate is commonly indicated by the term 'commitment', which Jean-Paul Sartre introduced in an article written in 1947; among the most significant contributions to the debate were *L'artiste et sa conscience* by René Leibowitz (1950), 'Presenza storica nella musica d'oggi', a lecture given by Luigi Nono at Darmstadt in 1959, 'Commitment', a lecture Adorno gave on Radio Bremen in 1962, and the article 'Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà' by Umberto Eco.[10]

The debate was pursued and extended over three decades. In the aftermath of 1968, thanks in part to the input of anti-establishment movements, the issue of the independence of artistic production was not limited to relationships with the state but was extended to cover scope for freedom in a communicative system, seen to be increasingly conditioned by the cultural industry and market laws. (And the emergence of avant-garde experimentation in jazz and rock is symptomatic of the fact that this problem does not pertain exclusively to art music.) When Heinz-Klaus Metzger, speaking during a student protest at the Musikhochschule in West Berlin in 1969, defended the principles of 'aesthetic autonomy and the immanent substance of an artistic creation',[11] he did not posit the ontological superiority of the model of music that had established itself in the West, but reacted against it: he advocated a history of artistic liberty which has asserted itself over the centuries and encountered all sorts of obstacles. Metzger's arguments were based on the definition of art that Adorno had developed over the previous years as a *fait social*, dispensing with the traditional opposition between autonomy and functionalism.[12] Starting from similar premises, in the same years Dieter Schnebel developed the concept of the political bias that is implicit in the practice of artistic autonomy; he sought to redefine the principle of autonomy in view of a social significance which evades the system of values imposed by the entertainment industry. From this perspective, the passivity of the recipient and the isolation of experimental art are seen as products of the ideology of entertainment and standardized communication. Nonetheless, Schnebel did not defensively revert to models which had

[9] Martin Scherzinger, 'In Memory of a Receding Dialectic: The Political Relevance of Autonomy and Formalism in Modernist Musical Aesthetics', *The Pleasure of Modernist Music*, ed. Ashby, 68–100.

[10] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature? and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA, 1988); René Leibowitz, *L'artiste et sa conscience: Esquisse d'une dialectique de la conscience artistique* (Paris, 1950); Luigi Nono, 'Presenza storica nella musica d'oggi', *Scritti e colloqui*, ed. Angela Ida De Benedictis and Veniero Rizzardi, 2 vols. (Lucca, 2001), i, 46–56 (trans. as 'The Historical Reality of Music Today', *The Score*, 27 (1960), 41–5); Theodor W. Adorno, 'Commitment', *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, CA, 2003), 240–58; Umberto Eco, 'Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà', *Menabò*, 5 (1962), 198–237, repr. in *Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milan, 1976), 235–90 (trans. Anna Cancogni as 'Form as Social Commitment', in Eco, *Open Work* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 123–57).

[11] Heinz-Klaus Metzger, 'Musik wozu', *Musik wozu: Literatur zu Noten*, ed. Rainer Riehn (Frankfurt am Main, 1980), 294–306 (p. 296).

[12] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Hullot-Kentor, 295–7. On this topic, see Lydia Goehr, 'Political Music and the Politics of Music', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52/1: *The Philosophy of Music* (winter 1994), 99–112.

shown a certain resilience in the past. He chose instead also to call for change in terms of production: 'Nowadays an autonomous art can no longer permit itself to manufacture its products remaining, as it were, aloof from reality, concentrating on the development of the material, as was the case in Schoenberg's school and later in the serial music of the fifties.'[13] The recognition of the 'social content' of the musical material implies new procedures aiming to produce a different experience of reality and transform 'regimented communication' into 'genuine' communication.[14]

The positions I have cited indicate the ways in which a significant number of avant-garde composers reacted to social changes not only in theoretical reflection but also in their composing practice (examples I might mention include *A floresta è jovem e cheja de vida* by Nono and *Maulwerke* by Schnebel). Alongside these statements, which share a basis in so-called 'Western Marxism', the critique of the principle of autonomy also emerged among composers who identified with another trend in modernity: structuralism and semiotics. The seminars held by Henri Pousseur in 1970 at the Centre de Sociologie de la Musique in the Université Libre de Bruxelles started from the conviction that 'sounds are not independent entities which are detached from reality and can be used without taking reality into account'.[15] Each sound is a genuine story in miniature; together with its physical properties, it carries within it a semantic layer that has accumulated during its use through the ages and is reactivated by the listener by means of an unconscious memory.[16] Thus emphasis comes to be placed on usage, on the continuous reorganization of the sounds in view of a 'message'. Moreover, Pousseur emphasized that the sound's production is linked to a practice that cannot be separated from its social context: 'Any music, even one held to be pure and autonomous, constitutes an authentic *theatre*, first and foremost in the mind, but also more "external", in which the allegories of our destiny are represented.'[17]

There are undoubted affinities between Pousseur's approach and the position of Luciano Berio, as seen more fully in the latter's compositions than in his sporadic writings. Berio did, nonetheless, leave one essay of particular relevance to our subject of enquiry, in which he focused on the concept of gesture.[18] Once again, the discussion takes place in the context of a

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[13] Dieter Schnebel, 'Autonome Kunst politisch', *Denkbare Musik: Schriften 1952–1972*, ed. Hans Rudolf Zeller (Cologne, 1972), 474–87 (p. 479).

[14] *Ibid.*, 480. See also Helmut Lachenmann, 'Die gefährdete Kommunikation: Gedanken und Praktiken eines Komponisten' (1973), *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung: Schriften 1966–1995*, ed. Josef Häusler (Wiesbaden, 1996), 99–103.

[15] 'Les sons ne sont pas des entités indépendantes, détachées du restant de la réalité et utilisables sans tenir compte de celle-ci.' Henri Pousseur, *Musique, sémantique, société* (Paris, 1974), 7. Pousseur refers here to the conception of music elaborated in Michel Butor, 'La musique, art réaliste: Les paroles et la musique', *Répertoire 2* (Paris, 1964), 27–41.

[16] 'C'est toute une petite histoire que chaque son, chaque structure sonore nous raconte.' Pousseur, *Musique, sémantique, société*, 8.

[17] 'En fait, toute musique, même la plus prétendument pure et autonome, constitue un véritable *théâtre*, mental d'abord mais aussi plus "extérieur", où se jouent les allégories de nostre destin.' *Ibid.*, 13.

[18] Luciano Berio, 'Du geste et de Piazza Carità', *La musique et ses problèmes contemporains 1953–1963*, Cahiers de la Compagnie Madeleine Renaud–Jean-Louis Barrault, 2/41 (Paris, 1963), 216–33; I cite, however, from the Italian version: 'Del gesto e di Piazza Carità', Luciano Berio, *Scritti sulla musica*, ed. Angela Ida De Benedictis (Turin, 2013), 30–6 (p. 31).

reflection on modernity: rather than seeking to identify a pre-linguistic sphere, freed from historical processes, Berio tries to highlight 'linguistic *objects* which we find ready and waiting on our arrival in a world that already possesses a language'.[19] Gesture is distinguished from other objects because it is the 'residue of a linguistic act which has already taken place' and which accordingly '*also* contains the experience of the sign'.[20] These considerations give expression to a critique of 'a music based exclusively on the notes and not on the sound and the gestures of performance and listening', as well as the composer's awareness of operating on objects which have social implications. Like Pousseur, Berio arrives at a broad notion of theatre as the representation of social relationships.

The excerpts from the writings of the composers I have referred to should be related to the compositional techniques they used; this is a crucial step, because technique can be seen as the engine of musical communication and the composers' writings represent only one side of the complex network that defines musical thinking (or poetics). Associating composers' public utterances with the complex problems they tried to solve in a given time would make it even clearer that the principle of autonomy, rather than having suffered an external attack from the joint forces of the cultural industry and postmodernist music, has always been involved in a dialectical interplay with its opposite. This dialectic in turn can be seen as a segment of a historical reality whose investigation requires a reflection on the process of modernity in music that needs to be more thoroughgoing than it has been hitherto.

Modernismus and the Philistines

PETER FRANKLIN

How modern *is* modernism? Pondering our brief to 'be provocative' here, I am minded to invoke earlier sceptics in the Chapel of Higher Modernism, not least when confronting its devotional text: Julian Johnson's *Who Needs Classical Music?*[21] Inevitably, one thinks of Richard Taruskin's amusing and often rude comments about Johnson in his notorious review article 'The Musical Mystique: Defending Classical Music against its Devotees'.[22] Next in line (perhaps at a slightly disrespectful distance from Taruskin) would have to be Susan McClary: I still love her 'Terminal Prestige' essay of 1988 ('the retreat to the boys' club of modernism was not simply a matter of sloughing off soft, sentimental, "feminine" qualities for the sake of more difficult, "hard core" criteria').[23] But this is more than a transatlantic

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[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Ibid.*, 32.

[21] Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Music Value* (Cambridge, 2002).

[22] Richard Taruskin, 'The Musical Mystique: Defending Classical Music against its Devotees', *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 2009), 330–53 (first published in *The New Republic*, 22 October 2007).

[23] McClary, 'Terminal Prestige', 72.